

Hilda B. Silverman Memorial Lecture on Israel/Palestine

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Open Yet Invisible: The US Record on Israel and Palestine, 1948¹

Irene Gendzier

The paradox and the questions

The subject of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, let alone a critical view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, remain largely taboo in the mainstream US media. Such themes fall under the category of 'controversial,' which suggests that the editor of any mainstream periodical considering publication of articles that depart from conventional interpretations of Israel's emergence, the war of 1948, or the nature of the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, puts the editor at risk of losing his/her audience or worse. What precisely is the risk? Is it challenging the systematic dehumanization of Palestinians and by extension, Arabs, that infects contemporary talk of the conflict in the Middle East? Is it opening the door to the reentry of Palestinians into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which they have long remained the silenced party, defined as inherently rejectionist and therefore illegitimate?

Interested readers will readily find multiple sources, including those of Israeli and Palestinian voices, on the internet. But while such sources are, in principle, accessible, they may not be available to all those who are interested. Their existence, moreover, has not altered the views that continue to dominate the media and some parts of academia.

Despite this, by late 2016, public opinion polls in the US recorded increasing numbers of Americans sympathetic toward Palestinians and critical of Israeli settlement construction on the West Bank.² The contrast between the findings of pollsters and media coverage suggests a shifting of public opinion that has not escaped the political class, some of whose members are actively fighting to contain the charges and changes involved. Hence, evidence of the polls has thus far not resulted in significant changes in the

¹ This essay is based on my presentation at the Memorial Lecture in honor of Hilda B. Silverman on May 11, 2016, "Open Yet Invisible: The US Record on Israel and Palestine, 1948." The evidence offered in both the presentation and the present essay is drawn from my study, *Dying to Forget, Oil, Power, Palestine, and the Foundations of U.S. Policy in the Middle East*, Columbia University Press, 2015; paperback edition with a new Introduction, 2016.

² Rashid Khalidi, "Trump's Middle East 'Deal' Leaves Out One Vital Player: Palestinians," *The Nation*, Feb. 21, 2017. <http://www.thenation.com/login/>.

platforms of either the Republican or Democratic parties. Political figures operating outside of this framework have greater independence and less influence.

Hence, while one may conclude that although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a controversial subject in the public sphere, its manifestations on the ground in Israel and Palestine are no longer invisible. Despite this, the reluctance to engage in public discussion of the subject effectively marginalizes it. Therein lies the paradox referred to in the title of this work in which evidence of a particular condition is publicly accessible, although conditions surrounding its discussion, whether in the media or academia, render it virtually invisible.

How can one explain this phenomenon in the absence of formal censorship? The answer lies in the extent to which the subject regarded as new or controversial, challenges dominant interpretations and its beneficiaries, and their ability through the media and the hierarchies of power within academia, to contain such challenges.

Consider the response to the recent UN report on Israel and Apartheid issued by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in 2017.³ The Report, "Israeli Practices Towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid, Palestine and the Israeli Occupation, Issue No. 1," argued that the practices of the Israeli state towards the Palestinian population constituted a system of apartheid, as interpreted in international law. Both the United States and Israel demanded the withdrawal of the report, condemning its conclusion as blatant anti-Semitism. The Executive Secretary of the UN Commission responsible for the Report, Dr. Rima Khalaf, was pressured by the UN Secretary General, to withdraw the Report, which she chose not to do, resigning her UN positions, instead.⁴ As for the text, journalist Glen Greenwald, pointed out that it did not present new evidence but repeated statements that had been made by a former Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, as well as the Trump Administration's Secretary of Defense.⁵ This was not sufficient to contain the response or mute the resulting attacks on its authors. It was also insufficient to bar interested readers from finding the Report on the Internet. But there was an unstated understanding that what rendered the Report toxic in the American context and that of Israel, was the legitimating stamp of UN approval in the mere issuance of the Report under UN auspices.

There are other examples that reflect pressures to conceal and deny historical evidence that undermine dominant narratives. Works by Palestinian historians as well as Israel's "new historians" writing

³ Rick Gladstone, "Tempest at UN Over Report Accusing Israel of Apartheid Against Palestinians," The New York Times, March 16, 2017, A8.

⁴ Rick Gladstone & Somini Sengupta, "Official Quits UN Post Over Report," The New York Times, Mar 18, 2007, A5.

⁵ Glenn Greenwald, "Trump Administration Ousts U.N. Official to Protect Israel From Criticism," The Intercept, March 18, 2017. <https://theintercept.com/2017/03/18/trump-administration-ousts-un-official-to-protect-israel-from-criticism/>.

on the events surrounding the 1948 war and its impact on the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem, have long been a source of controversy.⁶ Palestinian historians have written about 1948 and its significance for Palestinian communities uprooted as a result of the Nakba; and Israelis who have borne witness to the war over Palestine have left a record that is compatible. But such accounts remain within the purview of the specialist, seldom being integrated into mainstream analyses of the subject, whether in the media or in academic circles.

