

Israel Calls the Nakba a Lie. So Why Do Its Leaders Threaten a Second One?

Ex-government minister's recent warning to Palestinian flag-wavers of another forced expulsion exposes the lie at the heart of Israel's founding

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Here is a puzzle. What did Israel Katz, an [Israeli](#) legislator and until recently a senior government minister, mean when he threatened [Palestinian](#) students last month with another "Nakba" if they continued to wave the Palestinian flag? He urged them to "remember 1948" and speak to their "grandfathers and grandmothers".

"If you don't calm down," [he told the Israeli parliament](#), "we'll teach you a lesson that won't be forgotten."

And similarly, what was in the mind of Uzi Dayan, a former army general who is also a member of the Israeli parliament, when [he warned Palestinians](#) two months earlier "to be careful"? They would face "a situation you know, which is Nakba", if they refused to passively submit to Israel's dictates.

Both threats – and similar ones from senior Israeli politicians over the years – fly in the face of long-held claims by successive Israeli governments that the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba, the Arabic word for "catastrophe", constitutes a vile distortion of the region's history.

According to Israeli officials, Palestinian accusations that they were violently and willfully expelled from their homeland in 1948 are a slur against Israel's character and its army, supposedly "the most moral in the world". It is even suggested that commemorating the Nakba [equates to antisemitism](#).

And yet paradoxically, Israeli politicians seem only too ready to echo these supposed calumnies against the founding of the self-declared “Jewish state”. In 2017, Tzachi Hanegbi, while serving as a senior cabinet minister, warned Palestinians that they faced a “third Nakba” – after the mass expulsions of 1948 and 1967 – if they resisted the occupation.

“You’ve already paid that crazy price twice for your leaders,” [he wrote](#) in a Facebook post. “Don’t try us again, because the result won’t be any different. You have been warned!”

Nakba denial

According to Palestinians and a growing number of scholars researching Israel’s archives, Zionist leaders and their militias waged a violent, premeditated campaign of ethnic cleansing in 1948 in which four-fifths of all Palestinians were driven off their lands and into exile. As a consequence, the Zionist movement was able to declare a Jewish state on most of their homeland.

Today, many millions of Palestinian refugees are dispersed across the Middle East and much of the rest of the world, unable to return. Israeli officials have been so adamant that this narrative is a lie to demonise Israel that back in 2011 the government of Benjamin Netanyahu passed a law to erase from the public space [any commemoration of the Nakba](#).

The so-called Nakba Law threatens to strip Israeli institutions – including schools, universities, libraries and municipalities – of state funding if they allow any such commemoration. In its original form, the law would have led to a three-year jail term for anyone taking part in such an event.

But even before the legislation, Nakba denial was the Israeli state’s default position.

In contrast to the Palestinian narrative, Israel denies any premeditation or malicious violence by its leaders and soldiers, and instead blames the Palestinian exodus in 1948 on other factors.

It claims that most Palestinians [left on the orders of Arab leaders](#), rather than that they were ethnically cleansed by the new Israeli state’s army. Officials argue too that the Israeli army attacked Palestinian communities largely in response to violence from Palestinian fighters and units of Arab soldiers from neighbouring countries that came to their aid.

Noted Israeli historians like Benny Morris [continue to argue](#) that “at no stage of the 1948 war was there a decision by the leadership of the Yishuv [pre-state Jewish community] or the state to ‘expel the Arabs’.” On this official view, most Palestinians either chose to leave or were responsible for provoking the violence that led to them being forced out. Israel’s hands are supposedly clean.

But if Israelis really believe this to be the case, why are veteran politicians such as Katz, Dayan and Hanegbi using the Palestinian terminology of Nakba themselves – and threatening that Israel will carry out a second or third time what officials insist never happened in the first place?

Operation Broom

Israel's narrative is so dominant that until recently most Israeli Jews believed that their state's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, urged the Palestinian population fleeing the large port city of Haifa to return in 1948. Palestinians supposedly preferred to wait out the fighting until the Zionist forces were defeated.

According to this account, Ben-Gurion sent Golda Meir, later prime minister herself, on a mission [to reassure fleeing Palestinians](#). In her autobiography, Meir recounts: "I sat on the beach there [in Haifa] and begged them to return home... I pleaded with them until I was exhausted but it didn't work."

But a letter written in early June 1948 by Ben-Gurion came to light seven years ago that undermines Israel's propaganda. In it, he responded angrily to reports that the British consul was "working to return the Arabs to Haifa". Ben-Gurion demanded that Haifa's Jewish leaders [actively stymie these British efforts](#).

In fact, an Israeli scholar who was handed an archive file in error disclosed nearly a decade ago that the story of Arab leaders insisting Palestinians flee their homeland in 1948 [was a nonsense](#). It was concocted by Israeli officials as a way to end US pressure on Israel to allow Palestinian refugees to return.

Beginning in the 1980s, a new generation of Israeli historians started trawling through Israel's archives as sections of it were briefly opened. They unearthed documentary evidence of an entirely different set of events that [accorded with the Palestinian narrative](#).

Military operations had suggestive titles like "[Operation Broom](#)" and commanders received orders to "clean" areas. Many hundreds of [Palestinian villages were destroyed](#) as soon as their populations had been driven out by Zionist soldiers, with the clear intent never to let them return.

Reign of terror

And despite Israel's best efforts to keep it under wraps, archival evidence has kept emerging of Israeli massacres of Palestinian civilians, making explicit why the vast majority of Palestinians fled in 1948.

