

# Expulsion of the Palestinians

The Concept of "Transfer"  
in Zionist Political Thought  
1882-1948

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## Introduction

The Zionist concept of “transfer”—a euphemism denoting the organized removal of the indigenous population of Palestine to neighboring countries—is a prickly and even explosive subject that myriad researchers and writers focusing on Palestine have avoided for obvious reasons. From the outset, however, this concept has occupied a central position in the strategic thinking of the leadership of the Zionist movements and the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) as a solution to the “Arab question” in Palestine. Indeed, the idea of transfer is as old as the early Zionist colonies in Palestine and the rise of political Zionism. It can be said to be the logical outgrowth of the ultimate goal of the Zionist movement, which was the establishment of a Jewish state through colonization and land acquisition—in other words, through a radical ethno-religious-demographic transformation of a country, the population of which had been almost entirely Arab at the start of the Zionist venture.

While the desire among Zionists to solve the “Arab question”—or baldly stated, to be rid of the native Palestinian population—remained a constant until the “miraculous simplification” of the problem during the 1948 war, the envisaged modalities of transfer changed over the years according to circumstances. Thus, the wishful belief in Zionism’s early years that the native population could be “spirited across the borders,” in the words of political Zionism’s founder Theodor Herzl, or that they would simply “fold their tents and slip away,” to use the formulation of the Anglo-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill, soon gave way to more realistic assessments. These assessments necessitated strategies

and planning that produced a series of specific plans, generally involving Transjordan, Syria, or Iraq. As of the late 1930s, they included proposals for agrarian legislation and citizenship restrictions designed to encourage the Arabs to "transfer voluntarily."

It should not be imagined that the concept of transfer was held only by maximalists or extremists within the Zionist movement. On the contrary, it was embraced by almost all shades of opinion, from the Revisionist right to the Labor left. Virtually every member of the Zionist pantheon of founding fathers and important leaders supported it and advocated it in one form or another, from Chaim Weizmann and Vladimir Jabotinsky to David Ben-Gurion and Menahem Ussishkin. Supporters of transfer included such moderates as the "Arab appeaser" Moshe Shertok and the socialist Arthur Ruppin, founder of Brit Shalom, a movement advocating equal rights for Arabs and Jews. More importantly, transfer proposals were put forward by the Jewish Agency itself, in effect the government of the Yishuv.

In light of the massive exodus of Arabs from Palestine in 1948, the issue of transfer assumes crucial importance. This study sets out to explore the historical links between Zionist adherence to the strategic goal of establishing a Jewish homeland (state) in Palestine and the advocacy of the politico-strategic concept of transfer. It will analyze the notion against the background of Zionist ideological principles and doctrines such as *'Avodah 'Iurit* (Hebrew Labor), *Adamah 'Iurit* (Hebrew Land), and *Kibbush Ha'adamah* (Land Conquest). It would appear that the intensification of efforts to implement those doctrines in the 1930s contributed to a consolidation of the transfer proposals into official Yishuv positions. The study will trace the evolution of the concept of transfer and describe a number of unpublished plans put forward in the thirties and the forties within the context of unfolding events. Finally, the book will discuss the realization of Zionist goals during the 1948 war, with special reference to the leadership's discussions of transfer rather than



to the military dimension per se.

A deterministic research approach to the subject of transfer is bound to be misleading. The Yishuv leadership's role in the 1948 Arab exodus was influenced by the war circumstances and the local balance of forces. Nonetheless, the conduct during that war of the Haganah, the Yishuv's military forces, can not adequately be comprehended within the narrow confines of military circumstances. It can only be explained against the above-mentioned historical background, particularly the transfer plans of the 1930s and 1940s. These plans, although they do not all carry the same weight and must be situated in their various contexts, show clearly the transfer intent and mind-set informing the entire Zionist Yishuv.