Many critics have attempted to explain this phenomenon in terms of concealment or denial. Their responses are worth contemplating as they remain relevant to current circumstances.

In his essay, The Question of Palestine, Edward Said described “the concealment by Zionism of its own history,” pointing out that it had “become institutionalized, and not only in Israel.”⁷ Said suggested that concealment had become a self-serving habit that was inseparable from “uncritical support of Israel and Zionism” across a broad array of public and private spheres. Others have written of denial, such as Nur Masalha, and the deliberate erasure of memory, such as Saree Makdisi and Susan Slymovics.⁸ And as Yair Svorai’s essay on “Trump and Israel’s Occupation of Palestine” points out, following 1967, “in an attempt to eradicate the villages from history and erase them from public memory, the victors attempted to conceal their crimes by planting a recreational forest, named Canada Park, on the land formerly owned and cultivated by these villagers- a concealment method that had been used before.”⁹

In her book, Erased From Space and Consciousness, Israeli writer Noga Kadman discusses the effect of suppressing the history of Palestinian villages in the struggle over Palestine in 1948. As she argues

Israelis do not suppress the memory of the villages out of personal instinct; the suppression is collective, and it is shaped through direct manipulation by the state, which prefers to keep Israeli awareness of the issue dormant and distorted. The marginalization of the depopulated Palestinian villages in Israel has a political rationale that goes hand in hand with the ideology of Judaization and Israel’s ethnocratic structure, and it is motivated by the desire to cement Jewish domination

⁶ Eugene L Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds., The War for Palestine, Rewriting the History of 1948, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁷ Edward W. Said, The Question of Palestine, Vintage Books Edition, New York, 1980, 58.

⁸ Nur Masalha, The Politics of Denial, Israel and the Palestinian Refugee Problem, Pluto Press, London, 2003; Saree Makdisi, “The Architecture of Erasure,” Critical Inquiry, Spring 2010, 36, 3, 519-559; Susan Slymovics, The Object of Memory, Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian’ Village, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1998.

⁹ Y.J. Svorai, “Trump and Israel’s Occupation of Palestine,” Ha’aretz, English edition, March. 12, 2017 <http://www.hararetz.com/opinion/.premium1.776450?v=8EAA86FC33928A97403CA77F73053CA4>.

of the land. For Israel, the greatest possible threat to this aspiration is the return of the Palestinian refugees to their communities of origin within Israel. The depopulated villages are seen in Israel as a permanent reminder of that threat, and their marginalization is meant to reject the bond that exists to this day between the refugees and their villages, silence any open discussion of the refugee problem and their return to their villages and towns, and keep the entire subject off the agenda.¹⁰

In his essay, “Forgetfulness for Memory: The Limits of the New Israeli History,” historian Joel Beinin explained that the damaging disclosures concerning ethnic cleansing were in fact “illegible in the Israeli historical narrative.”¹¹ That is, within the existing context of what is accepted as the legitimate historical interpretation of Israel’s emergence, the disclosures concerning ethnic cleansing had no place. Barring a willingness to reconsider critical questions concerning the nation’s history and origins, the evidence of ethnic cleansing was thus rendered practically invisible. The question, as Beinin stated, was “how the discursive mechanisms of Zionism and the State of Israel enabled most Israeli Jews to ‘forget’ what they once ‘knew’: that during the 1948 war, the majority of the Palestinian Arabs were ethnically cleansed from the territories that became the State of Israel.”¹² Referring to the work of historian Benny Morris, Beinin writes, “much, even if not all the details, of the information Morris presents in The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem and other works was always available in one form or another. It was actively rendered illegible in the Israeli historical narrative.”¹³

To what extent are the issues raised by Said, Kadman and Beinin relevant to the study of US policy in Israel and Palestine? Said’s observation can be applied to the US case, as the de facto concealment of the US record is a self-serving habit. There is nothing, however, that compares precisely to the experience that Kadman describes with respect to a collective suppression of the record. There is no official censorship that accounts for the suppression or manipulation of the US record, which is accessible on the internet as well as in official archives and Presidential libraries that are open to the public. But there is evidence of media misrepresentation of the news, including US foreign policy, whose consequences are difficult to exaggerate.¹⁴

¹⁰ Noga Kadman, Erased From Consciousness, Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2015, 144.

¹¹ Joel Beinin, “Forgetfulness for Memory: The Limits of the New Israeli History,” Journal of Palestine Studies, XXXIV, winter 2005, 10.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Howard Friel and Richard Falk, The Record of the Paper, How the New York Times Misreports US Foreign Policy, Verso, London, 2004; Friel and Falk, Israel –Palestine On Record, How the New York Times Misreports Conflict in

Beinin's account of the incompatibility of the works of "Israel's new historians" with the dominant Israeli narrative, is relevant insofar as conventional accounts of US policy have conformed to the Israeli narrative, which is itself incompatible with the US record of the period 1945-1949.

