

## 7. Settlements

This is the seventh part of our acclaimed series, "A Short History of Israel". If you wish to read the preceding parts, see the **Table of Contents** for links to them. We welcome comments and criticisms. Do tell us what you think.

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Given that there was to be no land-for-peace deal in the immediate future, Israel faced the problem of what to do with that land, which had 1.2 million Arab inhabitants. A small minority of Jewish Israelis favoured returning it unconditionally to Jordan and Egypt, mainly on the grounds that anything less would cast Israel in the role of occupier and create increasing resentment among the population. Another small minority wanted Israel to annexe the captured territory. The great majority opposed both these ideas, because both of them would destroy the possibility of any future land-for-peace deal. Also, returning unconditionally to the situation that had just ended in a war seemed perverse and irresponsible, and in the meantime the territories constituted a much-needed buffer against attack. The closest Jordanian soldier or artillery piece was now separated from Tel Aviv by 40 miles, plus the River Jordan, as opposed to 12 before. The Egyptian army, which had been an hour's drive from Tel Aviv and within artillery range of Ashdod and Ashkelon, was now 200 miles away and across the Suez Canal. With the Syrian guns silenced, children and teenagers in Northern Israel who had seldom in their lives slept above ground, could now do so safely. This normalisation highlighted the blighted lifestyles that Israelis within range of those guns had been leading, and made returning the Golan Heights to the Syrian army unthinkable to many. And with Sharm-el-Sheikh in Israeli hands, the blockade of Eilat was lifted, and Israelis were in no mood to trust international promises on that issue again – indeed, none were offered this time.

The Jerusalem issue was especially uncontroversial among Jewish Israelis. Israel annexed East Jerusalem, reuniting the city. Arabs living there were given the option of becoming Israeli citizens or retaining their Jordanian nationality with a right of residence in Israel. Jewish sightseers and worshippers were able to visit the Old City for the first time in 19 years. The Jewish holy places had been desecrated and allowed to fall into disrepair. Work began on restoring them and the Jewish Quarter.

A military government was instituted in the West Bank and Gaza,

with orders to prevent violence but otherwise to interfere as little as possible in the lives of the residents. Residents were allowed to trade freely with Arab countries, and to visit them. They were also allowed to trade with, and seek jobs in, Israel, and many did so. Tens of thousands of Palestinian Arabs were allowed to return from Jordan to the West Bank, where businesses flourished under the influx of Israeli and foreign tourists. Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza became a common sight relaxing on Israeli beaches. The Palestinian Arab press became the freest in the Arab world, and institutions such as human-rights organisations and a competent civil service gradually developed.

One of the most controversial and complex issues raised by Israel's capture of the West Bank and Gaza was whether Jews should be allowed to live there, and if so, under what conditions. The Israeli government's initial attitude was to ban Jews altogether, except for day visits. However, within months, public opinion had forced them to make some exceptions. To the Jews of Hebron, for instance, the period between 1936 (when the last Jews had been forced to leave the city) and 1967 was no more than a brief interlude, of a familiar type, in their long history. Jews had lived near the holy sites in Hebron, and been expelled, and had returned, many times over the millennia. That some religious Jews wanted to live there again had nothing to do with Israel or Zionism. Indeed, the community massacred in 1929 had been largely anti-Zionist. But the prospect of the Israeli government joining the long list of rulers of Hebron who had attempted to keep the city forcibly Jew-free, was too much for the Israeli public to bear. So when a group of religious Jews, including some children of those who had been murdered in 1929, pretended to be Swedish tourists and checked in to a hotel in the centre of Hebron, and then refused to return to Israel, the Israeli government eventually relented and let them stay, on condition that they not live within the city, but build new houses on the outskirts, a short distance from the main Jewish holy site. These became Kiryat Arba, the first of what have come to be known as 'Jewish settlements'.

