

SOME NOTES ON MORRIS'S *BIRTH OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE PROBLEM*

Over the course of the first Arab–Israeli war, in 1947–1949, around 700,000 (probably somewhat more, perhaps somewhat less) Palestinian Arabs were permanently displaced, an event Arabic-speakers typically refer to as *Al-Nakba* (“the catastrophe,” in English). While perhaps not authoritative, Benny Morris’s *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* [Mor88; Mor04] is a standard reference. An Israeli historian coming from the left-of-center, Morris is not without detractors. One particular criticism is that he relies heavily on declassified Haganah/IDF and British intelligence, to the neglect of oral testimony, which Morris considers unreliable, and Arabic-language sources, which Morris cannot read. The extent to which, and even the direction in which, this curation biases Morris’s analysis is not agreed upon, and it must be kept in mind that not all of the relevant Israeli documentation has been declassified. These limitations notwithstanding, Morris’s account of the 1947–1949 Arab–Israeli war is something close to a consensus view among historians – closer, at least, than any other account.

The following plot shows a rough estimation of the growth of the Arab refugee population over the course of the first Arab–Israeli war, as Palestinian Arabs evacuated, fled, or were expelled from the cities, towns, and villages in which they resided. It is based mainly on the descriptions in [Mor04] (both the preface, which lists depopulated Arab localities and labels their cause of depopulation, and the body of the text, which provides more detail). Population estimates are largely derived from the *Village Statistics, 1945* [Vil]. These estimates are multiplied by a factor to account for three-and-a-half years of natural population growth of no more than 3.5% per annum, as estimated in [McC90].

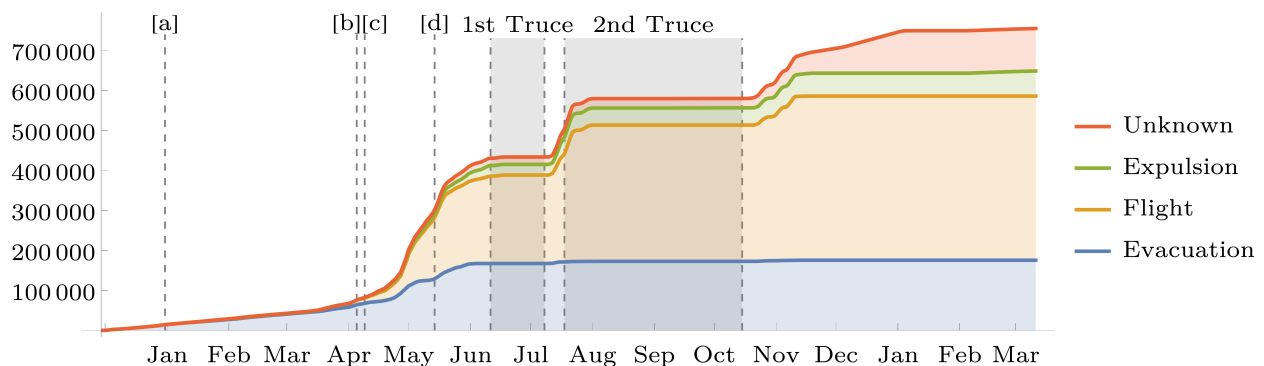


FIGURE 1. Stacked line plots showing a rough estimate of the accumulated number of Arab refugees vs. time, divvied up based on the mechanism of depopulation: expulsion, flight from advancing Israeli forces, and evacuation (regardless of cause). The plot starts on Nov. 30st, 1948, the day after the UN’s adoption of the UNSCOP partition plan, and ends in Mar. 10, 1949, when Umm Rashrash (Eilat) was captured by the IDF, marking the symbolic end of the war. See below for a description of the marked dates.

The distinction made in the figure between evacuation, flight, and expulsion is, necessarily, a bit arbitrary. Morris’s classification scheme (which I do not see as less arbitrary) uses ‘A,’ abandonment

on Arab orders, 'C,' influence of nearby town's fall, 'E,' expulsion by Jewish forces, 'F,' fear of being caught up in fighting, 'M,' military assault on settlement, 'W' whispering campaigns, and 'U' for unknown. The "unknown" and "expulsion" buckets I used correspond to Morris's, and "flight" corresponds to 'M.' Everything else I've grouped up as "evacuation," with part of the rationale being that Morris's 'A,' 'F', 'C,' and 'W' do not seem so different to me in terms of effect, or even in cause. 'C' and 'W' only account for a small number of refugees anyways, largely in small towns. One could count 'F' with 'M' as flight, but I wanted to distinguish flight significantly *in advance* of oncoming troops, which might as well be considered an evacuation, from something like flight under direct fire.