The work is divided into five parts. Chapter 1 deals with the Zionist transfer ideas from 1882 until 1936, with particular emphasis on the proposals of those who played a leading role in the establishment of the State of Israel. Chapter 2 discusses the partition and transfer recommendations of the Royal (Peel) Commission of 1937 and the intensive Zionist debate that surrounded these concepts, while chapter 3 outlines transfer proposals and preparations undertaken by the Jewish Agency in the wake of the Peel Commission Report. Chapter 4 focuses on the proposals that emerged during World War II and immediately thereafter. The last chapter concentrates on the Palestine exodus of 1948.

This work is largely based on declassified Israeli state and private archival material, supplemented by British archival documents and, to a lesser extent, Arabic sources, as well as a range of secondary sources that have become available in recent years. While sifting through archival material in Israel, I found that many of the official Zionist documents referring to the subject, particularly those dealing with the Palestinian exodus of 1948, are still classified. A definitive and comprehensive study regarding the extent of premeditated Zionist planning of transfer must await their opening.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Zionist Transfer Ideas and Proposals, 1882-1936

When in the late nineteenth century Zionism arose as a political force calling for the colonization of Palestine and the "gathering of all Jews," little attention was paid to the fact that Palestine was already populated. Indeed, the Basle Program adopted at the First Zionist Congress, which launched political Zionism in 1897, made no mention of a Palestinian native population when it spelled out the movement's objective: "the establishment of a publicly and legally secured home in Palestine for the Jewish people."

Moreover, in the early years of their efforts to secure support for their enterprise, the Zionists propagated in the West the idea of "a land without a people for a people without a land," a slogan coined by Israel Zangwill, a prominent Anglo-Jewish writer often quoted in the British press as a spokesman for Zionism and one of the earliest organizers of the Zionist movement in Britain. Even as late as 1914, Chaim Weizmann, who was to become the first president of Israel and who, along with Theodor Herzl and David Ben-Gurion, was one of the three men most responsible for turning the Zionist dream into reality, stated:

In its initial stage, Zionism was conceived by its pioneers as a movement wholly depending on mechanical factors: there is a country which happens to be called Palestine, a country without a people, and, on the other hand, there exists the Jewish people, and it has no country. What else is necessary, then, than to fit the gem into the ring, to unite this people with this country? The owners of the country [the Turks] must,

therefore, be persuaded and convinced that this marriage is advantageous, not only for the [Jewish] people and for the country, but also for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Neither Zangwill nor Weizmann intended these demographic assessments in a literal fashion. They did not mean that there were no people in Palestine, but that there were no people worth considering within the framework of the notions of European supremacy that then held sway. In this connection, a comment by Weizmann to Arthur Ruppin, the head of the colonization department of the Jewish Agency, is particularly revealing. When asked by Ruppin about the Palestinian Arabs, Weizmann replied: "The British told us that there are there some hundred thousands negroes [Kushim] and for those there is no value."<sup>2</sup> Zangwill himself spelled out the actual meaning of his slogan with admirable clarity in 1920:

If Lord Shaftesbury was literally inexact in describing Palestine as a country without a people, he was essentially correct, for there is no Arab people living in intimate fusion with the country, utilising its resources and stamping it with a characteristic impress: there is at best an Arab encampment.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such statements, however, the Zionists from the outset were well aware that not only were there people on the land, but that people were there in large numbers.<sup>4</sup> Zangwill, who had visited Palestine in 1897 and come face-to-face with the demographic reality, acknowledged in 1905 in a speech to a Zionist group in Manchester that "Palestine proper has already its inhabitants. The pashalik of Jerusalem is already twice as thickly populated as the United States, having fifty-two souls to the square mile, and not 25 per cent of them Jews..."<sup>5</sup> Abundant references to the Palestinian population in early Zionist texts show clearly that from the beginning of Zionist settlement in Palestine—which Zionist historiography dates to the arrival of the members of the Russian Bilu Society in 1882—the Palestinian Arabs were far from being an "unseen" or "hidden" presence.<sup>6</sup> Moreover,

recent studies have shown that Zionist leaders were concerned with what they termed the "Arab problem" (*Habe'ayah Ha'aruit*) or the "Arab question" (*Hashelah Ha'aruit*).<sup>7</sup> As seen in their writings, the attitudes prevailing among the majority of the Zionist groups and settlers concerning the indigenous Palestinian population ranged from indifference and disregard to patronizing superiority. A typical example can be found in the works of Moshe Smilansky, a Zionist writer and Labor leader who immigrated to Palestine in 1890:

