

“Israelis Know the Occupied Territories are Not Theirs to Keep,” *Baltimore Sun*, August. 15, 2000
“Preparing Israel for Peace,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 2000
“For Peace’s Sake, Israel Must Return All Lands,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 25, 2000
“Israel’s Leaders are Not Prepared for Peace,” *Beirut Daily Star*, July 28, 2000;
“The Palestinians’ Lands Are Not Ours,” *Milliyet* (Turkey), July 29, 2000.

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You could say the Camp David talks failed because of divisions over Jerusalem, refugees, or water, but the real reason is that neither side prepared its constituents for peace.

This is especially true in Israel, which holds most of the cards. Israel’s political leaders must take the plunge and courageously admit, “We took their land, and now we must give it back.”

Most Israeli Jews sense the occupied territories are not really theirs, but they have never been told so by their own leaders. Palestinian land claims are one of Jewish-Israeli society’s greatest taboos, and even Israel’s most liberal representatives skirt the issue for fear of electoral backlash.

My own experience is a case in point. My family came to Israel from the U.S. in the 1970s, renting an Arab home overlooking Jerusalem’s Old City. We realized the property originally belonged to Palestinians, but studiously avoided raising the topic in family discussions. We paid a Jewish landlord, and never inquired as to how he came to own the property.

After serving three years in the army, my own first rental was in Ein Karem, a formerly Palestinian village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Unlike many such villages, Ein Karem was not destroyed during the 1948 war. It had become a desirable neighborhood coveted by upscale Jewish intellectuals for its old world charm.

Although I and many neighbors belonged to Israel’s political left, we rarely spoke of Ein Karem’s Palestinian origins. Instead, we discussed our good luck in finding choice property in Jerusalem’s tight real estate market.

I believe Israel’s unwillingness to acknowledge Palestinian claims stems from its rarely-discussed shame over the 1948 war. During that conflict, Jewish soldiers forced -- or “encouraged” -- some 750,000 Palestinian to flee their homes. Through a process some today would label “ethnic cleansing,” Israel seized control over vast swathes of Palestinian land and denied refugees their right to return.

After 1948, the new Israeli state flourished on the ruins of Palestinian society. Some 400 Palestinian villages were bulldozed after the war, and their land was given to Jewish agricultural cooperatives. Thousands of Jewish families took possession of Palestinian homes in Haifa, Jaffa and Jerusalem, gaining control of what would later become lucrative property.

Estimates set Palestinian wartime losses at \$100-150 billion in current terms, resources that poured in to the Jewish economy as land, housing, and agricultural equipment.

Israel grew from strength to strength after 1948, building on the 78 percent of historic Palestine it now controlled. Although Jews had owned only seven percent of the land slated for Jewish control under the 1947 United Nations partition plan, Israel controlled over 90 percent by the war's end. Palestinians, meanwhile, were forced to make do with U.N. rations and miserable refugee camps.

Israelis know their country would not have survived as both "democratic" and "Jewish" if Palestinians hadn't been expelled in 1948. Had they remained, they would have challenged the state's Jewish identity, and Israel would have remained a "Jewish homeland" only by denying Palestinians their democratic rights.

Few Palestinians today expect to return to their pre-1948 homes, realizing their parents' villages are gone forever. Refugee experts believe that most will remain where they are or resettle in the West Bank and Gaza.

What Palestinians do want, however, is sovereignty over what little of Palestine still remains. If you think about it, they aren't asking for much. After all, the post-1967 lands comprise only 22 percent of what was once theirs.

In the coming months Barak must summon the courage to openly say what we all secretly know: the occupied territories are not Israel's to keep. Although the political right will surely respond with great anger, Barak's honesty will have finally broken the taboo, stimulating a realistic discussion among Israeli Jews.

Israeli withdrawal is also the only way to win genuine Palestinian support for a peace treaty. Although Israel may eventually compel Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to accept a partial pullback, it can't force millions of Palestinians to sign on. Without popular support, no deal will last.

Israelis have spent 52 years avoiding the issue of Palestinians, refugees, and land. The time has come for them to confront reality head on. The occupied territories are not theirs to keep.