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1945-1949 - A Collection of Reasoned Views for the dysfunctional condition of the Palestinian Arab's political state of affairs

Ken Stein revised in December 2022.

1. 1946 ---“The [Palestinian] Arabs are divided politically by the personal bickering of the leaders, which still center round the differences of the Husseinis and their rivals; and socially by the gap which separates the small upper class from the mass of the peasants—a gap which the new intelligentsia is not yet strong enough to bridge. Consequently, they have developed no such internal democracy as have the Jews. That their divisions have not been overcome ...is in part the result of a less acutely self-conscious nationalism that is found today among the Jews. It is, however, also the outcome of a failure of political responsibility. The Arab leaders, rejecting what they regard as a subordinate status in the Palestinian State, and viewing themselves as the proper heirs of the Mandatory Administration, have refused to develop a self-governing Arab community parallel to that of the Jews. Nor, so far, have they been prepared to see their position called in question by such democratic forms as elections for the Arab Higher Committee, or the formation of popularly based political parties. This failure is recognized by the new intelligentsia which, however, is unlikely to exercise much power until it has the backing of a larger middle class.” “Arab Leadership, as quoted in the *Report of the Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry*, 1946, page 36.
2. 1940s forward ...”decades of social change clearly contributed to [the Palestinian Arab] communal collapse and flight in the months of 1948- that is, rapid and chaotic breakdown and disintegration of village and urban political and social organization and leadership. In the context of an absent Palestinian national authority, the early flight of thousands among the upper and middle classes, and a colonial government that was hurriedly evacuating the country,

there was no body that could coordinate and organize resistance and maintain basic public services to avert the widespread collapse of communal institutions and authority.” Dr. Issa Khalaf, “The Effect of Socioeconomic Change on Arab Societal Collapse in Mandate Palestine,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 29, No. 1 (February 1997), pp. 93-112.

3. 1949 - “In the first phase the fundamental source of our [Palestinian Arab] weakness was that we were unprepared even though not taken by surprise, while the Jews were fully prepared; that we proceeded along the lines of previous revolutions, while the Jews proceeded along the lines of total war; that we worked on the local basis, without unity, without totality, without a general command, our defense disjointed and our affairs disordered, every town fighting on its own and only those in areas adjacent to the Jews entering the battle at all, while the Jews conducted the war with a unified organization, a unified command, and total conscription. Our arms were poor and deficient; the arms of the Jews were excellent and powerful. It was obvious that our aims in the battle were diverse; the aim of the Jews was solely to win it. These same weaknesses were the source of weakness in our defense in the second phase, that of the Arab armies: disunity, lack of a unified command, improvisation, diversity of plans, and on top of all a slackness and lack of seriousness in winning the war. Just as we failed in the military sphere, so we failed in the political. Our actions were improvised, our conduct of affairs a chain of enormous mistakes: we had no clear objective and no fixed policy. The natural result of all this was disaster and the loss of Palestine. [Musa Alami](#), “[The Lesson of Palestine](#),” *Middle East Journal*, October 1949, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 373-405.

4. **Note to the reader**—Professor Rashid Khalidi is the author of paragraphs 4 and 5 here, published separately. The first was published in 1997, the second in 2001. Their contents are very similar, and yet a sufficiently different for both to be included. As the author, it was of course Khalidi’s prerogative to paraphrase himself. The publication sources of both entries reveal his assessments of reasons why the Palestinians lost the 1947-1949 war against Israel.

”Thus, the *nakba*, the "catastrophe," of 1947-49 was both the outcome and the conclusion of a series of failures, a series of defeats. The Palestinians, with a divided leadership, exceedingly limited finances, no centrally organized military forces, and no reliable allies, were facing a Zionist movement and a Jewish society in Palestine which, although small, was politically unified, had centralized

institutions, and was exceedingly well led and extremely highly motivated-the horrors of the Holocaust had just been revealed, if any further spur to determined action to consummate the aims of Zionism were needed. As we have seen, the Zionist leadership had long since achieved territorial contiguity via land purchases and settlements which gave them holdings in the shape of an "N," running up the coastal strip, down the Marj Ibn 'Amir/Valley of Jezreel, and the finger of eastern Galilee. They benefited as well from international backing-both the U.S. and USSR supported the partition of Palestine and immediately recognized the new state of Israel, and finally had understandings with the key Arab military power, Jordan, whose ruler's ambition was to control the Arab portions of Palestine that were not absorbed into Israel, and who also commanded the Iraqi forces sent to Palestine in 1948.

