

# An Israeli in Palestine

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Jeff Halper is an American-born Israeli Professor of Anthropology as well as a peace and human rights activist for over three decades. In 1997, he co-founded the Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions (ICAHD), and as its Coordinating Director “organized and led nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience against Israel’s occupation policies and authorities.”

ICAHD’s mission is now expanded well beyond home demolitions. It helps rebuild them and resists “land expropriation, settlement expansion, by-pass road construction, policies of ‘closure’ and ‘separation,” and much more. Its aim is simple, yet hard to achieve – to end decades of Israeli-Palestinian conflict equitably and return the region to peace. For his work, Halper was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.

Besides his full-time work, he writes many articles, position papers, and authored several books. His latest and subject of this review is *An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel*. Israeli-based journalist Jonathan Cook ([jkcook.net](#)) authored two insightful books on the conflict that are highly recommended. Information can be found on his web site and much more. He calls Halper’s book “one of the most insightful analyses of the Occupation I’ve read. His voice cries out to be heard” on the region’s longest and most intractable conflict.

Halper is a “critical insider” and insightful commentator of events on the ground that he witnesses first hand. This review covers his analysis in-depth – in two parts for easier reading. It exposes Israeli repression and proposes remedial solutions. It provides another invaluable resource on the conflict’s cause, history, why it continues, and a just and equitable resolution.

## Introduction

Halper’s observation about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is accurate. Knowing how to end it isn’t the issue. Overcoming fear and Israeli obstruction is at its heart. There are “no sides,” and Halper stresses that as a “chief claim of (his) book.” Critical discussion and effective action must involve everyone this conflict affects as the way to “get out of this mess” and achieve justice.

Thinking “out of the Box” is key, reframing the issue, offering an alternative way, and using it to open “possibilities for resolution foreclosed (by) security framing.” Halper has a “clear, empowering message: if we the people lead, our governments will follow.” But it takes empowering ourselves to do it and a commitment for the task. The goal – a “win-win” peace for all parties on a global scale taking into account “equality, human rights, international law, justice, peace and development.” Make no mistake. Israel bears most responsibility for

the conflict, continuing it, and preventing its just resolution. Overcoming that is no small task, and 60 years of trying so far have failed.

## **Part I: Comprehending Oppression - The Making of a Critical Israeli**

One home demolition transformed Halper from a progressive, liberal-left Zionist to his post-Zionist state. It was a year after ICAHD's creation, but he'd yet to see demolitions firsthand. He described his background and values - third-generation American, small town midwest, Conservative Jew (as differentiated from Orthodox or Reformed), not religious, but believing in the "essential rules of life" that he learned as a child: play fair, don't hit other kids, ask forgiveness when fall short, and take nothing belonging to others. He's now lived in Israel for 35 years, arrived as a young doctoral student, is very much an Israeli, and saw his Jewishness transform into "Israeliness."

He was never a committed Zionist, then over time saw how destructive and racist it is. It made Israel a colonial state and redemption requires that it "transverse a long and painful trail from de-colonization through reconciliation" to a new political form that's just, equitable and inclusive for all its inhabitants.

Conflict was never inevitable, but a combination of "exclusivist nationalism" and high-level ideologues led pre-1948 Jews to be confrontational, not conciliatory toward Arabs. Conflict resulted and normalcy was sacrificed. Sixty years later, Israel is deeply polarized, a colonial enterprise, hugely repressive to Palestinians, including Israeli Arab citizens. In Halper's judgment and many others, "the present situation is untenable." His task is "hasten a just peace and, in the process, help Israel" transcend Zionism and "redeem itself from (its) worse-than-colonial situation...." He begins with a vital question. "Why in the hell did (Israel) demolish (one) family's home" that he witnessed with horror.

### **The Message of the Bulldozers**

What bulldozers destroy, 200 settlements restored for 500,000 Jews in 150,000 housing units. It's on Palestinian agricultural land where zoning restrictions deny them building permits. Since 1967, Israel demolished over 18,000 Palestinian homes, a process now routine, and nearly always for no security reason. Halper calls it a "national obsession," collective punishment, in defiance of international law that Israel disdains. For Palestinians, it's traumatic and devastating. It renders men powerless and emasculating for being unable to provide a family home.