Several dates in the figure have been labeled. The date labeled '[a],' December 31st, 1947, is chosen to mark the beginning of the Arab blockade of Jewish West Jerusalem as one of the first instances of organized violence following the UNSCOP partition plan. The blockade is of note in part because, according to Morris's telling, it necessitated an eventual Yishuv offensive, *Operation Nachshon*, which begun on Apr. 5th, 1948, in order to secure the supply route to West Jerusalem. The period between these two dates was characterized by disorganized intercommunal violence and subsequent reprisals. Nevertheless, both the Jewish and the Arab leadership tended to avoid direct confrontation during this period, with exceptions. The economic situation in urban Arab locales rapidly deteriorated, but the countryside remained largely peaceful.

The vast majority of refugees from this period, many of whom were from well-to-do families from urban centers such as Haifa, Jaffa, and Jerusalem, "voluntarily" left their homes, either due to the economic hardship they faced or in anticipation of future violence. These evacuations were voluntary insofar as any action in such circumstances can truly be considered voluntary. Facing similar hardship, the Jews stay put, so some degree of volition remained. Though accounting for less than 1/7th of all refugees, Morris considers the first wave of refugees to have had an important demoralizing impact on the remaining Arabs and a contributory factor in the subsequent exodus. Nevertheless, Morris places substantially less emphasis on this period than traditional Israeli historiography.

Operation Nachshon saw the Haganah, occasionally assisted by the revisionist paramilitaries, the Irgun and Lehi (who, with some justification, can be considered terrorist groups), conquer towns along the western corridor connecting Jerusalem to the coast. These towns were allotted to the would-be Arab state by the UNSCOP partition plan, but the Yishuv considered them to be of sufficient strategic interest to take. For the most part, Nachshon occurred without atrocities. However, the most consequential massacre of the war took place here, when militants from Irgun and Lehi ended up killing many civilians¹, including women and children, in the Arab village of Deir Yassin. This date is marked with '[c]' above. Though massacres were committed by both sides during the war, no other massacre were to have an effect on either side's psyche as much as Deir Yassin. All parties involved, the Arabs, Haganah, and Irgun/Lehi all had reason to exaggerate and broadcast the atrocities (and there *were* atrocities),

- the Arab side to stoke outrage, both domestically and abroad,
- the Haganah for reasons of domestic politics, to cast aspersions on the revisionists,
- the Irgun/Lehi to frighten the Arab populace.

Word, whether true or false, spread, precipitating the flight of many Arabs who now, if not already, had good reason to fear the advancing Jewish militias.

April of '48 involved many other Jewish offensives, including the capture of the Arab neighborhoods of Haifa by the Haganah and the capture of Jaffa by the Irgun. Nachshon was just one facet of the grand strategic plan known as *Plan Dalet* (Dalet being the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet,

¹According to modern estimates which are agreed upon by both Israeli and Arab historians, slightly over 100 villagers were killed, some of which were involved in the violence, most not. In addition, 5 Irgun/Lehi members were killed by the village's defenders.

having followed Plan Gimel), which called for the Yishuv's forces to secure the territory allotted to them by the UNSCOP partition plan and those areas outside of it (such as the West Jerusalem corridor) of sufficient strategic interest. It is a matter of historical controversy the extent to which a tacit objective of the plan was the expulsion of the region's Arabs. Certainly no such objective is expressed in the text of the plan itself, but that does not necessarily mean that no such objective was understood by the Yishuv leadership as implicit in its formulation. Many Palestinian Arabs ended up fleeing from the advancing Jewish militias, some far ahead of Jewish troops, some not. Morris says that "most villages were completely or almost completely empty by the time they were conquered" [Mor04, p. 263]. Many Jewish troops reported scarcely seeing the Arab villagers, whereas many Arabs describe specific atrocities.

Regarding the question of intent, Morris says "the exodus of April–May caught the Yishuv leadership by surprise, though it was immediately seen as a phenomenon to be exploited" *ibid.* Nevertheless, from early April to mid-May, few Arabs were expelled in the sense of being compelled to leave *after* their villages were conquered. Unfortunately it does not seem possible to address the counterfactual question as to what would have happened had they stayed, as there are not many relevant examples from this time period to draw on, and later events provide evidence for both possibilities.

