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The 1956–57 Occupation of the Gaza Strip: Israeli Proposals to Resettle the Palestinian Refugees

NUR MASALHA*

The Gaza district is the southernmost section of the coastal plain of Palestine. Under the 1947 partition plan, this district was to form a part of the Palestine Arab state, but during the 1948 war much of the district was seized by, and annexed to, Israel. The Egyptians held Gaza City together with two other towns and several villages forming what came to be known as the Gaza Strip. The Strip is about 25 miles long and varies in width from four miles in the north to eight miles in the south. Its population trebled from eighty thousand in 1947 to nearly two hundred and forty thousand at the end of the 1948 war, creating a massive humanitarian problem of tens of thousands of refugees crammed into a tiny area. To provide for the needs of the Palestinian refugees, the United Nations General Assembly in December 1949 established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

The Palestinian refugees clung stubbornly to the right of return that was embodied in UN Resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948 and reaffirmed almost yearly by the General Assembly. The essence of this resolution called for the repatriation of, or compensation to, the refugees. However unfeasible repatriation may have seemed to outsiders, the refugees themselves believed that they would eventually return to their homes and villages in what became Israel. Throughout the early 1950s, refugees continued to cross the armistice lines, 'infiltrating' back to their villages either to collect possessions and pick up unharvested crops or, in some cases, to raid Israeli settlements adjacent to the Strip.¹ In an effort to combat this persistent Arab 'infiltration', the Israelis carried out 'retaliatory' attacks against 'infiltrators' in general and civilian targets in the Gaza Strip in particular. These attacks resulted in many civilian deaths. According to the Israeli historian Benny Morris:

Israel's defensive anti-infiltration measures resulted in the death of several thousand mostly unarmed Arabs during 1949–56, the vast majority between 1949 and 1952... Thus, upward of 2700 Arab infiltrators, and perhaps as many as 5000, were killed by the IDF, police, and civilians along Israel's borders between 1949 and 1956.

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¹ On Arab refugee 'infiltration', see Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 28–68.

To judge from the available documentation, the vast majority of those killed were unarmed 'economic' and social infiltrators.²

One major reason for the insistence with which Israel prosecuted its 'retaliatory' policy during these days, according to Livia Rokach,

was the desire of the Zionist ruling establishment to exercise permanent pressure on the Arab states to remove the Palestinian refugees of the 1948 war from the proximity of the armistice lines and to disperse them throughout the interior of the Arab world. This was not due, in the early fifties, to military considerations.³

The Egyptians, in fact, undertook strong repressive measures to suppress 'infiltration'.⁴ Moreover, in 1954, against the background of escalating Israeli attacks for these 'infiltrations', the Egyptian President, Gamal Abdul Nasser (who had little wish to hang onto the Strip and its large refugee population), fearing a potentially explosive situation in the Strip and the consequences of provoking the Israelis into a war for which he was still unprepared, considered a United States–UNRWA plan to settle the refugees in Sinai. However, following strong protests against this leaked scheme from the refugees, which culminated in two days of demonstrations and rioting in Gaza and the besieging of Egyptian government buildings and the burning of Egyptian vehicles, Nasser was forced to discard this Sinai scheme.⁵

Two years later, on 29 October 1956, the Israelis invaded the Gaza Strip and Sinai, holding both areas for four months before strong international, and especially American, pressure eventually forced them to evacuate both areas. Originally, the Israelis had every intention of staying in what their government considered to be an integral part of the Land of Israel. Foreign Minister Golda Meir told a Mapai Party rally on 10 November 1956 that 'the Gaza Strip was an integral part of Israel'.⁶

Israel went to war in 1956 against Nasser's Egypt for several reasons which are beyond the scope of this discussion. For instance, in September 1955, after Egypt had signed an arms deal with Czechoslovakia intended to secure its self-defence, Isser Harel, the director of the Mossad (the body responsible for secret intelligence activities and special operations outside the borders of the state of Israel), proposed, according to Moshe Sharett's Personal Diary:

seriously and decisively...that [we] now carry out [our] plan for the occupation of the [Gaza] Strip...Today the situation has changed and new factors have emerged in favour of 'time for action.' First of all, there is the [recent] discovery of oil near the Strip. ...Its

² Morris, *Israel's Border Wars*, pp. 135, 137.

³ Livia Rokach, 'Israeli State Terrorism: An Analysis of the Sharett Diaries', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 9:3 (Spring 1980), p. 21.

⁴ Rokach, *ibid.*, citing Ehud Ya'ari's *Mitzrayim Vehafedayin*.

⁵ Michael Palumbo, *Imperial Israel* (London: Bloomsbury, updated edition, 1992), p. 28; Paul Cossali and Clive Robson, *Stateless in Gaza* (London: Zed Books, 1986), pp. 13–15.