Let us not be too familiar with the Arab fellahin lest our children adopt their ways and learn from their ugly deeds. Let all those who are loyal to the Torah avoid ugliness and that which resembles it and keep their distance from the fellahin and their base attributes.<sup>8</sup>

There were, certainly, those who took exception to such attitudes. Ahad Ha'Am (Asher Zvi Ginzberg), a liberal Russian Jewish thinker who visited Palestine in 1891, published a series of articles in the Hebrew periodical *Hamelitz* that were sharply critical of the ethnocentricity of political Zionism as well as the exploitation of Palestinian peasantry by Zionist colonists.<sup>9</sup> Ahad Ha'Am, who sought to draw attention to the fact that Palestine was not an empty territory and that the presence of another people on the land posed problems, observed that the Zionist "pioneers" believed that "the only language that the Arabs understand is that of force.... [They] behave towards the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, trespass unjustly upon their boundaries, beat them shamefully without reason and even brag about it, and nobody stands to check this contemptible and dangerous tendency." He cut to the heart of the matter when he ventured that the colonists' aggressive attitude towards the native peasants stemmed from their anger "towards those who reminded them that there is still another people in the land of Israel that have been living there and does not intend to leave."<sup>10</sup>

Another early settler, Yitzhaq Epstein, who arrived in

Palestine from Russia in 1886, warned not only of the moral implications of Zionist colonization but also of the political dangers inherent in the enterprise. In 1907, at a time when Zionist land purchases in the Galilee were stirring opposition among Palestinian peasants forced off land sold by absentee landlords, Epstein wrote a controversial article entitled "The Hidden Question," in which he strongly criticized the methods by which Zionists had purchased Arab land. In his view, these methods entailing dispossession of Arab farmers were bound to cause political confrontation in the future.<sup>11</sup> Reflected in the Zionist establishment's angry response to Epstein's article<sup>12</sup> are two principal features of mainstream Zionist thought: the belief that Jewish acquisition of land took precedence over moral considerations, and the advocacy of a separatist and exclusionist Yishuv.

### Early Transfer Proposals of the Founding Fathers

Zionism's aims in Palestine, its deeply-held conviction that the Land of Israel belonged exclusively to the Jewish people as a whole, and the idea of Palestine's "civilizational barrenness" or "emptiness" against the background of European imperialist ideologies all converged in the logical conclusion that the native population should make way for the newcomers. The idea that the Palestinian Arabs must find a place for themselves elsewhere was articulated early on. Indeed, the founder of the movement, Theodor Herzl, provided an early reference to transfer even before he formally outlined his theory of Zionist rebirth in his *Judenstat*. An 1895 entry in his diary provides in embryonic form many of the elements that were to be demonstrated repeatedly in the Zionist quest for solutions to the "Arab problem"—the idea of dealing with state governments over the heads of the indigenous population, Jewish acquisition of property that would be inalienable, "Hebrew Land" and "Hebrew Labor," and the removal of the native population. Thus, con-

templating the transition from a "society of Jews"<sup>13</sup> to statehood, he wrote on 12 June 1895:

When we occupy the land, we shall bring immediate benefits to the state that receives us. We must expropriate gently the private property on the estates assigned to us.

We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country.

The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly.

Let the owners of immovable property believe that they are cheating us, selling us something far more than they are worth.

But we are not going to sell them anything back.<sup>14</sup>

Another early example of the transfer idea's deep roots among the early Zionists is found in a story by Moshe Smilansky in which he recounts a dialogue that took place in 1891 between two pioneers of *Hovevie Tzion* (Lovers of Zion):

"We should go east, into Transjordan. That would be a test for our movement."

"Nonsense ... isn't there enough land in Judea and Galilee?"

"The land in Judea and Galilee is occupied by the Arabs."

"Well, we'll take it from them."