For women, it's worse - dispossession and loss of one's life that's like losing loved ones. Children as well are affected, traumatized, and rendered scared and insecure. It causes bed-wetting, nightmares, fear of abandonment, a drop in grades, leaving school, and exposure to domestic violence that results from parents' emotional upheaval.

Palestinians have no recourse. They get demolition notices. No formal legal, administrative process or orders accompany them. No warning or time to remove belongings. Barely time enough to escape alive, and at times not that when army policy destroys homes on top of residents suspected of being "wanted." Demolitions may be carried out immediately, months later or even years, and nearly always in early morning when inhabitants may be sleeping or at other times when they're most vulnerable.

Five government bodies control the process on both sides of the Green Line:

- the Civil Administration under the Ministry of Defense in the West Bank and formerly in Gaza;
- the Ministry of Interior and Jerusalem municipality in the city; and
- the Ministry of Interior, Israel Lands Authority and Ministry of Agriculture inside Israel with jurisdiction over Bedouin homes; in addition, Jewish-dominated municipalities control the process in “mixed” cities like Lod, Ramle and Jaffe.

It affects Palestinians, never Jews and is part of a process to “de-Arabize” lands and confine their inhabitants to small disconnected enclaves (Sharon’s “cantons”) on about 15% of the entire country. It encompasses Areas A and B in 42% of the West Bank and 3.5% of Israel where Arabs are confined by zoning, social pressure and plain fear if they show defiance. Another 1% is in East Jerusalem.

Israeli zoning and master plans authorize demolitions and deny building permits in ways to seem non-discriminatory. It’s hardly so in a country where Jews control 95% of the land from which Palestinians are barred.

Take Jerusalem for example. West Jerusalem is for Jews and its East portion maintains an artificial 72-28% Jewish majority over Arabs for a 220,000 Palestinian population. They’re in highly circumscribed enclaves. Israeli settlements took 35% of their land, and over half of East Jerusalem is designated “open green space.” Palestinians can own but not build on it. The result: Palestinian housing and communal needs are confined to 11% of East Jerusalem and only 7% of all Jerusalem as Palestinians can’t live in Jewish West Jerusalem. Here’s how it works:

- Palestinian Jerusalem residents can’t get building permits; the result is a 25,000 housing unit shortage;
- fewer homes mean higher prices; impoverished Palestinians can’t afford them; not even cheaper ones unless they build their own;
- unlike Jews – to retain their Jerusalem residency, Palestinians must continually prove that the city is their “center of life;”
- in spite of inadequate housing, Israel’s Municipality grants Arabs only around 150 to 350 building permits a year, yet demolishes 150 or more existing homes at the same time;
- even when obtainable, permits are too expensive for most Palestinians to afford; for Jews, however, fees are often waved or subsidized;
- even with a permit, Palestinians may only build on 25% of their land; the result is severe overcrowding;
- Jews, in contrast, have spacious accommodations in West and East Jerusalem;
- Palestinians also face discrimination for municipal services; they’re marginalized on budgets and essential needs like water, sewage, roads, parks, lighting, post offices, schools and other services; and

— East Jerusalem “neighborhoods” serve isolated Palestinian populations in disconnected enclaves, and the city is being transformed “into a region dominating the entire central portion of the West Bank.”

A similar system exists for the West Bank and for the same reasons - confinement, induced emigration and continued Israeli expansion. Civil Administration “Master Plans” zone 70% of the West Bank as “agricultural land” and prohibit Palestinian building. The 1995 Oslo II agreement also divided the Territory into Areas A, B, C and D (for Jerusalem) and H-1 and H-2 in Hebron. Further division established reserves for Jews only; security zones; closed military areas; “open green spaces” for Jewish-only housing developments in over half of East Jerusalem leaving Palestinians confined to unconnected cantons surrounded by Israeli settlements, restricted roads and hundreds of permanent and “flying” checkpoints.

A restricted interconnected highway and bypass road system links settlements and effectively incorporates them into Israel proper like suburbs are to downtown cities. These and other Israeli measures violate international law under which home demolitions constitute war crimes. They violate Fourth Geneva Convention provisions, especially Article 53 that states: “Any destruction by an Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons....is prohibited.”