The US record indicates that US officials in Washington and Jerusalem understood the nature of the ongoing secular conflict in Palestine as well as the objective of Zionist settlement and its impact on Palestinians who became refugees. Among other things, it reveals Washington's unwavering commitment to UN Resolution 194 of Dec. 11, 1948, that called for Palestinian refugee repatriation and or compensation. The circumstances that led the Truman Administration to alter its policies on this score are also part of the record that has been neglected in conventional accounts of US policy.

These developments and the history on which they rest, remain relevant – and sadly, controversial, nearly seven decades later.

Meron Benvenisti and the "heart of the matter"

On September 26, 2002 Hilda Silverman sent her list of correspondents an article from the Israeli daily, Ha'aretz by the former Mayor of Jerusalem, Meron Benvenisti, with the note, "for me this goes to the heart of the matter. Fabulous, thought-provoking article by Meron B."

Benvenisti's article was titled, "The Homeland Purified of Arabs."¹⁵ It described two sites visited by different groups of tourists; orthodox and militant rightists touring Hebron; and secular Jews out for "a 'happening' of pastoral olive picking" in Sataf. Their differences aside, these tourists were offered the same experience, one of the "homeland purified of Arabs..."

Briefly reviewing the history embedded in these sites, Benvenisti recalled the Mandate period and the war of Independence, asking what had become of the lands that had previously included over "600,000 dunam of Arab olives under cultivation"?¹⁶ The history to which Benvenisti referred represents a Zionist policy exposed by Israel's "new historians" as well as others with a keen understanding of the country's history. "The expansion of Jewish settlement in, and control of, Palestine has followed a consistent pattern for about 100 years: people replacement-the replacement of Palestinians by Jews."¹⁷ As the author of the preceding description writes, "prior to the Holocaust and before anyone could imagine the horrific fate

the Middle East, Verso, London, 2007; and see Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, Pantheon Books, New York, 1988.

¹⁵ Meron Benvenisti, "The Homeland Purified of Arabs," Ha'aretz, Sept. 26, 2002. http://www.haaretz.com/the-homeland0purified-of-arabs_1.332-11.

¹⁶ 2002, the same year in which Benvenisti's article appeared, Zochrot, and Israeli NGO was established; its purpose educating Israelis about the origins of the very policies Benvenisti described in the Nakba.

¹⁷ See the instructive account by Yair Svorai cited in ftnt 8.

awaiting European Jews, the foundation of the State of Israel was set in place via the creation of elaborate pre-state institutions, buttressed by small waves of immigrants whose political orientation ranged from Zionist socialists to right-wing ultra-nationalists.”

The power of Benvenisti’s account rested in his reminder that “there’s a direct line between the rape of the past and the rewriting of history to the arbitrary brutality of the present.” But how many were prepared to remember this, or even to acknowledge it as a subject worth remembering? The convenience of forgetting was not forgotten. “...forgetting is a blessing. Without forgetting we would all die of fright and abuse. Memory is the process of organizing what to forget....”¹⁸

Hilda Silverman’s reaction to Benvenisti’s remarks left no doubt as to her identification with his views of the “heart of the matter,” Fifteen years after the appearance of Benvenisti’s article, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories of Gaza and the West Bank remain subject to the “arbitrary brutality” of Israeli policy.

The US record of Israel’s state formation confirms some of what Palestinian and Israeli historians have written about the political and socioeconomic consequences of the struggle over Palestine. Although US policies in the intervening decades did not remain uniform, there was a common understanding among government insiders as to the events surrounding the transformation of Palestine, the emergence of the Israeli state, and the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem.

The following discussion emphasizes a select number of themes that dominated official talk of US policy towards Palestine and Israel in the years 1945-49: the importance of the Palestine problem; the nature of Zionist objectives; bi-nationalism as a solution to the conflict; the origin and resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem; and finally, the reassessment of Israel’s potential in US strategy and its implications for US policy toward Israel and Palestine. Evidence of interaction between US officials, Zionist officers and after 1948, Israeli officials, is commonplace. The same cannot be said with respect to US interaction with Palestinian officials, who are largely absent from the US record.

Despite this significant limitation, the US record is a rich and inadequately mined resource directly relevant to the issues that Benvenisti wrote about. How much of this record did Hilda Silverman know? I offer the following commentary on these pages of the U.S. record in memory of Hilda Silverman’s abiding commitment to know the truth about “the heart of the matter” and the conditions that gave rise to it. This is by no means designed as a summary of US policy. Rather, it is an attempt to draw attention to the extent to which US officials recognized the “heart of the problem,” and its impact on the Palestinian refugee problem,

¹⁸ Elias Khoury, Gate of the Sun, trans by Humphrey Davies, Archipelago Books, Brooklyn, 2006, 163.

and the conditions which resulted in Washington turning away from such recognition as a result of calculations of interest that profoundly altered the early direction of US policy.

