

(a) The Conquest of Land and the Dispossession of the Palestinian Peasantry

The dispossession of the Palestinian peasant is a function of the interlocking relationship between Arab feudal plunder, British colonialism, and Zionist land acquisition. The latter, however, played the major and most systematic role in this process.

Under the heavy yoke of rural indebtedness many peasants were forced to "free" themselves by turning over their small holdings to the landlords and becoming share tenants. Similar was the effect of taxation imposed by the British authorities, in turn transferring State-controlled land to Zionist settlement institutions. Purchase of land was the predominant method of land acquisition by the Zionist movement in the Yishuv. Land was purchased mainly from feudal lords, specifically absentee landlords, resulting in tenant eviction. As Christopher Sykes puts it:

"The land problem of Palestine came primarily from...the sales, often of very large tracts of country, by absentee landlords to Zionist individuals and syndicates. A usual condition of such sales was that the tenants should be evicted, for of what interest to Zionist was the possession of Arab-tenanted land? The wretched people who had earned a living, sometimes for many generations, on the land in question, found themselves forced out of their homes and deprived without compensation of their only means of earning bread...Evicted tenants, the real sufferers by Jewish immigration, were the essence of the Palestine problem." 34

Regardless of the method and form of Zionist land acquisition for Jewish settlement, it was inevitably at the expense of the Palestinian small peasant and tenant. This fact was recognized even by Arthur Ruppin, the Jewish Agency's expert on agriculture and settlement, in a secret memorandum to the Jewish Agency (in 1930), stating:

"Land is the most necessary thing for our establishing roots in Palestine. Since there are hardly any more arable unsettled lands in Palestine, we are bound in each case of purchase of land and its settlement to remove the peasants who cultivated the land thus far, both owners of the land and tenants...." 35