"How?" (Silence.)

"A revolutionary doesn't ask naive questions."

"Well then, 'revolutionary,' tell us how."

"It is very simple. We'll harass them until they get out ... Let them go to Transjordan."

"And are we going to abandon all of Transjordan?" asks an anxious voice.

"As soon as we have a big settlement here we'll seize the land, we'll become strong, and then we'll take care of the Left Bank [of the Jordan River]. We'll expel them from there, too. Let them go back to the Arab countries."<sup>15</sup>

Israel Zangwill was one of the strongest proponents of transferring the native population out of Palestine. In the same April 1905 talk in Manchester in which he outlined the demographic situation, he went on to draw an obvious conclusion. Given that Palestine was "already twice as thickly populated as the United States," and given that "not 25 per cent of them [are] Jews,"

[We] must be prepared either to drive out by the sword the [Arab] tribes in possession as our forefathers did or to grapple with the problem of a large alien population, mostly Mohammedan and accustomed for centuries to despise us.<sup>16</sup>

Zangwill held firm to this idea in the years that followed, couching his arguments for transfer in pragmatic and geopolitical terms. In a conversation during the summer of 1916 with Vladimir Jabotinsky (who later founded Revisionist Zionism, the forerunner of the present-day Likud), Zangwill argued that the removal of Arabs from Palestine to make room for the settlement of Europe's Jewish masses was a precondition for the fulfillment of Zionism. When Jabotinsky pointed out that the Arabs would never evacuate the land of their birth voluntarily, Zangwill replied that the Zionist enterprise should be part of a new world order in which there could be no place for sentimental argument.<sup>17</sup> At another time, he argued that

If we wish to give a country to a people without a country, it is utter foolishness to allow it to be the country of two peoples. This can only cause trouble. The Jews will suffer and so will their neighbours. One of the two: a different place must be found either for the Jews or for their neighbours.<sup>18</sup>

While Zangwill was particularly frank in his calls for the removal of the Arab population, others expressed the same ideas in euphemistic, discreetly formulated terms, stressing the peaceful nature of the operation that would be initiated by Zionist land acquisition and economic incentives.

For example, Arthur Ruppin, a socialist whose pioneer-



ing role in promoting Jewish settlement and land acquisition makes him a pivotal figure in Zionism, proposed in a May 1911 memorandum to the Zionist Executive, the executive organ of the Zionist Organization, "a limited population transfer" of the Arab peasants from Palestine to the northern Syrian districts of Aleppo and Homs.<sup>19</sup> Ruppin, who several years later founded the Brit Shalom movement advocating a binational Arab-Jewish state, repeated his proposal for the removal of the Arab *fellahin* to Syria in a letter dated 12 May 1914 to Victor Jacobson,<sup>20</sup> a member of the Zionist Executive and the Zionist Organization's representative in Istanbul (1908-15). Some years later, in 1930, after Ruppin had resigned from Brit Shalom in the wake of the intercommunal disturbances of 1929, he wrote that the dispossession and displacement of Arab farmers was inevitable because

land is the most vital condition for our settlement in Palestine. But since there is hardly any land which is worth cultivating that is not already being cultivated, it is found that wherever we purchase land and settle it, by necessity its present cultivators are turned away.... In the future it will be much more difficult to purchase land, as sparsely populated land hardly exists. What remains is densely [Arab] populated land.<sup>21</sup>

Another socialist Zionist who supported the transfer idea was Nahman Syrkin, the ideological founder of Socialist Zionism and considered an important influence in the whole range of Yishuv Labor parties since the second decade of the twentieth century. Syrkin's proposal was included in an 1898 pamphlet entitled "The Jewish Question and the Socialist Jewish State," in which he called for the liberation of Palestine from Turkish rule through cooperation with other rebelling nationalities of the Ottoman Empire and for the subsequent evacuation of Palestine's Arab inhabitants. "Palestine," he wrote, "thinly populated, in which the Jews constitute today 10 per cent of the population, must be evacuated for the Jews."<sup>22</sup>