⁶ Cited in the *New York Times*, 11 November 1956. Menahem Begin, the leader of the Herut Party, which was the second largest in Israel, said in an interview on 27 November that 'he could not countenance withdrawal from the Gaza Strip under any terms because the area belonged to Israel by right.' Cited in the *New York Times*, 28 November 1956.

defence requires the occupation of the Strip...this consideration alone is sufficient for deciding [in favour of occupying the Strip] against the [consideration of possible] turbulence among the refugees.⁷

Harel also suggested conquering the Gaza Strip, to topple the Egyptian President Nasser.⁸ In fact, the strategic thinking of Israeli 'hawks'—those who agreed with Ben-Gurion's policy towards the Arabs—was an integral part of the decision to invade the Gaza Strip and Sinai in October. On the eve of the tripartite attack on Egypt, Ben-Gurion presented the French Prime Minister Guy Mollet with a far-reaching secret plan for creating a 'new order' in the Middle East.⁹ The plan included, in addition to the occupation and annexation of Sinai and the Gaza Strip, the overthrow of Nasser; the dismantling of Lebanon and the annexation of southern Lebanon to Israel and the creation of a Christian state in other parts of the country; and the partitioning of Jordan between Israel and Iraq. Israel would annex the West Bank and Iraq the East Bank, on condition that Iraq signed a peace accord with Israel and absorbed the Palestinian refugees in the camps on both banks of the Jordan River. According to Ben-Gurion's secret plan, the Suez Canal would be internationalized and Israel would control access to the Gulf of Aqaba. He also believed that such a solution suited the interests of the British and the French and would consolidate their colonial positions in the Middle East and North Africa. However, when Israel captured the Gaza Strip and Sinai in early November 1956, Ben-Gurion was clearly disappointed about the demographic outcome of the war. Of the then 300,000 inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, 215,000 were listed as refugees, occupying eight vast camps. The Strip had nearly one-fourth of the total of about 900,000 Arab refugees from historic Palestine. According to Ben-Gurion's biographer Michael Bar-Zohar:

Ben-Gurion was thrilled by this spectacular victory of the IDF. But when he visited the towns and refugee camps in Gaza and northern Sinai, a new reality was revealed before his eyes, which shocked him deeply: the Palestinians did not flee from the IDF as they had in 1948.¹⁰

According to the *New York Times* of 2 November 1956 some 1000 Palestinians were thought to have fled from the Gaza Strip to Jordan and Syria. The true figure of the 1956 evacuees, however, may have been much higher—although, clearly, far smaller in comparison with the 1948 exodus, or even the subsequent 1967 one. The London *Times* correspondent had reported from Gaza on the evening of 1 November as follows:

darkly flashing Spitfires and Mustangs dived over Gaza and violet dust rose where shells

⁷ Moshe Sharett, *Yoman Ishi* [Personal Diary], Vol. 4 (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Ma'ariv, 1978), pp. 1186–7, entry for 3 October 1955.

⁸ Sharett, *ibid.*, Vol. 4, pp. 1186–8, entry for 3 October 1955, Vol. 5, p. 1233, entry for 19 October 1955.

⁹ See Michael Bar-Zohar, *Mool Hamarah Haakhzarit: Yisrael Berega'a Haemet* [Facing a Cruel Mirror: Israel's Moment of Truth], (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot Books, 1990), p. 27; Mordechai Bar-On, *Igar Vetigrah: Haderekh Lemivza'a Kadesh* [Challenge and Quarrel: The Road to Sinai 1956], (Beersheba: The University of Ben-Gurion, 1991), pp. 252–3; *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, 3 April 1986.

¹⁰ Bar-Zohar, *Mool Hamarah Haakhzarit*, p. 27.

and bombs had just burst...the Israelis were...putting the defences of Gaza out of action;...Earlier this afternoon that narrow gateway [the old road between Gaza and El Arish] was choked with fleeing Arab refugees, barefooted or riding distracted donkeys. Many of the refugees had taken to the sea in frail little boats. From this correspondent's point of vantage Gaza itself, seen through failing light and a screen of smoke, looked as if it had been emptied of the refugee multitude that was lodged inside it or in camps along the dunes after the Israel–Arab war of 1948.¹¹

The vast majority of the refugees and other residents in the Strip, however, stayed put.