UN Resolution 1544 (May 2004) obligates Israel to observe Fourth Geneva law and deplors the deteriorating conditions on the ground. Israel remains defiant. Creating a Jewish “ethnocracy” on both sides of the Green Line takes precedence. Home demolitions continue, and Israel’s “nishul” displacement policy advances it overall. Halper refers to “the Message of the Bulldozers: Get out. You do not belong here.” We uprooted you in 1948, and we’ll do it again throughout the “Land of Israel.” Palestinians have no right to claim a home in “our” country.

## **Part II: The Sources of Oppression - The Impossible Dream, Constructing a Jewish Ethnocracy in Palestine**

War or peace. Conflict or resolution. What do Israelis think? Halper believes most “want to get on with their lives. ‘Peace and quiet’ best describes (their) aspirations.” But things are never that simple in the “Holy Land.” Most Jews think ending the conflict is unattainable and accept Ehud Barak’s notion that we have “no partner for peace.” What then? Confrontation is inevitable, “hunker down, get on with our lives,” and let the army and government keep us safe. Everything comes down to personal security, so let the devil take the hindmost.

Barak’s contention and the second Intifada’s (September 2000) onset highlight the issue. Israelis also “live in a bubble,” much like Americans. Their perceptions and opinions are formed. They don’t grasp political realities, and affairs of state aren’t their thing. Nor do they care. They have their own lives to get on with, but Halper asks why can’t they “break out of the Box?” Three elements explain it:

- a national ideology - an ethnocracy and its political system;
- an obsession with security; and
- “small group decision-making.”

Understanding Zionism is important; its reliance on suppression, violence and dispossession;

its belief in exclusivity and privilege; and how politics derives from ideology. It purports to be democracy but won't countenance it for non-Jews. It demands an ethnically pure state where half of its inhabitants aren't Jewish and have few rights afforded Jews and virtually none that matter most.

Zionism justifies it, and its roots explain. The Jewish Diaspora "maintained an ethno-nationalism within a (religious) framework." Especially for 1000 years in Europe, mostly Eastern and Central. Jews were poor and lived apart from Christians in segregated communities. They embraced nationalism that was "organic, tribal as opposed to (western) civil nationalism." From this crucible, Zionism emerged and the notion that Jews deserve a homeland. Palestine was chosen to be returned to its rightful owner. Arabs have no claim to a land exclusively for Jews. It explains the "Israeli bubble," an ideological myopia, and an inability to admit any shortcomings when it comes to relations with Arabs.

Israel is an ethnocracy. It's the antithesis of democracy. Israelis won't admit it, but its leaders refer to a "Jewish democracy." A notion right out of Orwell. Structural inequalities highlight it. Israeli Arabs may vote, sit in Parliament, but government decisions aren't "legitimate" without a "Jewish majority." The Law of Return affords it to Jews alone. Then there's land, housing, education and many other examples of Jewish favoritism compared to discrimination and denial to Arabs. On virtually everything, even small things. What holidays are celebrated, having Jewish (not civil) law regulate marriages, citizenship, death, inheritance, and so forth. It's forbidden to bury non-Jews (even soldiers) in Jewish cemeteries.

The Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law prohibits Israeli Arab spouses from the West Bank, Gaza or any Arab country from entering Israel, getting residency rights or citizenship. It's to counter the "demographic problem" or the threat that a faster-growing Palestinian population will one day outnumber Jews in the land of Israel and change its Jewish character.

Policy stems from this and the notion of a two-state solution, one unacceptable to Palestinians, because it's based on an unworkable idea - keeping Arabs out of "our land" and having all of greater Israel's best parts for Jews. Palestinians get what's left, what's least valued, with settlement blocs kept untouchable, and expanding them as well. So some kind of Palestinian state will be finessed that by definition will amount to separated cantons in an "artificially supported prison-state." It can't work and assures no end to conflict.