Leon Motzkin, a cofounder of the Zionist Organization and coauthor of the Basle Program, suggested, in a speech at the annual conference of the German Zionists in July 1912, a solution to the Arab "demographic problem" in Palestine. This, he stated, could be found in the wider Arab framework provided that the Palestinians would agree to sell their lands to Jewish colonists and be resettled on land purchased in neighboring Arab provinces. "The fact is," Motzkin stated, "that around Palestine there are extensive areas. It will be easy for the Arabs to settle there with the money that they will receive from the Jews."<sup>23</sup>

The Balfour Declaration of November 1917 assuring Britain's support for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine dramatically improved Jewish prospects in Palestine, especially since by then it was virtually certain—given Britain's imminent military conquest of Palestine and the arrangements that already had been made to divide the Ottoman Empire among the Great Powers—that Palestine would become a British protectorate. Thus, whereas the transfer proposals up until then remained largely on the level of talk or wish, with the opportunities offered by the Balfour Declaration they began to take on a more pragmatic, less visionary turn.

This change became clear at the Paris Peace Conference, which opened in January 1919 to dispose of the territories captured from the defeated Hapsburgs and Ottomans during the war. Chaim Weizmann, leading the Zionist Commission that was to put forward Zionist claims, called for the imposition of a British Mandate over a Palestine extending north to the Litani River in what is now Lebanon and east to the Hijaz railway line, which is well east of the Jordan River. It was at that conference, too, that Weizmann called for a Palestine "as Jewish as England is English."<sup>24</sup>

While the transfer or removal of the native population is implicit in such a vision, it remained unspoken in official deliberations at the conference. But another member of the Zionist Commission, Aaron Aaronsohn, did mention it in the

corridors of the conference. Aaronsohn, an agronomist, was a member of the Zionist Executive and a director of the Palestine Land Development Company (in Hebrew, *Hevrat Hachsharat Hayishuv*). While working for British intelligence during the war, he had written in the secret intelligence weekly *Arab Bulletin* of the need to "remove forcibly" Arab tenant farmers from the lands to be purchased from Arab absentee landlords for Zionist colonization.<sup>25</sup> Aaronsohn's friend William K. Bullitt, a member of the U.S. mission to the Paris Peace Conference, later recalled:

Many times during the Peace Conference in Paris I joined him [i.e., Aaronsohn] and Dr. Weizmann at a time while both were considering and assessing policies and plans. Aaronsohn's proposal was the following: While Palestine must be made a Jewish state, the vast valley of Iraq, which is irrigated by the Euphrates and Tigris, should be restored, through the use of planned irrigation, to be the paradise of the world ... and furthermore the Arabs of Palestine should be offered lands there ... to which as many Arabs as possible should be persuaded to emigrate.<sup>26</sup>

The euphoria caused by the issuance of the Balfour Declaration also emboldened certain Zionists to speak more forthrightly about transfer. Israel Zangwill, for example, began to campaign for it openly. In late 1918, he published an article in the *Jewish Chronicle*, a London-based Zionist weekly, in which he stated that the emigration of the Palestinians to Arab countries would lessen their fears of displacement in Palestine.<sup>27</sup> Writing in the *League of Nations Journal* in February 1919, he again insisted that the Palestinians "should be gradually transplanted" in Arab countries. Zangwill's more public stance can be seen in the publication of his book, *The Voice of Jerusalem*, in 1920. There, he advocated an "Arab exodus" that would be based on "race redistribution" or a "trek like that of the Boers from Cape Colony," which he advocated as "literally the only 'way out' of the difficulty of creating a Jewish State in Palestine."<sup>28</sup>

Exemplifying once again the recurrent theme in cer-

tain Zionist writings of Palestinian cultural “backwardness” as a justification for the population’s removal, he continued:

We cannot allow the Arabs to block so valuable a piece of historic reconstruction....And therefore we must gently persuade them to “trek.” After all, they have all Arabia with its million square miles....There is no particular reason for the Arabs to cling to these few kilometres. “To fold their tents” and “silently steal away” is their proverbial habit: let them exemplify it now.<sup>29</sup>