What Truman Knew and We Have Forgotten Concerning US Policy in Palestine and Israel

The Truman Administration's Middle East desk was staffed by a modest cadre of officials assigned to deal with the Near and Middle East. This was a result of the understanding that Palestine was then a British Mandate, and that Britain and France remained the two imperial powers in the area. But this did not prevent the State Department from analyzing the situation in Palestine and evaluating its importance in the context of postwar conditions and their implications for US strategy.

a. The importance of Palestine

Increasing recognition of Palestine's importance came from diverse sources within the US policy establishment in this period. There were those who subscribed to a realist vision of foreign relations in which Palestine was to be viewed as a strategic asset or liability, with some going so far as to include it in discussions of US policy towards Middle East oil. There were others who adopted an ethical tone, arguing in favor of finding an international solution for the European refugee problem on the one hand, and for a consensual solution between Zionist Jews and Palestinian Arabs, on the other. In contrast to the commonplace default position of officialdom in the US in 2017, the Palestine conflict was not defined as a religious conflict but as a secular conflict over land.

In 1945 the US Department of State defined the Palestine problem as a matter of great urgency against a background of vast postwar desolation and devastation, and human displacement. Consider the State Department's affirmation of the importance of the Palestine question in May 1945.

Of all the political problems which call for solution in this area the Palestine question is probably the most important and urgent at the present time. Unless our attitude in regard to it be clarified in a manner which will command the respect and as far as possible the approval of the peoples of the Middle East, our Middle East policy will be beset with the gravest difficulties.¹⁹

The above statement was part of a State Department Report on U.S. economic policy in the Middle East that appeared in May 1945. Its authors understood that the implementation of US economic policy was

¹⁹ May 2, 1945, Report by the Coordinating Committee of the Dept. of State, Annex FRUS 1945, Vol. VIII, 37-38.

inseparable from Washington's response to the political situation in the region, including in Palestine. In that context, they identified the Palestine question as critical and they argued that the US favored a "just and reasonable solution" to the ongoing conflict, recognizing that it was a British Mandate which limited their influence.²⁰

Following Israel's declaration of independence in the war of 1948, the US Ambassador to London sent the Chair of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee an alarming message. It is instructive both as an expression of the Embassy's vision of the Palestinian situation and its perception of how it was dealt with in the U.S.

Palestine situation is probably as dangerous to our national interests as is Berlin. The danger of the latter has been played up in the headlines. The danger (not the situation) of the former has been ignored in the headlines. I have sometimes thought that this concealment of the danger in Palestine has permitted the Soviet to play her game in the Middle East without attracting attention.²¹

In the summer of 1948, Philip Jessup was US special delegate to the United Nations and in that capacity he offered Secretary of State George Marshall his assessment of Palestine and its strategic value to the U.S., including in connection with its importance in the protection of US oil company interests in the Middle East.

From the strategic viewpoint we assume that Palestine, together with the neighboring countries is a major factor presumably in any future major conflict this region would be of vital importance to US as a potential base area and with respect to our lines of communication. Presumably also the oil resources of the area are considered vital. It is our feeling that this last point may not perhaps have been dealt with adequately and frankly enough in official and public discussion of the Palestine question.

From the economic viewpoint it is probable that with the exception of oil our trade and other economic relations with Palestine and the other Near East countries are not directly of any substantial importance. Indirectly, however, the economic stability and developing prosperity of Palestine and the Middle East area under peaceful

²⁰ Ibid., 35.

²¹ Oct.30, 1948, The Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Douglas) to the Acting Secretary of State to the Secretary of State at London, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, 1532.

conditions could make a very substantial contribution to the economic recovery of the world generally and thus contribute to the economic welfare of the US. With respect to oil, we recognize that the oil supply from the area is of great importance in the European recovery program. Were it not for this factor, however, and the strategic importance of oil, we should probably not allow the economic importance of this commodity to condition our judgment substantially with regard to Palestine.²²

b. *What is to be done?*

By the time Jessup sent his assessment of Israel's potential in US strategy, the question of resolving the conflict over Palestine had assumed a different character. Yet it is important to recall the views of some in the State Department who, as of 1945, considered Palestinian independence and bi-nationalism, as viable or at least as desirable options in Palestine

In 1946 officials of the Division of Near Eastern Affairs of State Department, such as Gordon Merriam, Chief of the Division, called for US support of the principle of self-determination and the UN Charter, arguing that it was incumbent on the U.S. to grant Palestine independence since it was an "A Mandate" whose independence had been blocked by the "complication of the Jewish National Home."²³ Evan Wilson, who was US member of the 1946 Anglo-American Commission that sought to resolve Anglo-American differences stemming from US demands of Britain in Palestine that followed the Harrison Report, also favored a binational state in Palestine. More important, Wilson pointed out that this was the view of the State Department.

...we in the [State] Department had reason to be aware of the force of the Zionist drive toward a Jewish state, we continued until the end of 1946, at least, to think in terms of a compromise solution in Palestine. We thought there should be a solution under which, in the words of the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, Jew would not dominate Arab and Arab would not dominate Jew. In other words, we were thinking of a bi-national state long after the conflict between the parties had become so complete, and their opposition so intractable, as to put this out of the question. As men who tried to be reasonable, we thought that it should be possible to achieve a

²² July 1, 1948, The Acting United States Representative at the United Nations (Jessup) to the Secretary of State, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, 1181.

