Israel's Stolen Babies Remains the State's Darkest Secret

Kidnapping of Children and Mass Expulsion of Palestinians were Not Unrelated Events

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It is Israel's darkest secret – or so argues one Israeli journalist – in a country whose short history is replete with dark episodes.

Last month Tzachi Hanegbi, minister for national security, became the first government official to admit that hundreds of babies had been stolen from their mothers in the years immediately following Israel's creation in 1948. In truth, the number is more likely to be in the thousands.

For nearly seven decades, successive governments – and three public inquiries – denied there had been any wrongdoing. They concluded that almost all the missing babies had died, victims of a chaotic time when Israel was absorbing tens of thousands of new Jewish immigrants.

But as more and more families came forward – lately aided by social media – to reveal their suffering, the official story sounded increasingly implausible.

Although many mothers were told their babies had died during or shortly after delivery, they were never shown a body or grave, and no death certificate was ever issued. Others had their babies snatched from their arms by nurses who berated them for having more children than they could properly care for.

According to campaigners, as many as 8,000 babies were seized from their families in the state's first years and either sold or handed over to childless Jewish couples in Israel and abroad. To many, it sounds suspiciously like child trafficking.

A few of the children have been reunited with their biological families, but the vast majority are simply unaware they were ever taken. Strict Israeli privacy laws mean it is near-impossible for them to see official files that might reveal their clandestine adoption.

Did Israeli hospitals and welfare organisations act on their own or connive with state bodies? It is unclear. But it is hard to imagine such mass abductions could have occurred without officials at the very least turning a blind eye.

Testimonies indicate that lawmakers, health ministry staff, and senior judges knew of these

practices at the time. And the decision to place all documents relating to the children under lock untl 2071 hints at a cover-up.

Mr Hanegbi, who was given the task of re-examining the classified material by prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has been evasive on the question of official involvement. "We may never know," he has said.

By now, Israel's critics are mostly inured to the well-known litany of atrocities associated with the state's founding. Not least, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were expelled from their homeland in 1948 to make way for Israel and its new Jewish immigrants.

The story of the stolen babies, however, offers the shock of the unexpected. These crimes were committed not against Palestinians but other Jews. The parents whose babies were abducted had arrived in the new state lured by promises that they would find in Israel a permanent sanctuary from persecution.

But the kidnapping of the children and the mass expulsion of Palestinians at much the same time are not unrelated events. In fact, the babies scandal sheds light not only on Israel's past but on its present.

The stolen babies were not randomly seized. A very specific group was targeted: Jews who had just immigrated from the Middle East. Most were from Yemen, with others from Iraq, Morocco and Tunisia.

The Arabness of these Jews was viewed as a direct threat to the Jewish state's survival, and one almost as serious as the presence of Palestinians. Israel set about "de-Arabising" these Middle Eastern Jews with the same steely determination with which it had just driven out most of the area's Palestinians.

Like most of Israel's founding generation, David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister, was from Eastern Europe. He accepted the racist, colonial notions dominant in Europe. He regarded European Jews as a civilised people coming to a primitive, barbarous region.

But the early European Zionists were not simply colonists. They were unlike the British in India, for example, who were interested chiefly in subduing the natives and exploiting their resources. If Britain found "taming" the Indians too onerous, as it eventually did, it could pack up and leave.

That was never a possibility for Ben Gurion and his followers. They were coming not only to defeat the indigenous people, but to replace them. They were going to build their Jewish state on the ruins of Arab society in Palestine.

Scholars label such enterprises – those intending to create a permanent homeland on another people's land – as "settler colonialism". Famously, European settlers took over the lands of North America, Australia and South Africa.

The Israeli historian Ilan Pappe has observed that settler colonial movements are distinguished from ordinary colonialism by what he terms the "logic of elimination" that propels them.

Such groups have to adopt strategies of extreme violence towards the indigenous population. They may commit genocide, as happened to the Native American peoples and to

the Australian Aborigines. If genocide is not possible, they may instead forcefully impose segregation based on racial criteria, as happened in apartheid South Africa. Or they may commit large-scale ethnic cleansing, as Israel did in 1948. They may adopt more than one strategy.

Ben Gurion needed not only to destroy Palestinian society, but to ensure that "Arabness" did not creep into his new Jewish state through the back door.

The large numbers of Arab Jews who arrived in the first decade were needed in his demographic war against the Palestinians and as a labour force, but they posed a danger too. Ben Gurion feared that, whatever their religion, they might "corrupt" his Jewish state culturally by importing what he called the "spirit of the Levant".

Adult Jews from the region, he believed, could not be schooled out of their "primitiveness". But the Zionist leadership hoped the next generation – their offspring – could. They would be reformed through education and the cultivation of a loathing for everything Arab. The task would be made easier still if they were first detached from their biological families.

Israeli campaigners seeking justice for the families of the stolen babies point out that the forcible transfer of children from one ethnic group to another satisfies the United Nation's definition of genocide.

Certainly, the theft of the Arab Jewish children and their reallocation to European Jews chimed neatly with settler colonialism's logic of elimination. Such abductions were not unique to Israel. Australia and Canada, for example, seized babies from their surviving native populations in a bid to "civilise" them.

The "re-education" of Israel's Arab Jews has been largely a success. Mr Netanyahu's virulently anti-Palestinian Likud party draws heavily on this group's backing. In fact, it was only because he dares not alienate such supporters that Mr Netanyahu agreed to a fresh examination of the evidence concerning the stolen babies.

But if there is a lesson to be drawn from the government's partial admission about the abductions, it is not that Mr Netanyahu and Israel's European elite are now ready to change their ways.

Rather, it should alert Israel's Arab Jews to the fact that they face the same enemy as the Palestinians: a European Jewish establishment that remains resolutely resistant to the idea of living in peace and respect with either Arabs or the region.

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