

Angry and Vindicated

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In January, the Israeli daily newspaper, Haaretz, ran an article, "Secret Israeli Document Reveals Plan to Keep Arabs Off Their Lands." I found the piece unsettling for several reasons.

Given the headline, at first I thought the story was going to be about Israel's policies in the West Bank where Israel's military administration has, since the beginning of the occupation, set aside large areas of the territories as "closed" to Palestinians, presumably for reasons of "security". Other areas were designated "green spaces", which, while appearing to be an environmental designation, simply meant that Palestinians could not build on or otherwise make use of these lands.

Over time, both the "closed" and the "green spaces" gave way to settlements, since that had been Israel's intention in the first place. For example, the massive Israeli settlement called Har Homa was built on a hill of Palestinian-owned land between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, called Jabal Abul Ghnaïm. Early on, Israel zoned the jabal "a green space". Their concern was not to keep it "green;" it was to keep Palestinian owners from using the land until Israel was ready to build a Jewish-only settlement on that same location.

As I began to read the Haaretz story, however, I realised that it was not about Israel's current practices in the territories occupied in 1967. Rather, it was about the Israeli defence establishment's decades-long effort to bury or suppress documentation of the very same land-grab practices that the Israelis had implemented during the first few years of their state.

Haaretz, to its credit, has been running quite a few of these historical pieces exposing the outrageous policies Israel used to "ethnically cleanse" Palestinians from their land in order to insure that the new state was "more Jewish and less Arab". As I have read each of these articles, I must say that my reactions have ranged from anger to indignation to vindication.

I have felt angry and indignant because 40 years ago, when I first wrote about these same practices in a little book titled, "Palestinians: The Invisible Victims", I was denounced by major pro-Israel and American Jewish organisations for my anti-Israel views. Back then, these mainstream groups were operating in much the same way as today's shadowy Canary Mission or Campus Watch. They created defamatory and threatening background briefs on Arab American writers and activists. And they would use these briefs to pressure colleges, radio, and TV programmes to disinvite us. They accused us distorting history, fabricating lies, and being motivated by an anti-Jewish animus. Of course, we were doing none of the above. We were merely reporting on the history of what Israel had done and was still doing to remove Palestinians from their lands and to deny them their rights.

When I now read the very same history in an Israeli newspaper, I cannot help think of the price so many Arab American intellectuals and activists were forced to pay for simply telling the truth. So, yes, I am angry and indignant. At the same time, I feel somewhat vindicated that despite the heavy-handed efforts of major American Jewish groups to silence our voices, the truth is finally coming out.

One final aspect of the article that I found intriguing was the effort expended and the means used by Israeli authorities to bury the historical record that would prove the grave injustices they committed in establishing their state. According to the Haaretz article, this record includes evidence of “the looting and destruction of Arab villages during the Independence War [and]...evidence of acts of expulsion and testimony about camps set up for captives”.

What the article makes clear is that the “cover up” was not only designed to hide the truth, but to provide Israeli propagandists the opportunity to disingenuously “question” whether these things even happened or to simply deny that they happened at all and then discredit those who said otherwise. As one official quoted in the article says about the imperative of hiding any documentation of what Israel had done to the Palestinians, “if someone writes that the horse is black, if the horse is not outside the barn, then he cannot ever prove that it is really black”. The lesson: if you hide the records or destroy, no historian can prove it ever happened.

The Israeli plan in a nutshell: first, whitewash history denying all the claims made about the repressive policies put in place; then denounce anyone who refuses to accept this fictional account of “history”; and finally, hide from the public as much of the real history as possible, so that it becomes difficult to counter the “whitewashed” fictive historical narrative.

In the end, what is especially disturbing about this Israeli practice, is that it is still their modus operandi. They continue to dispossess Palestinians of their lands using the same tactics which they used to “Judaize the Galilee”. In the early 1950’s, Israelis used the Emergency Defence Regulations they inherited from the British to declare any Palestinian area “closed”. They did so “as a means to control the “state’s lands...until their permanent status could be regularised and ...Jewish settlement could begin in formerly Arab areas”.

This is exactly what the Israelis have done throughout the West Bank with “closed” and “green zones”. And precisely what the Trump “peace plan” has done is formalise, in Israel’s favour, “the permanent status” of the seized Palestinian lands.

For decades, Israel’s apologists hid their intent and the evidence of their crimes. The truth is now coming out. And yes, those of us who have been telling this story can feel vindicated. But we can also feel angry and indignant, and deeply concerned about the future.

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