The Israeli military victory was swift and complete. The Israeli forces entered the Gaza Strip on 1 November, and Gaza City fell after a three-hour fight on the morning of 2 November. At 10 o'clock that morning Gaza was surrendered by the general commanding the 8th Division of the Egyptian army. By 3 November Israel's lightning conquest of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip was almost complete. Arab resistance was neither strong nor organized. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that the Israeli occupation of 1956–57 was characterized by widespread brutality, especially in its early days, perhaps in order to terrorize the Palestinians into fleeing from the teeming refugee camps. In fact, the goal of dispersing the residents of the refugee camps was much in evidence throughout the 1956–57 occupation. Several hundred civilians were massacred by the Israeli army, the worst incidents being at Khan Yunis and Rafah on 3 November and 12 November 1956 respectively. Local residents believed that the motive behind these atrocities was the same as at Dayr Yassin in 1948—to create an incentive for the population of the Strip to flee.¹²

The Israeli army occupied Khan Yunis and its neighbouring refugee camp on 3 November. On the same day a twenty-four hour curfew was declared by the army, officially to check looting or disorder. A Khan Yunis resident, Abu Talal, recalled:

At dawn, just before 5am, we heard voices in the street and the next thing I knew, someone was kicking our door down. All my family was gathered in the back room; my mother, my wife who was seven months pregnant, three brothers, two sisters and my two daughters, aged six and four...When the soldiers came in, we did not even know which country they were from. We had heard talk about British and French troops...One of the soldiers shouted in Arabic 'Stand still!'. Then he opened fire on me with his rifle, hitting me in the elbow. I ran back into the room and my family held the door open for me. The soldiers fired again and my younger brother was killed instantly. My third brother was shot in the legs as he tried to climb out of the window. A second soldier then came into the room, took one look around and then emptied his rifle at random round the room. I was hit again in my leg and chest. Then they took all the women outside leaving the injured, myself and my brother, inside. My mother started to curse the soldiers and I remember one of them beating her with his rifle butt shouting 'Don't curse the Israelis, you should be cursing Abdel Nasser.'...

I don't know why they chose my house. I wasn't anyone special. I heard later that the

¹¹ *The Times* (London), 2 November 1956.

¹² Cossali and Robson, *Stateless in Gaza*, p. 17.

same thing had happened in many houses in our quarter alone. People were just chosen at random—ordinary people who had no connection with politics or the fedayeen. Outside I could hear a lot of shouting and shooting coming from the Khan in the town centre. Later, I heard that dozens of people had been lined up to the wall and shot in cold blood. Some say thousands were killed, but I think that 600 is probably near the truth. There were corpses everywhere, and because of the curfew, no-one could go out to bury them for about four days. This all took place that first morning. So much killing in such a short space of time. I heard that it was stopped by a senior officer.

I lay on my back on the floor of the bedroom in my house for 30 hours with blood everywhere... We couldn't get out to the clinic because of the curfew... When the curfew was finally lifted, I was able to get to the clinic on a stretcher. That's when I saw all the bodies in the streets.¹³

More accurate figures were produced by a subsequent investigation made by UNRWA officials who found that 275 Arab civilians were killed by the Israeli army at Khan Yunis and the adjacent refugee camp on 3 November, and 111 other civilians were killed at the Rafah refugee camp, mostly on 12 November. UNRWA officials also protested strongly about these civilian deaths, in particular about the murder of eight of the Agency's local employees.¹⁴

A correspondent for the *New York Times* reported from Gaza City on 26 November, a few weeks after the atrocities described above had taken place:

The Arab population of Gaza, still aching from the shock and wounds of war, appeared indifferent today to the effort of Israeli authorities to restore normal life to the Gaza Strip and integrate its economy with Israel. Arab shopkeepers, school-teachers, students and idlers questioned during a tour of the town said they hoped the United Nations Emergency Force would soon replace Israeli occupation authorities and restore the Gaza Strip to Egypt. Many asked why International Red Cross personnel had not yet come to Gaza. The main reason the Gaza population is embittered against Israel is the loss of life and property that occurred in the three days following occupation of the region.¹⁵

The initial estimate of civilian casualties made by United Nations truce personnel seemed inaccurate. According to the same account in the *New York Times* of 2 December, 'United Nations truce personnel said their information indicated that 400–500 persons were killed at Khan Yunis during the first days of the occupation, 700 at Rafah and thirty to fifty in the town of Gaza'. UN truce officers explained that their information was gathered indirectly because the Israeli army restrictions prevented them from carrying out on-the-spot investigations. These officers also added that 'physicians of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency had compiled a list of eighty-four civilians known to have been killed in Rafah'. Moreover, Dr James Young, Director of the American Baptist Hospital in Gaza, said that his 'institution had treated 165 civilians wounded by Israeli troops, including 118 men, thirty-six women and eleven children. Eight have died of wounds, including two children'.¹⁶

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁴ Palumbo, *Imperial Israel*, p. 31.

