The Normalisation of Transfer Ideology among the Israeli Right

Dr. Leena Dallasheh
May 2023

Introduction

The idea of "Transfer" (expulsion of Palestinians) has its roots in pre-state Zionist political thinking. It was later carried out during the war of 1948, in what became known as the Nakba (or Catastrophe, the term Palestinians use to describe establishment of Israel in 1948 and the displacement of over 750,000 Palestinians). The mass expulsion of Palestinians created a Jewish demographic majority within the borders of the new state. This Transfer idea remained in Israeli political discourse for some time following statehood, being implemented once again in 1967, when Israel forced between 200-250 thousand people out of their homes during and after the 1967 War.

Since the 1967 war, Israeli authorities have continued to implement policies aimed at reducing Palestinian demography in territories under its control (including revocation of residency in East Jerusalem, preventing family reunification, and more). However, over time, the idea of mass population transfer was ostracised from Israeli public discourse as something ultimately infeasible and morally reprehensible.

In a sharp turn, over the past few years, we are witnessing a growing legitimization of the idea of "Transfer", as it is becoming part of the mainstream across the right-wing camp in Israel ("Transfer" refers to expulsion of the Palestinians, targeting the citizens of Israel, Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), or all Arabs in both areas, to Jordan or other states). In the aftermath of the May 2021 confrontations, during which Palestinian citizens of Israel took part in the broader Palestinian protest, the Israeli right intensified its promotion of Transfer ideology, increasing the call to expel Palestinian citizens of Israel and not only those residing in the OPT. Transfer ideology is no longer limited to the extreme right-wing, and is now endorsed by members of the governing *Likud* Party, the main ruling party in Israel since 1977, who express support for Transfer of Palestinians from both Israel and the OPT.

The rise of Transfer ideology is clearly reflected in the dramatic rise in power of the extreme-right wing in Israel. Political parties such as The Religious Zionism, led by Bezalel Smotrich, and Jewish Power, led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, have unequivocally espoused Transfer as part of their core political agendas. In the most recent elections, the list in which the two parties ran together gained 14 seats as the third largest party list in the Knesset. With the formation of the 37th government led by Benjamin Netanyahu, some of these parties' MKs took up key positions in the coalition.This stands in stark contrast to past elections in which the extreme-right was marginal; in 1984, the Kach party gained only 1 seat in the Knesset before being barred from participating in the 1988 elections, and Moledet ('Homeland') never succeeded in gaining more than 3 Knesset seats in any Knesset.

Increasing normalisation of the Transfer ideology can be seen in the distinct shift in Israeli discourse of the Nakba. Contrary to the long-held Israeli denial of the Nakba and the denial of Israeli responsibility, key figures among the Right-wing leadership have been threatening another Nakba. This manifestation of Transfer ideology can no longer be dismissed as only extreme right-wing sentiment, as it is increasingly heard among the mainstream of the *Likud* party. As one example, last year Likud member Yoav Galant, the

current Minister of Defense, cautioned that if Arabs repeat the "*mistake [of 1948, the Jews would] take their hands out of their pockets ... and the price will be very high*".

Resurgence of Transfer ideology in the public discourse

Since 1948, various Israeli politicians have advanced different iterations of the Transfer ideology as part of their public agenda. During the 1980s, the main proponent of this ideology was Meir Kahane. Relying on religious arguments, he advocated for the forceful transfer of all Palestinian citizens of Israel and residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which he demanded to annex. His extremist Kach party was banned in 1988 from participating in the elections , and in 1994 the party was eventually outlawed. Overall, Kahane was situated on the most extreme margins of the Israeli political sphere and his ideology was publicly condemned by almost the entire Israeli political apparatus.

Also during the 1980s, Rehavam Ze'evi, leader of Moledet, advocated for an iteration of Transfer ideology which targeted Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Like Kahane, his Transfer ideology was condemned as racist by the majority in Israel, including those from the right. Yet unlike Kahane, Ze'evi was still generally accepted by broad section of the Israeli public due to his distinguished military career; Ze'evi even served as Minister Without Portfolio between 1991-2 and Minister of Tourism in 2001, the year he was assassinated by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

In the late 1990s, Avigdor Lieberman, founder and leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party ('Israel is our Home'), advocated for Transfer through what he framed as "population exchange" Liberaman argued that, *"there is no reason that Arabs should be Israeli citizens. Transfer them to Palestine…"*. Liberman also advocated in 2009 for conditioning citizenship with an oath of allegiance to Israel as *"a Jewish, Zionist, and democratic state"*. His election campaign centred on the motto "*no loyalty, no citizenship*", essentially threatening Palestinians to strip them of their citizenship unless they pledged loyalty to Israel as a Jewish state. However, unlike the previous examples cited above, Liberman and *Yisrael Beiteinu* gained significant electoral power earning 15 seats in 2009. However, this success should be partially attributed to other policies espoused by the party, including its appeal to the sectoral vote of Israeli citizens from former Soviet states. In addition, the rise of Yisrael Beiteinu to power coincided with the growing dominance of right-wing parties in the Knesset, an upward trend since the 2009 elections. Liberaman also served in key positions, including Minister of Defense, Foreign Affair, Finance, and in governments of Netanyahu (Likud), Naftali Bennett (Yemina), and Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid).