In view of this almost unbroken chronicle of failure on the part of the Palestinians, it was perhaps understandable that their enemies might assume that their rhetoric had been correct all along, and that there were indeed no Palestinians. In fact, it should have been understandable that in spite of the disparity in numbers in favor of the Palestinians, a larger economy (by 1948, the Jewish economy of Palestine was larger than the Arab one), greater firepower, superior organization, and considerable support from the great powers of the age would enable the new Israeli state to triumph over the poorly led and mainly rural, mainly illiterate Palestinian population of 1.4 million.” Professor Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 190-191.

5. “Thus the Palestinian catastrophe of 1947-49 was predicted on a series of previous failures. The Palestinians entered the fighting which followed the passage of the UN Partition resolution with a deeply divided leadership, exceedingly limited finances, no centrally organized military forces or centralized administrative organs, and no reliable allies. They faced a Jewish society in Palestine which, although small relative to theirs, was politically unified, had centralized para-state institutions, and was exceedingly well led and extremely highly motivated. The full horrors of the Holocaust had just been revealed, if any further spur to determined action to consummate the objectives of Zionism was needed. The Zionists had already achieved territorial contiguity via land holdings and settlements in the shape of an ‘N’, running north up the coastal strip from Tel Aviv to Haifa, south-east down the Marj Ibn ‘Amir (the Jezreel Valley), and north

again up the finger of eastern Galilee. This was the strategic core of the new state, and the springboard for its expansion. The outcome of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict of 1947-48 was thus a foregone conclusion. The Palestinians had superior numbers, but as we have seen, the Yishuv had more important advantages: a larger and far more diverse economy, better finances, greater firepower, superior organization, and considerable support from the United States and the Soviet Union. All these factors enabled the nascent Israeli state to triumph over the poorly led, poorly armed, and mainly rural, mainly illiterate Palestinian population of 1.4 million.” Professor Rashid Khalidi, “*The Palestinians and 1948: the underlying causes of failure,*” in *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, eds. Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 30.

6. A noted Palestinian commentator argued that Palestinian stubbornness cost the Palestinians dearly: “rejection of the partition decision in 1947 made more than half the Palestinian people refugees and deprived us of Palestinian sovereignty over our lands in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip... rejection of Resolutions 242 and 338 obstructed the opportunity of their implementation when the world was enjoying some sort of balance of power with the existence of the Soviet camp...how did the partition borders, according to which the Palestinian people would get 48 percent of their historic land, become truce line borders in 1949 when these do not exceed 22 percent of the historic land of Palestine? And how did the West Bank become a piece of Swiss cheese that is cut by settlements everywhere? And how, in Jerusalem, did we become a minority that Israel seeks to get rid of...Time, my brothers in HAMAS, does not work in our [Palestinians’]favor.” Muhammad Yaghi, "The Dangers of Hamas's Policy" *Al-Ayyam* , March 13, 2006.

7. Don Peretz, “Palestinian Social Stratification – the Political Implications, “ in Gabriel Ben-Dor (ed.) *The Palestinians and the Middle East Conflict*, Turtledove Press, 1979, pp. 403-427. Peretz wrote one of several important books on the Palestinian Refugees. This article is a summary of findings he published elsewhere, including *Palestinians, Refugees, the Middle East Peace Process*, 1993.
This assessment by Peretz is objective, detailed, and presented without prejudice or polemic -kws 12.2022 (All credit to these findings and assessments belong to the author, Don Peretz)

pp. 404 “Often the Palestinians are perceived as a cohesive or monolithic group, with a distinctive identity whose comic characteristics have created a strong national sentiment. While many of their mutual experiences during the past half century have helped to forge certain common reactions and perceptions, there remain among the Palestinian significant social and class differences. In times of political tension or stress, such as the Arab Revolt of 1936-139, on in the period following the 1967 war, there as a tendency to overlook these differences. To some observers, the community appeared to be galvanized in more or less unified political action.”

