

The Palestinian Nakba: 60 Years and More to Come

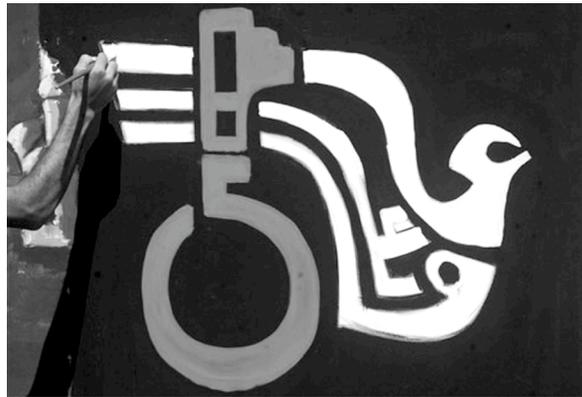
By Ismail Zayid

Al-Nakba (The Catastrophe) that befell the Palestinian people has become identified with May 15, 1948, with the creation of Israel, the dismantling of historic Palestine and the expulsion of the Palestinian people from their ancestral homeland. This disaster was not formulated on that date, but was inflicted on the Palestinian people by a longstanding Zionist colonial-settler program, the seeds of which were formally enunciated at the First World Zionist Congress, held in Basle, Switzerland in 1897. The words of Theodor Herzl, the father of the Zionist movement, continue to be upheld by his followers to this day: “We shall try to spirit the penniless [Arab] population across the border Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly” (from R. Patai, ed., *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, Vol I).

This program was followed by the creation of the myth formulated by Israel Zangwill’s words in 1907: “Land without a people for a people without land.” The Zionist campaign then brought about the Balfour Declaration when British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour stated in his letter, of Nov. 2, 1917, to Lord Rothschild: “His Majesty’s Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.....it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.”

It is interesting that the word “Arab” occurs not once in this document. To refer to the Arabs, who constituted at the time 92% of the population of Palestine and owned 98% of its land, as the “non-Jewish communities” is not merely preposterous but deliberately fraudulent. Clearly, this letter has no legality, as Palestine did not belong to Balfour to assume such acts of generosity. British historian Arnold Toynbee accurately described the British role in issuing this document: “We were taking it upon ourselves to give away something that was not ours to give. We were promising rights of some kind in the Palestinian Arabs’ country to a third party.”

On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) passed its Resolution #181, recommending the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state, in 56% of the land; an Arab state in 42% of the land; and an International Zone in Jerusalem. At the time, the Jews, a large proportion of whom were recent or illegal immigrants, constituted 31% of the population of Palestine and owned 5.6% of its land. In the area that was apportioned to the Jewish state, half of the population was Arab (Muslims and Christians) and half was Jewish. This resolution was forced through the UN General Assembly by pressure from the U.S. government. Sumner Welles, the U.S. Under-Secretary of State, summed up this action: “By direct order of the White House, every form of pressure, direct and indirect, was used to make sure the necessary majority would be gained.”



A Palestinian artist paints a mural marking the anniversary of the Nakba in the Jabalya refugee camp in the northern Gaza strip, 15 May 2006. (Wesam Saleh/MaanImages) From The Electronic Intifadah website.

Subsequently, fighting erupted between Arabs and Jews, and by the end of the fighting Israel had occupied 78% of Palestine, and approximately 750,000 Palestinians were driven out or fled in terror from their homes. The genesis of this exodus stems from the inherent concept in mainstream Zionist ideology of creating a pure Jewish state in Palestine, free of Arabs. The powerful political agenda that exists in Israel today as the policy of “transfer of Palestinians” from Israel and the occupied territories, is not a new one. The ethnic cleansing program was long-standing.

In a letter to his son Amos in 1937, David Ben-Gurion confided that when the Jewish state came into being, “We will expel the Arabs and take their places.” And while visiting the newly conquered Nazareth in July 1948, Ben-Gurion exclaimed: “Why are there so many Arabs left here? Why didn’t you expel them?”

Joseph Weitz, the Jewish Agency’s chief representative, reported in the September 29, 1967 issue of Davar, organ of the Histadrut, that he and other Zionist leaders concluded in 1940 that there was “no room for both peoples together in this country.” The achievement of Zionist objectives, he realized, required “a Palestine, or at least Western Palestine (west of the Jordan River) without Arabs.” He wrote that it was necessary “to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighbouring countries. To transfer all of them, and only after such transfer would the country be able to absorb millions of our brethren.” This, in essence, is the foundation for the policy of “ethnic cleansing” that the Zionist forces adopted in 1948 to remove, by massacre, the threat of massacre, and by psychological warfare, over 80% of the Arab population in the area of the Palestinian territory—78 per cent—that they conquered by military means.

On March 10, 1948, Ben-Gurion formulated the military plan Dalet for the expulsion of the Palestinians and the destruction of their villages and towns, to ensure that they would never be allowed to return. Under this program, around 350,000 Palestinians were driven out before May 15, 1948 and before a single Arab army soldier entered Palestine. To complete the program, over 500 Palestinian towns and villages, in the area conquered by Israel in 1948, were subsequently demolished.

