

CHAPTER 8

A LAND WITHOUT A PEOPLE

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.
—Jewish settler, 1891

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

—Israel Zangwill, 1905

Palestine shall be as Jewish as England is English, or America is American.
—Chaim Weizmann, 1919

I support compulsory transfer. I do not see in it anything immoral.
—David Ben-Gurion, 1938

Without the uprooting of the Palestinians, a Jewish state would not have arisen here.

—Benny Morris, 2004¹

CONSIDER A FEW DATES AND NUMBERS THAT bear testimony to the demographic transformation effected by the Zionists in Palestine during the first half of the twentieth century.

At the start of the nineteenth century, there were 7,000 Jews living in Ottoman Palestine: a mere 2.5 percent of its population.² In 1882, their numbers had increased to 24,000 and their share in the total population had grown to 8 percent. In 1918, following 36 years of organized efforts to establish Jewish colonies, the Jewish population of Palestine had grown to 60,000; their share was not much higher at 9.1 percent. Over the next three decades, following the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the rate of growth of the Jewish population accelerated dramatically. In 1946, the Jewish population

had increased to 543,000, a ninefold increase since 1918. Over the same period, their share had also increased more than threefold to 30 percent. In 1949, the Jewish population of Israel—incorporating 78 percent of mandatory Palestine—had climbed to 1,014,000. On the contrary, the Arab population of this territory had plummeted to 160,000. Proportionately, the Jewish and Arab shares in the population of Israel now stood at 86.4 and 13.6 percent.³ In no time, the Palestinians had become a minority in 78 percent of their own country.

In a single year, during 1948, the Arab population of the territory captured by Israel had plummeted from close to a million to 159,000.⁴ Where had all these Arabs gone? Had they been ethnically cleansed—under the cover of the War of 1948—by the Israeli military and other armed Jewish groups? Strenuously, in their official historiography, the Zionists have maintained that they had not driven out the Arab population of Israel; there were no massacres of Arabs, no rapes, no looting of Arab property. The Arabs had left voluntarily, following the advice of their leaders, to move out of the way of the victorious Arab armies that were advancing on Palestine. This is one of the entrenched myths created by Zionism after the War of 1948.

Israel would never allow the Palestinian Arabs to return to their homes inside Israel.⁵ Israel argued that the Arabs could not return because they had left “voluntarily.” In leaving “voluntarily,” they had demonstrated hostile intent toward Israel; if they returned, they would seek to undermine Israel from within. Israel denied that it had engaged in ethnic cleansing of its Arab population. Yet, it ensured the same outcome by preventing their return. Israel can eat its cake and have it too.

This is one of many Zionist myths that circulate as history in the West. According to official Zionist “history,” the Jews in Palestine have always wanted to live in peace with the Arabs, to share the land equitably with them. Did they not accept the partition plans proposed by the Peel Commission and the United Nations? Cohabitation was rejected by the Arabs; they attacked Israel on the eve of its independence, fully determined to destroy the fledgling state and drive the Jews into the sea. Israel won the War of 1948 by a narrow margin, and has since been forced to fight many more wars imposed upon it by the Arabs. Israel has made many peace overtures since 1948, only to be rebuffed by Arabs. Every nation believes in its own myths; myths of Israeli provenance are lapped up in every Western country.

The myth of a voluntary Palestinian departure from Israel was first challenged by four Israeli historians in the late 1980s. Drawing upon official archives recently opened to the public, they presented a new narrative