

# Zionist Massacres: the Creation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem in the 1948 War

*Dr. Saleh Abdel Jawad\**

“Palestine is the cruellest, most difficult cause to uphold, not because it is unjust, but because it is just and yet dangerous to speak about ... honestly and concretely.”

Edward Said<sup>1</sup>

“Things will come out in the end. The question is how to live with this.”

Aryeh Yitzachi<sup>2</sup>

## I. Introduction

The Arab-Israeli War began on Monday, 5 June 1967. By the next morning a long column of men, women, and children coming from nowhere began to crowd the streets of my home town, el-Bireh, heading

---

\* I want to thank the following institutions and individuals for supporting this work in a variety of ways: the Program for Scholars At Risk and the Department of History, Harvard University, especially Jacqueline Bhaba and Professor John Womack, Professor Joel Perlmann, Levy Institute Research Professor at Bard College; Professors Joseph Massad of Columbia University, Professor Suad Joseph of the University of California at Davis, Rosemary Sayigh, Linda Butler of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, and Professor Eve Spangler of the Boston College Department of Sociology for invaluable editorial suggestions and insightful ideas.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in B. Harlow, “Remember the Solidarity Here and Everywhere”, *Middle East Report* 229 (2002), 4 et seq.

<sup>2</sup> G. Ehrlich, “Not only in Deir Yassin”, *Ha’ir*, 6 May 1992, 22.

toward Amman. Some were in their cars, but most were on foot. My father, who was the Mayor of el-Bireh at that time, tried to stop the fleeing refugees with the help of local scouts. He noticed that the bulk of the mass was composed of people who had fled their homes in 1948 fearing war atrocities, and were now refugees for the second time. I was struck by the agony in their voices and the grief on their faces. I also observed their extreme fear of the Israelis whose only appearance in the town had been for a short strafing “visit” by three Israeli airplanes, which killed five people. My interest in the Palestinian refugee tragedy during the 1948 War dates from this moment when I, as a boy of 15, began to wonder about the nature of an enemy who could strike such terror into the hearts of the adults I knew.

Since then, I have dedicated my work to “the study of the inhuman use of power ... determined to uncover the essence of the system that produced it.”<sup>3</sup> Today, I argue the following: The number of documented massacres<sup>4</sup> perpetrated by Zionists and Israeli forces against the Palestinians during the 1948 War is much larger and more important than previously thought. Furthermore, the false perception of the size and the significance of the massacres is not only by the general public, but even historians, including Palestinian historians.<sup>5</sup> The size and significance of these incidents transcend the scope previously given to it by historians. For the time period between the beginning of the war, December 1947, and January 1949 at the end of the war, I documented *nearly 70 massacres*.

This relatively large number is a conservative count for many reasons. First, it does not cover the entire period of the war.<sup>6</sup> Second, there are locations for which I have no data at all, like the Bedouin settlements in

---

<sup>3</sup> S. Power, “The Lesson of Hannah Arendt”, *New York Review of Books* 51 (2004), 34 et seq., uses this language to describe the work of Hannah Arendt and it perfectly describes why I greatly admire her intellectual work.

<sup>4</sup> I will offer a definition of a massacre below.

<sup>5</sup> This contradicts both the old Israeli historiography that recognises only Deir Yassin, as well as the work of Benny Morris who continues to insist that “atrocities were limited in size, scope and time” (B. Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, 2004, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 482).

<sup>6</sup> The war itself began in December 1947 and ended in 1949 with the signing of multiple armistice agreements. The expulsion of the Palestinians from their land, however, continued for many years after the war. For example, the population of the city of Majdal was expelled in 1950; the Bedouin tribes’ expulsion continued up to 1953.