²³ "Memorandum by the Chief of the Division of Near Eastern Affairs (Merriam) to the Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs (Henderson)," FRUS 7, Dec/ 27, 1946, 733-734.

compromise, but the hard fact was that neither of the two parties in the dispute wanted a compromise; the depth of the nationalistic feeling on both sides precluded this.²⁴

Adoption of the UNGA Recommendation for Partition of Palestine, UNGA Res 181, was viewed by US officials as exacerbating the problem. The Central Intelligence Agency, created in 1947, regarded the likelihood of Zionists in Palestine as being prepared to accept partition as unrealistic given their territorial ambitions.

Even the more conservative Zionists will hope to obtain the whole of the Negev [Negev], Western Galilee, the city of Jerusalem, and eventually all of Palestine. The extremists demand not only all of Palestine but Transjordan as well. They have stated that they will refuse to recognize the validity of any Jewish government which will settle for anything less, and will probably undertake aggressive action to achieve their ends.²⁵

c. *The question of Palestinian Refugees*

The conviction among US officials at various levels within the policymaking hierarchy, was that Israel was primarily responsible for the conditions leading to the expulsion and flight of Palestinian refugees, and that the resolution of their situation was imperative. Indeed, key figures were on record as indicating that without it, there could be no resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a whole. The above situation led to a fairly consistent pattern of criticism of Israel for its failure to consider the repatriation of the refugees in accord with UN resolutions, until such time as the direction of US policy changed and with it, pressure on Israel with respect to abiding by such resolutions, diminished.

Consider first, then, the communication by Philip Jessup, Acting US Representative at the UN, on July 27, 1948, to Secretary of State Marshall Israel's official position on the subject of Palestinian refugees.

²⁴ Wilson, *A Calculated Risk, The U.S. Decision to Recognize Israel*, Clerisy Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2008, 294. This book was originally published under the title, *Decision on Palestine: How the US Came to Recognize Israel*, Hoover Institution Press, 1979.

²⁵ Nov. 28, 1947, "The Consequences of the Partition of Palestine," Central Intelligence Agency, p.8. http://www.foia.cia.gov/browse_docs_full.asp.

The Government of Israel must disclaim any responsibility for the creation of this problem. The charge that these Arabs were forcibly driven out by Israel authorities is wholly false; on the contrary, everything possible was done to prevent an exodus which was a direct result of the folly of the Arab states in organizing and launching a war of aggression against Israel. The impulse of the Arab civilian population to migrate from war areas, in order to avoid being involved in the hostilities, was deliberately fostered by Arab leaders for political motives. They did not wish the Arab population to continue to lead a peaceful existence in Jewish areas, and they wished to exploit the exodus as a propaganda weapon in surrounding Arab countries and in the outside world. This inhuman policy has now faced the governments concerned with practical problems for which they must assume full responsibility.²⁶

In successive communications through August 1948, Secretary of State Marshall, Dean Rusk, the CIA, and the U.S. Ambassador to London, expressed their views on the Palestinian refugee question. In mid-August, Secretary of State Marshall sent the U.S. Embassy in London his impressions of the UN Mediator's views on Israeli policies on land and refugees. According to Marshall, "Bernadotte thinks that Jews should be given valuable lands in western Galilee which they now hold by virtue of military conquest but in return for this acquisition should permit Arabs to take over most of Negev."²⁷ On the refugee question, Marshall was in accord with Bernadotte.

With ref to economic, political military factors in connection with return Arab refugees to Israel, we appreciate security considerations governing PGI attitude but believe that under supervision Mediator substantial number refugees so desiring could be permitted gradually return their homes and resume occupations without prejudicing maintenance internal security Israel. From economic viewpoint, Israel now demonstrating ability absorb large numbers European DPs [Displaced Persons] monthly. It would therefore be unfortunate for PGI, by continuing refuse permit Arab repatriation, to create impression that assimilation Jewish immigrants was taking

²⁶ July 27, 1948, The Acting United States Representative at the United Nations (Jessup) to the Secretary of State, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, 1248.

²⁷ August 13, 1948, The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, FRUS 1948, V, Part 2, 1309.

place at expense former Arab inhabitants Israel. From political standpoint, PGI action to permit gradual return Arab refugees would provide Arabs with tangible assurance of PGI desire establish cooperative relations with Arab states on long range basis. We consider overall solution Arab refugee problem intrinsic to final settlement Palestine problem, but believe increasingly critical nature refugee problem makes it essential that at least partial return of refugees should be permitted for those so desiring prior to achievement final settlement. Moreover, we believe PGI assistance in alleviating situation would substantially improve chances securing early peaceful settlement Palestine problem. Conversely, PGI failure to cooperate by partial repatriation refugees might create difficulties for 265,000 Jews permanently residing Arab states.²⁸

