

"The Solution is a Land of Israel Without Arabs": A Chronicle of 100 Years of Support for Transfer

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President Trump's proposal for the voluntary transfer of Gaza Strip residents has received positive responses from parts of Israeli society, particularly from the political establishment led by ministers and Knesset members from the Religious Zionist party. While Israeli public discourse has previously tended to view the idea of transfer – relocating the Arab population from the Land of Israel – as a product of political extremism, historical examination reveals a more complex picture. This idea has accompanied the Zionist movement from its inception and was an integral part of its leaders' strategic thinking.

Although the early Zionist movement assumed that a Jewish majority in the Land of Israel would be achieved mainly through mass Jewish immigration, it never refrained from considering the possibility that the Jewish majority could also be created by transferring part of the Arab population beyond the borders of what was meant to be the Jewish national home. The Zionist leadership believed that the idea of absorbing persecuted Jews in the Land of Israel and creating a Jewish majority enjoyed strong moral justification as long as Jewish rights were weighed against the rights of Arabs in the Land of Israel; after all, these particular Arabs were no different from their brethren in neighboring Arab countries, and it made no difference to them which country they lived in. Given moral justification, all that was needed to implement the transfer idea was adequate financial support.

Edward Said wrote that as early as June 1895, Theodor Herzl raised the possibility of executing a limited "relocation" of the weak Arab population, writing in his diary: "We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our country."

Herzl was not alone. Writer and Zionist activist Israel Zangwill was less subtle when he said in 1905: "Palestine itself is already occupied [...] We must be prepared either to drive out by the sword the tribes in possession as our forefathers did, or to grapple with the problem of a large alien population, mostly Mohammedan and accustomed to despise us." Zangwill was the first to formulate in 1920 what would become a central argument in Zionist history: The Arabs have the entire Arab world at their disposal, while the Jews have only one Land of Israel. This argument served as the basis for justifying the transfer idea throughout the Zionist movement's existence.

Ben-Gurion, still believing in immigration, rejected this and wrote in 1918: "Palestine is not an uninhabited country... Under no circumstances should we touch the rights of these inhabitants. Only 'ghetto dreamers' like Zangwill can imagine that Palestine will be given to the Jews with the

right to remove non-Jews from the country. No state would agree to this. Even if this right were granted to us – Jews have neither the right nor the ability to use it. It is neither desirable nor possible to evict the country's current inhabitants. This is not Zionism's mission."

What might surprise is that the transfer idea was not exclusive to the Zionist right. Chaim Kalvarisky, later one of the founders of the leftist "Brit Shalom," admitted at a meeting of the Temporary Committee in June 1919: "During my 25 years of colonization work, I displaced many Arabs from their land, and you understand that this work – displacing people from land where they, and perhaps their fathers too, were born – is not at all easy, especially when the displacer doesn't view the displaced as mere sheep but as people with heart and soul."

Ze'ev Jabotinsky, leader of the Revisionist movement, shared Ben-Gurion's position during these years and wrote in 1923: "I consider the removal of Arabs from Palestine absolutely inconceivable; Palestine will always have two peoples... I am prepared to swear in our name and our descendants' that we shall never violate this equality of rights, and never attempt to displace anyone." However, in a 1926 book, he already eloquently articulated what he saw as the inevitable conflict with Palestine's indigenous people: "The tragedy lies in the clash between two truths, though our justice is greater [...] The Arab – culturally backward – but whose patriotism is as pure and noble as ours; it cannot be bought with money, it can only be curbed by superior force."

[Continues with subsequent sections about the evolution of the transfer idea through various historical periods, maintaining the measured, analytical tone of the original while preserving historical accuracy and context. Would you like me to continue with the next section?]

Historian Tom Segev notes that in June 1931, Jacob Thon, a central Zionist activist in settlement affairs, wrote to Colonel Frederick Kisch, head of the Jewish Agency's Political Department, that from the Zionist movement's perspective, the ideal solution was transferring Arabs to Transjordan. He added that this was highly desirable from the Arabs' perspective as well, since with the money they would receive for 100 dunams in Palestine, they could purchase at least 500 dunams in Transjordan. Michael Bar-Zohar wrote that in July 1936, as part of Ben-Gurion's attempts as chairman of the Zionist Executive to thwart the High Commissioner's "Land Law" – which would guarantee every Arab peasant a minimum living space – the "Old Man" proposed at a Mapai meeting that Jews buy land in Transjordan and transfer there any peasants who would sell their lands to Jews in Palestine.

1937 marks a turning point in the history of the transfer idea, with the British Peel Commission's proposal to implement an extensive population transfer: 350,000 Arabs from the Galilee and 2,500 Jews from the planned Arab state. The British Colonial Secretary, Ormsby-Gore, argued that the country's Arabs "had not seen themselves as Palestinians until now, but rather as part of Syria, part of the Arab world," and therefore their transfer would not be difficult.

Berl Katznelson viewed this matter very positively and said: "The matter of population transfer has sparked debate among us: permitted or forbidden. My conscience is completely clear about

this, better a distant neighbor than a close enemy, they won't lose from their transfer, and we certainly won't. In the final calculation – this is a political-settlement reform benefiting both sides. I have long believed this is the best solution... I believed and still believe they will eventually move to Syria and Iraq. David Ben-Gurion received the recommendation with extraordinary enthusiasm." On July 12, 1937, he wrote in his diary that this point of forced transfer "outweighs all the deficiencies and shortcomings in the report," and it "could give us something we never had [...] even during the First Temple and Second Temple periods." He added that the Zionist movement should use all its "pressure power" to make Britain "forcibly uproot about one hundred thousand Arabs from their villages where they have lived for hundreds of years."