While the more extreme-right parties promoted Transfer in the 1980s and 1990s, the Likud Party and the vast majority of the political apparatus rejected the ideology altogether. In 1984, Likud MKs walked out in protest when Meir Kahane, leader of the Kach party, gave his first speech in the Knesset; moreover, Likud was part of the effort to ban Kach from taking part in the 1988 elections (Shamir and Margel, 2003). When Ze'evi joined the Likud government in 1991, its leaders distanced themselves from his Transfer ideology. The Prime Minister at the time, Yitzhak Shamir, stressed that the move, *"did not imply consent to the idea known as 'Transfer'. The Israeli government opposes it"*. Ovadia Eli, another Likud member, further insisted, *"The Likud vehemently rejects the Transfer idea"*. Michael Eitan, another Likud member, reminded the Knesset that, **"I was one of standard-bearers, perhaps the first, to come out against MK Kahane and the racist phenomena he symbolised, including the issue of the transfer"*.

Accordingly, one indication that Likud is changing its attitude towards Transfer ideology is the endorsement by the current government of Rehavam Ze'evi and his legacy, as it is currently seeking to allocate 20 million NIS for a "Rehavam Ze'evi Heritage Center", disregarding his controversial racist Transfer legacy.

Smotrich's "Decisive Plan"

Unlike previous governments which rejected the ideology, the current government includes members who openly and actively embrace Transfer. As one example, since 2017, Bezalel Smotrich, current Minister of Finance and Minister in the Ministry of Defense, has been advancing his "Decisive Plan" for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The plan states that, *"there is room for only one expression of national self-determination west of the Jordan River: that of the Jewish nation"*. Smotrich leaves the Palestinians with three "alternatives":

1. Remaining in their place without citizenship or political rights - *"Those who wish to forgo their national aspirations can stay here and live as individuals in the Jewish State.. the Arabs of Judea and Samaria will be able to conduct their daily life in freedom and peace, but not to vote for the Israeli Knesset…"*.
2. "Voluntary Transfer" - Palestinians who insist on their national rights, *"will receive aid to emigrate to one of the many countries where Arabs realise their national ambitions, or to any other destination in the world."*.
3. Death - As for the Palestinians who reject the first two alternatives, insist on their national rights, and choose to fight, *"The IDF, thank God, is a strong and astute army, with the will and the capability to defeat the terrorists within a short time frame: killing those who need to be killed, confiscating weapons to the last bullet, and restoring security to Israel's citizens."*.

Sample statements by politicians in support of Transfer and Nakba

Over the past few years, several senior Likud members have made statements warning Palestinians of another Nakba:

- Israel Katz, current Minister of National Infrastructure, Energy, and Water, stood on the stage of the Knesset in May 2022 (then as Likud MK) as he warned Arabs:*"Remember 1948. Remember our War of Independence and your Nakba... we will teach you a lesson that will not be forgotten"*.
- Shlomo Karhi, current Minister of Communications, declared in January 2022 (then as Likud MK): *"As soon as an Arab comes to hurt a Jew's hair, he should be expelled from here. Those who want Nakba - maybe they need to be reminded what Nakba is"*.
- Uzi Dayan, former IDF Deputy Chief of Staff (1998-2000), Head of the National Security Council (2000-2002), and Likud MK (2019, 2020-21), said in May 2022:*"If this situation continues where Arabs riot at will, it will lead to a civil war...between the Arabs and the Jews, because the Jews will not continue to be silent about [riots] … again in the mixed cities and again blocked roads, and… such a civil war … will end in a kind of Nakba"* .
- Avi Dichter, current Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, said in 2007 (then as Minister of Internal Security):*"those who sit year after year crying about the Nakba, should not be surprised that in the end they really will have a Nakba"*.
- Tzachi Hanegbi, current National Security Advisor, addressed the Palestinians on his Facebook page in 2017 (then as Likud MK): *"This is how Nakba begins… Remember 48, remember 67"*.