In the same text Marshall expressed the State Department's concern about Israel's adoption of "a more aggressive attitude in Palestine."²⁹

The Department has noted evidence of hostility of Israelis in Palestine towards the military observers serving under Count Bernadotte; the inflammatory speeches of the Israeli Foreign Minister, Mr. Shertok, with regard to alleged 'rights' of Israel in Jerusalem; the military occupation by Israel of much of the Jerusalem area; and the refusal of the Israeli military governor in Jerusalem to cooperate with Count Bernadotte in discussions regarding the demilitarization of Jerusalem. The Department has likewise noted increasing evidence of systematic violations of the United Nations truce by the forces of Israel, including forward movement of Israeli forces from agreed truce positions, continued sniping and firing against Arab positions; and conclusive evidence of the organized transport of arms shipments to Palestine from France, Italy and Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, the Israeli Foreign Minister has officially proclaimed that Israel will not accept, pending negotiation of a final peace settlement, the return of the approximately 300,000 Arab inhabitants of that part of Palestine now comprising the Jewish State who fled from their homes and

²⁸ August 14, 1948, The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, 1311.

²⁹ August 16, 1948, Memorandum by the Secretary of State to President Truman, FRUS 1948, V, Part 2, 1313.

are now destitute in nearby Arab areas.³⁰

At the end of August, Dean Rusk, the Director of the Office of UN Affairs, sent Acting Under-Secretary Robert Lovett, Truman's views on the refugee issue. According to the President,

as part of this government's diplomatic participation in securing a peaceful settlement of the Palestine problem, it urges upon the Provisional Government of Israel and other governments concerned the need for repatriating Arab and Jewish refugees under conditions which will not imperil the internal security of the receiving states.³¹

In the late summer of 1948, the CIA provided the following evaluation of the refugee situation to the Secretary of Defense. It appeared in the context of its discussion of the truce in Palestine. The CIA viewed the refugee problem as,

the most serious population upheaval since the termination of World War II, has been the exodus of Palestinian Arabs from Israeli-held areas. The Arab refugees, conservatively estimated at 330,000, exceed in number the Jewish DP's in Europe. The Arab countries have neither the economic resources nor the political stability to absorb such large numbers of destitute refugees. Israel's decision not to allow the refugees to return to their homes has greatly exacerbated Arab bitterness against the Jews.³²

Sept 1, Marshall once again turned to Israeli policies and the refugee question, in his exchange with U.S. Ambassador McDonald. His observation that the problem predated Israel's independence was significant, as it pointed to the origins of the policies at issue in Zionist ideology. Hence, the likelihood of reforming such practices went to the 'heart of the matter,' in this instance, the very nature of the Zionist enterprise. Marshall may not have intended to go this far, but his comments with respect to the flight of

³⁰ Ibid., 1313-1314.

³¹ August 20, 1948, Memorandum by the Director of the Office of United Nations Affairs (Rusk) to the Under Secretary of State (Lovett), FRUS 1948, V, part 2, 1331.

³² See discussion in Gendzier, *Dying to Forget*, pp.203-4.

Palestinian refugees from Haifa and Jaffa in April 1948, were sufficiently unsettling to those unprepared to take the longer and deeper view.

Marshall was sober in his evaluation of the consequences of leaving the refugee problem unresolved.

Arab refugee problem is one which, as you quote PGI as saying, did develop from recent war in Palestine but which also began before outbreak of Arab-Israeli hostilities. A significant portion of Arab refugees fled from their homes owing to Jewish occupation of Haifa on April 21-22 and to Jewish armed attack against Jaffa April 25. You will recall statements made by Jewish authorities in Palestine promising safeguards for Arab minority in areas under Jewish control. Arab refugee problem is one involving life or death of some 300,000 people. The leaders of Israel would make a grave miscalculation if they thought callous treatment of this tragic issue could pass unnoticed by world opinion. Furthermore, hatred of Arabs for Israel engendered by refugee problem would be a great obstacle to those peace negotiations you say PGI immediately desires. In the light of the foregoing I do not concur in your conclusion that 'Jewish emphasis on peace negotiations now is sounder than present US and UN emphasis on truce and demilitarization and refugees.'³³

Although US officials realized that their insistence that Israel accept the repatriation of Palestinian refugees produced no tangible results, they continued to argue in favor of such a policy through the end of 1948. At the end of May 1949, two weeks after the first anniversary of Israel's independence, the US Acting Secretary of State, James Webb, sent the head of the Israeli Government a secret message relaying Washington's position on territorial expansion and Palestinian refugees. Washington was "seriously disturbed by the attitude of Israel," Webb explained, on both matters of territory and refugees. He explained that the US was aware that the Israeli government was not planning to take action with respect to the refugees, and that it was planning to hold on "all territory now held under military occupation by Israel, which is clearly in excess of the partition boundaries of Nov 29, 1947, but possibly an additional acquisition of further territory within Palestine."³⁴

³³ September 1, 1948, The Secretary of State to the Special Representative of the United States in Israel (McDonald), FRUS 1948, V, Part 2, 1367.