¹⁵ See the *New York Times*, 2 December 1956.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The Israeli authorities claimed that many of the Arab deaths in the Gaza Strip resulted from the army's response to Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip in general and to disturbances at the Rafah refugee camp on 12 November in particular, and that the initial estimate of civilian casualties given by United Nations truce personnel was too high.¹⁷ The refugees, on the other hand, asserted that local resistance had ceased when the Israelis arrived and that the victims were largely unarmed civilians.¹⁸ On 28 November 1956 an Arab member of the Knesset (MK) asked for a debate on the Rafah incident. This motion was defeated by 62 votes to three. Although the ruling Mapai party blocked any debate on the Rafah killings, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, speaking in the Knesset on the same day, said that the incident was the result of 'disturbances in which Israeli soldiers, after firing into the air, had been compelled to fire into the rioting mob. Forty-eight refugees had been killed and a number wounded'. Ben-Gurion accused the Communist Party MKs of being 'traitors'.¹⁹ In March 1957, after the Israelis had withdrawn from the Strip, a mass grave was unearthed at Khan Yunis containing the bodies of forty Arabs who had been shot in the back of the head after their hands had been tied.²⁰

During the five-month occupation, the Israelis had every intention of staying in the Gaza Strip. Within four days of taking over the area, the *New York Times* reported, 'Israel has started integrating the conquered territory into the nation'. Workmen were busy laying new railway lines between Israeli territory and Gaza. At the same time plans were being formulated by the occupation authorities in Gaza to change from Egyptian to Israeli currency.²¹ Even shortly before their evacuation, they succeeded in forming a new Municipal Council composed of notables who were amenable to their policies.²² During the short-lasting occupation of 1956–57 a secret committee was also set up by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion to consider proposals for resettling elsewhere hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Gaza Strip. Little is known about the ideas put forward by this committee, which was headed by 'Ezra Danin, a senior Foreign Ministry official, who at the same time was involved in the Libyan resettlement scheme. In a letter dated 10 December 1956 to Eliahu Sasson, Israel's ambassador to Italy (who was at the time involved in the scheme for purchasing the lands of former Italian settlers in Libya for resettlement of Palestinian refugees in that country), Danin explained that the Prime Minister had appointed the committee and that Finance Minister Levi Eshkol had approved the allocation of financial resources for the work to be carried out by the committee whose members would be Haim Gvati (Director General of the Ministry of Agriculture and later Minister of Agriculture), Yitzhak Levi (Secretary General of the Prime Minister's Office), Shmuel Divon (Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's advisor on Arab

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Palumbo, *Imperial Israel*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Cited in *The Times* (London), 29 November 1956.

²⁰ Palumbo, *Imperial Israel*, p. 32.

²¹ *The New York Times*, 6 November 1956.

²² Cossali and Robson, *Stateless in Gaza*, p. 16.

affairs), Yitzhak 'Elam (Director General of the Ministry of Labour), and Ra'anán Weitz (Yosef Weitz's son, Director General of the Jewish Agency's Land Settlement Department).²³ It is not clear whether there was any direct link between this committee and Danin's Libyan scheme. Only patchy information is available on the Israeli intention to remove Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip during this short period. Yosef Nahmani, the Jewish National Fund's senior executive in Galilee, wrote to his senior colleague Yosef Weitz (who was also a member of the Israeli team of senior officials working on the Libyan resettlement plan), on 22 December 1956:

You certainly know that a committee headed by 'Ezra Danin is considering proposals to resettle the refugees of Gaza. If Gaza remains in Israeli hands together with its refugees this would put a great burden on the economic development and security of Israel...Your absence denies the Jewish National Fund representation on the committee.²⁴

The official Israeli position had always been that there could be no return of the Palestinian refugees to Israeli territory, and that the only solution to the problem lay in their resettlement in the Arab states or elsewhere. If Israel intended to annex the Gaza Strip in late 1956, the official Israeli reasoning was that a solution had to be found to the critical refugee problem. Indeed, the idea of relocating the refugees residing in the Strip to the Sinai Peninsula was raised in internal debates. For instance, on 23 December 1956 Premier Ben-Gurion cut short a cabinet session in Jerusalem in order to have a lunch meeting with President Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi and his wife Rahel Yanait. The latter was a prominent Mapai leader, who subsequently joined the Whole Land of Israel Movement, which advocated the annexation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to Israel. The conversation at the presidential residence in Jerusalem on 23 December, which focused on the future of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, contained the following exchange between the Prime Minister and Rahel Yanait:

- Ben-Gurion: We will hold on to Gaza. However we have no need of the 300 thousand refugees, it would be better for UNRWA to deal with them.
- Rahel Yanait: You should propose a constructive settlement.
- Ben-Gurion: These things are abstracts. Would you suggest the resettlement of the refugees of Gaza in Israel?
- Rahel Yanait: We would settle them in El Arish [in Sinai].
- Ben-Gurion: Do you know that in 1920 an expedition went to investigate whether or not El Arish was suitable for [Jewish] settlement and the conclusion was negative. How would we settle them in El Arish if the land is not suitable?

²³ 'Ezra Danin, *Tzioni Bekhol Tnai* [Zionist in All Conditions] (Jerusalem: Kiddum, 1987), Vol. 1, pp. 328–9.

