

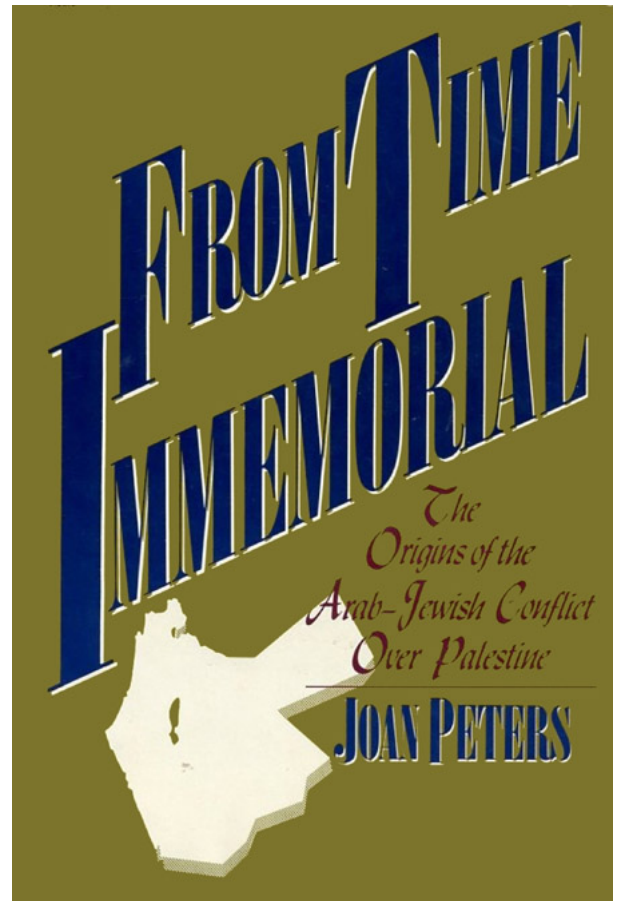
# Rediscovering Joan Peters in Israel

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (May 2020)



*Joan Peters*

I am in Israel. The country is managing the plague rather well. I am self isolating in a remote part of the Galilee and I have lots of time to read, especially as Passover is approaching, a time when the entire Jewish people celebrates the Exodus from Egypt into the Land of Israel and to celebrate my being here, I have just finished rereading Joan Peters' book, *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict Over Palestine*.



I recommend it to anyone who wants to get a clearer understanding of the Israeli/Arab conflict and particularly, in answering the question of who are the indigenous people of the Land of Israel? This April 29, the day after Israel Independence Day, marks the anniversary of the birth of the late Joan Peters and so it is fitting to consider how her book has fared since it was first published in 1984, 36 years ago.

Consider these curious facts, the first two which were first made public in Peters' book.

- In 1934 the governor of the Hauran, in what was then the French Mandate for Syria, Tewfik Bey el Haurani, gave an interview to the French language newspaper *La Syrie*,

reporting that “during the last few months” 30-36,000 Arab peasants from the Hauran had illegally moved from Syria to the Palestine Mandate in the Land of Israel.

- Four years earlier, the British authorities noted in one of their reports that Palestinian Christians and Muslims spoke 51 different languages and that Arab occupants of Jerusalem when surveyed gave 20 different places of birth outside the city.

- In 1971, as a potential young socialist (it did not stick), I picked fruit and cleared fields of stones at Kibbutz Ein Hashofet in the Jezreel Valley of Israel. I discovered that the grandfathers of the nearby neighbouring Arab village had left Egypt as a group to come to Palestine in the early 1920s, because they heard there was work to be had on the Jewish farms of the Jezreel valley and that life was better here.

- Then in 2012 there was this wonderfully strange declaration, which was made in Arabic by Fathi Hammad, the Hamas Minister of Security in Gaza. He announced:

We all have Arab roots, and every Palestinian, in Gaza and throughout Palestine, can prove his Arab roots—whether from Saudi Arabia, from Yemen, or anywhere. We have blood ties. So where is your affection and mercy? . . . Personally, half my family is Egyptian. We are all like that. More than 30 families in the Gaza Strip are called Al-Masri [“Egyptian”]. Brothers, half of the Palestinians are

Egyptians and the other half are Saudis . . . Who are the Palestinians? We have many families called Al-Masri, whose roots are Egyptian. Egyptian! They may be from Alexandria, from Cairo, from Dumietta, from the North, from Aswan, from Upper Egypt. We are Egyptians.

- In early March of 2020, I ate dinner at a restaurant in the Arabic-speaking, largely Muslim village of Abu Ghosh. The owner of the restaurant invited me to visit the newly-built mosque which celebrated the origins of the villagers; in the Caucasus.

If the ancestors of most of today's Arabs of Israel, Gaza, Judea and Samaria have been in the land of Israel "since time immemorial," then what does one make of these interesting facts? The answer is simple. A significant number of the immediate ancestors of the Muslims of Israel, Gaza, Judea and Samaria came from abroad during the British Mandate for Palestine, from 1920 to 1948.