Date [d], May 15th, 1948, marks three roughly simultaneous events: the termination of the British mandate, the Israeli declaration of independence, and the beginning of the invasion of the surrounding Arab states, marking the transition from civil war to conventional war. Regardless of what the leadership of the Arab states had planned in advance of Nachshon, pressure from the Arab street now made invasion inevitable. As far as the refugee problem is concerned, this wave of exodus is a continuation of the wave that began a month prior, except that now some expulsions occurred in earnest. However, it can be seen from Figure 1 that these still constituted a minority of all cases. Overall, Morris estimates that the period between early April and the beginning of the first truce in June saw the displacement of 250,000 to 300,000 Arabs [Mor04, p. 262].

Besides two truce periods, the situation continued in much the same manner through to the end of the war, which is usually placed in Mar., 1949. Perhaps representative of the IDF's tendencies is Morris's description of IDF behavior between the two truce periods:

During the 'Ten Days', Ben-Gurion and the IDF were largely left on their own to decide and execute policy towards conquered communities.. That policy, as shall be seen, was inconsistent, circumstantial and haphazard. The upshot – different results in different places – was determined by a combination of factors, chief of which were the religious and ethnic identity of the conquered populations, specific local strategic and tactical considerations and circumstances, Ben-Gurion's views on the cases brought, or of interest, to him, the amount and quality of resistance offered in each area, and the character and proclivities of particular IDF commanders. [Mor04, p. 415]

Morris estimates that "something over 100,000 Arabs" were displaced during the period between the two truce periods [Mor04, p. 448] and 200,000–230,000 were displaced over the period beginning with the breakdown of the second truce until the end of the war [Mor04, p. 515].

Some methodological points about the creation of Figure 1 are in order. The first and most important caveat is that the estimations required to make the figure are all rough and not to be taken too seriously. For example, while Morris labels all depopulation events with specific dates, I have used date ranges and spread the created refugees uniformly over them. In cases where there was a lack of documentation, I simply guessed plausible dates. (Only a small number of refugees fall into this latter category.) Moreover, on top of those estimated ranges, I have added a few days to allow for some error.

In addition, the figure counts some populations omitted by Morris but counted in [AS10], another often cited work. This includes, in particular many Negev Bedouins. Since the Negev Bedouins were nomadic, it is impossible to assign specific dates to them – though we can safely say their displacement occurred during the IDF's push, beginning in Operation Yoav, to wrest the Negev from the Egyptian army – and their population sizes are infamously difficult to estimate. For example, McCarthy, a reputable demographer, states:

The evaluation of [the] nomadic population in Palestine is in such a state of confusion that I have felt that to make an estimation is fruitless, [McC90, p. 36]

and quotes others to the same effect. Based on the discussion therein, it seems reasonable to say that the Negev Bedouin numbered somewhere between 60,000 and 95,000. In Figure 1, the large increase in refugees categorized as being due to an unknown cause after Nov. '48 is due to me arbitrarily including Bedouins in this date range, but it must be understood that their contribution to the total number of refugees is uncertain. I ended up going with a higher estimate of 80,000.

Figure 1 can be compared to [AS10, Figure 3.1, p. 107]. Differences in the total number of accounted for refugees (Figure 1 lists roughly 750,000 as the final count, which is slightly higher than the standard estimates such as that in [Mor04], whereas Abu-Sitta gives about 805,000) come largely from two sources:

- it seems to be the case that Abu-Sitta tends to count the whole population of any municipality captured by Israeli forces, even if most of the population remained in place — see the listings in [AS10, Table 3.9] for the large cities of Jerusalem, Haifa, Acre, etc.
- Abu-Sitta uses the largest possible estimates of the Bedouin population.

Moreover, in what is likely an attempt to fudge the accounting to match the estimates to those given by traditional Arab propaganda (usually justified by an appeal to UNRWA registrations, which are known to overcount the number of refugees e.g. due to duplications of documents), Abu-Sitta asserts:

[the count] excludes the additional refugees from 662 hamlets or locations; some were living in or near 183 Jewish colonies, others were living in small hamlets not stated as primary villages by the British Mandate. By comparing this figure with UNRWA data, it is estimated that these additional refugees, pro rata, to be 130,000, making a total of 935,000. [AS10, p. 117]

This does not seem plausible. If it were the case that 130,000 Arabs were displaced from 600 locations, this would mean that the average Arab population of such a location was at least 200, larger than many of the villages listed in [Vil]. Indeed, the structure of the *Village Statistics* seems to be such that Arab inhabitants of hamlets, Jewish settlements, etc. are counted with a neighboring Arab district. Estimates of the Arab population of the area in Mandatory Palestine that would become Israel are usually around 950,000. However, around 150,000 Arabs remained residents of Israel, so an estimate of 935,000 refugees is far too high. Therefore, I am inclined to agree with the now standard estimate of somewhere between 700,000–800,000 refugees, maybe a little more, maybe a little less, over Abu-Sitta's.

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