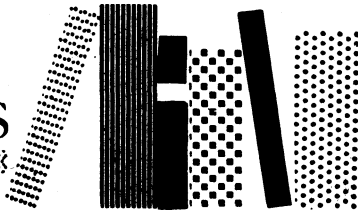


BOOK REVIEWS



THE ARAB REFUGEE QUESTION

By A. B. MAGIL

Israel and the Palestine Arabs by Don Peretz, with a foreword by Roger Baldwin. Middle East Institute, Washington, D. C. 264 pp., \$5.

THE Israel-Arab conflict is today where it was when the armistice agreements with the Arab states were signed nearly ten years ago: at dead center. The irresistible force of Israel's creation as an independent state and the immovable object of the Arab governments' hostility have produced a tension that resists all efforts at abatement and has become one of the most baffling and dangerous international problems.

Of the many issues that divide Israel and the Arab states, the most difficult and complicated is that of the hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees clustered in the Arab countries around Israel's borders. They are the tragic symbols of a conflict which, in terms of the clashing nationalisms of Israel and the Arab countries and of the am-

bitions of the western powers that exploited these nationalisms, has proved irreconcilable.

Israel and the Palestine Arabs is the most comprehensive study that has yet been made of the Arab refugees and their relation to Israel. But it does not profess to give answers to the Damoclean question that overhangs the Middle East, though it contains hints and glimpses of possible answers. The book is dedicated to the memory of one of the most luminous figures in American and Palestine Jewish life, the late Dr. Judah L. Magnes, president of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and founder of *Ihud* (Unity), a group of leading Palestine Jewish intellectuals who have championed Jewish-Arab friendship and cooperation. Don Peretz, now a vice-chairman of the American Friends of *Ihud*, studied at the Hebrew University after World War II and in the ensuing years gathered material in Israel and several Arab countries on the refugee problem. This he made the subject of a doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. The dissertation, apparently completed in 1955, has been brought up to date and now published.

Very few Ph.D. theses make good reading. This book is no exception.

A. B. MAGIL is a veteran author and journalist. His *Israel in Crisis*, published in 1950 (*International Publishers*, 381 Fourth Ave., N. Y. 16, paper, \$1.25) is still very useful and available.

It is stiffly written and suffers from an academic neutrality (traditional in such documents) that converts the author into a mere mechanical recorder of facts devoid of passion or opinions of his own. Nevertheless, *Israel and the Palestine Arabs* is an important contribution to the understanding of the Arab refugee problem. It brings together in a cogent pattern the most important data, many of them previously unknown to the general public, and reveals the interplay of forces that has determined Israel's approach to the question. It should be understood that the focus of the book is the Israel-Palestine Arab relationship; the problem as it affects and is affected by the surrounding Arab countries is dealt with only peripherally. Within this framework the author has been scrupulously objective. And the book's story of frustration and failure is a challenge to all concerned with Israel's security, the progress of the Arab peoples and world peace.

Besides tracing the evolution of Israeli policy toward the refugee question, the author presents in great detail the efforts of the United Nations to achieve progress toward a solution. After many U.N. proposals and plans and nearly ten years of labor, Dr. Peretz notes only a mouse of accomplishment: the release of about 4,000,000 pounds of Arab refugee funds in Israeli banks and the admission of 30,000 refugees to join their families in Israel. The fact is that on the substance of the refugee problem not only has there been no progress, but positions have hardened. It is therefore difficult to accept the author's concluding assurance that time will prove to be "a healing element" and its mere passage will somehow automatically generate the changes to effect a solution. Time is not a vacuum. The economic, social and political processes that take place

in time can exacerbate the problem (as did the Israeli attack on Egypt in 1956), as well as ease and eventually resolve it. The conscious human factor is necessary to redress the crimes and follies of the past.

What makes a solution of the Arab refugee problem so difficult even for third parties to get at is that, as in other aspects of the Israel-Arab conflict, right and wrong are so thickly intertwined on both sides. Add foreign imperialist manipulation and cold war politics, and the problem is compounded manifold. Nevertheless, certain facts need to be borne in mind in any serious approach.

Israel in 1948 was the victim of brutal and reactionary aggression by Arab governments which at the time were strongly influenced by British imperialism. Neither Israel's government nor its people bore responsibility for initiating the mass flight of the Arabs. It was the appeals of the Arab governments and the Palestine Arab leadership as well as the actions of the British that touched off and encouraged that tragic exodus. However, as Dr. Peretz notes, massacres perpetrated by anti-government Jewish terrorist groups and outrages by Israeli military forces helped give impetus to the flight.

By maintaining an intransigent, beligerent posture and using the refugees as a pretext to bar negotiations with Israel, the Arab governments have sapped their own economic strength and made themselves politically more vulnerable to the pressures and intrigues of the former as well as to the would-be imperialist masters of the Middle East. Nor can the Arab governments evade their share of responsibility for the tension that threatens peace.

The government of Israel has also

played self-defeating politics with the refugee question. Dr. Peretz points out, for example, that "the primary cause of Israel's infiltration problem, a running sore which has frequently brought relations with the Arab states to an explosion point," was the Israeli government's refusal to repatriate Arab farmers whose homes were on the other side of the Israel-Jordan armistice line but whose fields were in Israeli territory.

