

# Rashid Khalidi's Palestine Myths: Part I



by Andrew E. Harrod

Charging that “the commanding heights of the American economy and American institutions are controlled by people who are so blindly hostile to Palestinian rights,” Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University [Rashid Khalidi](#) proclaimed the situation “horrifying.”

Khalidi addressed the anti-Israel website *Jadaliyya*'s December 14 [webinar](#) “Gaza in Context: Collaborative Teach-In Series” in an episode on “Colonial Narratives (Part 2).” *Jadaliyya*'s moderator was [Bassam Haddad](#), director of George Mason University's Middle East and Islamic Studies Program.

Regarding the League of Nations Palestine Mandate created after World War I for the British to administer for the

establishment of a Jewish national home, Khalidi rejected any idea that the area was a “terra nullius, empty land” with “just a bunch of nomadic Arabs.” Yet the largely empty [mandate territory](#) in 1918 contained some 600,000 Arabs alongside 60,000 Jews in an [area](#) over 1,000 square miles larger than [Maryland](#) ([2022 population](#) over six million).

Israelis, “made up mainly of immigrants” from the Jewish diaspora, also try “to delegitimize the claims of the indigenous population of Palestine,” contradicting Khalidi’s imaginary Palestinian indigeneity. “The overwhelming majority of the population of Palestine is made up of people whose ancestors have been there for centuries” or even “millennia,” he claimed. In reality, the ancestry of most local Arabs in the former mandate territory, a population largely formed by [successive immigration waves](#) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is [relatively recent](#).

“Starting in 1939,” Khalidi claimed, Britain “started to limit what had up to that point been its full-throated support for Zionism.” In fact, throughout the Mandate period British support for a Jewish national home was [far more controversial](#). [Restrictions](#) on Jewish immigration to the Mandate and land purchases existed before the British, in an effort to appease Arab violence, [ended](#) its support for Zionism in a 1939 white paper.

Khalidi’s description of the UN General Assembly’s [1947 plan](#) to partition the mandate into a Jewish and an Arab state – a proposal accepted by the Zionist leadership but rejected by the Arabs – was equally misleading. “This was not a generous offer” for Arabs; “this was a theft of most of the country that they believed belonged to them,” he said, disregarding Jewish claims to their ancestral homeland. The plan, he claimed, violated Arab “self-determination in their homeland,” a historically “Arab land.”

The plan assigned 55 percent of the mandate territory to the

Jewish state, Khalidi complained, including “most of the fertile lands,” while “over 90 percent of the privately owned land in Palestine was Arab owned.” He never explained why such a small territory was too generous for a Jewish state or whether he would accept any percentage at all for a Jewish state. Furthermore, the Negev desert contained over 60 percent of the proposed Jewish state territory, while the land in the mandate was overwhelmingly state-owned, not private.

“Almost half of the population of the area that was to be granted to a Jewish State under the 1947 partition plan” was Arab, resulting in a “Jewish state only in name only,” he objected. But this demography was short-lived since, contrary to severe mandate restrictions on Jewish immigration, Jews [fleeing](#) both the aftermath of Nazi genocide in Europe and [repression](#) in Muslim-majority countries surged into the new-born Israel. Its [Jewish population](#) accordingly quickly multiplied.

“To create a Jewish state in an overwhelmingly Arab country,” Khalidi asserted falsely, Zionist leaders long planned ethnic cleansing of local Arabs. “The founder of modern political Zionism, Theodore Herzl, in his diaries wrote, ‘we have to spirit the penniless population across the borders discreetly,’” Khalidi noted, severely distorting an 1895 Herzl diary entry. He attributed similar malign intent to Zionist pioneers like Ze’ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, even though the [historical record](#) clearly shows their intent to integrate an Arab minority into a Jewish state.

Accordingly, he said, a “scholarly consensus” holds that the Arab catastrophe in Israel’s 1948 independence war or “Nakba was a result of the driving out of the Palestinians by Zionist forces.” In Haifa, there were “sixty-five or seventy thousand people driven out,” he said, ignoring that Jewish authorities [pleaded](#) unsuccessfully with the city’s Arabs – who in the end heeded Arab directives to evacuate the city – to stay. This is among the [numerous facts](#) contradicting his false contention

that “one of the greatest myths, completely manufactured out of whole cloth and with absolutely no basis to it, is that the Palestinians left because their leaders told them to leave.”

“For honest historians, including honest Israeli historians, none of this is even controversial,” Khalidi claimed. As evidence, he cited Israeli historian [Benny Morris](#), who has long denied any Jewish Arab expulsion plan in 1948 and documented that most Arab refugees simply fled a warzone, and [Ilan Pappé](#), whom [Morris](#) and others dismiss. Khalidi also regurgitated the myth of [Deir Yassin](#), an Arab village on Jerusalem’s outskirts, as the “scene of a horrific massacre” by Israeli forces on April 9, 1948.

In contrast to such Jewish rapacity, Khalidi described the [five Arab state armies](#) that Israel battled for survival after their invasion of the former Mandate territory in moderate, almost benign terms. “As Palestinian resistance breaks down under the hammer blows of the Zionist militias, Arab countries reluctantly decide to intervene in Palestine,” he stated, “at the very last moment” as the British Mandate ended on May 15, 1948. He neglected to mention that [popular Muslim hatred](#) of Jews and their new state incited by Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood forced hesitant Arab governments to seek Israel’s destruction.

Khalidi also invoked the [discredited trope](#) of Jordan’s King Abdullah colluding with Jewish leaders before the final November 29, 1947, UN partition vote to allow Jordan to annex the proposed Arab state while recognizing Israel. Jordan “has secret agreements with the Jewish Agency and has secret agreements with the British to confine its intervention to the areas allotted to the Arab State under partition, so the Jordanian Army never invades Israel,” he said. In truth, Abdullah’s exploratory talks with Jewish Agency officials had no effect on the [subsequent fighting](#), as Jordan’s [conquest](#) of Jerusalem’s Jewish Old City showed. Contrary to any such conspiracy theory, Abdullah [sought to annex](#) the entire mandate

territory and give the Jewish community there mere autonomy within his [expanded Arab kingdom](#).

Such is the imaginary nature of Khalidi's Palestine. While his myth-making might impress those cossetted at Columbia, it helps legitimize the anti-Israel, antisemitic, and anti-Western ethos prevalent in higher education. The public, from university donors to grantmaking government bodies, should take their time and treasure elsewhere.

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