Yet the considered opinion of academics and journalists throughout the West and the Islamic world claims that the Arabs of Palestine have lived here in the land of Israel since time immemorial and therefore their national rights are equal to, or even exceed, that of the Jews who returned to their ancestral homeland to successfully recreate the State of Israel.

The first public intellectual who questioned this widely accepted paradigm, that the absolute majority of Muslim Arabs of the land of Israel have been here for over a thousand years

and that Jewish Zionists were largely immigrants and settlers from Europe who have “occupied” Arab land, was an American liberal journalist named Joan Peters. This was not the only orthodox principle that Peters had imbibed from other journalists, academics and politicians at the time and which she began to question.

This included the assumption as fact that Jews and Arabs had got along famously in the lands of Islam and that it was only in the 20th century that the incoming Zionists spoiled everything with their Jewish nationalism and their newly created State of Israel. In the 70s and 80s when she was covering the middle east, Peters also imbibed the mantra that until “all Palestinian refugees” had the right to return to their homeland and that another Palestinian state (the first one is Jordan and the most recent the independent city state of Gaza) must be created for their exclusive use, otherwise there will be endless war in the region.

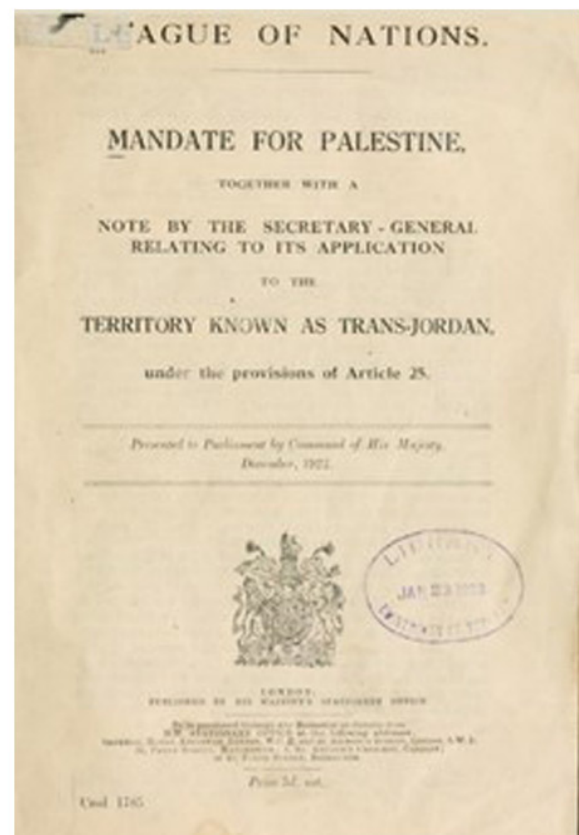
In 2020 this still seems to be the dominant paradigm of most Western and all Arab media. As a gestalt, it has taken over the Middle East studies department of most American academia and those of almost of all of Europe ( encouraged by hundreds of millions of dollars of generous funding from Arab League countries, particularly Qatar). It has also become mainstream in academic anthropology, sociology, women’s studies, gender studies, post colonial studies and all the other academic invasions of the cultural Marxist left of the last forty years.

When Peters was covering the Middle East, something changed. She began to question the paradigm. Her intellectual journey of discovery is well documented and clearly explained in her

book. At the time, it became a “National Best Seller.” Clearly she had something new to say. Do not be surprised to discover that resentful academics panned her book.

Why is Peters not famous or at least, well known and celebrated? Few people today take her book seriously, largely because she claimed that there was consistent evidence that the British had covered up and encouraged significant migration of Muslim peoples from outside of the Palestine Mandate from its start in the early 1920s until their withdrawal in 1948. At the same time, they had consistently done everything possible to limit Jewish immigration to Palestine, despite the fact that it was the mandate of the Mandate to facilitate Jewish emigration.

No less a self-appointed authority on the history of the middle east than Noam Chomsky (he neither speaks nor reads any other language than English), led the attack on Peters, supported by some left wing Israeli academics at that time. Chomsky’s attack was not well refuted nor was it terribly well done, although it was supported by Professor Jehoshua Porath of the Hebrew University.



No one in the then leftist dominated Israeli universities of the time took Peters’ initial and tentative qualitative and

quantitative evidence seriously, suggesting that many Arabs were recent immigrants to Mandated Palestine. Nor, did the academic or media establishment at the time suggest that they should put together a multi disciplinary team to further flesh out Peters' discoveries and iron out the details. Instead, her data and arguments were dismissed.

In other words, Peters was discredited, only because there was the possibility that her data and conclusions were not 100% correct. Her character was attacked and the old paradigm continues to spread, morphing into BDS, for if the paradigm is true, then Zionists and Israelis must be very, very, very bad people.