²⁴ Yosef Weitz (ed.), *Yosef Nahmani, Ish Hagalil* [Man of Galilee] (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1969), p. 139.

Rahel Yanait: But things have changed since. Today there are new and modern methods for discovering water and improving the soil.²⁵

Rahel Yanait and the President were also trying to persuade Ben-Gurion not to yield to Eisenhower's pressure and evacuate the Sinai Peninsula. An implied threat by the United States of economic sanctions against Israel had already forced Premier Ben-Gurion to agree to withdraw from Sinai when a United Nations force moved into the Suez Canal zone. In his speech to the nation, broadcast on 9 November 1956, Ben-Gurion had even conceded that one of the main objectives of the offensive against Egypt—the 'liberation of homeland' territory—had not been achieved.²⁶ Ben-Gurion, on the other hand, replied to Ben-Tzvi and Rahel Yanait that Israel could not fight two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—and therefore would be forced to evacuate Sinai. However, he still regarded Gaza as part of the 'homeland' and wanted, he said, to hold on to the Gaza Strip.²⁷ Judging by his past record before and during 1948 and his previous vigorous advocacy of Palestinian transfer, it seems that Ben-Gurion's scepticism towards Yanait's argument in favour of relocating the refugees from the Gaza Strip to Sinai had more to do with political realism and the need to evacuate Sinai in the face of strong American-Soviet pressure, than with any fundamental rejection of the idea of removing the refugees from the Gaza Strip, away from Israel and the 1949 cease-fire lines.

The same idea of dispersing the refugees residing in the Gaza Strip was frequently raised by top officials of the Foreign Ministry, which at the time was headed by Golda Meir. In his personal diary entry for 20 November 1956, former Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett cited a cable sent to him in India by Walter Eytan, Director General of the Foreign Ministry. Eytan explained in his cable that 'the problem of the refugees [in Gaza] is very pressing...there is a need now for more far-reaching actions with the aim of ensuring the future'. In response Sharett—who was at that time bitter about having been manoeuvred out of office by Ben-Gurion and had opposed the occupation of Gaza largely because of the hundreds of thousands of refugees in it—recorded in the same entry of his diary his amazement at the content of Eytan's cable: 'What is far-reaching action—the transfer of the refugees to Iraq or their resettlement in Israel? The two solutions are impractical'.²⁸ Eytan did not explain what he meant by 'far-reaching actions', and it seems that in Jerusalem Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir were determined to keep Sharett in the dark, mainly because of his known opposition to the 1956 war. Sharett, on the other hand, felt deceived and humiliated for not being informed about the impending attack on Egypt, and this might also explain his amazement at the suggestion of 'far-reaching actions' in connection with the refugees in the Strip.

²⁵ Quoted in Yosef Carmel, *Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi: Metokh Yoman Bevet Hanasi* [Diary of President Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi's bodyguard] (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1967), p. 92.

²⁶ See the *New York Times*, 10 November 1956.

²⁷ Carmel, *Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi: Metokh Yoman Bevet Hanasi*, p. 92.

²⁸ Moshe Sharett, *Yoman Ishi* [Personal Diary], Vol. 7, entry for 20 November 1956 (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Ma'ariv), 1978, p. 1866.

About the same time, another senior official of the Foreign Ministry and Minister plenipotentiary to the Scandinavian countries, Haim Yahil, wrote a secret letter from Stockholm to Walter Eytan in Jerusalem. He strongly advocated the annexation of the Gaza Strip to Israel. Yahil at the same time totally rejected a proposal put forward in *Haaretz* on 22 November by Eli'ezer Livneh, a Mapai colleague and member of the First and Second Knessets of 1949–55, calling for the annexation of the Gaza Strip to Israel together with all of its Palestinian residents, including the refugees. Describing Livneh's proposal as totally impractical, Yahil instead suggested that the refugees in the Strip be divided into three groups: the first group would be relocated to and settled in Sinai; the second group would be settled in Israel, outside the Gaza Strip; and the third would be settled in the Strip itself. No specific figures were mentioned in Yahil's proposal as to how many refugees should be included in each category.²⁹ A month later, Yahil returned to the proposal in another secret letter to Eytan, dated 26 December. After the annexation of the Gaza Strip to Israel, Yahil explained, Israel would then absorb some of the refugees residing in the Strip 'and the rest of them would be settled in Sinai or some other Arab country through the payment of compensation on our part'. No less important, for Yahil,

a solution to the refugee problem is necessary not only for political reasons—as our contribution to a settlement—and humanitarian reasons, but also for [Jewish] settlement reasons. Here the incorporation of Gaza to Israel would be secure and durable only if certain Jewish settlement would also be in this area, and how could we carry out settlement in the area when it is full of refugee camps?³⁰