The Palestinian Refugees

The question of the refugees and their right to return to their homes came before the UNGA, and UN Mediator Count Folke Bernadotte stated: “It would be an offense against the principles of elemental justice if these innocent victims of the conflict were denied the right to return to their homes.” Tragically, Count Bernadotte, a man of nobility and honour, paid dearly for stating this basic principle of justice. He was assassinated on Sept. 17, 1948, in Jerusalem, by the terrorist “Stern gang,” on the orders of its leader and future prime minister of Israel, Yitzhak Shamir.

However, the UNGA passed its resolution #194 on Dec. 11, 1948, stating that the General Assembly “resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live in peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return ... “ This resolution has since then been reaffirmed repeatedly but this “earliest practicable date” has not yet materialized, and today around six million Palestinian refugees are mostly living in extremely poor refugee camps scattered in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

The Nakba that befell the Palestinians in 1948 did not entirely spare the Palestinians who remained and became citizens of Israel. Israeli laws, including the Absentee Property Law of 1950, were used not only against the refugees who were expelled, but were also used to expropriate the land of Arab citizens of the state who happened to be

absent from their homes for a brief period, even a day or two, but remained in the area that became Israel. Under the extraordinary Zionist lexicon, they were called “present absentees” and their land was expropriated. Today, in Israel, there are approximately 250,000 Palestinians who are, thus, internal refugees. Besides this, the systematic racist treatment to which the 1.2 million Arab citizens of Israel, Muslims and Christians, are subjected is a manifestation of discrimination, apartheid style. The Israel Land Authority (ILA) and the Jewish National Fund (JNF) control 93% of the land in Israel, which is used for exclusive Jewish use only, and no Muslim or Christian citizen of Israel is allowed to lease or live on this land.

The 1967 War and After

In June 1967, Israel waged another expansionist war against its neighbours and occupied Sinai, Gaza, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Syrian Golan Heights. In the West Bank alone, around 300,000 Palestinians were expelled to Jordan, and three villages in the Latroun area, Imwas, Yalu and Beit Nuba (my own hometown), were systematically dynamited and bulldozed on the direct order of Yitzhak Rabin, the then chief of staff of the Israeli army.

The Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt in 1979 under a peace treaty between the two states. However, the illegal occupation of the Palestinian and Syrian territories remains after over 40 years, in defiance of international law and repeated Security Council resolutions. We witness today over three million Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories [OPT] living under a brutal occupation regime with practices including extra-judicial execution, detention of thousands without charge or trial, torture, daily humiliation, denial of health care and expropriation of their land for the creation of illegal Jewish settlements. These acts are in violation of virtually every article of the Fourth Geneva Convention and are defined as war crimes under international law. On top of this, Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem and a large surrounding area with towns and villages, has brought devastation and denial of fundamental rights to the Palestinian people in Jerusalem as well as all the people in the OPT, who are denied access to their religious sanctuaries, health and academic institutions. This annexation is illegal and stands in defiance of Security Council resolutions. The ongoing siege that is currently imposed on Gaza has the manifestations of a humanitarian catastrophe. The universal condemnation of this siege by all international and Israeli human rights groups carries no weight with Israel or its U.S. and other allies.

Furthermore, the Apartheid wall continues to be built, encroaching on land well beyond the “Green Line”—the 1967 border—and encircling towns and villages, denying them access to their land, schools, health facilities and work places. This wall is illegal and has been condemned by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

An End to the Conflict?

Resolving this conflict is clearly dependent on Israeli compliance with international law and UN resolutions. This compliance should be unconditional and immediate, but the powers that be speak of a peace process and negotiations. We have seen a whole series of peace conferences and plans including the first and second Camp David, and Madrid conferences, as well as the Oslo Accord, the Road Map (to nowhere) and the Annapolis conference, amongst others, and the negotiations for decades between Israeli leaders and the Palestine Authority [PA] leaders, Yasir Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas.

Did we get any positive results? The answer is no. The fundamental reason for the failure, so far, to achieve peace and resolution of this conflict is the dedication of Israeli leaders to the Zionist program built on conquest and domination. The Oslo Accord proved meaningless as Rabin, Peres and Barak continued to expropriate land in the West Bank and create and expand the illegal settlements. In accordance with The Accord, the PA, led by Arafat and Abbas, was to function as the sub-contracting agency to provide security for Israel, disregarding the rights of the Palestinians.

In 2004, Ariel Sharon came up with the Gaza Disengagement plan, followed by withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlements from Gaza. This revived talk of a peace process along the lines a two-state solution. The intent of the "Disengagement" was clearly illustrated in the statement of Dov Weisglass, Sharon's chief adviser at the time, who stated that, "Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda And all this ... with a [U.S.] presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress." Just in case anyone might still have illusions, he explained that the Gaza disengagement "is actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians" (Haaretz, Oct. 6, 2004). As Ephraim Sneh, a Labour member of the Knesset, observed, "Formaldehyde, it should be noted, is the liquid in which dead bodies are preserved."