In the great majority of the settlements, the inhabitants have always gone to some lengths to be good neighbours to the local Arab communities, trading with them, employing them, providing services such as health care, and trying to maintain good relations even when this is not reciprocated and even when terrorist murders occur. But the Jews of Hebron have a programme of gradually re-taking possession of the ancient Jewish Quarter (most of which was razed and desecrated under the Jordanian occupation) from the existing occupants whom they regard as squatters. They have sometimes used intimidation and assault – not only against Arabs but also against Israeli police – to achieve this. Today, tension between the 6,000 Jews and the 150,000 Arabs of Hebron runs very high. There are frequent murders, mostly in the form of terrorist attacks on Jews, but in 1994 a Kiryat Arba doctor opened fire in a mosque in Hebron, murdering 29 Arabs before being killed himself.

An example of a very different type of settlement is Gush Etzion.

Established in 1970, it is built on land at the southern approaches to Jerusalem, which had been purchased by the Jewish Agency in the early days of the Mandate. It had first been a collective farm, which was abandoned during the riots of 1929. An attempt to re-settle it was cut short by the riots of 1936. In 1943, four villages were built there. Orchards were planted and the villages prospered. Five years later, just before the declaration of the State of Israel, Gush Etzion was attacked by the Jordanian Army and Arab irregulars, heading for Jerusalem. It was besieged, and the defenders radioed for reinforcements. The Haganah could spare only 35 men, but they were ambushed on the way there and all were killed. Further attempts to lift the siege failed too. This became one of the epic sieges of the War of Independence, with the defenders isolated for many months, beating off attack after attack but suffering terrible casualties. Finally, with Jordanian armoured vehicles inside the defences, the surviving defenders surrendered. At one of the villages, Kfar Etzion, there were only fifteen of them left. They were asked to stand in a row for a photograph and were murdered by machine gun fire. Some of the surviving civilians, including an Arab family who were friends of the Kfar Etzion people and had taken shelter there, were then murdered too, and the remainder were taken to captivity in Jordan together with the other Gush Etzion survivors. Despite its outcome, the battle is considered by Zionists to be a key event in their history, epitomising the permanent commitment of Jews to their land. Ben Gurion said: "I can think of no battle in the annals of the Israel Defense Forces which was more magnificent, more tragic or more heroic than the struggle for Gush Etzion ... If there exists a Jewish Jerusalem, our foremost thanks go to the defenders of Gush Etzion".

After the War of Independence, the Jordanians destroyed all trace of Gush Etzion, uprooting the orchards, razing the villages and building an army base there. They also built a refugee camp for Palestinian Arabs. This must have seemed appropriate to them – billeting expelled Arabs on the property of expelled Jews – as, indeed, the mirror-image of that policy seemed appropriate to the Israeli authorities during the same period: many Jewish refugees were billeted in former Arab homes. However, in other respects the two sides' policies were not symmetrical. Israel was, and had been throughout, seeking a negotiated solution to the issue of refugees, and other issues, based on partition, while the Arab countries were still rejecting both partition and negotiation on principle. Also, as Golda Meir, who had been Foreign Minister during Israel's brief occupation of Gaza in 1956, recalled:

Then I toured the Gaza Strip, from which the fedayeen had gone out on their murderous assignments for so many months and in which the Egyptians had kept a quarter of a million men, women and children (of whom nearly 60 percent were Arab refugees) in the most shameful poverty and destitution.

I was appalled by what I saw there and by the fact that these miserable people had been maintained in such a

degrading condition for over eight years only so that the

Arab leaders could show the refugee camps to visitors and make political capital out of them ...

I couldn't help comparing what I saw in the Gaza Strip to what we had done – even with all the mistakes we had made – for the Jews who had come to Israel in those same eight years.

When the survivors of Gush Etzion were released in 1950 and arrived in Israel, they were not confined to camps.

After the Six Day War, a group including some of the children of the original inhabitants of Kfar Etzion petitioned the Israeli government to be allowed to return to the village and rebuild it. The petition was granted.