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“Before the Palestinian flight in 1947-1948, Arab Palestinian society was not monolithic. It was vertically and horizontally stratified. Within each stratified segment of the society, they were both cross and sub-fragmentations. The society was characterized by strong regional differences distinguishing Northerners from southerners, hill dwellers from plainsman, nomads from settled population, urbanites from villagers, and Christians from Muslims. These differences in stratification had both economic, social, as well as political importance. Although Palestinian society was torn asunder by the Arab Israeli war in 1947-1948, many elements of stratification that characterized the society during the British Mandate have continued in the quarter century of the diaspora.”

“According to the British Mandatory authorities, the structure of Arab society was quasi feudal. The aristocracy of Muslim landowners who had served the Ottoman authorities was the *effendi* or governing class that dominated Arab society. Many were wealthy and well educated and had acquired through many extensive European contacts a Western sophistication. But their cohesion as a politically effective class was hindered by traditional rivalries among the leading families , the two most influential being the Husainis and the Nashashibis. Members of these and other families of Muslim notables, had assumed leadership during Ottoman times. Under the Mandate they continued to control the organized religious, political, and social life of the Arab community.”

“The movement of notable families to towns began at the end of the 19th century and was intensified in the process of rapid urbanization during the mandate. Many important family leaders continue to exercise authority and control over the villages from which they had come, from their new urban bases. Thus, leadership is characterized by domination of the notable families who became urbanized, but the regional differences which had been marked by inter family rivalries at the

village level continued. As political rivalries between the two leading families, the Hussainis and Nashashibi's intensified and as each of the two-family groups acquired increasing strength, they came to dominate the political scene, although the Nashashibis were eclipsed by far more powerful Hussaini, these who greatly increased their influence by virtue of control over the Muslim Supreme Council. Lesser families, and their village or regional affiliates moved toward identification with one or the other of the big two. Throughout the mandate era the upper class was horizontally segmented into regional subgroups, among whom tensions were often greater than those between classes or religious factions.”

“Often regional differences were tensions between city and town were expressed in identification with one of the leading political families. Centers his opposition to domination by the Jerusalem centered Husseini developed in Hebron Gaza and the north. There were instances where village shakes actively disassociate themselves from the same anti-Zionist movement because of traditional village city tensions. This bitterness was evident during 1920, when the stating that the urban political associations had no ties outside the cities and that quote in the name of the villages we are opposed to all the corrupt activities which hamper the security of the community UN quote although there was a general support throughout the country for the 1936-1939 Arab rebellion against Great Britain entered the scene feuds and clashes caused more casualties within the Arab community than among both British and the Jews.”

“Next in influence to the large landowners were the middle class of urban professionals and businessmen. The controlled the few small industries, like the Nablus soap factories. Some owned fruit groves in the plains. Others operated the local newspapers, generally cooperated with one or another of the notable Muslim families, frequently as the acquired wealth and purchased land, they would merge through intermarriage and new family alliances with the gentry. And sons of the land-owning gentry began, by the end of the last century to enter urban professions and commerce. A number of middle-class professionals, physicians, lawyers, editors, educators, government employees were Christians. The traditional social distance between Muslims and Christians really lessened as a result of common opposition to the two chief foes of the Palestinian Arabs the British rulers and the Zionist establishment, which led to mutual identification in political associations dominated by the notable Muslim families.”

“The great majority of Palestinians were peasants or fellahin, some owners of small farms, but mostly tenants are hired labor on estates of the gentry. At the lowest social level with the Bedouin desert nomads still largely pastoral, although

many engaged in primitive dry farming. In 1922 they were estimated to be about 100,000.

