

Israel at 60: No Remorse after all these Years

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It has been a week of adulation from world leaders, ostentatious displays of military prowess, and street parties. Heads of state have rubbed shoulders with celebrities to pay homage to the Jewish state on its 60th birthday, while a million Israelis reportedly headed off to the country's forests to enjoy the national pastime: a barbecue.

But this year's Independence Day festivities have concealed as much as they have revealed. The images of joy and celebration seen by the world have failed to acknowledge the reality of a deeply divided Israel, shared by two peoples with conflicting memories and claims to the land.

They have also served to shield from view the fact that the Palestinians' dispossession is continuing in both the occupied territories and inside Israel itself. Far from being a historical event, Israel's "independence" — and the ever greater toll it is inflicting on the Palestinian people — is very much a live issue.

Away from the cameras, a fifth of the Israeli population — more than one million Palestinian citizens — remembered al-Nakba, the Catastrophe of 1948 that befell the Palestinian people as the Jewish state was built on the ruins of their society.

As it has been doing for the past decade, Israel's Palestinian minority staged an alternative act of commemoration: a procession of families, many of them refugees from the 1948 war, to one of more than 400 Palestinian villages erased by Israel in a monumental act of state vandalism after the fighting. The villages were destroyed to ensure that the 750,000 Palestinians expelled from the state under the cover of war never return.

But in a sign of how far Israel still is from coming to terms with the circumstances of its birth, this year's march was forcibly broken up by the Israeli police. They clubbed unarmed demonstrators with batons and fired tear gas and stun grenades into crowds of families that included young children.

Although most of the refugees from the 1948 war — numbering in their millions — ended up in camps in neighbouring Arab states, a few remained inside Israel. Today one in four Palestinian citizens of Israel is either a refugee or descended from one. Not only have they been denied the right ever to return to their homes, like the other refugees, but many live tantalisingly close to their former communities.

The destroyed Palestinian villages have either been reinvented as exclusive Jewish communities or buried under the foliage of national forestation programmes overseen by the Jewish National Fund and paid for with charitable donations from American and

European Jews.

There have been many Nakba processions held over the past week but the march across fields close by the city of Nazareth was the only one whose destination was a former Palestinian village now occupied by Jews.

The village of Saffuriya was bombed from the air for two hours in July 1948, in one of the first uses of air power by the new Jewish state. Most of Saffuriya's 5,000 inhabitants fled northwards towards Lebanon, where they have spent six decades waiting for justice. But a small number went south towards Nazareth, where they sought sanctuary and eventually became Israeli citizens.

Today they live in a neighbourhood of Nazareth called Safafra, after their destroyed village. They look down into the valley where a Jewish farming community known as Zippori has been established on the ruins of their homes.

This year's Nakba procession to Saffuriya was a small act of defiance by Palestinian citizens in returning to the village, even if only symbolically and for a few hours. The threat this posed to Israeli Jews' enduring sense of their own exclusive victimhood was revealed in the unprovoked violence unleashed against the defenceless marchers, many of them children.

Like many others, I was there with a child — my five-month-old daughter. Fortunately, for her and my sake, we left after she grew tired from being in the heat for so long, moments before the trouble started.

When we left, things were entirely peaceful. Nonetheless, as we drove away, I saw members of a special paramilitary police unit known as the Yassam appearing on their motorbikes. The Yassam are effectively a hit squad, known for striking out first and asking questions later. Trouble invariably follows in their wake.

The events that unfolded that afternoon have been captured on mostly home-made videos that can be viewed on the internet, including here (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-P4LI1ceGA>). The context for understanding these images is provided below in accounts from witnesses to the police attack:

Several thousand Palestinians, waving flags and chanting Palestinian songs, marched towards a forest planted on Saffuriya's lands. Old people, some of whom remembered fleeing their villages in 1948, were joined by young families and several dozen sympathetic Israeli Jews. As the marchers headed towards Saffuriya's spring, sealed off by the authorities with a metal fence a few years ago to stop the villagers collecting water, they were greeted with a small counter-demonstration by right-wing Israeli Jews.

They had taken over the fields on the other side of the main road at the entrance to what is now the Jewish community of Zippori. They waved Israeli flags and sang nationalist Hebrew songs, as armed riot police lined the edge of the road that separated the two demonstrations.

Tareq Shehadeh, head of the Nazareth Culture and Tourism Association whose parents were expelled from Saffuriya, said: "There were some 50 Jewish demonstrators who had been

allowed to take over the planned destination of our march. Their rights automatically trumped ours, even though there were thousands of us there and only a handful of them.”