During the following few years the escalating attacks on Israel (see Part 3), the continuing insistence of Arab governments on withdrawal without peace, and the consequent total lack of progress towards either peace or withdrawal, caused Israelis and Israeli political parties to re-think their policies on the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, and in particular on Jewish settlement there. For a period of at least a decade, all the major political groupings came to approve of some further Jewish settlement. Their positions were roughly as follows:

- So long as a negotiated peace was not on offer, Labour Party supporters and their allies wanted to impose viable and defensible borders unilaterally, as far as this was possible. To this end, they supported the building of new settlements close to the 1948 cease-fire line, in areas that they expected to be recognised as part of Israel in a future peace treaty. They also supported the establishment of settlements that could serve as military outposts in the Jordan valley, and some settlements in Sinai. They also sought to demonstrate, in this way, that the Arab governments' policy of relentless war would have long-term costs in addition to the short-term ones that the IDF was inflicting.
- Likud supporters were not expecting the Arab countries' implacable stance to change in the foreseeable future, regardless of what Israel did. They reasserted the Revised Zionist position that the whole of Palestine should become Israel, and that Jews should be free to purchase land anywhere. In addition, when in power, they favoured financial support for settlements. Few, however, advocated annexation of the West Bank and Gaza for the foreseeable future.
- Religious Jews underwent a fundamental reversal of attitude. They increasingly took the view that Jews had a religious duty to inhabit all sites of historical or religious Jewish significance in Palestine, and a right to be protected there by the IDF. Many of these sites were in or near Arab population centres.

No significant faction, in any of these groupings, advocated the confiscation of land or property belonging to individual Arabs. Nor was any such policy ever implemented, though it is alleged that Israeli adjudicators often made unjust decisions when determining

the ownership of unoccupied land, and that some Arab absentee landowners were prevented by bureaucratic means from claiming compensation for land seized for security purposes.

Within months of the end of the Six Day War, Israel was again under attack.

## Part 8: The Yom Kippur War

Thu, 06/12/2003 - 17:39 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

## Part 7: Settlements

Very well written!

by [Daniel in Medford](#) on Thu, 06/12/2003 - 21:42 | [reply](#)

## The Fourth Geneva Convention

Ever heard of it?

by a reader on Thu, 08/07/2003 - 18:26 | [reply](#)

## Re: The Fourth Geneva Convention

International law being as vague as it is, and given the nature and political agendas of the UN and other elements of the international-law culture, it is perhaps not surprising that international conventions are routinely interpreted as de-legitimising Israel and justifying violence against Jews.

If there were indeed an international Convention establishing an absolute right to keep a territory Jew-free, so that systematically expelling Jews from their homes throughout any given territory would be an act of philanthropy meriting the Nobel Peace Prize, while any Jew returning to his home there, or buying a new home from a willing seller, would be committing a war crime that merits his being summarily shot or blown to pieces, then that Convention would be evil, would it not? But as it happens, contrary to what 'a reader' evidently thinks, there is no such Convention. We largely agree with the Israeli government's interpretation [here](#), that Israel's 'settlements' policy over the years has not violated the **Fourth Geneva Convention** or any other provision of international law. In particular, we agree that:

- The provisions of the Geneva Convention regarding forced population transfer to occupied sovereign territory cannot be viewed as prohibiting the voluntary return of individuals to the towns and villages from which they, or their ancestors, had been ousted. Nor does it prohibit the movement of individuals to land which was not under the legitimate sovereignty of any state and which is not subject to private ownership. In this regard, Israeli settlements have been established only after an exhaustive investigation process, under the supervision of the

Supreme Court of Israel, designed to ensure that no

communities are established on private Arab land.

- It should be emphasised that the movement of individuals to the territory is entirely voluntary, while the settlements themselves are not intended to displace Arab inhabitants, nor do they do so in practice.

We do admit, however, that the very existence of Israel violates various Declarations and Resolutions of international bodies, such as the UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 (since reluctantly reversed) that "Zionism is Racism". However, those Resolutions are evil too, and do not have the force of international law.

by [Editor](#) on Thu, 08/07/2003 - 19:38 | [reply](#)

### **(I also posted the "FGC" comment)**

I've only skimmed over your writings here, but I have to say that I think they're awful.

The position you seem to be in is one of wanting to do some objective inquiry, but not to the extent that it might threaten that you accept the Israeli/Zionist position in most regards to begin with. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's what I see.