Throughout the mandatory era 2/3 to 3/4 of the Moslem Arab populations were rural peasantry engaged in agriculture, compared to the 3/4 of the Christian Arab population which was urban. The outstanding characteristic of the class, according to the 1936 British royal Commission and the 1946 Anglo- American Commission of Inquiry, was its poverty. Bareness of soil antiquated agricultural methods, insecure land tenure, an outdated land holding system, limited markets, and an ever-increasing rate of population growth, conspired to impoverish the fellah. In 1930, the Johnson-Crosbie Report (Palestine Government investigation) estimated that 30% of the rural families were landless and that more than a third of the Arab peasants had less than a minimum amount of land for subsistence.

Well-off landlords and merchants accumulated wealth, large numbers of small, farmers, and landless peasants were drawn to towns in search of scarce employment in the resulting urbanization process. The Arab city population increased by 85% between 1931 and 1944, a period in which the rural population increased by only 40%. Many of the unemployed, urban proletariat, and those at the bottom of the wage scale, fanned the urban interest and political turmoil of this era. “

Page 407 “Palestinian society benefited from improved healthcare in the period of the mandatory. The Arab population nearly doubled between 1920 and 1940, Despite many economic setbacks, Palestinians Arab per capita income in comparison to the rest of the Arab world rose to the highest in the Arab world. The greatest benefit of Palestine’s economic development accrued to the new middle class; industrialists created during the era of prosperity. The overwhelming majority, small farmers, landless peasants, and bedouin and urban proletariat benefitted but little.”

“It must be emphasized that in the 1940s Palestinian economy and the Palestinian era population was undergoing massive .Lands that were sold by individual landowners may have lived in Syria and Lebanon, but also Palestinians who sold their estates, not only to Jews but to local Arabs. Although approximately a third of the farmers remain landless, landownership was mostly by small holders who lived in their villages. In many cases land was commonly owned by villagers and yearly rotated from farmer to farmer, a practice which tended to disrupt the cultivation pattern and diminish productivity.”

“At the beginning of the mandate, infant mortality was a very very high and looks Palestinian Arabs and natural precipitously during the mandate rates among Muslims decline from 39% about 412 pro thousand to 251,000 it was greater than in the urban in the rule areas, but the reality is that the Palestinian population was increasing at a time when its economy was under pressure the rule economy was under pressure and duress.”

Page 409 **“Given the segmentation of Palestine into British governing class, the Jewish Yishuv, and a rather amorphously organized Arab society, or a group of communities, each of the above relatively self-contained an isolated in its cultural, educational, social, and economic life from the other two, it was not difficult for Arab leadership to create an illusion of a national community, galvanized its opposition to the British rule, and to the threat of Zionist encroachment. Increasing numbers of studies which deal with the Palestinian Arab community during the Mandate, and indeed, the performance of that community during the crisis of 1947-1948, substantiate the fragmentation, the internal weakness, and the extent to which national political unity was still an illusion. Although Arab Palestine was in transition from a traditional to modernizing society, the illusion of political unity was premature. Page 409**

How and why Palestinians flee- where do they go and how they change sociologically over the next 20 years.

pp. 409-410

“The pattern of vertical and horizontal stratification among the Palestine Arabs during the mandate was a major institutional factor in the community’s disintegration during the 1948 Arab Israeli war. While atrocities such as those at Dir Yasin spread fear and panic through Arab Palestine, the collapse of communal institutions, probably caused more disruption leading to the exodus of some 80% of the Arabs living in Israel- control territory. The pattern of flight also reflected the community’s social stratification. A large part of the influential Arab political leadership, especially those active in the dominant Hussaini groups had left the country before the Civil War began between Jews and Arabs. Some had been expelled by the British and were prohibited from returning since the 1930s. Beginning on a small scare late in 1947, and early in 1948, an estimated 30,000 Arabs mostly from well-to-do and middle-class families in times of social instability stress or upheaval; it was not unusual for middle-class families to seek refuge with family or friends in neighboring areas. ”

p. 411 - "As the Civil War [in Palestine in the late 1940s] gained momentum many Arab communities in Palestine were bereft of leadership. When the British precipitously withdrew their administration, services from the country, those most affected were the Arab communities. Most functions of government in Arab areas were under British control and, when they withdrew, a communal vacuum remained. There was no organized Arab body to replace the services of government essential to communal stability. With disappearance of government functions necessary to maintain law, order, and well-being, such as water, electricity, posts, police, education, health, sanitation in the like, Arab morale also collapsed."

