

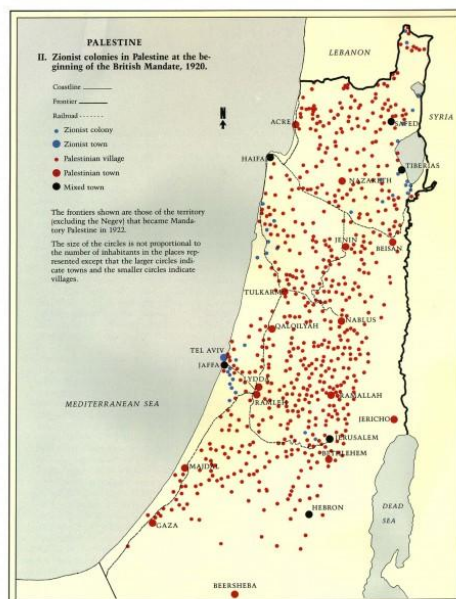


Zionist colonies in Palestine at the beginning of the British Mandate, 1920.

When in the late nineteenth century Zionism arose as a political force calling for the colonization of Palestine and the “gathering of all Jews,” little attention was paid to the fact that Palestine was already populated. Indeed, the Basic Program adopted at the First Zionist Congress, which launched political Zionism in 1897, made no mention of a Palestinian native population when it spelled out the movement's objective: “the establishment of a publicly and legally secured home in Palestine for the Jewish people.”

Moreover, in the early years of their efforts to secure support for their enterprise, the Zionists propagated in the West the idea of “a land without a people for a people without a land,” a slogan coined by Israel Zangwill, a prominent Anglo-Jewish writer often quoted in the British press as a spokesman for Zionism and one of the earliest organizers of the Zionist movement in Britain. Even as late as 1914, Chaim Weizmann, who was to become the first president of Israel and who, along with Theodor Herzl and David Ben-Gurion, was one of the three men most responsible for turning the Zionist dream into reality, stated:

In its initial stage, Zionism was conceived by its pioneers as a movement wholly depending on mechanical factors: there is a country which happens to be called Palestine, a country without a people, and, on the other hand, there exists the Jewish people, and it has no country. What else is necessary, then, than to fit the gem into the ring, to unite this people with this country? The owners of the country [the Turks] must, therefore, be persuaded and convinced that this marriage is advantageous, not only for the [Jewish] people and for the country, but also for themselves.



Neither Zangwill nor Weizmann intended these demographic assessments in a literal fashion. They did not mean that there were no people in Palestine, but that there were no people worth considering within the framework of the notions of European supremacy that then held sway. In this connection, a comment by Weizmann to Arthur Ruppin, the head of the colonization department of the Jewish Agency, is particularly revealing. When asked by Ruppin about the Palestinian Arabs, Weizmann replied: "The British told us that there are there some hundred thousands negroes [Kushim] and for those there is no value." Zangwill himself spelled out the actual meaning of his slogan with admirable clarity in 1920:

If Lord Shaftesbury was literally inexact in describing Palestine as a country without a people, he was essentially correct, for there is no Arab people living in intimate fusion with the country, utilising its resources and stamping it with a characteristic impress: there is at best an Arab encampment.



About three hundred Zionist rural colonies, collective and noncollective, were established between 1882 and 1948 in Palestine. Throughout this period, however, the vast majority of the Jewish population (75 percent in 1948) continued to live in the three main cities: Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv. Collective colonies (kibbutzim and moshavim) were not introduced until the first decade of this century. Even by 1948 less than 7 percent of Palestine was Jewish-owned, chiefly by the central Zionist land-acquisition organization, the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemeth). The sites of many colonies were chosen with geopolitical or military considerations in mind. Some, as in these photographs taken ca. 1946, were straight military strongholds. The bulk of the rural male population, especially in the collective colonies, belonged to the official Zionist military organization, the Haganah. Despite such statements, however, the Zionists from the outset were well aware that not only were there people on the land, but that people were there in large numbers. Zangwill, who had visited Palestine in 1897 and come face-to-face with the demographic reality, acknowledged in 1905 in a speech to a Zionist group in Manchester that "Palestine proper has already its inhabitants. The pashalik of Jerusalem is already twice as thickly populated as the United States, having fifty-two souls to the square mile, and not 25 percent of them Jews..." Abundant references to the Palestinian population in early Zionist texts show clearly that from the beginning of Zionist settlement in Palestine—which Zionist historiography dates to the arrival of the members of the Russian Bilu Society in 1882—the Palestinian Arabs were far from being an "unseen" or "hidden" presence. Moreover, recent studies have shown that Zionist leaders were concerned with what they termed the "Arab problem" (Habe'ayah Ha'aruit) or the "Arab question" (Hashelah Ha'aruit). As seen in their writings, the attitudes prevailing among the majority of the Zionist groups and settlers concerning the indigenous Palestinian population ranged from indifference and disregard to patronizing superiority. A typical example can be found in the works of Moshe Smilansky, a Zionist writer and Labor leader who immigrated to Palestine in 1890:

Let us not be too familiar with the Arab fellahin lest our children adopt their ways and learn from their ugly deeds. Let all those who are loyal to the Torah avoid ugliness and that which resembles it and keep their distance from the fellahin and their base attributes.

There were, certainly, those who took exception to such attitudes. Ahad Ha'Am (Asher Zvi Ginzberg), a liberal Russian Jewish thinker who visited Palestine in 1891, published a series of articles in the Hebrew periodical *Hamelitz* that were sharply critical of the ethnocentricity of political Zionism as well as the exploitation of Palestinian peasantry by Zionist colonists. Ahad Ha'Am, who sought to draw attention to the fact that Palestine was not an empty territory and that the presence of another people on the land posed problems, observed that the Zionist "pioneers" believed that "the only language that the Arabs understand is that of force [They] behave towards the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, trespass unjustly upon their boundaries, beat them shamefully without reason and even brag about it, and nobody stands to check this contemptible and dangerous tendency." He cut to the heart of the matter when he ventured that the colonists' aggressive attitude towards the native peasants stemmed from their anger "towards those who reminded them that there is still another people in the land of Israel that have been living there and does not intend to leave.



At the end of World War II, the Zionist leadership decided to undermine the British regime in Palestine as a prelude to the establishment of a Jewish state. One of its chosen tactics was the sponsorship of illegal mass Jewish immigration into the country over and above the official postwar annual quota of 18,000 Jewish immigrants (set by the British in spite of their promise to the Arab delegates at the 1939 London Conference). Between 1946 and 1948, tens of thousands of illegal immigrants were transported to Palestine from European ports. These scenes were photographed at Haifa in the summer of 1946. Another early settler, Yitzhaq Epstein, who arrived in Palestine from Russia in 1886, warned not only of the moral implications of Zionist colonization but also of the political dangers inherent in the enterprise. In 1907, at a time when Zionist land purchases in the Galilee were stirring opposition among Palestinian peasants forced off land sold by absentee landlords, Epstein wrote a controversial article entitled "The Hidden Question," in which he strongly criticized the methods by which Zionists had purchased Arab land. In his view, these methods entailing dispossession of Arab farmers were bound to cause political confrontation in the future. Reflected in the Zionist establishment's angry response to Epstein's article are two principal features of mainstream Zionist thought: the belief that Jewish acquisition of land took precedence over moral considerations, and the advocacy of a separatist and exclusionist Yishuv.

This introduction is excerpted from the first chapter of *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought 1882-1948* (IPS, 1992) by Nur Masalha.

Above photos from *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians, 1876-1948* by Walid Khalidi.