



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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From Hope to Despair: The Nakba at 60

Esther Webman

The 60th anniversary commemoration of the Palestinian *nakba* (lit. “catastrophe”; referring to the defeat and destruction of Palestinian society in 1948, including the uprooting of 60-65% of the population) was a far cry from ten years ago. Then, for the first time since its inception in 1994, the Palestinian National Authority (PA) officially commemorated the *nakba* in public assemblies, processions, seminars and exhibits in the major towns of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The commemorations were characterized by strong feelings of hope and conviction that the Palestinians were at last embarking on a better future. Concomitantly, a debate was triggered in Arab and Palestinian newspapers on the meaning of the *nakba* and its significance in the process of Palestinian nation-building, constituting a conscious attempt at shaping the community’s collective memory and understanding of history. The debate was largely introspective, especially among Palestinians, who dealt candidly and critically with the past, and notably avoided attacks on Israel and Zionism. Like the role played by the Holocaust in the shaping of Israeli and Jewish identity, the *nakba* was presented not only as a part of the past but as a springboard for a more hopeful future. “We do not seek to be captives of history or victims of the past. The Palestinian people have launched a redemptive journey to the future. From the ashes of our sorrow and loss, we are resurrecting a nation celebrating life and hope,” asserted the “Palestinian People’s Appeal,” delivered by poet Mahmud Darwish at the conclusion of a mass commemoration march on 14 May 1998.

Ten years later, the hopes that had accompanied the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the *nakba* had given way to despair. Palestinian collective despondency was reflected in the small number of uncoordinated and poorly attended events in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as in the barrage of articles published in Arab and Palestinian papers. Ironically, the day was marked more vigorously in Lebanon, London and San Francisco, and in the pan-Arab and Western electronic media, than in Palestine itself. Clearly, the Palestinians are in a much worse situation than ten years ago - a fragmented society, reeling under the consequences of the second *intifada*, physically and politically divided, and torn between competing worldviews. Hence, unlike in 1998, the 2008 anniversary was not an occasion for self-examination, but rather a return to earlier forms of discourse which sought to place the blame for past and present predicaments on external forces, especially amplifying Zionist and Israeli wrongdoings.

With the exception of PA President Mahmud Abbas's statement on "*Nakba* Day," commemoration events and commentaries made no favorable references to the peace process, the value of co-existence with Israel or even to the idea of a two-state solution to the conflict. On the contrary, articles as well as demonstrators and speakers in rallies launched scathing attacks on Israel and Zionism, reiterating support for the armed struggle and commitment to the right of return (*haqq al-`awda*) and Palestinian perseverance and steadfastness (*sumud*). The "National Committee to Commemorate the *Nakba* at 60" declared that "those that expelled us can reject and conspire and deny, but we continue to remain steadfast and resist and resist and resist, and we will continue to resist until we return. For there is no right that is not granted without the sacrifices of struggle, and there is no oppressor that can continue to commit grave injustice for ever."

Opinion pages of Arab papers displayed general agreement with the spirit of this statement. They did not make any attempt to assess the Palestinian situation, the causes leading to it, or to assign even partial responsibility for it to the Palestinian and Arab sides. Rather, they focused on discussing Israel's concurrent 60th anniversary festivities marking its founding in order to uncover the "skeletons in its closet," and expose it as a "racist state" doomed to extinction (*zawal*). "Does Israel have a future?" was a frequent question, and the answer was almost self-evident. "The Zionist entity

is lacking the basic components of a state," a superficial entity relying on foreign aid and external military support, which will always be rejected as a foreign body by its neighbors, wrote Egyptian intellectual Hasan Hanafi, who suggested a return to the one-state solution advocated in the 1968 Palestinian National Charter. In response to Israel's celebration of its achievements, the Lebanese writer Samir Karam recommended to his fellow Arabs to enumerate Israel's failures and defeats. Indeed, several articles attempted to prove that Israel is "a failed state," and that the sixtieth anniversary of the *nakba* bears the seeds of its annihilation. Despite its military and economic strength, Israel was purported to be suffering from an "existential anxiety" (*qalaq wujudi*), with a growing number of its intellectuals believing their state "may soon implode by force of its contradictions and failures."

In the same vein, a number of articles discussed the meaning of the term *nakba*. "This is our stone of Sisyphus," `Azmi Bishara (a former Palestinian-Israeli Knesset member residing outside the country) had explained in 2004, "and the task of pushing it has passed from one movement to the other, and in each case no sooner did a movement's ideologues exclaim, 'I found it!' than the stone came rolling back down to a lower world again with a resounding crash... Our definition of the *nakba* has changed with every new ideology and every new definition necessitated a change in means." Relying on the anti-Zionist Israeli Jewish academic Ilan Pappé's book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (which has recently been translated into Arabic), Palestinian scholar Joseph Massad asked whether the term "ethnic cleansing" is more accurate than "catastrophe" to describe what happened and is still happening in Palestine. "Is the *nakba* to be seen as a discrete event that took place and ended in 1948, or is it something else? What are the political stakes in reifying the *nakba* as a past event, in commemorating it annually, in bowing before its awesome symbolism?" Insisting that the Palestinians are still living in "*nakba* times," he drew comfort from their ability to endure its brutality and their continued resistance. The mere existence of the Palestinian people, boasted others, is a victory over Israel.

Nazi-era terminology and Holocaust metaphors were also employed in the debate. Massad described the PA leadership as *Judenrät* and Zionism's policies as aiming at rendering Palestine *Arabrein*. Palestinians were presented as the victims of victims, and Israel was accused of exploiting the Holocaust for rehabilitating its tarnished

reputation because of its barbaric crimes, or denying the existence of the victimized people and monopolizing its identity.

One of the rare voices questioning the general Arab approach to the *nakba* was Kuwaiti liberal scholar Muhammad Jabir al-Ansari. A staunch critic of Arab society, he pointed to the Arabs' consecutive defeats despite their sacrifices in their long confrontation with Israel, accusing them of drowning in the conflict while neglecting the road to Arab revival and modernity. The Palestine problem, he maintained, gained a historic victory with the establishment in 1994 of its recognized national entity, which should be preserved and built upon. "The mentality of all or nothing" would lead nowhere, he warned. Even more ahead of the curve was former Jordanian Crown Prince Hasan bin Talal, who called for the development of a global perception of human solidarity based on moral and legal foundations. For decades, he contended, Arabs have talked about circumstantial solutions for the Palestine problem and sought to achieve a more favorable military balance of power with Israel but forgot that the problem is a human problem. The future, he concluded, cannot be built on remembrance, mourning and lamentation, but only through the joint and sustained action of Muslim, Christian and Jewish peace-loving persons committed to ameliorating past wrongs.

The second *intifada*, which began in Fall 2000, shattered the fragile Israeli-Palestinian peace process and radicalized the discourse of the Arab-Israeli conflict, recalling themes from the 1960s, the heyday of Nasserist and Ba'thist radical pan-Arabism. The writings on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the *nakba* demonstrated that those themes have returned to dominate the discourse, leaving no room or hope for reconciliation.