But Zangwill’s public campaign was not without some mishaps. His remarks at a public meeting in 1919 about the Arabs of Palestine—“many are semi-nomad, they have given nothing to Palestine and are not entitled to the rules of democracy”<sup>30</sup>—apparently angered Emir Faisal, who was visiting England at the time. Faisal, the military commander of the Arab revolt against the Ottomans during World War I and at the time the focus of Britain’s plans in the Arab world, referred to Zangwill’s speech in a *Jewish Chronicle* interview on 3 October 1919, emphasizing that Palestine had a deeply-rooted Arab population and could not be transformed into a Jewish state. Zangwill’s remarks apparently embarrassed and angered Chaim Weizmann, who was involved at the time in sensitive negotiations aimed at a Zionist-Arab deal with the Sharifian Emir.<sup>31</sup>

### The General Approach toward the Palestinians In the Mandatory Period

At the time the Balfour Declaration was issued, Jews constituted about 10 percent of the population of Palestine, and owned about 2 percent of the land. While Zionist land purchases remained relatively limited during the Mandate period (6 percent until 1948), Jewish immigration into Palestine began eroding the immense numerical superiority of the Palestinians.<sup>32</sup> Growing Arab awareness of Zionist aims in Palestine, reinforced by Zionist calls for unrestricted Jewish immigration and unhindered transfer of Arab lands to

exclusive Jewish control, triggered escalating protests and resistance that were eventually to culminate in the peasant-based great Arab Rebellion of 1936-39.

Thus, while the Balfour Declaration and the formal imposition of the British Mandate over Palestine in 1922 considerably raised the likelihood of eventual Jewish statehood, at the same time it was becoming clear that the indigenous inhabitants were clinging to the land with stubborn insistence; demonstrations beginning in the early 1920s against Jewish immigration swept away any illusions that may have remained about the ease of solving the "Arab problem."

Caution in public pronouncements was therefore essential, not only so as not to antagonize the Arabs, but also out of regard for the British public's sensitivities towards the handling of the "Arab problem"; after all, in addition to promising a national home to the Jews, the Balfour Declaration had promised not to prejudice the rights of the "non-Jewish communities existing in Palestine."

Already at the time of the Balfour Declaration, apprehensions concerning the fate of the "non-Jewish communities" had been voiced in British establishment circles. Edward Montagu, a Jewish cabinet minister at the India Office, had expressed in 1917 his belief that the Zionist drive to create a Jewish state in Palestine would end by "driving out the present inhabitants."<sup>33</sup> Even the enthusiastically pro-Zionist Winston Churchill had written in his review of Palestinian affairs dated 25 October 1919 that "there are the Jews, whom we are pledged to introduce into Palestine, and who take it for granted that the local population will be cleared out to suit their convenience."<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, there are claims that Balfour had actually envisaged such a "solution." In his contribution to a British radio program tribute to Chaim Weizmann in 1964, Lord Boothby, a life-long Zionist and president of the Anglo-Israel Association, told his listeners that "the original Balfour Declaration made provision for the Arabs to be removed elsewhere, more or less."<sup>35</sup> However, in his letter to the editor of

the *Jewish Chronicle*,<sup>36</sup> he did not produce documentary evidence to substantiate his reference to the content of an "original Balfour Declaration," a draft allegedly produced either by the Zionists or the British providing for the removal of the Arabs. At the same time Boothby stuck to his claim: "The original Balfour Declaration was far more clear and specific than the one that was ultimately adopted; and Weizmann wondered, to the end of his days, whether in fact it was not wiser to accept the latter, press for ratification and hope for the best." He added:

For my part, as a life-long Zionist, I never had any doubt that the creation of a National Home for the Jews must result in the establishment of the State of Israel and that the consequences of this must be faced. I thought, and said long ago, that a steadily increasing immigration of Jews from all over the world to a country the size of Wales, without great natural resources, was quite unrealistic unless accompanied by some resettlement of the Arab population. This could, and should, have been carried out between thirty and forty years ago by the British government, on lavish lines, when they had both the power and the money to do it. How, otherwise, could they hope to implement the pledges they had given?<sup>37</sup>