³⁴ May 28, 1949, The Acting Secretary of State to the Embassy in Israel, FRUS 1949, VI, 1072.

Far more explicit in its criticism of Israel for its failure to act on the refugee question, was Mark Ethridge's statement at the time of the Lausanne conference in June 1949. Ethridge was the U.S. delegate to the Palestine Conciliation Commission that was designed to advance the possibilities of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict following the armistice agreements that had been negotiated between Israel and its Arab neighbors in 1949. Ethridge considered Israel's position on the refugee question as "morally reprehensible and politically short-sighted," persuaded that it "has no security that does not rest in friendliness with her neighbors. She has no security that does not rest upon the basis of peace in the Middle East. Her position as conqueror demanding more does not make for peace. It makes for more trouble."³⁵

Ethridge went further in blaming Israel's position at Lausanne for the failure of the conference to achieve results. He pointedly criticized Israel for the failure to provide any indication of what it considered "as peaceful co-existence of Arabs and Jews in Israel," and took issue with Israel's insistence that it could neither bear the economic burden of repatriation, nor accept responsibility for the flight and expulsion of Palestinian refugees.³⁶ Ethridge's response to the latter point was that Israel "has particular responsibility for those who have been driven out by terrorism, repression and forcible ejection."

Ethridge was persuaded that Israel's refusal to accept UNGA Resolution 194 was at the heart of the failure at Lausanne. But as Israeli historian and former Foreign Affairs Minister, Shlomo Ben Ami pointed out in *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace* (2007) at issue was the very nature and objective of Zionism, which was "about demography-ingathering the exiles in a stable Jewish state with as small an Arab minority as possible-and land."³⁷ From this vantage point, to have accepted the UNGA Resolution would have meant compromise with the fundamental tenets of Zionism, which was clearly unacceptable to the Israeli government at Lausanne, or after.

d. A Change in Direction

The subsequent turn in US policy was not a function of its failure to move the Israeli government on the refugee question, but rather the result of a reconsideration of Israel's potential in the context of US regional policy.

Conventional interpretations of US policy maintain that the Department of State (DOS) was opposed to Zionism and the creation of the state of Israel because the DOS feared its effects on US oil interests in the Middle East. This is accurate but incomplete as the record of Max Ball, US Director of the Oil and Gas Division

³⁵ June 12, 1949, The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to the Secretary of State, FRUS, 1949 VI, 1125.

³⁶ June 12, 1949, The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to the Secretary of State, FRUS, 1949 VI, 1124.

³⁷ Shlomo Ben-Ami, *Scars of War, Wounds of Peace, The Israeli-Arab Tragedy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, 50.

of the Department of the Interior under Harold Ickes, reveals. US sources reveal that US oil company interests were not incompatible with US support for Israel and indeed, US oil companies expanded their control over Middle East oil in the area of the Gulf after Israel's declaration of independence.

Prior to this, Washington moved to reorient its policy toward Israel, clearly not envisioning this as constituting a risk to US oil interests. Evidence from a variety of sources, political, economic and military, indicate the breadth of accord on the importance of this move in order to assure its pro-Western and more specifically, pro-US policy, thereby blunting the feared risks of a pro-Soviet policy emanating from the USSR's earlier endorsement of partition and independence. What followed was momentous insofar as it signified a policy of US deference to Israel with respect to recommended changes in policy, including those relevant to the Palestinian refugee problem.

But it is also important to have clarity with respect to Washington's Palestinian policy. Despite the recommendation of UNGA Res 181, the Partition Resolution for the creation of two states linked in economic union, which the US supported; in practice, Washington favored the secret agreement between Israel and Transjordan to take over Palestinian land not earmarked for Israel. Moreover, while US officials supported UNGA Res 194 with respect to the repatriation of Palestinian refugees and or compensation, this did not signify recognition of Palestinian nationalism. On the contrary, US policy supported the transformation of Palestinian nationalism into a refugee problem under the direction of George McGhee.

It is useful to consider some of the pronouncements of US officials who had previously been ardent supporters of resolving the Palestinian refugee question and who, in the new look of US policy, revised their positions. Philip Jessup, for example, was among those who underlined the extent to which Washington appreciated that Israel's successful military campaign of 1948 altered the balance of power in the region. In comparison Israel's military forces with those of its neighbors, Jessup and others recognized that there was little comparative strength on the Arab side.³⁸ By diminishing its pressure on Israel on the Palestinian refugee problem, Jessup argued that "it [Israel] could become a force operating to our own advantage and to advantage of Arab countries."³⁹ The US military espoused this position in 1949. Suffice it to cite some of the considerations it highlighted.

The March 7, 1949 Memorandum by the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force described the situation in the Middle East in the following terms.

³⁸ July 1, 1948, The Acting United States Representative at the United Nations (Jessup) to the Secretary of State, FRUS 1948, V, part 2, 1183.

³⁹ Ibid.