In private and internal discussions, senior officials of the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office, including members of the committee set up to deal with the Palestinian refugees in the occupied Gaza Strip, emerged as the strongest advocates of encouraging the refugees to emigrate from the Strip to countries overseas. The same officials also realized that neither Egypt nor Syria had any intention of opening their borders to the masses of refugees in Gaza. There were three men at the centre of these discussions: 'Ezra Danin, a senior advisor on Arab affairs at the Foreign Ministry and head of the Gaza Strip's refugee committee; Shmuel Divon, a member of the same refugee committee and Ben-Gurion's advisor on Arab affairs; and Ya'acov Hertzog, the son of the Chief Rabbi of Israel and a brother of Haim Hertzog, who later became President of Israel 1983–93.

During the 1956–57 occupation of Gaza, Ya'acov Hertzog, in his official capacity as Israel's minister plenipotentiary in Washington, as well as other officials of the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and the Israeli embassy in Washington, were involved in the efforts to encourage the emigration of refugees from Gaza to countries overseas, including the United States and Latin American

²⁹ Israel State Archives (ISA), Foreign Ministry, 3085/16, from Israel's Minister to Stockholm, Haim Yahil, to Foreign Ministry's Director General, Walter Eytan, secret and personal letter no. ST/101, dated 28 November 1956.

³⁰ ISA, Foreign Ministry, 3085/16, from Dr Haim Yahil, Stockholm, to Walter Eytan, Foreign Ministry's Director General, secret letter, dated 26 December 1956.

countries. It is also inconceivable that Ya'acov Hertzog's boss in the Washington embassy, Abba Eban, Israel's ambassador to Washington (later to be Foreign Minister), was not privy to these official efforts, which were presided over by Walter Eytan and his boss Foreign Minister Golda Meir. Gershon Avner, Director of the Foreign Ministry's US Division, wrote a secret letter to Hertzog dated 24 January 1957, telling him about 'a new attempt to deal with the problem of the refugees': the 'rehabilitation' of Gaza's refugees through 'the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM)'.³¹ Avner had been the Director of the Foreign Ministry's West Europe Division between 1948 and 1952. (He later became Secretary to the Israeli Cabinet, 1974–77.) In December 1951 the ICEM had been set up on the initiative of the United States, at a meeting in Brussels in which sixteen nations took part, to be 'responsible for the movement of migrants, including refugees, for whom arrangements could be made with the governments of the countries concerned'. In his letter to Hertzog, Avner explained that 'Ezra Danin was enthusiastic about this plan which fits in with Israel's effort to move a number of refugees to resettle permanently, in the hope that this example would activate other [refugees to emigrate]'.

Avner added:

As is known, we are prepared to pay compensation to refugees exploiting this possibility. Assuming that it is possible to reach an agreement with the ICEM, there will be a need for a gentle whispering activity initially in order to move a number of families to take this road, but it is still early [to know whether this would work].

The key to success, according to Avner, was to secure the support of the US representative on the ICEM and his government's influence on this organization. Avner also suggested that the Israeli embassy in Washington should discuss exploiting these ideas to the full.³² At this stage the Israeli government was still insisting that under no circumstances could it agree to the return of Egypt to the Gaza Strip.

A few weeks later Moshe Bartor, Director of the Economic Department of the Foreign Ministry, wrote a strictly secret memorandum dated 10 February 1957 (copies were sent to three senior officials of the Ministry: Y. Hertzog; Arthur Lourie, Deputy Director General of the Foreign Ministry and a member of the Israeli delegation to the UN General Assembly; and Yosef Teko'ah, later to be Ambassador to the UN), suggesting the following:

Since we are determined to stay in the Strip in one way or another, we have in fact taken responsibility for the 200,000 refugees. It cannot be assumed that we would be able to cause their departure except through an orderly process of resettlement in and outside Israel. For the sake of that we need the assistance of the UN and USA.

In order to achieve this aim, Bartor went on, the Israeli administration in the

³¹ ISA, Foreign Ministry, 3085/16, G. Avner, to Y. Hertzog, Israel's Minister to Washington, secret letter dated 24 January 1957. Abba Eban is also brother-in-law of Haim Hertzog.

³² Ibid.

Strip should assume joint responsibility with UNRWA for the refugees in Gaza (an Israeli-UN 'condominium', in his words) and set up an international committee, the composition of which would remain private, for working out a final solution to the problem through resettlement. Bartor did not specify how many refugees would be resettled in the Gaza Strip after its annexation by Israel and how many of them would be resettled overseas.³³

By March 1957, Israel, under intense international pressure, was preparing to withdraw from Gaza. Reporting to the Knesset on 7 March, Ben-Gurion stressed that under any administration 'the Gaza Strip would be a source of trouble as long as the refugees had not been resettled elsewhere'.³⁴ By this stage, the United Nations had agreed to station an emergency force (UNEF) between Israel and Egypt in the Gaza Strip.

