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To the Editors:

Jonathan Kalmus' March 15 article about my lecture at the University of Manchester did not properly represent my views on complex and sensitive topics in the history of modern Israel.

There are few historical subjects more controversial than the 1948 Palestine war. Those who write on it come from differing political perspectives and at times their work crosses the line from scholarship to polemics. Yet even scholars who sit on opposite sides of the pro-Israel/pro-Palestinian axis often find points of agreement.

The most sensitive issue surrounding the 1948 war is the exodus of some 650000 Arabs from Palestine. Was it the result of deliberate Arab military strategy to clear the battlefield of civilians, spontaneous flight caused by panic, localized initiatives by the Israeli military, or an Israeli policy of forced migration?

Historians have shown us there were only a

few documented cases of Arabs being ordered to flee their villages at the commands of Arab forces. Benny Morris' research has shown that the Israeli government had no master plan for expulsion. In fact, in the first months of the war, the Yishuv's political leaders were still assuming that the Jewish state would have a large Arab minority.

Nonetheless, as the war progressed, many expulsions occurred. The flight of Palestinians from their communities was often accelerated by whispering campaigns and other forms of what Morris has called "psychological warfare" waged by the IDF. Local commanders took matters into their own hands. Haim Laskov, IDF commander in the Western Galilee, ordered the expulsion of the Arabs of Nazareth, but he was opposed by both David Ben-Gurion and the brigade commander in Nazareth, Ben Dunkelman.

Expulsions by Israeli forces of Palestinians were well known to Israelis during and shortly after the war. They were the subject of journalistic reports and fiction (most famously S. Yizhar's 1949 novella *Khirbet Khizeh*). The expulsions were even reported in September of 1948 in the American Jewish press.

As the historian Hillel Cohen has shown, the overwhelming majority of Palestinians were not combatants in 1948, and Israel's political and military leaders knew as much.

Yet after the war ended, only about 10000 were allowed back. The refugees' land was confiscated and given over to the state. Abandoned Palestinian villages that had not yet been destroyed were razed and became the site of new moshavim, kibbutzim, and suburbs.

Israel's leaders did not go into the 1948 war intent on emptying the land of Arabs, but such was largely the result, and it was solidified by actions taken after the war. The Israel of 1949 had less than a fifth of the Arabs who had lived in that territory before the 1948 war.

The twentieth century has witnessed ethnic cleansing in eastern Europe, South Asia and the Balkans on an exponentially greater scale than what occurred in Palestine in 1948. Some Israel advocates invoke these tragedies so as to trivialize the Palestinian cause, but doing so does not move the Israel-Palestine conflict towards a solution. Nor is it helpful to present the dispossession of the Palestinians as having been balanced out by the post-1948 expulsion and mass flight of over 800,000 Middle Eastern Jews from their homelands. Each is a catastrophe in its own right.

At this moment it does not appear as if apologies from Israel to the Palestinians, or from the Arab world to the Jewish people, are forthcoming. But scholars can pave the way towards reconciliation by investigating

the past with rigor and an open mind. Scholars must strive to distance themselves from their sources while retaining compassion for their subjects.

Scholars who write on the Israel-Palestine conflict sometimes fail to meet these goals and slip into either advocacy or delegitimization. More frequently, though, scholarship on Israel is perceived outside of academia as negative or hostile when it is merely doing its job — to question received wisdom, to be critical in the most constructive sense of the word.

Despite its flaws and gaps, the last quarter century's writings on the 1948 war have undercut myths held by both sides of the conflict. The more this scholarship remains true to the ethos of academic neutrality, the more practical good it can do for the world.