

The Transformation of Palestine

The Impact of the 1948 Disaster: The Ways that the Nakba has Influenced Palestinian History

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Introduction

The first Arab-Israeli war of 1948 has been the seminal event in the modern history of the Palestinians. The impacts of the 1948 defeat – the Nakba (Arabic: Disaster) – for Palestinians have been profound, for they have shaped the contours of Palestine and Palestinian history in myriad ways. Without understanding the impact of 1948, no serious analysis of present-day Palestinian life will be complete. Materially, the 1948 Nakba shattered Palestinian socio-economic structures: the Arab economy in Palestine was virtually destroyed, and hundreds of villages were emptied of their inhabitants as over one-half of the country's Arabs were uprooted as refugees. After Israel refused to allow the refugees to return, they were forced to reconstitute their lives in exile as best they could while a complete spatial transformation of Palestine's geography took place that destroyed their villages and all but wiped out the Arab character of the land itself. Politically, the war not only left them without a state as envisioned by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 of November 1947, but also produced a revolution in terms of political leadership, the echoes of which continue to be felt today in Palestinian politics. Moreover, the outlines of Palestinian cultural and intellectual life continue to be shaped by the legacy of 1948, and in turn affect Palestinian politics and society profoundly.

Those who wish to follow and comprehend Palestinian history today must understand the various structural ways that the 1948 Nakba affected, and continues to affect, that history.

The Material Impacts of 1948

The 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which actually began in the final days of November 1947 and technically lasted until the last armistice agreement was signed in July 1949, devastated the Arab sector of Palestine. Socio-economic structures, buildings and land, and demography all were irrevocably altered. This fact more than any other explains the twists and turns of Palestinian history in the six decades since 1948. The material devastation of Palestine is most dramatically seen in the demography of the country before and after the war. Beyond those killed during the war,ⁱ the fighting led to a massive depopulation of Palestine's Arabs that altered the country and its inhabitants forever. Prior to the 1948 war, over 1,308,000 Arabs lived in Palestine.ⁱⁱ During the fighting, more than one half of these people were uprooted from their homes, mostly those living in the 77.2 percent of Palestine that emerged from the war as the new state of Israel. Approximately 750,000 refugees fled or were expelled by Israeli forces. Two-thirds of these found refuge in the remaining 22.8 percent of Palestine controlled by Arab forces after the war (the West Bank and Gaza).ⁱⁱⁱ Somewhere around 300,000 other refugees found themselves in the surrounding Arab countries. Even among the approximately 160,000 Palestinians who remained behind in Israel, over 30,000 were refugees living outside their homes as well.^{iv} Pre-war Palestinian society thus metamorphosized into three distinct arenas: Palestinians in Israel, those in the West Bank and Gaza, and those in the Arab world and even beyond.

Palestinian spatial reality was drastically changed by the war and the refugee exodus. The refugees left behind somewhere between 360 and 429 villages, which Israeli authorities later destroyed.^v Only about 81 Palestinian villages emerged intact within Israel.^{vi} Towns in Israel that formerly contained mixed Palestinian and Jewish populations, such as Jaffa, Haifa, and Tiberias, became largely Jewish towns with small Palestinian minorities after 1948. Only one Palestinian

town in Israel, Nazareth, retained its Palestinian population and character. The Arab character of the West Bank and Gaza remained intact, however. Beyond the destruction of their villages, the refugees lost an immense amount of land in Israel. A study conducted from 1953-62 by the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) identified 6,057,032 dunums of individually-owned land^{vii} (one dunum = 1,000 m.sq.) abandoned by refugees – a huge area, especially considering that before the war, Jews had owned only 1,734,000 dunums in all of Palestine, 6.59 percent of the total surface area.^{viii}

The value of these property losses was staggering, and represented a significant dispossession. The UNCCP estimated that the refugees lost at least £P235,660,250 (\$824,780,808 in 1948 dollars) in land that had been owned personally.^{ix} This figure did not include the value of collectively-owned village land, grazing land, lands devoted to public uses, and so forth. A later study by Yusif Sayigh placed the amount of lost refugee property much higher. Sayigh estimated that the refugees abandoned 6,611,250 dunums of land and real estate worth £P403,400,000 (\$1,625,702,000 in 1948 dollars), as well as 173,000 buildings, worth \$954,304,000.^x Finally, Sami Hadawi and Atif Kubursi calculated that the refugees lost 19,031,012 dunums of land worth £P528,900,000 (\$2,131,467,000 in 1948 dollars).^{xi} Even many of those Palestinians who remained in Israel had their land confiscated during and after the war. Beyond these losses, the new Israeli state also took over an additional 12,500,000 dunums of other, largely arid lands in the southern Naqab/Negev region, that Israeli authorities declared “state land” after 1948.^{xii} The result was that by 1962, 93 percent of the land inside Israel was controlled by the Israel Lands Administration. Palestinian citizens only owned 810,200 dunums in Israel by that year – four percent of the total surface area of the country.^{xiii}