Dr. Peretz presents in detail the security and economic considerations by which the Israeli government sought to justify its policy. However, the negative attitude adopted toward the refugees from the outset cannot in my opinion be justified morally, legally or by Israel's true national interests. Despite Ben-Gurion's statement in a magazine article written early in 1948 that "the Arabs of Palestine are, with few exceptions, unwilling and unable to fight the Jews," the government refused to repatriate the refugees at a time when just and equal treatment could have won their loyalty. Instead they were publicly branded en masse as potential fifth columnists. Thus, the smoldering volcano of hate that is today on Israel's borders was built not only by the Arab governments but by Israeli policy.

For a Jew there are passages in this scholarly book that make painful reading. The wrongs committed against Israel by the Arab states, such as the permanent economic boycott, the denial of the use of the Suez Canal and the *fedayeen* incursions, have been used by official Israeli and Zionist propaganda to deny or obscure the wrongs committed by the Ben-Gurion government against the Palestine Arabs. But here in cold documentation are the horrible facts: the looting and plunder of Arab homes, farms and businesses by Israeli citizens; the seiz-

ure of whole villages and the exiling of their people; the confiscation by the Israeli government of millions of dollars of Arab property—including 40 per cent of the land of Arabs who remained in Israel—and its use for Israel's economic benefit (as well as private enrichment); the discriminatory treatment of the Arab minority.

"Achievement of security and well-being by the Arab minority," writes Dr. Peretz, "would remove one cause of friction between Israel and the Arab states, especially since the latter avidly searched out every flaw and weakness in the new state's internal life." Who can doubt the truth of this statement, which was also the view of the late Albert Einstein? One can add that restoration of the rights of the Jewish minority in the Arab countries would also remove a cause of friction.

There are aspects of the Israel-Arab conflict that extend beyond the policies of the two contending sides. Dr. Peretz grasps one of the decisive keys to that conflict when he writes in his introductory chapter: "The seeds of the Palestine struggle were nurtured by the irreconcilable promises made to the Jews and Arabs by Great Britain in an effort to win support of the two peoples during the First World War and at the peace conference immediately following it."

It is a pity the author failed to pursue this line of thought further and develop the role of Britain and other great powers in nurturing later stages of the internecine Palestine struggle. In fact, Britain's efforts to promote chaos in Palestine in the last months of the mandate and its complicity in instigating the flight of the Arabs and the aggression of the Arab governments are conspicuously missing from the book. Also missing—a serious defect—is the whole matrix of international politics in which the Arab refu-

gee problem and the Israel-Arab conflict are embedded. All this would probably be regarded as extraneous in a doctoral dissertation. But since it is part of the flesh and blood of Jewish-Arab relationships, the book would have profited greatly if Dr. Peretz, in preparing it for publication, had made such "digressions" a central part of his work. The book does record the frequent pressure by the State Department on Israel in regard to the refugees and boundaries, but much more needs to be said about those who in the Middle East have divided in order to rule.

The corollary of this approach is omission of the anti-imperialist motif underlying the liberation struggles of the Jewish and Arab peoples in Palestine and the Middle East. Israel's birth was an affirmation, the Arab states' aggression a denial, of that motif. Since then the roles have tended to be reversed. The Israeli government's rejection of a neutralist policy in the East-West conflict, its economic and political dependence on the West and its frequent collaboration with the predatory designs of Washington, London and Paris widen the gulf separating an Arab world increasingly moving in the opposite direction. Growing sectors of Israeli public opinion and important Jewish forces outside of Israel are pressing for a change in this respect as well as in the treatment of the Arab minority. Such changes would go a long way toward building a bridge to peace with the Arab countries.

The old enmities will not vanish overnight. But there is reason to believe that just as the growth of Arab nationalism, whose dynamic symbol is Nasser, collides with a pro-imperialist Israeli government policy, so that nationalism will sooner or later find

means of accommodation with an Israel pursuing a different course. This is directly related to the question of the Arab refugees. In addition, it seems to me that four elements are indispensable for an approach to a solution of this intractable problem.

1. Agreement among the great powers to promote peace in the Middle East. This requires acceptance by the Western powers, especially by the United States, of the Soviet Union's legitimate role in that area and of at least some of the USSR's constructive proposals, such as non-interference in the internal affairs of the Middle Eastern countries and an arms embargo.

2. Recognition by the government of Israel of the legal and moral right of the refugees to return to what was their homeland for centuries. No action of the *non-Palestine* Arab governments has caused the *Palestine* Arabs to forfeit that right. Whether a mass return is feasible is, however, another matter. The Israeli government should agree to accept as many of the refugees who wish to return as the Israeli economy can absorb, the number to be determined by negotiation.

3. Recognition by the Arab governments that, regardless of past wrongs committed against the refugees, the *status quo ante* cannot be restored. The homes that the Arabs abandoned no longer exist and the traditional Arab society in which they grew up has been uprooted on the territory of Israel. The issue is no longer repatriation or resettlement. The issue is whether hundreds of thousands of refugees shall be resettled in the modern capitalist society that is Israel, under conditions to which they are not adapted and in an atmosphere that can hardly be congenial for them, or whether the vast majority shall be

resettled in the Arab countries where social and other conditions make integration possible.

4. Compensation by Israel for all Arab property confiscated or destroyed.

In all this the United Nations should play a part, and both Israel and the Arab countries will require international financial assistance. The great powers, while they cannot impose a settlement of the refugee problem or of other differences between Israel and the Arab states, can create the political climate in the Middle East that nourishes reason and peace.