This, together with Israel's refusal to consider the 2002 Arab League peace proposal, confirms Israel's real designs, which show no change under the present Israeli leadership. Olmert is speaking of annexation of the areas covered by multiple large settlements and the Jordan Valley in the West Bank. Even talking about Jerusalem is not allowed, and the Right of Return of the refugees is crossed out.

In this context, the proposal for a two-state solution, with a Palestinian state alongside Israel, is meaningless. How can a state be created out of multiple small non-contiguous bantustans walled in by the apartheid wall and separated by Jewish settlements and bypass roads for Jews only? How can such a state be independent and viable, when its skies and land and sea borders are controlled by another state?

The idea of a one-state versus two-state solution is a current controversy amongst many people, including those who see themselves as peace activists, among them Israelis and Palestinians. A recent debate between Dr. Ilan Pappé, an historian at Exeter University in England and a former professor at Haifa University in Israel, and Uri Avnery, of the Israeli peace group Gush Shalom, highlights the difficulties inherent in each of the proposed solutions. Ilan Pappé strongly opposes the two-state solution and favours the one-state solution, stating: "If the principle of justice is the basis for those who support the partition of this country, there is no formula more cynical than the two-states solution, as it is now presented in the peace camp: 80% of the country to the occupier and 20% to the occupied. That is, 20% in the best case. More likely, no more than 10%, a dispersed and surrounded 10% to the occupied."

On the other hand, Uri Avnery, while recognizing the historic injustice that Zionism caused to the Palestinian people, maintains that the one-state solution is not realistic and cannot be achieved in the foreseeable future. He states that, "A moral position which is not realistic is immoral," and argues that the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews oppose this solution, and a proposal of this kind will drive them to more extreme right-wing positions. He states that, "Occupation is a despicable condition which must be terminated," and settlements can be dismantled, to which Pappé responds by asking if it is conceivable that any Israeli leader will ever dismantle the settlements of Gilo or Ma'ale Adumim.

This question was also taken up in a statement titled, “The One State Declaration,” issued by participants meeting in Madrid in July 2007 and London in Nov. 2007. The statement, issued and endorsed by international and Palestinian and Israeli intellectuals and peace activists, stated in part:

“For decades, efforts to bring about a two-state solution in historic Palestine have failed to provide justice and piece for the Palestinian and Israeli Jewish peoples The two-state solution ignores the physical and political realities on the ground, and presumes a false parity in power and moral claims between a colonized and occupied people on the one hand and a colonizing state and military occupier on the other. It is predicated on the unjust premise that peace can be achieved by granting limited national rights to Palestinians living in the areas occupied in 1967, while denying the rights of Palestinians inside the 1948 borders and in the Diaspora. Thus, the two-state solution condemns Palestinian citizens of Israel to permanent second-class status within their homeland, in a racist state that denies their rights by enacting laws that privilege Jews constitutionally, legally, politically, socially and culturally. Moreover, the two-state solution denies Palestinian refugees their internationally recognized right of return.....All the international efforts to implement a two-state solution cannot conceal the fact that a Palestinian state is not viable, and that Palestinian and Israeli- Jewish independence in separate states cannot resolve fundamental injustices, the acknowledgment and redress of which are at the core of any just solution.

”In light of these stark realities, we affirm our commitment to a democratic solution that will offer a just, and thus enduring, peace in a single state based on the following principles:

The historic land of Palestine belongs to all who live in it and to those who were expelled or exiled from it since 1948, regardless of religion, ethnicity, national origin or current citizenship status;

Any system of government must be founded on the principle of equality in civil, political, social and cultural rights for all citizens. Power must be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all people in the diversity of their identities;

There must be just redress for the devastating effects of decades of Zionist colonization in the pre- and post-state period, including the abrogation of all laws, and ending all policies, practices and systems of military and civil control that oppress and discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, religion or national origin;

The recognition of the diverse character of the society, encompassing distinct religious, linguistic and cultural traditions, and national experiences;

The creation of a non-sectarian state that does not privilege the rights of one ethnic or religious group over another and that respects the separation of state from all organized religion;

The implementation of the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees in accordance with UN Resolution 194 is a fundamental requirement for justice, and a benchmark of the respect for equality;

The creation of a transparent and nondiscriminatory immigration policy;

The recognition of the historic connections between the diverse communities inside the new, democratic state and their respective fellow communities outside;

In articulating the specific contours of such a solution, those who have been historically excluded from decision-making—especially the Palestinian Diaspora and its refugees, and Palestinians inside Israel—must play a central role;

The establishment of legal and institutional frameworks for justice and reconciliation.”

If we truly want to discuss a fair and achievable solution to this conflict, which has been going on for over a hundred years, we must look at the process that brought it about. Our present situation is the direct outcome of the exclusivist colonial settler regime brought about by the introduction of the Zionist program in this land. Peace with justice can and must be accomplished by the creation of a state and pluralistic society of equal and free human beings, a state to which Jews, Christians, Muslims and seculars equally belong and which equally belongs to them all. Then we can have peace and security with justice to us all in this tortured land.

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