In addition to the value of lost land, the UNCCP also reckoned that the refugees lost anywhere between \$70,122,000 and \$169,538,070 (1948 dollars) in moveable property such as household furnishings, cash and jewelry, farm animals and tools, automobiles, factory inventories, and so forth.^{xiv} Sayigh’s study once again showed higher losses: \$453,375,000 in moveable property.^{xv}

Obviously, Palestinian demographic and socio-economic structures suffered from these traumatic events. In Israel, much of the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia had fled in the refugee exodus, leaving behind an overwhelmingly rural and leaderless population. Agriculture was thrown into turmoil by the ongoing land seizures and the forced requisition of certain agricultural products like olive oil. Some farmers in villages near the cease-fire lines were separated from their lands on the other side of the fences, while merchants were cut off from their traditional markets. Outside Israel, the Nakba severely impacted the material aspects of Palestinian life as well. The 80,000 Palestinians living in what became Egyptian-controlled Gaza were swamped by the influx of nearly 250,000 refugees, while the 450,000 Palestinians in the Jordanian-annexed West Bank were joined by 350,000 refugees.^{xvi} These refugee populations put immense strain on local resources and social structures. Although native West Bank and Gazan Palestinian society largely emerged intact from the war, the property-less refugees now living there lacked the landed capital required to rebuild their lives and livelihoods, and required international aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) for survival. While not all refugees lost land – only about 44 percent did, according to a 1965 UNCCP study^{xvii} – it was still a devastating blow for the refugees who formerly were farmers. The refugees in the West Bank and Gaza became a lumpenproletariat, dependent upon UNRWA rations. Even native West Bank and Gazan farmers suffered. The ceasefire lines separated some West Bank and Gaza villagers from their land in Israel, and merchants and manufacturers found themselves cut off from their traditional

markets elsewhere in Palestine. The same problems faced those Palestinians who ended up in exile outside Mandate Palestine, in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Gulf states, and further afield.

Despite such negative impacts, the 1948 experience has, over the years, contributed to certain positive developments within Palestinian society as well. For example, the ongoing political struggle faced by Palestinians in most parts of the world has led to well developed civil society among them wherever they are located, including media organizations, unions, student and professional organizations, research institutes, and human rights groups. This fact would shape Palestinian society in an indelible way throughout the six decades after the Nakba.

The Political Impacts of 1948

The Nakba also left a permanent political impact on the Palestinians. Given the shattering of Palestinian economic life and social structures, no “normal” socio-economic development emerged that could lead to development of “normal” political response to the tragedy. In the immediate short term, the most tangible political effect was that no Arab state emerged in Palestine comparable to the new Jewish state. British Mandatory Palestine was divided among Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, while Palestinians who lived in exile throughout the Middle East were subject to the rule of states like Lebanon and Syria. This meant the instant submission of the Palestinians to other states and national movements, most of which worked actively against the rise of a uniquely Palestinian political movement that could threaten them. Thus an already divided, fractured Palestinian political structure disintegrated even further.

For the first two decades after 1948, no unified Palestinian political movement emerged as a result of the Nakba. Palestinian activists tended to look to movements in their countries of residence that were wider in ideological vision, rather than those focusing on uniquely Palestinian issues. In Israel, where Palestinians were subject to military rule until December 1966 and openly Arab political parties like the pan-Arab nationalist al-Ard movement were banned, they turned to the binational, Jewish-Arab left: the Israeli Communist Party. In the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, activists were attracted to pan-Arab nationalist parties like the Ba`th Party; to the pan-Syrian ideology of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party; to leftist groups like the Jordanian Communist Party; or, like those who joined the Movement of Arab Nationalists, to the pan-Arab philosophy of Egyptian President Jamal Abd al-Nasir (Gamal Abdel Nasser). Still other Palestinians were co-opted by the various governments that ruled them, working with Zionist parties like the Labor Party in Israel, or becoming mayors and ministers within the government in Jordan and the West Bank.

The first stirrings of a uniquely Palestinian nationalist movement that crossed international boundaries came in the late 1950s, among refugees in the Gulf countries. Here was one of the most tangible effects of the Nakba of 1948 for Palestinian politics: the emergence of a pan-Palestinian movement, formed and led by refugees, and based in the refugee camps and other centers of Palestinian life in exile. The movement was called al-Fateh. Its aims were relatively simple: fight for their return to the refugees' homes and lands in Israel through armed struggle; self-reliance instead of placing their faith in Arab parties and regimes to lead the struggle do it for them; and neutrality in the vicious intra-Arab factionalism that centered around pro-Nasir vs. anti-Nasir forces. The fact that Fateh activists – including Fateh's leader, Yasir Arafat – largely hailed from traditional, petit bourgeois, Muslim backgrounds meant that Fateh by and large did not subscribe either to the militant secularism characteristic of leftist movements (some of which contained a disproportionately high percentage of Christian members), or to the ideology of social revolution within Arab society that many leftists waged alongside the nationalist struggle against Israel. This

fact would leave its mark on Fateh in terms of its overall conservative, traditionalist and Islamic character over the decades.