In one of the worst, around 170 unarmed men, women and children were executed by the Israeli army near Hebron, and hundreds more wounded, even as they offered no resistance.

A letter from the time by Shabtai Kaplan, a soldier and journalist who witnessed the [Dawayimah massacre](#), was found in 2016. He observed that the killings were part of "a system of expulsion and destruction". The rationale, he [wrote](#), was: "The fewer Arabs who remain, the better."

Another long-denied massacre of Palestinians – at Tantura, on the coast south of Haifa – was thrust into the spotlight earlier this year after a new Israeli film included testimonies from former soldiers in which they [admitted committing the massacre](#).

Katz, Dayan and Hanegbi understand what the word Nakba means for Palestinians and are aware too that the Palestinian narrative of the events of 1948 has been confirmed by the

archives.

Nakba – for them, as for Palestinians – means a reign of military terror to drive out the Palestinian population in areas Israel wishes to further colonise with Jews, or “Judaize” as official Israeli terminology puts it. It means yet another wave of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, both those under occupation and the minority living with highly degraded citizenship inside Israel.

In threatening a second Nakba, Katz and Dayan are simply confirming that Israeli leaders, despite their protestations, have always known what the Nakba was – and have always approved of the goal of ethnic cleansing Palestinians.

The irony is that, while Israel denounces Palestinians and their supporters as liars for speaking of the Nakba, its own officials publicly cite the Nakba as a real event that can be repeated if Palestinians do not submit completely.

Genocidal rhetoric

That should not surprise us. After all, the goal of expulsion did not end with the events of 1948 – the reason Palestinians speak of an [“ongoing Nakba”](#).

Israeli officials regularly employ genocidal-type rhetoric. As head of Israel’s military, Moshe Yaalon compared the threat posed by Palestinians to [“cancer”](#) that had “to be severed and fought to the bitter end”.

Ayelet Shaked, currently Israel’s interior minister, has characterised all Palestinians as “enemy combatants” – a term suggesting they are legitimate military targets. She has referred to any Palestinians that fights Israel’s decades of belligerent occupation as “snakes” and indicated that their entire families can be eliminated, including their mothers, otherwise [“more little snakes will be raised there”](#).

Leading rabbis in Israel are even more explicit. Two wrote a notorious handbook, [The King’s Torah](#), arguing that it is permitted to kill Palestinians, even babies, pre-emptively because “it is clear that they will grow to harm us”. [Neither faced prosecution](#).

‘Finish the job’

These types of menacing comments are not just directed at Palestinians in the occupied territories. Notably, the recent Nakba threats were chiefly aimed at Israel’s 1.8 million Palestinian citizens, who, Israel falsely maintains, enjoy equal status with Israel’s Jewish citizens.

Palestinian citizens are the descendants of the small numbers of Palestinians who managed to avoid expulsion in 1948 – due largely to oversights and international pressure.

Exemplifying Israelis’ cognitive dissonance on this issue, historian Benny Morris has cited the existence of a Palestinian minority in Israel as proof that the Nakba is a lie and that Israel never intended to ethnically cleanse Palestinians.

He has done so even as he lamented the [fact that Ben-Gurion](#) “got cold feet during the [1948] war” and “faltered” in failing to expel every last Palestinian.

In this, he shares the sentiments of far-right politicians like Bezalel Smotrich, another former government minister. Last year, [Smotrich addressed legislators](#) representing the Palestinian minority, saying: “It’s a mistake that Ben-Gurion didn’t finish the job and didn’t throw you out in 1948.”

On another occasion, Smotrich made a barely veiled [threat of expulsion](#): “Arabs are citizens of Israel – for now, at least.”

Caught in a trap

Such threats are far from idle. In its first decades, Israel continued to secretly expel [vulnerable communities of Palestinian citizens](#), such as the Bedouin in the Naqab, and [plotted to expel more](#).

Israel’s security forces carried out an [early massacre of Palestinian citizens](#), almost certainly to incentivise them to leave. Israel has also conducted at least [one secret military exercise](#) to prepare for a scenario in which there is a mass expulsion of Israel’s Palestinian minority.

Israel’s most senior politicians have [proposed opaque plans](#) to strip much of the Palestinian minority of its Israeli citizenship and their right to live in the state of Israel.

And in addition to comments by Katz and Dayan, Israeli politicians – even former [prime ministers such as Netanyahu](#) – have incited against Palestinian citizens as freely as they have Palestinians under occupation, suggesting they are terrorists and murderers.

And all of this takes place as the jurisdiction of Israel’s settlements [continues to expand relentlessly](#) in the occupied territories, and Palestinians in the West Bank [face ever more pressure and violence](#) to leave their homes and their homeland.

While Palestinians are effectively banned from publicly referring to the Nakba and may soon be barred even from waving a [Palestinian flag in public spaces](#), Israelis can march through Palestinian communities calling out: “[Death to the Arabs!](#)” and “[May your village burn!](#)”

The reality, as hinted at by Katz and Dayan’s latest statements, is that Palestinians are caught in a trap. If they assert their national identity, or even their most basic rights such as by waving a Palestinian flag, they risk providing Israel with the pretext to forcibly expel them, to carry out another Nakba.

But if they stay silent, as Katz and Dayan demand, the process of incremental ethnic cleansing, a second Nakba, takes place anyway – if a little more quietly.

Palestinians pay the price either way – while Israel’s policy of Nakba continues unabated.

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