

Palestine: The Great Catastrophe

Historical Review article

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Global Research, May 15, 2006

The Guardian 12 May 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

May 15th marks the 58th anniversary of the founding of Israel in 1948 – and the expulsion of Palestinians from their land. With millions still living under occupation or in exile, what Palestinians call their ‘nakba’ remains at the heart of their national identity, argues Karma Nabulsi

In the last week of April 1948, combined Irgun-Haganah forces launched an offensive to drive the Palestinian people out of the beautiful port city of Jaffa, forcing the remaining inhabitants to flee by sea; many drowned in the process. My aunt Rose, a teenager at that time, survived the trip to begin her life in exile on the Lebanese coast. Each Palestinian refugee family grows up hearing again and again the stories of those final moments in Palestine, the decisions, the panic, as we live in the midst of their terrible consequences. Throughout 1948, Jewish forces expelled many thousands of Palestinians from their villages, towns and cities into Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of others fled in fear. The purpose was to create a pure Jewish state, ethnically cleansed of the original inhabitants who had lived there for centuries. The creation of the state of Israel was the heart of this cataclysmic historical event for the Palestinians – the mass forced expulsion of a people; the more than 50 massacres carried out over the summer of 1948 by various armed Jewish forces; the demolition of villages to ensure the refugees could not return – all this is summed up in a single word for Palestinians: nakba, the catastrophe.

“We must do everything to ensure they [the Palestinians] never do return ... The old will die and the young will forget,” said David Ben-Gurion, the founder of Israel, in 1949. But the young have not forgotten. The event is remembered every year on May 15, and the youth are at the heart of it: at a rally on the site of the destroyed village of Umm al-Zinnat near Haifa, Salim Fahmawi, now 65, a primary school student when the soldiers entered the village 56 years ago to expel them, told an Israeli reporter: “The presence of so many young people, many of whom are third- and fourth-generation post-1948, gives me a sense of relief – because I know the torch has not been extinguished and is passing from generation to generation.”

Nakba day has now become a profoundly political event – unlike other cultural and social manifestations of our national identity – because it is all about resistance to the current Palestinian situation rather than enshrining past memories of victimhood. The project against the Palestinians begun at the start of the past century had two purposes: first, to deny the very concept of Palestine and destroy its political and social institutions, and second, to annihilate the spirit of the Palestinians as a people, so that they would forget their collective identity once scattered far from home. But the relentless and dynamic

nature of the catastrophe – it is an ongoing daily Palestinian experience – binds this generation directly to the older one, and binds the exiled to Palestine. Indeed, the past few years have witnessed a violent acceleration in this process of attempted destruction – hence the title of this year’s event: The Nakba Continues.

The nakba is being lived again today in the brutal thrust of the current policies of the Israeli state. More than 10,000 Palestinian refugees have been created by the construction of the concrete separation wall that has cordoned off huge new tracts of occupied land. This wall, condemned as illegal by the International Court of Justice, has turned West Bank cities such as Qalqilya into ghost towns, and thousands of refugees have been created for the third and fourth time in the refugee camps in Gaza. Yet it is not simply in the building of the walls and checkpoints by Israel’s occupying forces, or the different roads created for Jews and Arabs on Palestinian land, or the use of specially constructed bulldozers that rip up Palestinian orchards and olive groves and demolish hundreds of homes, or the imprisonment of thousands of political prisoners, or the daily murder of Palestinian civilians, that demonstrates the continuing nature of the nakba. It is also in the dedication of Israel’s military and political machinery to the destruction of Palestinian resistance to their project.

This resistance operates on two levels, just as the nakba operated – and operates today – on both. The first is the Palestinians’ physical effort to resist Israeli attempts to dispossess, disinherit and physically control them and their land, to get rid of its people and to militarily control and legally disenfranchise those they cannot. The second lies in the Palestinians’ existential affirmation of their identity in the face of a systematic Israeli effort to fragment and destroy it, so that Palestinians will surrender, submit, forget. But no matter how violently the first method is used by Israel, the second has been a failure: Palestinian identity is stronger than ever in 2006.