The power balance in the Near and Middle East has been radically altered. At the time the state of Israel was forming, numerous indications pointed to its extremely short life in the face of Arab League opposition. However, Israel has now been recognized by the United States and the United Kingdom, is likely soon to become a member of the United Nations, and has demonstrated by force of arms its right to be considered the military power next after Turkey in the Near and Middle East.⁴⁰

At the beginning of September 1948, in his correspondence with U.S. Ambassador McDonald, cited earlier, Marshall indicated that he thought the Provisional Government of Israel wanted both territory allotted to it in UNGA Res 181, and "such additional territory as is now under military occupation by Israeli forces, including the rich area of western Galilee and a portion of Jerusalem."⁴¹

Secretary of State Marshall was among those who also counselled a reorientation of US policy. He supported Israel's border proposals, arguing that the change in boundaries would "make it more homogeneous and well integrated than the hourglass frontiers drawn on the map of the November 29 Resolution."⁴²

In the course of clarifying President Truman's position with respect to Israel's territorial ambitions in the fall of 1948, Acting Secretary of State, Robert Lovett explained that "in plain language, the President's position is that if Israel wishes to retain that part of Negev granted it under Nov 29 resolution, it will have to take the rest of Nov 29 settlement which means giving up western Galilee and Jaffa."⁴³ But Lovett acknowledged that Truman indicated that added that changes to UNGA Res of Nov. 29, 1947 "should be made only if fully acceptable to the State of Israel."⁴⁴

As indicated above, the military was in accord with the change in US policy for reasons that it made clear were of a strategic order. By 1949, its officials concluded that Israel, in alliance with Western governments, could play a critical role in protecting US and Western oil and defense interests in the Middle East. Despite the general accord on this change, there was continued recognition that the absence of a resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem would ultimately block regional stability. Thus, in the fall of

⁴⁰ March 7 1949, enclosure, Memorandum by the Chief of Staff, US Air Force to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on US Strategic Interest in Israel, in Records of the JCS, Part 2, 1948-1953 [sect B], the Middle East, p. 181. Film A 368 (B) Reel 2.

⁴¹ Sept. 1, 1948, The Secretary of State to the Special Representative of the United States in Israel [McDonald], FRUS 1948, V. Part 2, 1367.

⁴² Ibid., 1367-1368.

⁴³ Nov. 10, 1948, The Acting Secretary of State to the Secretary of State, at Paris, FRUS 1948, V, Part 2, 1566.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 1565.

1949, the National Security Council's "Report to the President on US Policy Toward Israel and the Arab States," made it clear that while Israel's military capacity had enabled it to expand territorially beyond the area allotted to it under UNGA Res 181, "as a result of hostilities, some 700,00 Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from Israeli-controlled territory. They took refuge in areas of Palestine under Arab military occupation and in the neighboring Arab states."⁴⁵ The failure to resolve this problem would undermine political and economic conditions in Arab states, thus endangering the stability that US policy considered a prerequisite of the very regional order it sought to guarantee.

Concluding remarks

Where does this leave us? Reflections on the US record in the evolving Israeli-Palestinian conflict allow us to confront the evolution of the so-called, "special relationship" between the U.S. and Israel, which is generally viewed as a product of the 1967 war in the Middle East. Its origins, as the preceding discussion has indicated can be traced back to the period 1948-1949. In that period, US officials concluded that strategic considerations justified deferring to Israeli policies with respect to UN resolutions, notably those affecting Palestinian refugee repatriation, the internationalization of Jerusalem and the identification of boundaries.

Why has this history been marginalized in the global portfolio of American historians? Why has the nature and extent of US involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at its origin, become invisible, given its continuing importance? The void has contributed to effacing the human toll of this conflict by dissolving the connection between "the rape of the past and the rewriting of history to the arbitrary brutality of the present."

In his presentation on receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1972, the Chilean writer and crusader for social justice, Pablo Neruda, spoke of his harrowing flight from Chile and his encounter with villagers who helped him to survive, an experience that forever marked his life and poetry. Reflecting on its meaning, he wrote,

There is no insurmountable solitude. All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence, in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our sorrowful song- but in this dance or in this song there are fulfilled the most ancient rites of our conscience in the awareness of being human

⁴⁵ Oct 17, 1949, "Report by the National Security Council," FRUS VI, 1430.

and of believing in a common destiny.⁴⁶

Historical amnesia contributes to this “insurmountable solitude,” not only for those who would forget the Chile that exiled Neruda but in other circumstances such as the history of what the US knew about Israel and Palestine. Pablo Neruda’s words apply to Hilda Silverman’s lifelong struggle to uphold what it means to be human and to believe in a common destiny. In fulfilling her commitment to both, she recognized the importance of history and memory in defying the dehumanization of those rendered invisible by ignorance and indifference. It is my hope that she would have found the above pages of the US record an unsentimental contribution to this ongoing struggle.

⁴⁶ Pablo Neruda, Toward The Splendid City, Nobel Lecture, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY 1972.