

**MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT
OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE**

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MINOR WRITINGS ON HISTORY AND THE HISTORIANS

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A.J. Toynbee, *The Gaza Strip*, in *East to West. A Journey Round the World*, New York – London, Oxford University Press, 1958, pp. 203-207.

THE GAZA STRIP IN JULY 1957

By Arnold J. Toynbee

As we stepped into the plane that was to convey us from Beirut to Gaza, we were presented with a sample of the world government of the future. Our fellow travellers included a New Zealand colonel representing the Armistice Commission in the Gaza Strip sector, and an Indian N.C.O. and a couple of Brazilian privates from the United Nations Expeditionary Force (UNEF), returning to duty from leave in the Lebanon. All civilians in the plane, apart from us, were officers of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

As we flew southwards offshore, I could not keep my eyes off the unfolding panorama. Sidon and Tyre: I had seen these already from the ground. But here comes "the Ladder of Tyre", which is now the seaward end of the armistice line between the Lebanon and Israel; and everything beyond that cape is new to us. Acre, Mount Carmel: how thrilling to set eyes on them for the first time. And next come alternate patches of bright yellow sand-dunes and dark green orange-groves. This big built-up area must be Tel Aviv and Jaffa. And now we are veering south-eastwards over the coast. A town, with masses of hutments north and east and south of it, flits by beneath our descending wings. That must be Gaza with its thorn-crown of refugee camps. We are touching the ground and coming to rest. The end of the runway lies, they tell me, only a few yards away from the dividing line between the Strip and Israel. That house and that horse, just over there, are in Israeli territory.

While my eyes had been drinking in the landscape, my mind had been pulling out of its pigeon-holes some of its previous associations with the region that I had come to see. Gaza, refugees, Philistines: were not the Philistines refugees who had trekked by coasting-boat and bullock-cart all the way from the Aegean Isles to the Nile Delta and had then settled in the Strip after they had been flung back from Egypt? Was not Gaza the southernmost of the five Philistine cities? The sites of the other four must be in Israel today. Gaza: here it was that captive Samson pulled down the pillars of the theatre – content to die himself in the act of bringing death upon his Philistine enemies. And here it was that the Macedonian Christian fanatic, Saint Porphyrius, tore down the temple of Our Lord, Gaza's tutelary god, after having

pulled the necessary wires in the Imperial Palace at Constantinople. Ominous episodes of local history; for there are plenty of fanatics and plenty of prisoners in the Gaza Strip today. Their tempers are on edge; and I would not put it beyond them to attempt some desperate act of demolition that might bring, not just a single temple or theatre, but the whole of civilization tumbling in ruin about the ears of the human race. It is a relief to switch one's mind from Gaza to Rafa and to recall the battle, fought there in 217 B.C., in which Indian and African elephants met for the first and last time in history. (The Indian elephants won. The Africans were bigger, but they were not so well trained or so well led.)

From Rafa to Gaza the Strip is, at most, twenty-five miles long. Its width varies from three miles, at the northern end, to five. Along the coast there is an almost continuous belt of sand-dunes. Inland the landscape turns to desert as one travels south. Behind Gaza itself there are stretches of green fields and orange-groves fenced in with huge hedges of some evergreen shrub, casuarina or something of the kind. But on the southward road there comes a point where this gives way to hedges of prickly pear and where the desert sands show through the furrows. Before the catastrophe of 1948, the population of the Strip was about 90,000. Today it is about 100,000, while the refugees in the Strip amount to twice that number. The permanent population is hard put to it now; for some of their best lands are on the Israeli side of the armistice line. But at least they still have something to live on and something to do. The refugees have nothing to do but to brood over the injustice that has been done to them. The Germans wronged the Jews, but the Arabs, not the Germans, have been made to pay for what the Germans did. This has been the act of the Germans' victorious British and American adversaries. In Arab eyes this looks like a conspiracy among the Western nations to salve the West's guilty conscience towards the Jews by compensating the Jews at the Arabs' expense. In the refugees' hearts the reaction is to insist obstinately on a righting of the wrong done to them. They must be reinstated in their own homes and fields under a non-Israeli regime. What is to happen to the Jewish settlers on Arab land that has been seized forcibly, and without being paid for, since 1948? "England and America created the problem; it is for them to solve it", is the Arabs' logical but unconstructive reply.

Within each camp the refugees maintain their former village organization – each village under the leadership of its headman (mukhtar). These headmen still have the influence to

set the tone of the rank and file, and they tend to set it hard, because it is they who have suffered the most painful change of fortune. Some of them own four or five hundred acres of ploughland, with fruit trees besides, on the other side of the line. Yet now they are paupers on the dole. Inevitably they are bitter; and, in present circumstances, their passions are not curbed by the responsibility that used to rest on their shoulders before they lost their homes. Today the responsibility for keeping the refugees fed, housed, clothed, medically tended, and educated lies with UNRWA and its staff.

This United Nations agency is doing a fine job under perpetual difficulties, financial, political, and psychological. Its budget is derived, not from UN's general funds, but from contributions paid by individual member states (the U.S. pays the lion's share, and Britain the next largest share, as is just). UNRWA's moves to re-settle the refugees permanently elsewhere than in their own homes are opposed by the governments of the Arab states in whose territories the refugees are camped (the Gaza Strip is administered by the Egyptian Government). There is also opposition among the refugees themselves. They feel that to acquiesce in resettlement would be tantamount to renouncing their title to restitution. One may point out to them that Western Germany has absorbed the East German refugees into her economic life – and has won prosperity and power by so doing – without renouncing her title to the German territories that Poland and the Soviet Union have annexed. But this apparently pertinent example makes little impression on Arab minds. As they see it, the maintenance of their title requires them to reject proposals for resettlement in the meanwhile.

UNRWA has two budgets: one for the refugees' subsistence; the other for their rehabilitation. The first is too small to give the refugees more than about 1,500 calories of food in summer and 1,600 in winter; the use of the rehabilitation fund is blocked by the political opposition of the Arab governments. In this quandary, UNRWA is doing well. The rations may be inadequate, but they are efficiently and fairly distributed, and, for a selected group consisting of children, old people, and the sick, they are supplemented by a hot midday meal. The health service is excellent (the maternity work is particularly striking). Mothers are being educated into bringing their children to the camp clinic at an early stage of any complaint. The rehabilitation fund, which cannot yet be used for resettlement, is being

drawn upon for education. The refugees' standard of education, like their standard of medical attention, is probably higher now than it was before they were uprooted. There can be few other Arab communities in which so high a percentage of the girls is at school. These measures are a credit to UNRWA, but what is going to be the end thereof? The refugee population is increasing rapidly and is being educated in large numbers – for what? What have they to look forward to when their education is over – especially the abler minority that has gone on to the secondary schools? Perhaps the most encouraging institution in the Strip is UNRWA's vocational training centre. Technicians, even if refugees, do seem to have a prospect of permanent employment. But what are these among so many?

If the nine hundred thousand Palestinian Arab refugees are a bomb, the two hundred thousand of them who are languishing in the Gaza Strip are this bomb's explosive war-head. Here is a risk to the World's security as well as a challenge to its conscience. This urgent human problem cannot be solved without painful sacrifices on the part of all parties concerned: Israel, the Arab states, and the refugees themselves. The World's duty is to insist on negotiating a settlement and to pay handsomely to alleviate its hardships. Among all the nations of the World, the heaviest responsibility lies on Great Britain and the United States. On this point, at least, the Arabs' contention is unanswerable.