"The Arab community became easy prey to rumor and exaggerated atrocity stories. Hysteria fed into the growing number of Jewish military victories and extension of Jewish control over large numbers of Arab towns and villages. The vertical and horizontal fissures in society were widened and communal differences between classes, regions, and sect prevented any unified action. There was no authoritative Arab voice to inspire confidence amongst the masses, or to check their flight, which gathered momentum until it carried away most of the Palestinian Arab community in Jewish occupied areas."

"Following the first Palestine war in 1947-1948, the countries Arab population was divided into four main groups. Fewer than half remained in their original homes.

- About 160,000 remain in Israel.
- Some 350,000 fell under the Jordanian administration on the West Bank;
- About 70,000 to 100,000 under Egyptian occupation in the Gaza Strip;
- In addition, about 750,000 refugees were dispersed in the above areas and in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan [into some 63 refugee camps, where Palestinians were not given national citizenship except in Transjordan]

"If there had been little unity of political cohesiveness before the war, now that was even less. The Palestinians were wildly scattered under diverse national institutions. Tensions were great between refugees and non-refugees, even between the non-refugees who were themselves, Palestinians. Blame for the military defeats, the political failures, the social disruption, and economic dislocation, was passed freely for one group to another. The previous leadership, such as it was, was widely discredited. Both refugee and non-refugee Palestinian communities were in disarray, entering a two-decade period of political suppression and even greater social fragmentation, then had existed in pre-war Palestine."

“A generation after the Palestinian flight, estimates of the Palestinian era population indicated that their numbers had more than doubled to over 3,000,000 souls. By 1975 about half the 3,000,000 Palestinians scattered throughout the Middle East were registered with UNWRA (United Nations Works Relief Agency) as refugees.”

“The most salient change among the refugees has been their *depeasantization*. This term, rather than proletarianization or urbanization, is used because the process was negative; one in which refugees lost their skills and capacities as agriculturists or peasants but did not become integrated into the urban centers which their camps adjoined, nor did they acquire new non-farming occupational skills; there was a major shift away from agriculture.”

“*Depeasantization* of refugee and non-refugee Palestinians has both positive and negative implications for the future. On the one hand, before 1948 the Palestinians were among the most skilled and productive agriculturalists in the Arab world. Despite extensive poverty, low productivity, and backward agricultural methods by European standards, the Palestinians were, next to Egyptians, the best farmers among the Arabs. Within the limitations of the skills, the Arab cultural area in Palestine had reached a saturation point by the end of the mandate— according to many estimates. Agricultural expansion was not considered to be the answer to future economic development of Palestine. Certainly, a reconstituted Arab Palestine in the West Bank would be able to survive with agricultural as its primary industry. A large proportion of Palestinians are now in refugee camps on the West Bank and Gaza, and most of those who might return to a new Palestine would have to find other employment.”

“While many Palestinians have prospered in the Arab countries since 1948, in a variety of professions, business and economic enterprises, the social structure still resembles an inverted pyramid. At the base are refugees living in camps. They have lived a generation in political uncertainty, economic dislocation, and social instability. Well, depeasantized, they are basically a dislocated unskilled proletariat.”

“Many of the 63 camps parenthesis (53 establish 10 emergency) are parts of, or adjacent to urban centers, thus most of the refugee camp dwellers, and a substantial proportion of the non-camp refugees, have been semi-urbanized at the bottom of the social scale. Few have permanent employment, although most families have been able to supplement their UNRWA assistance with income from temporary low-paying jobs and remittances from male family members who found

opportunity abroad, in places, such as Libya, Kuwait Other gulf states. Since 1967, the number of Arabs employed in Israel, a large proportion of whom are from Gaza in the West Bank, has grown. One Israeli economist estimates that Arabs (about half Israeli and half from the occupied areas) provide nearly a quarter of the labor in Israel's "productive industries." p. 412.

Ken Stein, December 2022