

For peace's sake, Israel must return all land

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Israel was established as being both "democratic" and "Jewish," but it would never have survived as such if many Palestinians hadn't been forced out. Had they all remained in their homes, the Palestinian population would have eventually challenged the state's Jewish identity at the polls. Israel could have remained a "Jewish homeland" only by denying Palestinians a democratic voice.

FULL TEXT

Prime Minister Ehud Barak must prepare the Israeli public for territorial concessions by publicly acknowledging what most Israelis already know in their hearts: We took their land. The occupied territories are not Israel's to keep.

Although Israeli Jews tacitly understand that these lands, including the eastern section of Jerusalem, belong to another people, they rarely acknowledge so in public. Ever since the 1948 war, the subject of Palestinian land claims has been one of the greatest taboos of Jewish Israeli society. Even Israel's most liberal leaders gingerly skirt the issue, fearing that acknowledgment of Palestinian rights will hurt them at the polls.

My family first came to Israel from the United States in 1973, taking up residence in a beautiful Arab home overlooking Jerusalem's Old City. We must have known the property originally belonged to a Palestinian, but we avoided raising the topic in family discussions. Instead, we dwelt on its tasteful architecture, delightful views, and picturesque surroundings.

After growing up in Israel and serving in the army, I rented a small home in Ein Karem, a former Palestinian village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Unlike many such villages, Ein Karem was not destroyed during the 1948 war, and eventually became a desirable neighbourhood coveted by upscale Jewish intellectuals and yuppies for its old world charm.

Although I and many of my neighbours belonged to Israel's political left, we rarely spoke of Ein Karem's Palestinian origins. Instead, we dwelt chiefly on our good luck in finding such choice property in Jerusalem's tight real-estate market.

I think many Israelis' unwillingness to acknowledge Palestinian rights stems from their secret shame over the events of 1948. During that conflict, Jewish soldiers forced – or "encouraged" – some 750,000 Palestinians to flee their homes. Through a process that some today would call "ethnic cleansing," Israel seized control over vast swathes of Palestinian land and denied refugees the right of 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 co-operatives. Thousands of Jewish

families took possession of Palestinian homes in Haifa, Jaffa and Jerusalem, gaining control of what would later become highly lucrative property.

Estimates set Palestinian wartime losses at \$100-billion to \$150 billion in current terms. Most of those resources entered the Jewish economy in the form of land, housing and agricultural equipment.

Israel grew from strength to strength after the 1948 war, building everywhere on the 78 per cent of historic Palestine it came to control. Although Jews had owned only 7 per cent of the land slated for Jewish control under the 1947 United Nations partition plan, Israel owned more than 90 per cent of that land by the war's end.

Israel was established as being both "democratic" and "Jewish," but it would never have survived as such if many Palestinians hadn't been forced out. Had they all remained in their homes, the Palestinian population would have eventually challenged the state's Jewish identity at the polls. Israel could have remained a "Jewish homeland" only by denying Palestinians a democratic voice.

Few Palestinians today expect to return to their pre-1948 homes, knowing that their parents' villages are gone forever. Many will remain where they are, while others will take advantage of an international compensation package to resettle in the new Palestinian state.

What Palestinians do want, however, is to assume full sovereignty over what little of Palestine still remains.

Mr. Barak must summon the courage to openly say what most Israelis secretly know: the occupied territories belong to the Palestinians, not to Israel. Although many Israelis will initially respond with anger, the Prime Minister's honesty will pave the way for fundamental change.

A full withdrawal from these lands is the only way to win genuine and popular Palestinian support for a peace treaty. Although Israel may eventually compel Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to accept a partial withdrawal, it can't force millions of Palestinians to support the deal.

If Israel makes a full withdrawal and generously compensates Palestinian refugees, however, the conflict will finally end. *James Ron, an assistant professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, serves as an investigator for international human-rights groups in the Balkans and the Middle East. He is the author of a forthcoming book on Serbian and Israeli nationalism.*

DETAILS

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