

Getting the facts right about Israel and the Arabs

AS WITH all nations, Israel should be criticised whenever its actions fail to meet acceptable standards, but the criticism should be proportional, comparative and accurately contextual. No one is being asked to compromise principles; rather, all people of goodwill should apply the same principles of morality and justice to the state of Israel that they do to other states. As long as Israel stands singularly and falsely accused of being the worst offender, those committed to truth and fairness are obliged to disprove those accusations – firmly and unequivocally. Limited space prevents replies to all the issues raised in Terry Crawford-Browne's letter ("Jews will soon be liberated from the burden of Zionism," Cape Times Letters, December 24), so I refer only to the issue of land.

Crawford-Browne's accusation that "only 6 percent of the land was owned by Jews in 1946" is easily rejected by readily available evidence. In May 1948, the state of Israel was established in only part of the area allotted by the League of Nations mandate 8.6 percent owned by Jews, 3.3 percent by Israeli Arabs – while 16.9 percent had been abandoned by Arab owners who imprudently heeded the call from neighbouring countries to "get out of the way" while the invading Arab armies destroyed Israel. The rest of the land – over 70 percent – had been vested in the mandatory power and, accordingly was allocated to the state of Israel as its legal heir (Government of Palestine, Survey of Palestine, 1946, British Government Printer p 257).

These lands had not been owned by Arab farmers under the mandate nor under the preceding regime (Moshe Aumann: *Land Ownership in Palestine, 1880-1948*). The contention that the bulk of the land had belonged to Arabs has no foundation in reality. Documents show that hundreds of millions of dollars were paid by Jewish buyers to Arab landowners (Palestine Royal Commission report, 1937). Crawford-Browne's contention that the Palestinians "are refugees because Israel stole their land" is entirely false.

As for "forcing them to flee", in 1920 Ben-Gurion said, "under no circumstances must we touch land belonging to the fellahs or worked by them".

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_land_purchase_in_Palestine.) Ben-Gurion and other Jewish leaders pleaded with many Arabs not to leave their homes; in a few cases Arabs were forcibly evacuated. In 1949, Israel allowed "family reunions" of nearly 200 000 Arabs.

The leaders of five Arab armies did not hide their intention to massacre all the Jews (Jamal al-Husseini, of the Arab High Committee, Nov 11, 1947: "...would continue fighting until the Zionists are annihilated and all of 'Palestine would become a purely Arab state"). By fleeing, the local Arabs would thus not be in danger of becoming "collateral damage". Once Palestine had been made Judenrein (the Nazi word for free of Jews), they could return and take possession of the dead Jews' assets.

To conclude:

Jews have the same right to national self-determination as anyone else.

Their choice of Israel is entirely rational and consistent with their history. If it were not, they would have tried Uganda.

The Arabs did not attempt to establish a state under British Mandate Palestine. They did not need to – they already had at least five Muslim states in the region.

The refugee camps still exist because Muslim states, unlike Israel, were unwilling to absorb their brethren and have used them as pawns in the political game ever since.

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