

**Documentary Film Reviews**  
**THE LAND SPEAKS ARABIC**  
**Reviewed by Prof. Mazin Qumsiyeh**

'La Terre Parle Arab' (2007). Director Maryse Gargour. Arabic, French, English audio with English subtitles, 61 minutes. Winner of several European awards (ASBU, Prix France 3 Medirerranee, Prix Memoire du Medirerranee).

This excellent documentary on one of the most pressing issues of our time brings together rarely seen footage of Palestine before 1948 juxtaposed with historical research, eyewitness accounts, stunning choreography, moving testimonials, and historical documents.

We can state the fact that before the Zionist project began in Palestine it was more heavily populated than the United States of today. We can state that Palestine 20 years or even fifty years after the Zionist project was launched was still predominantly Arab. But it is one thing to state a fact and another to have seen it or lived it. The next best thing is to have a film that shows you a video of the era and pictures of the documents of the era. That is what this film does in a very professional, practical, and effective way.

We are transported back in time with amazing scenes of the old and bustling city of Jerusalem, native fishermen on seas, lakes and rivers, native farmers tending rich agricultural lands, shepherds watching over their flocks, women with embroidered dresses balancing jars of water on their heads, men with white head dresses pressing olives for olive oil, cooking classical Arabic bread in earthen ovens, church bells ringing, people kneeling in prayers, families posing for photos at weddings and holidays. These scenes of an idyllic life in the Holy Land haunt us as we are transported to other turbulent times.

Letters in European languages exchanged between European Zionists and European imperialists are read followed by scenes of the impact of these blueprints of social engineering. Articles from newspapers of the late 19th century and early 20th century report on the progress (a poor choice of word in this context) of the colonisation project. We see through documents, including news reports and letters, that the word colonisation was used by the Zionist colonizers, when their writings and their speeches expressed the ideas of replacing the natives with the new population from Europe. We hear from Ahad Haam, Israel Zangwill, Yosef Weitz, Chaim Weitzmann, Theodor Herzl, and David Ben-Gurion.

We learn about how Jewish underground forces like the Haganah, Irgun, and Stern gangs specialised in various forms of terrorism ranging from bombings of market places to assassinations (including of British officials).

Historian Nur Masalha guides us through the maze of history with a calm voice stating facts and figures with almost clinical precision.

I always thought the term documentary is not adequate to describe some films of this genre. Occasionally one watches a film that not only documents amazing material and not

only provides a memorable experience but changes us at a fundamental level. It makes us think deeply about what transpired and begs us to take action.

We hear from refugees speaking about their lives before 1948. They explain with pained voices how life was simple, people of different religions coexisting. They tell you they were simple peasants or city folks who knew little of the machinations of Zionism and imperialism and how they conspired to take their lands and transform the country into a Jewish state.

Buzz words on headlines of local news papers (Jewish Zionist or Arab nationalist) speak volumes: funds flow to Palestine, Zionist immigration increases, Jews will oppose immigration bar, Jewish militias train, reward for capture of wanted Jews, Arab strikes, 59 Arab casualties in Haifa bombing, the land issue in Palestine, Haganah-Irgun pact, arms for Palestinian Jews.

There is an interview with a 1948 resister: 'why did you join the fighters?' He is asked. 'Because we saw that they wanted to take over our country and remove us. Few guns available, few fighters, no organisation or experience in modern warfare, eight people pooling their money to buy a single old gun...'

In one image a sign says office states in English 'The Jewish agency of Palestine' and in Hebrew 'The Jewish agency of Israel' before there was ever an Israel. Deception has always been part and parcel of the programme.

The 1936 uprising against the British occupation and Zionist colonisation is covered. During that time, the Zionist movement proposed that the way to deal with the uprising is to speed up colonisation and to transfer the Arab population out of the planned Jewish state. Zionists think of it as an engineering project just like draining a swamp or clearing a forest for settlement. The British instituted bombing of villages, collective punishment, public hangings, expulsions, ... These were tactics later adopted by Israeli army to deal with Palestinian uprisings.

Even with intensified purchases and other methods, the Jewish National Fund was able to acquire only 3.5 percent of Palestine. It was war that was to get them what they really wanted, Ben-Gurion simply stating that 'our and not ours are only peace time concepts, in war they lose their meaning'. Refugees then tell you why they left: under fire, as Zionist forces intentionally targeted civilians to drive them out. It was a choice between life and death in so many cases. The Zionist forces already had airplanes, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, heavy machine guns. The few Palestinians who resisted had single-bullet guns, many going back to Ottoman times. In cases where natives did not leave and surrendered, men were rounded up and shot in groups with machine guns. One survivor with bullets in his body explained how he lay among the dead the whole day with bullets in his body faking death. Another explained seeing a woman with a slit abdomen and a dead unborn baby. We see and hear from survivors of the King David hotel bombing by the Jewish underground in 1946 and similar bombings at Hotel Samiramis in 1948. These testimonies are supplemented by documents and newsreels of the period.

The film ends with an elderly Jerusalemite painfully speaking about his feelings of exile and longing. The combination of history with images and documents, facts and figures puts you at these events as if they happened yesterday. It is a powerful production.