In late July 1937, speaking before the World Council of Poalei Zion in Zurich, Ben-Gurion expanded his doctrine: "It is difficult to find any political or moral argument against transferring those Arabs from territory under Jewish rule to territory under Arab rule [...] Even from excessive piety and maximum moral scrupulousness, one cannot oppose transfer, which ensures the transferees both sufficient material conditions and maximum national security."

However, Ben-Gurion sought to exercise caution due to potential implications for establishing a Jewish state, and in June 1938 said: "I support forced transfer and see nothing immoral in it," but "only if England does it — and the British government has abandoned the idea... Therefore, not only is it impractical for us to carry this out but it's also impractical for us to propose it... This proposal poses an enormous danger to Zionism in the country and to Jews in general."

Moshe Sharett also supported population transfer. At a party at Dr. Halpern's house on December 12, 1937, in Jerusalem, Sharett said: "I want to reject the comparison with Germany. What Germany is doing to Jews is a government taking people and throwing them out, not caring what happens to them, not allowing them to take their wealth with them — such a transfer is impossible. The matter of transfer here is very simple [...] Even when it's forced, it will be with compensation for the assets they leave here and with concern for their situation in the new place."

The Chairman of the Arab Higher Committee, Mufti Amin al-Husseini, addressed this in his 1954 memoirs, expressing the resolute opposition that has persisted to this day: "Already in 1934, British emissaries contacted me personally and other Palestinian national figures, proposing that Palestine's Arabs move to eastern Transjordan — where they would be given twice the land they owned. They also proposed that Jews would pay all funds necessary to implement the proposal. It was only natural for Arabs to reject this ridiculous proposal."

Once World War II broke out, discussions about transfer took place against the backdrop of massive and violent population transfers of many nations from territories conquered by the German army. Tom Segev notes that Jabotinsky wrote the following about this: "The world has grown accustomed to the idea of mass migrations and has almost come to like it. Hitler — however much we hate him — has added popularity to the idea of transfer in the world."

News about the fate of European Jewry intensified the tone and decisiveness of Zionist movement leaders regarding Arabs in the country. Jabotinsky wrote in early 1940: "If the Arabs don't want to stay, the author sees no tragedy or disaster in their willingness to emigrate... We shouldn't be alarmed by the possibility that 900,000 will leave the country..."

More decisive was Josef Weitz, who wrote in his personal diary in 1940: "We toured Arab villages this morning. I contemplated the plan I've been thinking about for years: clearing the land for us. Between ourselves it must be clear: there's no room in the country for both peoples together. If the Arabs leave, the country will become wide and spacious for us. If the Arabs stay, the country will remain narrow and miserable. The only solution is the Land of Israel without Arabs. There's no room for compromise! Transfer them all. Don't leave a single village, not a single tribe. Only through this method – transfer of Israel's Arabs – will redemption come."

However, opposing voices were also heard within the Zionist movement. Pinhas Lavon warned at a Mapai bureau meeting in 1950: "It's impossible to work among Arabs when the policy is transfer. It's impossible to work among them – if the policy is Arab oppression. What's being implemented is dramatic and brutal oppression of Arabs in the State of Israel."

Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, later Israel's president, raised pointed questions at a Mapai meeting in July 1950: "The question is what is the state's position toward minorities? Do we want them to remain in the state, be absorbed into the state, or leave the state [...] We declared equality for citizens regardless of race. Is the intention for a time when there will be no Arabs in the state? If so, this is deception."

The transfer idea gained renewed momentum after the Six-Day War. Israel actually implemented a transfer of 90-95 thousand Syrians from the Golan Heights. In the 1980s, Rabbi Meir Kahane raised the demand to expel Palestinian citizens of Israel, and right-wing parties like Moledet and the National Union adopted the idea of "voluntary transfer" in their platforms.

Today, Bezalel Smotrich continues this line when he declares: "There is room here [in the Land of Israel] for national self-determination and fulfillment of national aspirations for only one people – the Jewish people. This is just. This is moral." Smotrich proposes the "Decisive Plan" based on three options: "Those who want to accept – will accept," "Those who want to leave – will leave," and "Those who want to fight – will fight."

From the history of the transfer idea, three central lessons can be learned: First, this is not a marginal or extreme idea, but an inherent part of Zionist thinking about resolving the Jewish-Arab conflict. Second, the idea received legitimacy from international factors, especially in the period between the world wars. Third, even when the idea seemed abandoned, it continued to exist and influence decision-makers.

We must confront the fact that the transfer idea was not solely the domain of "extremists." Leaders from across the Zionist political spectrum – from "Brit Shalom" members to Revisionists

– supported the idea in one form or another. Even apparent "moderates" saw transfer as a legitimate solution.

Moreover, the Zionist movement didn't just stop at words. As Josef Weitz wrote at a government meeting in August 1948: "If we say it's not good to have empty villages that will call Arabs to return and infiltrate – they shouldn't remain standing." This was a practical approach that led to policies preventing refugee return and encouraging emigration of Arab citizens of Israel.

Genuine confrontation with the transfer issue requires recognizing that it's not just a historical idea, but an active force in current Israeli politics. Instead of continuing to cling to ideas of forced separation, Israel must develop new models of coexistence. As Yitzhak Ben-Zvi said: "We declared equality for citizens regardless of race" – we must implement this declaration in practice. Only honest confrontation with the past, and recognition that the transfer idea was and remains part of Zionist discourse, will allow us to build a future based on equality, mutual respect, and recognition of both peoples' legitimate rights.