

# David Bercuson: The simple truth behind the 'Nakba'

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May 15, 2026

Throughout history, wars — declared or not — have dispossessed people

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People march with a giant Palestinian flag during a demonstration commemorating the 78th anniversary of the Nakba, in the city of Ramallah in the West Bank on May 12, 2026. Photo by Zain JAAFAR / AFP via Getty Images

Israel and Jews worldwide celebrate the independence of the state of Israel on the secular date of May 14, 1948, when the leader of the Jewish community in Palestine, David Ben-Gurion, read the Declaration of Independence of the state of Israel upon the expiry of the British Mandate for Palestine. Palestinians and their supporters have long labelled May 15 as the date of the Nakba (the catastrophe) which, they claim, includes the expulsion from Israel of some 700,000 Palestine Arabs,

the permanent exile of those Arabs, the defeat of the five national armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon by Israel and, the emergence of Israel and as a new independent country. The very word was introduced by the Syrian Arab intellectual Constantine Zureiq.

The Nakba today has come to represent everything that was wrong in the minds of millions of Arabs and their supporters about the coming into existence of the Jewish state. They focus most particularly on the expulsion of Palestine Arabs by what they call Jewish colonizers acting against an aboriginal people. Let us look more closely at this definition of the Nakba.

Throughout history, wars — declared or not — have dispossessed people. Twentieth-century examples include the partition of India in 1947 when the British created independent states in Pakistan (Muslim) and India (Hindu), causing the dispossession of some 14-15 million people, attended by vicious violence and killings by both groups, as Muslims fled India and Hindus fled Pakistan. What happened to these refugees? The Muslims were absorbed into Pakistan and the Hindus were absorbed into India.

After the Second World War, some 12-14 million ethnic Germans were expelled from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Prussia, and the Soviet Union to Germany due to the extreme hostility toward these Germanic people by the nations that Hitler's armies had crushed.

In 1971, the revolt of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) resulted in a war between the revolutionaries and Pakistan and some 10 million people fled to India, never to return.

The recent Syrian civil war produced some six million displaced persons and the Russian invasion of Ukraine caused more than six million Ukrainians to flee their country.

In the case of the Nakba, there's a simple truth. If the Palestine Arabs and the Arab states had accepted the new Jewish state of Israel, there would have been no civil war and no war between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries. There would have been no Arab populations displaced. Israeli historian Benny Morris, writing in the 1980s, and using American, British and Israeli sources, concluded that although Arabs in some parts of Israel were expelled by Israeli forces, it is also true that many hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees fled of their own accord out of fear, especially after the Irgun/Stern gang massacre at Deir Yassin. Others left as a result of entreaties of the Arab states. The 1979 English memoirs of Yitzhak Rabin confirmed expulsions. Ben Dunkleman, a Canadian volunteer who commanded the Israeli 7th Brigade that captured upper and lower Nazareth, related a story that his resistance to an order to expel the Arabs was ultimately successful and no expulsions took place there.

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Records of the British Palestine Police in Haifa show that the Jewish community there begged their Arab neighbours not to leave, but in vain.

No doubt some leaders of the new state of Israel wanted to expel Arabs from within the partition boundaries established by the United Nations in November 1947. It is hard if not impossible to know which Arabs left of their own accord and which were deliberately expelled. But if there had been no war, there would have been no displacement. The war gave some Zionist leaders the chance they

had waited for, to clear Arabs out of Jewish designated areas. But it was Jewish military victories after the first and second ceasefires that enabled those expulsions.

How then is the Nakba a special colonial example of human rights violation by the Jews of the new Israel? It wasn't, any more than the other examples of population displacement caused by wars in the 20th century. As tragic as all these displacements were — including the Nakba — they did not emerge out of thin air, or as deliberate efforts by one side or the other to deprive groups of people of their human rights. They were a product of the brutality and the inhumanity of war.

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