Six weeks later, Lord Boothby wrote again in the *Jewish Observer* and *Middle East Review* (London, 28 February 1964), acknowledging the absence of any written evidence to substantiate his claim, while at the same time sticking to its validity and citing in support a letter Mrs. Weizmann sent to him. Lord Boothby's claim was also supported by Boris Goriel, a senior official of the Weizmann Archives, in Rehovot.<sup>38</sup>

Whether or not Lord Boothby's claims have any validity, the fact remains that the possible impact of Balfour's promise to the Jews on the Arabs of Palestine was a delicate issue from the beginning. As a result, the Western-attuned Labor Zionists were at pains to temper their public utterances regarding the "Arab problem." Israel Zangwill, whose disparaging remarks about the Arabs had already

caused difficulty with Emir Faisal, recounts a similar episode in 1917 when "...the Arabs had read my article in *Pearson's Magazine*, in which I pointed out the difficulty in the existence of the Arab population in the Land of Israel . . . and this caused much agitation among them. Now the Zionists asked me not to raise the question and I agreed for the time being."<sup>39</sup> During the twenties, the Ahdut Ha'avodah party, then the dominant Zionist grouping in the Yishuv (which would merge with the Hapo'el Hatza'ir to form Mapai in 1930), adopted a policy line of "avoiding all mention of the Arab question in party manifestos and policy statements."<sup>40</sup>

Despite all the efforts at public discretion, Zionist policy pressed forward. In the face of growing Palestinian resistance the Zionists adopted the same approach they had always used in dealing with the "Arab problem," which was to seek-both with the British government and with Arab leaders-a solution outside Palestine within the wider framework of the Arab countries.

At the root of this notion-that the Palestinians did not have to be dealt with directly-was the denial of a distinct Palestinian identity or any semblance of Palestinian nationalism. This was unquestionably grounded in the dismissive attitude that had always attended anything relating to Palestinians or Palestinian culture. Thus the attitudes of the two pivotal figures in the creation of the Israeli state, Chaim Weizmann (principally in the diplomatic and international arena) and David Ben-Gurion (principally as leader of the Yishuv). It also explains Weizmann's assessment, even prior to the British conquest of Palestine, that the Palestinians "could be bought off" their land "or suppressed with a little firmness"-in essence, that they were a negligible factor posing no obstacle to Zionist or British plans.<sup>41</sup> For Weizmann, the native population was akin to "the rocks of Judea, as obstacles that had to be cleared on a difficult path."<sup>42</sup> Ben-Gurion, too, expressed disdain towards Arab society and culture and distrusted the Arabs in general. Surely significant is the fact that, despite an aptitude for

language that enabled him to learn—in addition to his native Yiddish–Hebrew, Turkish, English, Russian, French, German, and later in life Spanish and ancient Greek, he never learned the language of the people among whom he lived for almost his entire life.<sup>43</sup>

It is true that under certain extreme circumstances—such as the anti-Jewish Arab riots of 1929 triggered by a perceived change in status of the holy places and prolonged strikes and fighting that dominated Palestine during the Great Arab Rebellion of 1936 to 1939—Zionist leaders sometimes recognized a certain national and mass character to the Palestinians' opposition to Zionism. Thus, several months after the 1929 riots, Ben-Gurion told the joint secretariat of the major Zionist groupings in the Yishuv:

The debate as to whether or not an Arab national movement exists is a pointless verbal exercise; the main thing for us is that the movement attracts the masses. We do not regard it as a resurgence movement and its moral worth is dubious. But politically speaking it is a national movement.... The Arab must not and cannot be a Zionist. He could never wish the Jews to become a majority. This is the true antagonism between us and the Arabs. We both want to be the majority.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, not long after the outbreak of the rebellion in 1936, Ben-Gurion, who had become the year before chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive, the twenty-odd member body that made major political and strategic decisions affecting the future of Zionism and the Yishuv, acknowledged at a meeting of his Mapai party that the indigenous Palestinians were fighting to keep Palestine as an Arab country:

