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## ISRAEL APARTHEID WEEK?

# THE REAL STORY IS ARAB OPPRESSION AND APARTHEID, ARAB DENIAL OF DIVERSITY AND BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS

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## THE STORY OF ARAB APARTHEID

*Ben-Dror Yemini*

*Front Page Magazine*, June 3, 2011

(Originally published in Ma'ariv, May 14, 2011)

The real “nakba,” the Palestinian-termed great “catastrophe” of the creation of Israel, is the story of Arab apartheid. Tens of millions, among them Jews, suffered from the “nakba,” which included dispossession, expulsion and displacement. Yet only the Palestinians remained refugees because they were treated to abuse and oppression by Arab countries. Below is the story of the real “nakba.”

In 1959, the Arab League passed Resolution 1457, which states as follows: **“The Arab countries will not grant citizenship to applicants of Palestinian origin in order to prevent their assimilation into the host countries.”** (*emphasis ours – Ed.*) That is a stunning resolution, which was diametrically opposed to international norms in everything pertaining to refugees in those years, particularly in that decade. The story began, of course, in 1948, when the Palestinian “nakba” occurred. It was also the beginning of the controversy of the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the blame heaped on Israel, because it allegedly expelled Palestinian refugees, turning them into miserable wretches. This lie went public through academe and the media dealing with the issue. In previous articles on the issue of the Palestinians, I explained that there is nothing special about the Israeli-Arab conflict. Here’s why:

First, Arab countries refused to accept the proposal of Israel-Palestine partition, and they launched a war of annihilation against the State of Israel, which had barely been established. All precedents on this matter show that the party that starts the war — and with a declaration of annihilation — pays a price for it.

Second, this entails a population exchange: indeed, between 550,000 and 710,000 Arabs fled the area (the most precise calculation is that of Prof. Ephraim Karash, who calculated and found that their number ranges between 583,000 and 609,000). A minority were expelled because of the war, and a larger number of about 850,000 Jews were expelled or fled from Arab countries (the “Jewish nakba”).

Third, the Palestinians are not unique in this story. Population exchanges and expulsions were the norm at that time. They occurred in dozens of other conflict points, and about 52 million people experienced dispossession, expulsion and uprooting.

And fourth, in all the population exchange precedents that occurred during or at the end of an armed conflict, or against the backdrop of either the establishment of a national entity or the disintegration of a multinational state and the establishment of a national entity, there was no return of refugees to the previous region, which had turned into a new national state. The displaced persons and the refugees, with almost no exceptions, found sanctuary in the place in which they joined a population with a similar background. For example, the ethnic Germans who were expelled from Central and Eastern Europe assimilated in Germany, the Hungarian refugees from Czechoslovakia and other places found sanctuary in Hungary, the Ukrainians who were expelled from Poland found sanctuary in Ukraine, and so forth. The affinity between the Arabs who originated in mandatory Palestine and their neighbors in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, was, in fact, similar or even greater than the affinity between many ethnic Germans and Germany, sometimes after a disconnect of many generations.

Only the Arab states acted completely differently from the rest of the world. They crushed the refugees, despite the fact that they were their coreligionists and members of the Arab nation. In the words of Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader: “The Arab armies entered Palestine to protect the Palestinians from the Zionist tyranny, but instead they abandoned them, forced them to emigrate and to leave their homeland, imposed upon them a political and ideological blockade and threw them into prisons similar to the ghettos in which the Jews used to live in Eastern Europe” (from the official journal of the PLO, *Falastin el-Thawra*, “What We Have Learned and What We Should Do,” Beirut, March 1976).

The Arab states, not Israel, instituted a régime of apartheid. So, we must remember that the “nakba” was not caused by actual dispossession, which had also been experienced by tens of millions of others. The “nakba” is the story of the apartheid and abuse suffered by the Arab refugees (it was only later that they became “Palestinians”) in Arab countries.

### **Apartheid in Egypt**

Throughout many eras, there was no real distinction between the inhabitants of Egypt and the inhabitants of the coastal plain. Both were Muslim Arabs, who lived under Ottoman rule. According to the researcher Oroub El-Abed, commercial ties, mutual migration, and intermarriage between the two groups were commonplace. Many of the residents of Jaffa (now in Israel) were defined as Egyptians because they arrived in many waves, like the wave of immigration to Jaffa during the rule of Muhammad Ali and his son over many parts of the coastal plain. Inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, which became mandatory Palestine, did not have an ethnic or religious identity that differed from that of the Egyptian Arabs.