On 12 March 1957, shortly before Israel was forced to evacuate the Strip, the US Division of the Foreign Ministry received an undated memorandum addressed to Ya'acov Hertzog from Yehuda Harry Levine, a counsellor at the Israeli embassy in Washington who was also in charge of information (and later became Director of the Information Division of the Foreign Ministry), suggesting that a unilateral, practical and dramatic measure should be undertaken by Israel that would demonstrate that the Arab leaders were deliberately preventing a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. Levine, who subsequently became ambassador to Denmark, explained that he had just met the editor of Harper's magazine, John Fisher, who had expressed an opinion in favour of a similar proposal. According to Levine, Fisher assumed that for the first time since 1948 the refugees in Gaza were now free of pressures from Arab leaders, and consequently as a first step and gesture of goodwill, Israel should offer compensation to a number of refugees in Gaza (he mentioned 5000 people) that would enable their relocation to and resettlement in other countries, with the UN's assistance.³⁵ In May 1949, during the last stage of the Palestinian refugee exodus, Harper's magazine had published an article by Eliahu Ben-Horin, a Zionist Revisionist publicist and advocate of Arab transfer since the early 1940s, entitled 'From Palestine to Israel'. The then editor of Harper's noted that in an earlier article in the magazine's December 1944 issue, Ben-Horin had advocated a plan that at the time 'looked far-fetched...that the Arabs of Palestine be transferred to Iraq and resettled there. Now, with thousands of Arab refugees from Palestine facing a dismal future, the transfer idea appears to be a likely bet...in view of the sound character of Mr. Ben-Horin's earlier judgements and prophecies, we feel we can bank on his word about present-day Israel: "It works"'.³⁶

Two days later, on 14 March 1957, another senior Israeli official, Hanan Bar-On, wrote a secret letter to Hertzog and Divon suggesting the following:

³³ ISA, Foreign Ministry, 2448/8.

³⁴ David Ben-Gurion, *Israel: A Personal History* (New York and Tel Aviv: Funk & Wagnalls and Sabra Books, 1971), p. 534.

³⁵ ISA, Foreign Ministry, 3085/16, from Y. H. Levine to Y. Hertzog, memo no. YHL/114.

³⁶ Central Zionist Archives (CZA), A 300/54, Ben-Horin's file.

Following through our conversation, the outlines of the plan for encouraging the emigration of refugees from the [Gaza] Strip are as follows:

- (1) the setting up of an organization in the United States or Latin America, whose aim is to encourage the emigration of refugees to countries of the world, including countries of the American continent, without becoming involved in the political problems of the Middle East;
- (2) the organization must be based first of all on the leaders of Arab migrants in Latin America and the United States; however, this could also include in it other elements, such as Christian clergy and perhaps even Jewish factors who are not publicly known as distinguished sympathisers of Israel (Lessing Rosenwald?);³⁷
- (3) the organization should operate on a scale similar to that of HIAS's [the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society's] and the JOINT's [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's] in the years before the Second World War; that is to say, it should not only try to concern itself with the matter of financing emigration as such, but first of all conduct negotiations with governments and various bodies in the world to find resettlement places in various countries. The proposed body should operate as a political body based on humanitarian principles, without pretending to represent the refugees or any other Middle Eastern community. In addition to this the body should work in order to bring about the emigration of refugees without religious distinction, in spite of the fact that most of the activists of the organization would, undoubtedly, naturally be Christians;
- (4) Notwithstanding that the financing of the first steps of such an organization would, undoubtedly, have to come from our own sources, it is possible to assume that it would be possible when the time comes to finance the lion's share of the organizational expenditures with the help of various fund-raising appeals. Clearly this could not include the actual costs of rehabilitating the refugees in their new countries of residence, but perhaps it would be possible to find solutions for this in the framework of UNRWA;
- (5) Despite the fact that the proposed organization should be based first of all on Arab elements, the action of organizing and guidance must, undoubtedly, be made by Israeli and Jewish bodies and personalities jointly, of course with adequate camouflage and concealment.

In summing up the outlines of his proposed plan, Bar-On wrote:

The above are only a few initial thoughts, and it is possible, no doubt, to find impractical flaws in them, but it seems to me that the central idea, that is to say, the setting up of an organization which would attempt by various means to persuade governments to open their borders for emigration, even if limited, is likely to give us not insignificant advantages in the sphere of our dealing with the refugee problem in general and the Arab refugees in particular.³⁸

³⁷ Lessing Rosenwald was an American non-Zionist Jewish merchant and philanthropist. In 1943 he led the foundation of the American Council for Judaism and was its first president. Before 1948 the Council was against the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. It is not clear whether Rosenwald would have been interested in cooperating with an Israeli plan to transfer Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip to the USA or Latin America. His younger brother William, a financier, served as chairman of the National United Jewish Appeal campaign, and vice-chairman of the Joint Distribution Committee, American Jewish Committee, and United HIAS Service. Although generally non-Zionists, the Rosenwalds contributed modestly to Jewish educational and agricultural institutions in Palestine.

