

We Cry with Palestinians as They Mark the Nakba

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Today, Palestinians observe 68 years of occupation, dispossession and oppression – referred to as the Nakba, writes Imraan Buccus.

Johannesburg – Had we not defeated apartheid, this year would have marked 68 years of oppression in the country. But, with incredible mobilisation and international solidarity, the evil system of racial capitalism was toppled, and in 1994 we had our first democratic election.

The euphoria of liberation was overwhelming. This year, we celebrate our democracy again with a fourth local government election. But, as we celebrate democracy, Israel, a country that continues to brutalise Palestinians marks 68 years of its existence.

And today, Palestinians observe close to seven decades of occupation, dispossession and oppression – referred to as the Nakba or catastrophe – the day of forced removals in Palestine.

This year's observance is likely to be marked by increased state security violence against demonstrators. In recent years people have been killed and scores wounded in the Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, Maroun al-Ras in Lebanon and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, as Palestinians marked the Nakba. Particularly heartbreaking during the commemorations are people who show replicas of the keys to their homes that they were forcefully removed from in 1948.



Photo caption: A Palestinian refugee boys play between their families' houses in Jabalia refugee camp, northern Gaza strip. Palestinians mark the 68th so-called Nakba Day, or Day of the Catastrophe, commemorating the displacement after the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. Picture: Mohammed Saber

Many still remember the Nakba. Palestinian Ali Hamoudi was 8 years old in 1948 and he painfully recalls the day: "I remember I had to hide with my family in a cave near my house for nine days. There were seven of us in the cave, and there was not much room to move around. We could hear the Israelis passing, but they could not see us because the cave was well hidden."

There was large-scale intimidation and siege, setting fires to Palestinian homes, planting of mines, destroying of 500 villages, and other terrorist activities. Nearly 800 000 Palestinians were forced out of their homes and into refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere. They have never returned.

Most Palestinians have a personal narrative of loss – a relative killed, or a branch of the family that fled north while the others fled east, never to be reunited, or homes, offices, orchards and other property seized. That cogent and eloquent defender of the Palestinians, the late intellectual, Edward Said, also recalled how in 1948 his entire family was turned into a scattering of refugees.

“None of the older members of my family ever recovered from the trauma,” he wrote in one of his famous works, *The Politics of Dispossession*.

And 18 years ago Said commented on the “Israel at 50” celebrations:

“I still find myself astonished at the lengths to which official Israel and its supporters will go to suppress the fact that a half century has gone by without Israeli restitution, recognition or acknowledgement of Palestinian human rights, the Palestinian Nakba is characterised as a semi-fictional event caused by no one in particular.”

One positive development this year will be the opening of the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, near Jerusalem, and will be dedicated to preserving and celebrating the culture, society and history of Palestine over the past two centuries. Also positive is the announcement by Reebok that it will cancel a special edition sneaker with “Israel 68” engraved on it. It was designed as a collectors item for today – which Israel marks as its day of independence and what Palestinians mark as the day of a great catastrophe.

In South Africa we know and can understand, perhaps more than others, the plight of the Palestinians. While Israel will be celebrating its 68th anniversary this year, Palestinians have nothing to celebrate.

Just as pass laws restricted the movement of black South Africans, the movement of Palestinians, especially in the West Bank, continues to be restricted by check points, road blocks and a concrete wall. The apartheid wall means that a journey of 20 minutes takes 7 hours.

It cuts farmers from their land, children from their schools, mothers from medical services for their babies, and grand parents from their grandchildren – even apartheid South Africa’s Bantustans were not surrounded by gates.

In a UN report some years ago, Professor John Dugard said Israel was unwilling to learn from South Africa and observed that the human rights situation in the occupied territories continues to deteriorate.

Dugard made shocking parallels between Palestine and South Africa, saying that the “large-scale destruction of Palestinian homes, levelling of agricultural lands, military incursions and targeted assassinations of Palestinians far exceed any similar practices in apartheid South Africa”.

A South African MP recently related these similarities between Israel today and apartheid South Africa.

Addressing Parliament she said:

“Madam Speaker, every time I relate to my own children how it felt to live in apartheid conditions, detention without trial, state of emergency; how we would be woken up at night as kids when police searched our homes; how, as students, we used to throw stones at the police who were shooting at us – like in Palestine today. The response I get from my children is: ‘Mom, why did you allow them?’ This they say without understanding how mighty the army was. I am sure children in Palestine wish to be in a situation where the present conditions they live under could be history.”

Who can forget the attack on Gaza a few years ago? The area remains devastated and is often in darkness because Israel shuts them off. Just as the world remembered us in our dark days, so too should we remember the oppressed peoples of the world. Especially on a day like the Nakba or Catastrophe, when 800 000 Palestinians were forcefully removed from their homes. Their tears are surely our tears. And as a people oppressed for so long, we can perhaps understand the Nakba more than others.

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