Various records from the end of 1949 show that 202,000 refugees went to the Gaza Strip, primarily from Jaffa, Beer Sheva and Majdal (Ashkelon). That number may be exaggerated because the local poor also joined the list of aid recipients. The refugees went to the place where they were part of the majority group from all standpoints: ethnic, national and religious. Egypt, however, did not think so. At first, back in September 1948, a “government of all Palestine” was established, headed by Ahmad al-Baki. However, it

was an organization under Egyptian auspices due to the rivalry with Jordan. The nascent Palestinian government gave up the venture after a decade.

What happened to the people in the Gaza Strip? How did the Egyptians treat them? Strangely, there is almost no research dealing with those days. But it is a bit difficult to hide that not so distant past. The Gaza Strip became a closed camp. It became almost impossible to leave Gaza. Severe restrictions were imposed on the Gazans (the originals and the refugees) in everything connected with employment, education and other matters. Every night, there was a curfew until dawn the next day. There was only one matter in which the Egyptians assisted to the best of their ability: the school books contained serious incitement against Jews. Already in 1950, Egypt notified the UN that “due to the population crowding,” it would not be possible to assist the Palestinians by resettling them. That was a dubious excuse. Egypt thwarted the UN proposal to resettle 150,000 refugees in Libya. Many of the refugees who had fled in the earlier stages and were within Egypt were also forced to move to the giant concentration camp that was forming in the Gaza Strip. In effect, all the settlement arrangements proposed for resettling the refugees were blocked by the Arab countries.

Despite the absolute isolation, there is testimony about what happened in the Gaza Strip during those years. The important American journalist Martha Gellhorn paid a visit to the refugee camps in 1961. She also went to the Gaza Strip. It wasn't simple. Gellhorn described the bureaucratic ordeal involved in obtaining an entry permit to the Gaza Strip and the days of waiting in Cairo. She also described the “sharp contrast between the amiability of the clerks, and the anti-Semitic propaganda that blossomed in Cairo.” “The Gaza Strip is not a hole,” Gellhorn stated, “but rather one big prison. The Egyptian government is the warden.” She described a harsh military régime with all the elite of the Gaza Strip expressing enthusiastically pro-Nasser positions. Thus, for example, “For 13 years (1948-1961) only 300 refugees managed to obtain temporary exit visas.” The only thing that the Egyptians gave the Palestinians was hate propaganda.

That is not the only testimony. In 1966, a Saudi newspaper published a letter by one of the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip:

I would be happy if the Gaza Strip would be conquered by Israel. At least that way we would know that the one violating our honor, hurting us and tormenting us – would be the Zionist oppressor, Ben Gurion, and not an Arab brother whose name is Abdel Nasser. The Jews under Hitler did not suffer the way we are suffering under Nasser. In order to go to Cairo or Alexandria or other cities, we have to go through an ordeal.

*Radio Jedda* in Saudi Arabia broadcast the following:

We are aware of the laws that prohibit Palestinians from working in Egypt. We have to ask Cairo, what is the Iron Curtain that Abdel Nasser and his gang have raised around the Gaza Strip and the refugees? The military governor in Gaza has prohibited every Arab from traveling to Cairo without a military permit, which is valid for only 24 hours. Imagine, Arabs, how Nasser, who claims to be the pioneer of Arab nationalism, treats the wretched Arabs of Gaza, who are starving to death while the military governor and his officers enjoy the riches in the Gaza Strip.

Even assuming that those were exaggerated descriptions in the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Nasser, we are still left with an oppressive régime of two decades. And it is worth noting another fact: when Israel arrived in the Gaza Strip, the life expectancy there was 48 years of age. After a little over two decades, the life expectancy has jumped to 72 years of age, past that of Egypt. More than the fact that this awards points to Israel, it also shows the abyss in which the Gaza Strip found itself during the days of the Egyptian régime.

Refugees from mandatory Palestine also lived in Egypt itself. Many of them did not even feel that they were Palestinians and preferred to assimilate. The Egyptians prevented them from doing so. Except for a short period of time that was considered the “golden age,” during some of the years of Nasser's rule, which

did not include the Gaza refugees. Even those who were in Egypt suffered from restrictions on purchasing land, engaging in certain professions and education (for example, there was a prohibition on the establishment of a Palestinian school). The Egyptian citizenship law allowed citizenship for someone whose father was Egyptian, and later, the law was expanded to anyone whose mother was Egyptian. In actuality, however, restrictions were imposed on anyone considered a Palestinian. Even the decision of an Egyptian court cancelling the restrictions did not help....

### **Apartheid in Jordan**

Precisely like the identification and unity between the Arabs of Jaffa and southern Israel and the Arabs of Egypt, similar identification exists between the Arabs of the West Bank and the Arabs of Jordan. Thus, for example, the Bedouin of the Majalis (or Majilis) tribe from the al-Karak region are originally from Hebron. During the days of the Ottoman Empire, Eastern Jordan was part of the Damascus district, like other parts of what later came under the auspices of the British Palestinian Mandate. According to the Balfour declaration, the area now called Jordan was supposed to be part of the Jewish national homeland.