It's so untenable, yet Israelis buy it. How so? Because security framing sells it. Jews are isolated and endangered, Arabs hostile, conflict inevitable, and everything comes down to "either we 'win' or 'they' do" - a clash of civilizations with no political solution and "civilian militarism" essential in daily life. This justifies "tribal nationalism and ethnocracy," and Halper lists its main elements:

- Israel the victim; fighting to survive; Arabs are permanent enemies; reject peace; are bent on Israel's destruction; conflict is inevitable;
- Palestinian "terrorism" is the core of the problem; Israel's not responsible and acts only in self-defense;
- no Occupation exists; the Territories are "disputed;" and
- no political solution is possible; Israel must retain total control; maintain "Fortress Israel;" allow a separate Palestinian state; bantustan-style only, non-

viable, semi-sovereign, encircled by Israel, and subject to the will of its powerful neighbor.

These notions are untenable. They foreclose any chance for peace, reconciliation, real security, and a fair and equitable solution to the region's longest and most intractable conflict. Yet Israel continues it for its own purposes, blames the victims for its own transgressions, and gets away with it because of western backing, mostly by America, and Palestinians have to fend for themselves.

Repeatedly through the years, Israel spurned compromise, avoided peace, and opted for conflict and repression. Halper cites examples. There are many, but few in the West know them:

- Israel met with Arab states in 1949; it rejected territorial concessions and refused to let 100,000 Palestinian refugees return - a small percent of those displaced;

- also in 1949, Israel refused Syria's peace treaty offer;

- before his assassination, Jordan's King Abdullah negotiated, but Israel rejected his peace overtures;

- in 1952-53, Syria's pro-American leader tried and failed as well;

- so did Egypt's Nasser;

- overall, Israel remained inflexible; it felt empowered by its successful armistice negotiations that left it politically, territorially and militarily superior to its neighbors;

- in 1965, Egypt extended peace overtures and was rejected;

- after the 1967 war, Palestinians wanted peace, an independent state, but were rebuffed as well;

- so was Sadat in 1971;

- Arafat as well in the early 1970s; Henry Kissinger flat turned him down and rejected all contact;

- Sadat was again rebuffed in 1978, a year before Camp David;

- in 1988, the PLO publicly recognized an Israeli state within the Green Line;

- in 1993, the PLO did again;

- doubling the settler population between 1993-2000 foreclosed a viable two-state solution;

- Sharon was uncompromisingly rejectionist;

- in 2006, Olmert dismissed the Prisoners' Document whereby all Palestinian factions ( Hamas included ) sought a politically-crafted two-state solution;

- since fall 2006, Syria's Assad made repeated peace overtures; Israel dismissed them and remains hostile to Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas' democratically elected government; it's confined to Gaza; kept under

siege; relentlessly targeted for removal; and since June 19 sticking to an Egyptian-brokered cease-fire that may in the end prove tenuous.

Israel chooses conflict over peace. It continues its settlement program. Palestinians are shut out, and something has to give. Without rethinking Zionism and reframing an obsession with security, nothing will. Things will keep worsening, resolution will get harder, and global fallout greater. There's a bad ending out there unless decisive measures counteract it far greater than a momentary letup in fighting.

### **Dispossession (Nishul): Ethnocracy's Handmaiden**

Security alone can't explain decades of Israeli policy. "Something else was going on," according to Halper - Nishul, dispossession, transfer, "de-Arabization," "Judaization" ethnocracy's "natural extension." Its logic is simple. A Jewish state can't be viable with a sizable Arab population. Worse still is a majority one even more able to demand equality. Preventing it and empowering Jews is thus policy. It defines Zionism's agenda, its roots go back over 100 years, and nishul is at its core. In seven stages according to Halper:

— localized from 1904-1914; early Zionist arrivals began it; they saw themselves as "returning natives" and used terms like "conquest" and "colonization;" buying land from absentee Arab landlords and removing Palestinian peasants began the process; resistance to the idea began early; nishul progressed slowly;

— from 1918-1947, systematic Jewish expansion along with nishul; the 1917 Balfour Declaration spurred it; it gave Arabs assurances but betrayed them; Jewish population grew; it was 17% of Palestine by 1932; grew faster in the 1930s; Arabs revolted from 1936-1939; Zionists adopted a "compulsory transfer" policy to counter it; Jewish sovereignty over all Palestine became a priority; accommodation with Arabs was rejected; the 1942 Biltmore Program was firm - "Palestine (would) be constituted as a Jewish Commonwealth;" Palestinians were left out entirely;