Other members of the current government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, have also made statements promoting Transfer:

- Bezalel Smotrich stated in 2021 (then as The Religious Zionism MK): *"The Arabs are citizens of Israel, for the time being, they have representatives, Knesset members, for the time being..."*. While addressing Palestinian MK Ahmad Tibi, he warned *"...over time, Arabs like you who do not recognize this will not stay here"* .
- Itamar Ben-Gvir, National Security Minister, said in an interview in May 2021 (then as Jewish Power MK): *"Jerusalem is ours.. the Palestinians can go to – the Gaza Strip should also be ours – can go to Saudi Arabia or other places, like Iraq or Iran. Not here, this is our place. Israel is our country."* Ben-Gvir argued that those who should be expelled include *"anyone who works against the State of Israel [or] IDF soldiers"* and *"Those who work against the state like Ofer Kasif [a Jewish MK for the Arab Joint List at the time] will be deported"*.
- Yitzhak Wasserlauf, Jewish Power MK, stated in September 2021 that his party would demand that the government takes *"significant deterrent measures: we will demand the death penalty for terrorists, and we will demand the deportation of supporters of terrorism… Whoever isn't [loyal to the State of Israel], let him go to Syria"*.
- Elisha Yered, in April 2023 (then speaker of Jewish Power MK Limor Son Har-Melech) tweeted a video of a Palestinian citizens' demonstration: *"We have created here an enemy within the country who, on the day of command, will join the armies that will rise against us. The state that seeks continuity would put everyone on buses today and throw them across the border"*.

"Voluntary transfer" as a "soft" variation of mass expulsion

"Voluntary transfer" is a policy not only promoted by Smotrich, having gained increasing attention in Israel. Practical discussions have taken place over possible governmental action to implement the policy, including a cabinet discussion in August 2019 seeking ways to compel Gaza residents to leave. An official in Netanyahu's entourage issued a following statement announcing that the National Security Council had been requested to draw up a plan for encouraging residents of the Gaza Strip to leave their homes and move to Arab countries and elsewhere. The Security Cabinet of Israel seriously debated the idea, but as of yet the architects of the plan, "have not found a country willing to take in the would-be emigres."

In addition, "voluntary transfer" has continued to feature as a key component of the political programmes issued by Jewish Power. In the run-up to previous elections, Itamar Ben-Gvir's election platform committed to creating a "National Authority for Encouraging Immigration" which would act to *"expel Israel's enemies from the Land of Israel"*. Earlier platform also stated *"Jewish Power will work to expel the enemies of Israel from our land. A national authority will be established to encourage immigration. The people of Israel will return to Zion and the enemies of Israel will return to their countries of origin"*.

The Rise of Transfer in Israeli public discourse

In recent years, there have also been distinguishable expressions of the Transfer idea by journalists and public opinion makers, many of whom are not associated with extreme-right media outlets.

- Yinon Magal, journalist and commentator, former The Jewish Home MK, and frequent guest on mainstream media shows, [told](#) Palestinians: *"If you raise your head, there will be another Nakba here"*.
- Itamar Fleischmann, former advisor to former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, and journalist for Channel 14 and Israel Hayom, [said](#) on TV: *"What is happening here is that the Arabs have forgotten the Nakba, and it is time to start reminding them of it. And to tell them that if they don't come to their senses soon…their next stop is across Jordan or in the al-Yarmouk camp in Syria"*.
- Edy Cohen, academic, journalist, and senior researcher at the Begin–Sadat Center for Strategic Studies affiliated with Bar-Ilan University, [stated](#): *"Targeted killings, deportation to Gaza …will significantly reduce the level of terrorism. I wish we had a full-fledged right-wing government to carry out the above"*.
- Chani Edri, reporter for the Ultra Orthodox Bakehila weekly, [tweeted](#)*: "I don't understand why we don't treat them [the Palestinians] with maximum fairness and send them to any other Arab country….A nation of murderers, animals, primitives, slaughterers with axes and ungrateful. So it is a shame that the State of Israel does not initiate expulsion"*.
- Doron Nir Tzvi, settler lawyer and frequent contributor to right-wing media outlets, [wrote](#): *"Rabbi Kahane was right...and I did not come to speak about the Arabs living in the West Bank… I came to speak about the Arab citizens of Israel, ...not for nothing, moderate MKs… such as Israel Katz and Yoav Galant … even threatened them with a 'second Nakba'…"*.
- Nadav Ha'etzni, frequent contributor to Ma'ariv and Israel Hayom, when referring to a Palestinian rapper from East Jerusalem, [stated](#) that "incitors" like him should be *"arrested, prosecuted, sent to … prison, and definitely denied citizenship and even deported…. [he] should be transferred to North Korea"*.
- Dr. Mordechai Nisan, Professor at the Hebrew University, [published](#) an article in Mida stating: *"the transfer card will be pulled if and when Israel comes under the fire of terror along with large-scale subversion … in response to the danger, Israel will cause the Arab population to leave as an automatic operating mechanism"*.
- Guy Terno, journalist for the right-wing channel Artuz 7, [stated](#) in one of his pieces*: "I would like to take the forced transfer off the table for the time being… but it is also possible... to carry out a transfer with consent or voluntarily"*.
- During a demonstration in East Jerusalem, a Jerusalem municipal council member and a group of right-wing activists [chanted](#) *"we want Nakba now"*.