

Israel: 60 Years of Denial

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Global Research, May 16, 2008

16 May 2008

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Don't ask for what you never had,' is the underlying message made by supporters of Israel when they claim Palestine was never a state to begin with.

The contention is, of course, easily refutable. Following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th Century, colonial powers plotted to divide the spoils. When Britain and France signed the secretive Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, which divided the spheres of influence in west Asia, there were hardly any 'nation-states' in the region which would fit contemporary definitions of the term.

All borders were colonial concoctions that served the interests of the powerful countries seeking strategic control, political influence and raw material. Most of Africa and much of Asia were victims of the colonial scrambles, which disfigured their geo-political and subsequently socio-economic compositions.

But Palestinians, like many other people, did see themselves as a unique group linked historically to a specific geographic entity. All That Remains by Professor Walid Khalidi is one leading volume which documents a thriving pre-Israel history of Palestine and the Palestinian people. Such history is often overlooked, if not entirely dismissed. Some choose to believe that no other civilization ever existed in Palestine, neither prior to nor between the assumed destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE until the founding of Israel in 1948. But what about irrefutable facts? For example, the Israeli Jerusalem Post called the Palestine Post when it was founded in 1932. Why Palestine and not Israel? Whose existence, as a definable political entity, preceded the other? The answer is obvious.

It isn't the denial or acceptance of Israel's existence that concerns me. Israel does exist, even if it refuses to define its borders, or acknowledge the historic injustices committed against the Palestinian people. The systematic and brutal ethnic cleaning of the majority of Palestinian Christians and Muslims from 1947 to 1948 is what produced a Jewish majority in Palestine and subsequently the 'Jewish state' of Israel.

Also worth remembering are the equally systematic attempts at dehumanising Palestinians and denying them any rights. When Ehud Barak, Prime Minister of Israel at the time, compared Palestinians in a Jerusalem Post interview (August 2000) to "crocodiles, the more you give them meat, they want more," he was hardly diverting from a consistent Zionist tradition that equated Palestinians with animals and vermin. Another Prime Minister, Menahim Begin referred to Palestinians in a Knesset speech as "beasts walking on two legs." They have also been described as "grasshoppers", "cockroaches" and more by famed Israeli statesmen.

Disturbingly, such references might be seen as an improvement from former Prime Minister

Golda Meir's claim that "there were no such thing as Palestinians...they did not exist." (June 15, 1969)

To justify its own existence, Israel has long subjugated its citizens to a kind of collective amnesia. Do Israelis realise they live on the rubble of hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns, each destroyed during a most tragic history of blood, pain and tears, resulting in an ethnic cleansing of nearly 800,000 Palestinians?

As Israel celebrates its 60th birthday, nothing is allowed to blemish the supposed heroism of its founding fathers or those who fought in its name. Palestine, the Palestinians, and an immeasurably long relationship between a people and their land hardly merit a pause as Israeli officials and their Western counterparts carry on with their festivities.

While some conveniently forgot many historic chapters pertinent to the suffering of Palestinians, Israeli leaders — especially those who took part in the colonization of Palestine — were fully aware of what they did. David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, warned in 1948, "We must do everything to insure they (the Palestinians) never do return." By ensuring that Palestinians were cut off from their land, Ben Gurion has hoped that time will take care of the rest. "The old will die and the young will forget," he said.

Moshe Dayan, a former Israeli Defence Minister also had no illusions regarding the real history beneath Israel's momentous achievements. His speech at the Technion in Haifa (April 4, 1969) was quoted in the Israeli daily Haaretz thus: "We came here to a country that was populated by Arabs and we are building here a Hebrew, a Jewish state; instead of the Arab villages, Jewish villages were established. You even do not know the names of those villages, and I do not blame you because these villages no longer exist. There is not a single Jewish settlement that was not established in the place of a former Arab village."

Israel has, since its foundation, laboured to undermine any sense of Palestinian identity. Without most of their historic land, the relationship between Palestinians and Palestine could only exist in memory. Eventually though, memory managed to morph into a collective identity that has proved more durable than the physical existence on the land. "It is a testimony to the tenacity of Palestinians that they have kept alive a sense of nationhood in the face of so much adversity. Yet the obstacles to sustaining their cohesiveness as a people are today greater than ever," reported the Economist (May 8, 2008).

Living in so many disconnected areas, removed from their land, detached from one another, fought with at every corner, Palestinians have not just been oppressed physically by Israel, but physiologically as well. There are attempts from all angles to force them to simply concede, forget, and move on. It is the Palestinian people's rejection of such notions that makes Israel's victory and 'independence' superficial and unconvincing.

Sixty years after their Catastrophe (Nakba), Palestinians still remember their past and present injustices. Of course more than mere remembrance is necessary; Palestinians need to find a common ground for unity — Christians and Muslims, poor and rich, secularist and the religious — in order to stop Israel from eagerly exploiting their own disunity, factionalism and political tribalism.

But, despite Israel's hopes and best efforts, Palestinians have not yet forgotten who they are. And no amount of denial can change this.

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