The initial distress of the refugees on both sides of the Jordan River was enormous. For example, Iraqi soldiers controlled the area of Nablus, and there is testimony about “the Iraqi soldiers taking the children of the rich for acts of debauchery and returning the children to their families the next day, the inhabitants are frequently arrested.” Indeed, Arab solidarity.

It seemed that Jordan treated the refugees differently. Under a 1954 Jordanian law, any refugee who lived in the area of Jordan between 1948 and 1954 was given the right to citizenship. However, that was only the outward façade. Below is a description of the reality under the Jordanian régime in the West Bank:

We have never forgotten and we will never forget the nature of the régime that degraded our honor and trampled our human feelings. A régime that was built on an inquisition and the boots of the desert people. We lived for a long time under the humiliation of the Arab nationalism and it hurts to say that we had to wait for the Israeli conquest in order to become aware of humane relations with civilians.

It should be noted that these statements were published in the name of critics of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *Al Hawadith* on April 23, 1971.

As in all other Arab countries, Jordan did not do a thing to dismantle the refugee camps. While Israel was absorbing hundreds of thousands of refugees from Europe and the Arab countries in similar camps (transit camps), and undergoing a punishing process of rehabilitation, building new settlements and dismantling the camps, Jordan did exactly the opposite and prevented any process of rehabilitation. During those same two decades, not one institution of higher learning was established in the West Bank. The flowering of higher education began in the 1970s, after the Israelis took control.

Even the citizenship that was given to the refugees was mainly for the sake of appearances. Despite the fact that the Palestinians number over 50% of the inhabitants of Jordan, they hold only 18 seats – out of 110 – in the Jordanian parliament, and only 9 senators out of 55, who are appointed by the king. It should also be recalled that during just one month, September 1970, in one confrontation, Jordan killed many more Palestinians than all the Palestinians who have been hurt in the 43 years of Israeli rule over the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

### **Apartheid in Syria**

The first Congress of Muslim-Christian Associations, the first Palestinian Arab conference, was held in Jerusalem in 1919. At the conference, it was decided that Palestine, which had just been conquered by the British, was southern Syria — an integral part of greater Syria. Over the years of the mandate, the immigration from Syria into the British mandate territory increased, for example, the Al-Hourani family, which arrived from the Houran in Syria. The idea of “greater Syria,” which included mandatory Palestine,

was also reflected in the growing involvement of Syrians in the great Arab rebellion and in the gangs that arrived from Syria during the War of Independence. The refugees, therefore, were not strangers politically, religiously or ethnically. To the contrary, their fate should not have been different from the fate of other ethnic groups who were expelled to a place in which they constituted the national and cultural majority.

Between 70,000 and 90,000 refugees arrived in Syria, the decisive majority of them from Safed, Haifa, Tiberias and Acre. Thus, in 1954, they were granted partial rights, which did not include political rights. Until 1968, they were prohibited from holding property. Syrian law enables any Arab citizens to obtain Syrian citizenship, provided that his permanent residence is in Syria and he has a proven capacity for economic subsistence. However, the Palestinians are the only ones outside the applicability of the law. Even if they are permanent residents and possess means, the law prevents them from obtaining citizenship....

### **Apartheid in Lebanon**

In the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians suffered for only two decades because of the Egyptian régime. In Lebanon, the apartheid continues to this day. The result is poverty, neglect, and enormous unemployment. Up to 1969, the refugee camps were under the stringent military control of Lebanon. According to the descriptions of Martha Gellhorn, most of the refugees were in a reasonable situation. Many even improved their standard of living compared with the days before the “nakba.” But in 1969, the Cairo Agreement was signed, which transferred control of the camps to the refugees themselves. The situation only grew worse. Terrorist organizations took control of the camps, which turned them into arenas of conflict — mostly violent — among the various groups.

A new study that was published in December 2010 presents data that makes the Gaza Strip look like paradise compared with Lebanon. Indeed, there was some scant publicity about it here and there, but as far as we know, there was no worldwide protest, not even a Turkish or international flotilla. In contrast to Syria and Jordan, in which most of those defined as refugees are no longer in refugee camps, two thirds of the Palestinians in Lebanon live in camps, which are “enclaves outside the control of the state.” The most stunning data is that, despite the fact that about 425,000 refugees are registered with UNRWA, the study found that only between 260,000 and 280,000 Palestinians live in Lebanon. The paradox is that UNRWA is receiving financing for more than 150,000 people who are not even in Lebanon. This figure alone should have led to a serious inquest by the financing countries (primarily the US and Europe), but there is no chance that that will happen. The issue of the refugees is fraught with so many errors and lies that one more lie doesn’t really change anything. And so UNRWA can demand a budget for 425,000 people from the international community, while its website has a link to the study that shows that it’s all a fiction.