...the fear is not of losing land, but of losing the homeland of the Arab people, which others want to turn into the homeland of the Jewish people. The Arab is fighting a war that cannot be ignored. He goes out on strike, he is killed, he makes great sacrifices.<sup>45</sup>

A year later Ben-Gurion wrote to Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), the powerful head of the Jewish Agency Political



Department who would become Israel's first foreign minister, that were he a politically conscious Arab, he would protest Jewish immigration because "what Arab cannot do his math and understand that the immigration at the rate of 60,000 a year means a Jewish state in all of Palestine?"<sup>46</sup>

But such statements were not representative of his attitudes, nor of the attitudes of other Zionist leaders. Indeed, when Zionist leaders referred to Palestinian nationalism, especially as of the mid-1930s, it was generally to compare it to German Nazism. Thus Yitzhak Tabenkin, one of the most important Labor leaders of the Yishuv and a leading ideologue of the kibbutz movement, described the Palestinian national movement in his May Day speech of 1936 as a "Nazi" movement, with which there was no possibility of compromise.<sup>47</sup> A few months later, Berl Katznelson, one of the three most important Labor leaders of the Yishuv (along with Ben-Gurion and Tabenkin) referred to Palestinian nationalism in a speech to Mapai members as "Nazism," and spoke of "typical Arab bloodlust."<sup>48</sup> On another occasion, in January 1937, he spoke of "Arab fascism and imperialism and Arab Hitlerism."<sup>49</sup>

Such references to Palestinian nationalism notwithstanding, the dominant and fundamental view among the Zionist leadership was to deny anything akin to Palestinian national feeling. For Ben-Gurion as for others, the Palestinians were not a distinct people but merely "Arabs"—the "Arab population" or "Arab community" that happened to reside in the country. Ben-Gurion succinctly expressed this idea in 1936: "There is no conflict between Jewish and Palestinian nationalism because the Jewish nation is not in Palestine and the Palestinians are not a nation."<sup>50</sup>

Closely linked to this idea of the nonexistence of the Palestinians as a nation and their nonattachment to the particular soil of Palestine is their belonging to a larger Arab nation. Hence the way in which the Zionists seized upon the Arab nationalist movement that was sweeping the Arab world as a justification for their own program. After all, if the

Palestinians did not constitute a distinct, separate nation and were not an integral part of the country with profound historical ties to it, but instead belonged to the larger Arab nation, then they could be shifted to other territories of that nation without undue prejudice. Similarly, if the Palestinians were merely a local part of a larger body, then they were not a major party to the conflict with Zionism; thus Zionist efforts to deal over their heads with outside Arabs was completely justifiable. It is thus that Zionist pronouncements are full of references to the vast Arab territories: who could begrudge the Jews these "few kilometres," to use Zangwill's formulation? Hence Moshe Beilinson, a writer, Labor leader, and a close associate of Ben-Gurion, wrote in 1929:

There is a fundamental and decisive difference between the situation of the Arabs as a nation and that of the Jews as a nation. Palestine is not needed by the Arabs from the national point of view. They are bound to other centres. There, in Syria, in Iraq, in the Arabian Peninsula lies the homeland of the Arab people.<sup>51</sup>

And on the question of the Palestinians being deprived of their rights as a result of the exclusive Jewish right to sovereignty over Palestine, Beilinson pronounced:

There is no answer to this question nor can there be, and we are not obliged to provide it because we are not responsible for the fact that a particular individual man was born in a certain place, and not several kilometres away from there.<sup>52</sup>

Ben-Gurion's belief that Palestinians had little attachment to Jerusalem derived from the same line of argument. During the violent Arab-Jewish clashes of 1929 over changing the status quo with regard to praying rights at Jerusalem's holy places, he stated: "Jerusalem is not the same thing to the Arabs as it is to the Jews. The Arab people inhabits many great lands."<sup>53</sup>

Such assertions were crucial to legitimize Zionism's denial of the Palestinian Arabs' entitlement to self-determination in Palestine or even part of Palestine. The wider