The police had their backs to the Jewish demonstrators while they faced off with the Palestinian procession. “It was as if they were telling us: we are here only for the benefit of Jews, not for you,” said Shehadeh. “It was a reminder, if we needed it, that this is a Jewish state and we are even less welcome than usual when we meet as Palestinians.”

The marchers turned away and headed uphill into the woods, to a clearing where Palestinian refugees recounted their memories.

When the event ended in late afternoon, the marchers headed back to the main road and their cars. In the police version, Palestinian youths blocked the road and threw stones at passing cars, forcing the police to use force to restore order.

Dozens of marchers were injured, including women and children, and two Arab Knesset members, Mohammed Barakeh and Wassel Taha, were bloodied by police batons. Mounted police charged into the crowds, while stun grenades and tear gas were liberally fired into fields being crossed by families. Eight youths were arrested.

Shehadeh, who was close to the police when the trouble began, and many other marchers say they saw the Jewish rightwingers throwing stones at them from behind the police. A handful of Palestinian youngsters responded in kind. Others add that the police were provoked by a young woman waving a Palestinian flag.

“None of the police were interested in stopping the Jews throwing stones. And even if a few Palestinian youths were reacting, you chase after them and arrest them, you don’t send police on mounted horseback charging into a crowd of families and fire tear gas and stun grenades at them. It was totally indiscriminate and reckless.”

Clouds of gas enveloped the slowest families as they struggled with their children to take cover in the forest.

Therese Zbeidat, a Dutch national who was there with her Palestinian husband Ali and their two teenage daughters, Dina and Awda, called the experiences of her family and others at the hands of the police “horrifying”.

“Until then it really was a family occasion. When the police fired the tear gas, there were a couple near us pushing a stroller down the stony track towards the road. A thick cloud of gas was coming towards us. I told the man to leave the stroller and run uphill as fast as he could with the baby.

“Later I found them with the baby retching, its eyes streaming and choking. It broke my heart. There were so many families with young children, and the police charge was just so unprovoked. It started from nothing.”

The 17-year-old boyfriend of Therese Zbeidat’s daughter, Awda, was among those arrested. “It was his first time at any kind of nationalist event,” she said. “He was with his mother, and when we started running up the hill away from the police on horseback, she stumbled and fell.

“He went to help her and the next thing a group of about 10 police were firing tear gas cannisters directly at him. Then they grabbed him by the keffiyah [scarf] around his neck and pulled him away. All he was doing was helping his mother!”

Later, Therese and her daughters thought they had made it to safety only to find themselves in the midst of another charge from a different direction, this time by police on foot. Awda was knocked to the ground and kicked in her leg, while Dina was threatened by a policeman who told her: “I will break your head.”

“I’ve been on several demonstrations before when the police have turned nasty,” said Therese, “but this was unlike anything I’ve seen. Those young children, some barely toddlers, amidst all that chaos crying for their parents – what a way to mark Independence Day!”

Jafar Farah, head of the political lobbying group Mossawa, who was there with his two young sons, found them a safe spot in the forest and rushed downhill to help ferry other children to safety.

The next day he attended a court hearing at which the police demanded that the eight arrested men be detained for a further seven days. Three, including a local journalist who had been beaten and had his camera stolen by police, were freed after the judge watched video footage of the confrontation taken by marchers.

Farah said of the Independence Day events: “For decades our community was banned from remembering publicly what happened to us as a people during the Nakba. Our teachers were sacked for mentioning it. We were not even supposed to know that we are Palestinians.

“And in addition, the police have regularly used violence against us to teach us our place. In October 2000, at the start of the intifada, 13 of our unarmed young men were shot dead for demonstrating. No one has ever been held accountable.

“Despite all that we started to believe that Israel was finally mature enough to let us remember our own national tragedy. Families came to show their children the ruins of the villages so they had an idea of where they came from. The procession was becoming a large and prominent event. People felt safe attending.

“But we were wrong, it seems. It looked to me very much like this attack by the police was planned. I think the authorities were unhappy about the success of the processions, and wanted them stopped.

“They may yet win. What parent will bring their children to the march next year knowing that they will be attacked by armed police?”

Jonathan Cook is a journalist and writer living in Nazareth, Israel. His most recent book is “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East”, published by Pluto Press. His website is www.jkcook.net

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