Only the outstanding American scholar of Islam, Dr. Daniel Pipes wrote the following review in 1986, two years after the publication of Peter's book. Despite his somewhat arrogant and ungenerous put down of the writing style of her book, in the end he agreed with the contents. He wrote:

I would not dispute the existence of . . . faults. From Time Immemorial quotes carelessly, uses statistics sloppily, and ignores inconvenient facts. Much of the book is irrelevant to Miss Peters's central thesis. The author's linguistic and scholarly abilities are open to question. Excessive use of quotation marks, eccentric footnotes, and a polemical, somewhat hysterical undertone mar the book. In short, From Time Immemorial stands out as an appallingly crafted book.

Granting all this, the fact remains that the book presents

a thesis that neither Professor Porath nor any other reviewer has so far succeeded in refuting. Miss Peters's central thesis is that a substantial immigration of Arabs to Palestine took place during the first half of the twentieth century. She supports this argument with an array of demographic statistics and contemporary accounts, the bulk of which have not been questioned by any reviewer, including Professor Porath.

By the way, the book is well written and readable. Pipes misconstrues a tone of righteous indignation for "hysteria." Pipes is famous for his independence of thought and research, not his writing style.

Since then other demographers have looked at Peters' and others' data supporting Peters' claim that not all the Arabs of Palestine had not been there since the rise of Islam, 1300 years back. In the *Smoking Gun; Arab Immigration into Palestine 1922-1931 in the Middle East Quarterly Winter 2003* professor of statistics, Dr. Fred M. Gottheil re-examined the data on the growth of the non Jewish population in Palestine during the Mandate. He largely confirmed Peters thesis. His is an article worth reading and it includes a fair amount of quantitative and comparative demographic analysis.

Gottheil did not dismiss the factor of natural growth among the Muslims during the Mandate but, he makes a strong quantitative argument that the economic prosperity created by the Mandate pax and correlated Jewish economic growth was responsible for the disproportionate and almost exponential growth of the Muslims of the Palestine Mandate, so many of whom came from beyond its borders, thus supporting the broad strokes of Joan Peters' discovery.



As he pointed out in his article, *"Real domestic product per capital soared, doubling during 1922-31."* And so, we should not be surprised that the Arab village near my kibbutz came from Egypt or that there were more than 51 languages spoken in Palestine in 1930 suggesting multiple, extraterritorial origins or, that it may have been likely that the kinds of unreported mass influx of Arab peasants from surrounding countries was not limited to the Hauran and, that it happened more than once.



Gottheil, like Peters, has his critics and so the demographic argument goes on. But one thing is certain—a lot of Arabs came from outside of the Mandate from 1920-1948. Why is this important? It is important because until quite recently the prejudice of our time is that whoever is a majority in a country and who was there longer is “indigenous,” and has greater national rights. The two principles are rarely separated.

Let us say that perhaps half the Arabs of Palestine came from abroad during the Mandate, or three quarters, or one third.

This would still ignore the fact that Arabs and the Muslims of Palestine in their own words identified with ancestors either real or imagined, who invaded and conquered Palestine in the 7th century AD. That is to say, they came from outside of the land of Israel in the 7th century AD. During this 1300 year period in Palestine they persecuted the Jews of Palestine and treated them as second class citizens, according to Shariah law until close to the British conquest in 1917. Just go back and read the statement by Fathi Hammad quoted above. It is actually the rant of a settler colonialist!

Gideon Kressel is an Israeli anthropologist who has spent much of his professional life studying the Arabs of Israel, in their homes, in the Negev desert among the Bedouin and in the "refugee camps." (I use quotes here because those camps in Judea and Samaria are often populated by Arabs who were resident in the Palestine Mandate before 1948 and therefore should not be seen as refugees, but as Jordanian citizens resident West of the river. Please go to the following [link](#) to better understand this paradox a little better.

During his early studies of marriage patterns among Israeli Arabs Kressel, like any good anthropologist, constructed lineages of descent and found that many of these families, lineages and clans had come to Palestine from Egypt during the 19th century when it was ruled by the Ottomans. Once again, he was more or less marginalized by the Israeli academic and media establishment for his discovery. Further research that he carried out indicated that many "Palestinians" had migrated from Egypt to the coast of Israel during the 19th century.

Many travel writers, including Mark Twain when visiting the

Holy Land in the 19th century commented on how depopulated the place was. This often happens after a war. In the early 1800s Napoleon himself led an army from his conquered territory of Egypt into Palestine. The coming and going of the army caused chaos, disease, death and insecurity in what became 19th century Ottoman Palestine. When things settled down peasants from Egypt, often with the blessings of the authorities there, moved up into Palestine as there was land and opportunity there. These were the Arabs that the early Zionists met on the coast of Israel. And so, when Fathi Hammad of Hamas claims that a good portion of Israeli Arabs came from Egypt, he is not wrong. Kressel's study has been largely ignored by the press. Here is a direct