Nevertheless, the denial of the Palestinians’ right to resist what has been imposed on them has been demonstrated dramatically in recent weeks. We have witnessed the astonishing international policy of imposing sanctions as a form of collective punishment on an occupied people – rather than on their occupier who is maintaining that occupation through brute violence. Vital international aid for basic services has been cut off by the European Union and the US – from Palestinians in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967 – because they elected Hamas, voting for representatives who had campaigned on a platform promising to hold the line against this destruction of their national identity and rights.

The most malicious aspect of this policy is the fact that the money being withheld is only needed because the occupation tactics of curfews, closures and checkpoints have destroyed the Palestinian economy. The financial catastrophe triggered by these sanctions is created entirely by the Israeli occupation itself, as World Bank and British parliamentary select committee reports have made clear. The punishment of starving the Palestinians is quite blatant: to force them to their knees and make them repudiate their elected representatives. Even more absurdly, Israel has not accepted – or even been asked to accept – any of the parallel conditions being demanded of the Palestinians for a resumption of aid: an end to violence; the acceptance of the 1993 Oslo agreements; or the recognition of a Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967: the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. Instead they build expand settlements, denounce the Oslo accords, and have used increasingly indiscriminate violence in both Gaza and the West Bank. The west’s response in a conflict it helped created 58 years ago has fallen to a truly cruel, but also bizarre level.

This denial of Palestinians' worth has been demonstrated again in the way western media studiously ignore their daily suffering. In April and May, more than 40 Palestinians have been killed by the army – most of them civilians, at least eight of them children – with the most perfunctory coverage in the western press. Schoolchildren blown to bits while playing in Beit Lahia, like Mamdouh Obeid; Eitan Youssef, a 41-year-old mother from Tulkarm, shot in front of her children because troops “thought they saw a suspicious movement”; an old man, Musa Sawarkah, herding his flock in Gaza, gunned down; a taxi-driver, Zakariya Daraghmeh, “accidentally” shot in the back in Nablus. Each one a story unheard, untold.

The predicament of life under military occupation is usually recognised in principle, but life in exile has its own characteristics, and continues to create its own bitter experience for Palestinians. Most young Palestinians today live not in the West Bank or Gaza, but in the immediate region outside of historic Palestine in the Arab world: stateless, ID-less, jobless, without the international legal protections of other refugees from other countries. Theirs is often a relentless struggle to live any kind of life at all. The younger generation, wherever they are, possess a common character created through these harsh conditions of exile and passed on through others' memories of place names, old liberation songs, photographs of eternally absent relatives, intimate domestic connections and objects – above all, the rusted key to the front door of the lost house, never seen. As the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs first noted, human memory is an entirely collective engagement. In his book *La mémoire Collective*, published in 1949 four years after he was executed at Buchenwald, Halbwachs was the first to recognise that memory itself is never really individual.

In 2005, young Palestinian activists helped to organise more than 100 meetings in refugee camps and exile communities in more than 28 countries. The idea was to bring Palestinians together – whether under occupation or in exile – to discuss the things they want to do next. I participated in many of these gatherings and witnessed the promise of this generation replicating something they have no first-hand experience themselves, for it is rarely talked about and is as yet unwritten: the secret history of the previous generation of Palestinian resistance activists and fighters. Their current endeavours echo the same practices, the same spirit, and the same direction.

Although these huge meetings held last year were all organised locally, the transcripts – from places as far apart as Australia, Iraq, Egypt, Sweden, Lebanon, Canada, Saudi Arabia and Greece – show that a shared conversation is happening. Palestinians are reclaiming their past – of the nakba and dispossession – and at the same time preparing the next phase of their fight for justice. By some miracle of the general will, every Palestinian has somehow, through different journeys, arrived together at the same place.

Karma Nabulsi is a politics fellow of St Edmund Hall, Oxford University and a former PLO representative. She is also the author of the outstanding book “In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story,” which narrates her family’s displacement from Jerusalem in 1948.

The book is available at <http://www.palestineonlinestore.com/>

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