³⁸ ISA, Foreign Ministry, 3085/16, Hanan Bar-On to Ya'acov Hertzog and Shmuel Divon, personal and secret letter, dated 14 March 1957. The American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC), an American Jewish relief

In the same month in which Israel was forced to evacuate the Gaza Strip, Danin, the head of the official committee set up to consider the relocation and resettlement of the Gaza refugees, complained in a letter to David Shaltiel, Israel's ambassador to Brazil, that 'it was possible to operate a great deal in Gaza, but we did not receive permission and money for it'.³⁹ Perhaps because the 1956–57 occupation was short-lived and uncertain, the Israeli goal of dispersing the refugees under their control through transfer and resettlement schemes was not prosecuted vigorously. After the withdrawal from Sinai and the Gaza Strip, Danin and other senior Foreign Ministry officials were back dealing with the Libyan scheme, which envisaged the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Libya. The Israeli goal of dispersing and resettling the hundreds of thousands of refugees residing in the Gaza Strip—constituting over three quarters of the Strip's population—would remain constant for many years to come.

Conclusion

The Arab states have always demanded that the Palestinian refugees be given a free choice between repatriation or compensation. The refugees themselves have traditionally demanded repatriation and refused resettlement. The official Israeli position, on the other hand, has always been that there can be no return of the refugees to Israeli territories, and that the only solution to the problem was their resettlement in the Arab states or elsewhere. Israel has not wanted the refugees back under any condition. It has not wanted them to return because it has needed their lands and their villages for Jewish immigrants. Nor has it wanted the repatriation of a large Palestinian population that would question the Zionist-Jewish character of the state and undermine it demographically. Israel did, however, consider in the 1950s some form of restitution of refugee property in lieu of repatriation.

In the 1950s one key slogan coined by senior Israeli Foreign Ministry officials was: 'if you can't solve it, dissolve it', meaning that if you cannot solve the Palestinian refugee problem as a political problem, you can attempt to 'dissolve' the problem and disperse the refugees through economic means, employment projects and resettlement schemes. Indeed, during the 1950s several Israeli plans to resettle the Palestinian refugees were put forward. This preoccupation with the need to resettle the refugees stemmed from a variety of reasons including the fear of Palestinian 'return' and the determination to remove the refugee problem from the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

³⁸ *continued*

organization, had its beginning in 1914. In August 1954 the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) merged with the United Service for New Americans and the migration service of the AJDC to establish the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). HIAS is the international migration agency of the organized American Jewish community. It assists Jewish migrants and works with various agencies to increase Jewish immigration opportunities.

³⁹ Danin, *Tzioni Bekhol Tnai*, Vol. 1, p. 251, citing a letter to Shaltiel dated 21 March 1957.

During the short-lasting occupation of 1956–57 a secret committee was set up by Ben-Gurion to consider proposals for resettling elsewhere hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Gaza Strip, which Israel had, originally, intended to annex. The refugee camps were (and still are) the most overcrowded parts of the Strip and were therefore the most difficult parts to control. Moreover, because the refugees did not accept their sojourn in Gaza as an indefinite one, Israeli leaders saw a greater long-term challenge from the refugees than from the smaller indigenous population. Against this backdrop Israeli attempts to encourage the emigration and resettlement elsewhere of refugees were inevitable. During this period several senior Israeli officials, who realised that neither Egypt nor Syria nor Iraq had any intention of opening their borders for the masses of refugees in Gaza, suggested in internal debates and secret correspondence that Israel should arrange for the refugees to emigrate from Gaza to countries overseas. However, because the 1956–57 occupation was short-lived and uncertain, the Israeli goal of dispersing the refugees under their control through organized emigration and resettlement schemes was not prosecuted vigorously, although the same goal remained constant for many years to come.

Furthermore, although the official, though secret, schemes of 1956–57 ended in failure, they are significant in the sense of showing how the Israeli Labour government wanted to remove the refugee problem from the centre of the Arab-Israeli conflict and remove the possibility of Palestinian return in the future. These projects also constituted a background against which other schemes were attempted by the governments of Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir in the aftermath of the conquest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in June 1967. The practical and usually discreet approach to resettlement schemes and activities characterized the pragmatism of Labour Zionism. The 1956–57 experience may also have taught Israeli government officials to take pragmatic constraints into consideration, including opposition among the refugees themselves, and rejection by Arab states, as well as the sensitivity of Western public opinion. All these constraints have rendered the refugee resettlement task exceedingly difficult.