I see this because, even in my limited perusal, I can see what another commentator has noted: that you give reasons and excuses for Israeli misdeeds, but leave Palestinian and Arab misdeeds as being just naked, evil undertakings. One need only to look at your comments on the Irgun being a terrorist organization to see this -- I think you begin by essentially saying "Yes, Irgun was a terrorist organization, but it was also much more than that, unlike Palestinian terrorist organizations like the PLO, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas." It would not take any real research, Editor, but only a consistent reading of a decent newspaper for you to realize that Hamas, in particular, sponsors hospitals and schools more than it sponsors terror. If the Irgun ever sponsored a school, it was probably only a school for assassins.

I see your bias also in your omissions. Did you think it was responsible of you to have written about "Settlements" without once mentioning the Fourth Geneva Convention, regardless of your personal opinion on it? Does it count for nothing that the United States -- Israel's monolithic ally -- believes that the FGC does apply in the Occupied Territories? And your explanation of your position on the FGC is weak -- in fact, Israel holds that the FGC does not apply to the OT because the FGC applies only to the territories of signatory states, and the OT never rightfully belonged to a signatory state. In essence, this is a position that holds that there are no rights until states create them -- not a very American position, to say the least.

(As an aside, your bias is extremely evident in your extrapolation from my eight words your remarkable diatribe about how I "evidently think" that there is a convention promoting the ethnic cleansing of Jews. Even for the internet, your comments are incredibly low-brow. I might also note that the resolution that

created Israel was a General Assembly resolution [186], which did not have the force of international law. Whether or not it was evil is arguable.)

I see your bias also in your mischaracterizations. I note that someone else has beaten me to pointing out problems with your comments on "Arab immigration" in the Mandate period, but let me highlight one thing. You wrote, "The number of Arab immigrants to Palestine during the Mandate period is unknown and highly controversial, but the net increase in the Arab Palestinian population was about twice the net increase in the Jewish Palestinian population." (Should you have credited Joan Peters is some of your statistics??) Well, given that the Arab population was about eight times the Jewish population at the beginning of the period, we can expect that equal levels of natural growth would make the net increase in the Arab Palestinian population EIGHT TIMES the net increase in the Jewish Palestinian population, so that it was "about twice" that amount is remarkable in that the ratio is SO LOW. But of course your insinuation is something else entirely.

Again, I have only skimmed your report -- what I have seen leads me to believe there is no value to me in looking any further at it. I think you are ultimately embarrassing yourself in presenting this as anything other than a Israel-biased account of the situation. I would hope that you would just take it down -- it's that bad. Maybe you could try to take a fresh look at the situation, but I think you really need to take a fresh look at yourself and try to figure out exactly where you're coming from on this issue, and what baggage you might be bringing to it -- frankly, you are bringing an awful lot. Sorry.

(The most objective general history of the Israel-Palestine situation that I have found, in case anyone is reading, is "Righteous Victims" by Benny Morris. Morris is probably the foremost of the "New Historians," and, while he is a pretty staunch Zionist, he is also [and probably moreso] a committed historian.

Anyone who wants to write their own comments on the situation for the consumption of others should also look to the UNISPAL documents that are available on the internet. These are hardly all-encompassing, but they at least give a reasonably objective accounting of certain aspects of the history from the Mandate period and all the UN activities.)

by a reader on Fri, 08/08/2003 - 16:02 | [reply](#)

## **Speaking of Tendentious Propagandistic Bias**

A reader wrote

'Should you have credited Joan Peters is some of your statistics??'

The statistics were not from Joan Peters, they were from an article that admits her book has rather more polemics than it does

common sense, although she happens to have found a good

argument about that one issue.

'The most objective general history of the Israel-Palestine situation that I have found, in case anyone is reading, is "Righteous Victims" by Benny Morris. Morris is probably the foremost of the "New Historians," and, while he is a pretty staunch Zionist, he is also [and probably moreso] a committed historian.'

Morris is a liar. Read **Fabricating Israeli History** by Efraim Karsh for his persistent, flagrant disregard for truth. This includes entirely deliberate misquotation of David Ben-Gurion with the sole purpose of utterly inverting the meaning of his words. He is rank charlatan, not an historian.

by **Alan Forrester** on Fri, 10/17/2003 - 20:50 | [reply](#)

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