According to the study, the refugees are suffering from 56% unemployment. That seems to be the highest figure, not just among the Palestinians, but in the entire Arab world. Even those who are working are at the bottom of the employment ladder. Only 6% of those in the workforce have some kind of academic degree (compared with 20% of the workforce in Lebanon). The result is that 66% of the Palestinians in Lebanon live below the poverty line, which was set at six dollars per day per person. That is double the number of the Lebanese.

This dismal state of affairs is a result of apartheid for all intents and purposes. A series of Lebanese laws restrict the right to citizenship, to property, and to employment in the fields of law, medicine, pharmaceuticals, journalism, etc. In August 2010, there was a limited amendment to the labour law, but the amendment did not actually lead to any real change. Another directive prohibits the entry of building materials into refugee camps, and there are reports of arrests and the demolition of houses resulting from construction in the refugee camps....

### **Apartheid in Kuwait**

In 1991, the Palestinians constituted 30% of the country of Kuwait's population. Relative to other Arab countries, their situation there was reasonable. Then Saddam Hussein invaded from Iraq. As part of the attempts at compromise that proceeded to first Gulf War, Saddam made a "proposal" to retreat from Kuwait in exchange for Israel's retreat from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The PLO, headed by Yasir Arafat, supported Saddam's proposal. That support was the opening salvo in one of the worst events in Palestinian history. After Kuwait was liberated from the Iraqi conquest, an anti-Palestinian campaign commenced, which included persecution, arrests and show trials. The terrible saga ended in the expulsion of 450,000 Palestinians. Incidentally, some of them had settled there back in the 1930s, and most of them had no connection to Arafat's support for Saddam. Nevertheless, they were subject to collective punishment, a transfer of proportions similar to the original "nakba" in 1948, which barely earned any mention in the world media. There are endless academic publications on the expulsion and flight in 1948. There are close to zero studies on the "nakba" of 1991.

These are the main countries in which the refugees are located. Apartheid is also rampant in other countries. In Saudi Arabia, the refugees from mandatory Palestine have not received citizenship. In 2004, Saudi Arabia announced some changes, but clarified that the changes do not include the Palestinians. Jordan also prevents 150,000 refugees, most of them originally from the Gaza Strip, from receiving citizenship now. In Iraq, the refugees were actually given preference under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, but since he fell from power, they have become one of the most persecuted groups. Twice, both on the Libyan-Egyptian border and on the Syria-Iraqi border, thousands of expelled Palestinians lived in temporary camps and not a single Arab state agreed to take them....

Time after time, the Arab countries have rejected proposals to resettle the refugees, despite the fact that there was room and there was a need. The march continues. In 1995, the ruler of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, decided to expel 30,000 Palestinians, just because he was angry about the Oslo accords, about the PLO, and about the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. A Palestinian doctor, Dr. Ashraf al-Hazouz, spent 8 years in a Libyan prison (together with Bulgarian nurses) on false charges of spreading AIDS. In August 2010, before the present uprising, Libya passed laws that made the lives of the Palestinians impossible. It was at precisely the same time that Libya dispatched a "humanitarian aid ship" to the Gaza Strip. There is no limit to hypocrisy.

*Ben-Dror Yemini is a researcher, a lecturer and a journalist.*

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## **ON TOPIC**

**In the Apartheid Oscars, Arab States Win Hands Down:** [Lyn Julius, \*Times of Israel\*, February 26, 2013](#)—Roll up, roll up for Israel Apartheid Week – a global, multimedia extravaganza devoted to cementing the comparison between the new international pariah, Israel, and the old racist regime in South Africa. And it's coming to a campus near you.

**The False Apartheid Narrative:** [Robert Cherry, \*The Daily Beast\*, Feb 28, 2013](#)—Apartheid represents a pervasive system of state policies that institutionalize separate and unequal treatment. In March, there will be anti-apartheid activities at many colleges. Most participants judge Israel to be an apartheid society based solely on its actions in the West Bank. However, some like Omar Barghouti and Ben White use the term "apartheid state" to also characterize Israeli policies towards its 1.5 million Arab citizens.

**More proof of Israel's restraint:** [Editorial, \*National Post\*, Mar. 12, 2013](#)—On Nov. 14, 2012, the Israeli Defense Forces began Operation Pillar of Defense, aimed at Hamas' Gaza-based network of rocket batteries and terrorist hideouts. Soon after the conflict began, tragedy befell one Palestinian family. Their home was destroyed by a powerful explosion. Three civilians, including an 11-month-old boy, were killed.