— active nishul - 1948; post-war, Jews were one-third of the population; partition was considered; the UN's 1947 resolution gave Jews 56% of the land, the Arab majority 42% with 2% left under internationalized trusteeship (including Jerusalem); nishul became necessary; at minimum, Gen Gurion wanted 80% of Palestine; the 1948 war secured 78%; ethnic cleansing (mass-nishul) out of which Israel was created; born in blood; thereafter immersed in it; all the while blaming the victims;

— from 1948-1966 - consolidating nishul; most Arabs were removed (up to 80%); the problem was how to keep them out; as a condition for its creation, Israel agreed to UN Resolution 194 and international law guaranteeing the Right of Return; on June 16, 1948, its Cabinet barred it; it remains policy today; Kafkaesque laws let Israel appropriate Palestinian land, bar them from owning it, and give refugees no rights in perpetuity; Halper cites four policy stages from other sources he quotes:

(1) Israel claims sovereignty - the "Abandoned Areas Ordinance" Section 1 (A) defines them as "any area captured by the armed forces or surrendered to them" or land abandoned;

(2) freezing the 'lack of ownership' - the (1948) Provisional Council of State created a "Custodian" for "abandoned areas;" various laws, regulations, military orders, and extra-legal means facilitated the expropriation of

Palestinian land;

(3) “Israelification” – from “lack of ownership” to Israeli ownership; various laws and legal maneuvers empowered government agency seizures; and

(4) De-Arabization – land was nationalized to protect its “Jewish character;” by 1962, 92.6% of the land belonged either to the state or Jewish National Fund; Palestinians got the remaining 7.3%; they were classified “internal refugees” (more Orwell) and prohibited from returning to their homes; laws were strengthened; the “Basic Law: Israel Lands – 1960” prevents lands or houses built on State Lands or on Jewish National Agency-controlled ones from being sold, leased or rented to Israeli Arabs; they’ve seen their ownership shrink from 93% pre-1948 to 25% in the immediate aftermath to 4% in 2007;

— from 1967 to the present – occupation, colonization, and a permanent “Matrix of Control;” it defines the Palestinian dilemma today;

— from 1993-2000 – post-Oslo attempts to complete nishul; de-Arabization and Judaization formalized an apartheid system; permanent domination defines it; from 1948 to 1966, the military administered it; thereafter, a mixed regime replaced it – martial law for Arabs; expansive space exclusively for Jews with generous subsidies for enticements; and

— from 2001 to the present, adopting unilateral “separation” – completing the nishul process; de-Arabization shifted to confinement; nishul proceeds in the Territories as well; its goal is to expand Israeli control over the entire country and confine Palestinians to isolated bantustans under Israeli control.

## **The Narrative of Exodus**

It refers to Leon Uris’ novel about a “heroic little Israel standing bravely against hordes of bad Arabs....(a) familiar colonial narrative (portraying) an idealized image of Israel” that boils down to bad fiction. Arabs are villainous while Jews come off as “righteous victims” after centuries of persecution. They were “attacked by five Arab armies” bent on their destruction, and have fought to survive ever since. Powerful stuff and in hardcover sold over 550,000 copies in more than 40 printings. In paperback it topped seven millions sales by the late 1980s, still sells, and became a hit film in 1960.

Poor little Israel. It’s the world’s fourth most powerful military power, has a formidable nuclear arsenal, yet it still casts itself as victim. Against what must be asked as no regional country threatens it nor do the Palestinians with light arms and crude homemade rockets for protection.

Halper says he’s often asked: “How can Jews (treat Arabs so harshly) after what they have been through? It does not come from Jewish culture.” Biblical times perhaps but not thereafter. But some believe a “latent manifestation of power, violence, exclusivity and cruelty,” surfaced as an ethnocracy after 2000 years of latency. Palestinian rights are denied, and showing compassion is seen as “weakness.” Israel’s existence as an ethnically-defined state requires it to be hard line against adversaries, external enemies and internal ones. Otherwise, its whole colonial enterprise is jeopardized. Unless victims come off as unworthy, Israel can’t justify its actions. Maintaining the Exodus spirit allows them. It filters out reality with a reverse narrative of truth.

**Part II will continue the story. Watch for it on this site.**



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