The devastating Arab defeat in the June 1967 war and the bankruptcy of the claims of leadership made by Nasir and other Arab leaders led to the almost immediate growth in popularity of Fateh and other Palestinian resistance movements formed by refugees after the war, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP, led by George Habash) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP, led by a Jordanian, Nayif Hawatima). These guerrilla organizations challenged the traditionalist leaders of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a uniquely Palestinian organization established by Nasir and the Arab regimes in 1964, and took over the organization in 1969. Arafat thereafter became the head of both Fateh and the PLO.

While made up of activists from all levels of Palestinian society, and financed by, among others, wealthy Palestinian businesspersons, the PLO by and large found its strength among poor refugee populations throughout the Arab world as well as in the West Bank and Gaza. Throughout the long years when the PLO defined the parameters of Palestinian political activity, and as its ideology and strategies changed, it always reflected the experience of Palestinian exiles in the post-Nakba world: the stubborn insistence upon creation of a Palestinian state and the right of return; self-reliance, armed struggle, and formulation of a uniquely Palestinian identity and movement; and mistrust of the machinations of the Arab regimes.

As analyzed by Yezid Sayigh,^{xviii} the development of an armed national liberation movement in exile also has shaped the development and structures of Palestinian leadership bodies over the decades, foremost among them Fateh itself. The fact that a nascent national leadership structure emerged as part of a military movement helps us understand better the reasons why Fateh, the PLO, and, after 1994, the Palestinian Authority (PA) that was established by the Oslo peace process, looked and functioned as they did. Despite the presence of national councils and other trappings of democracy, Arafat in fact ran all three bodies in an authoritarian and secretive manner rather like an army general. In the process, a political culture of personality cults, nepotism, corruption, reliance upon security apparati, and absence of the rule of law became traits of Palestinian political life despite the development of a thriving civil society among Palestinians that actively sought to challenge these tendencies.

Even the most significant shift in the focus of Palestinian political activity reflected the impacts of the Nakba: the eventual shift in focus of national endeavor to a diplomatic solution involving the West Bank and Gaza starting in the 1970s and 1980s. The fact that Israel did not immediately change the solidly-Arab demographic profile of the West Bank and Gaza after occupying the two territories in 1967, as it had done with the lands it controlled in 1948, meant that this 22.8 percent of mandatory Palestine was the only part of the country on which more and more PLO activists felt that a future Arab Palestinian state could be created. The failure of armed struggle to liberate the 1948 territories, and the sometimes violent setbacks inflicted upon the PLO by Arab regimes that hosted the PLO leadership and its armed militants in exile from the historic homeland, shifted the gravity of Palestinian political activism toward the West Bank and Gaza. Yet this strategic change was controversial in all its dimensions, and reflected the dispersed, post-Nakba Palestinian political reality. For refugees living outside those two occupied territories, abandoning or tempering armed struggle and adopting instead diplomatic means to create a West Bank and Gaza state meant a betrayal of the PLO's early vision of total liberation and the return of refugees to their ancestral homes inside Israel.

This sense of disappointment with the PLO's movement away from total liberation and armed struggle waged from outside historic Palestine, toward a diplomatic strategy aimed at creating a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, stems from the deep yearnings of the refugee to cling fast to the right of return. The fact that a negotiated settlement would not lead to the right of return to Israel in no small way, then, helps explain the rise of Hamas and others who are not willing to abandon a political strategy anchored in the hopes of the refugees. Indeed, Hamas always has been stronger in Gaza, where refugees outnumber native Gazans, than the West Bank. Hamas today has picked up the reins of the anti-Fateh activism of the PFLP and other such groups before it. While Arafat's authoritarianism, the corruption within the PLO and the PA, and the ongoing construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank also help explain the disenchantment many Palestinians feel toward Fateh, the PLO, and the PA, the rise in popularity of Hamas also underscores the degree to which post-Nakba refugee grievances still affect Palestinian politics in significant ways.

The rootlessness and statelessness created by the Nakba also explains the PLO's steadfast insistence, at least since the 1970s, upon the creation of fully independent Palestinian state, with its capital in Jerusalem. The desire for a unique Palestinian state, where the Palestinians can government themselves and display their own symbols of sovereignty such as passports and flags, has been a goal which the PLO has pursued with single-minded devotion over the decades. Some Palestinians even have criticized the various compromises made by the PLO in recent years in its drive to obtain even limited degrees of autonomy over parts of the West Bank and Gaza as representing the PLO's obsession with achieving the trappings of an independent state without obtaining the reality of one.

The Cultural and Intellectual Impacts of 1948

Finally, Palestinian cultural and intellectual life has been deeply affected by the Nakba and the refugee experience. A culture of return, of dispossession, exile, and the dispersal of Palestinian life, has permeated Palestinian cultural life since the Nakba. On the literary level, for example, almost all of the great Palestinian men and women of letters of the past 60 years have centered their writing on 1948, the Nakba, and the shattering of Palestinian life. Some of the greatest of these writers, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Ghassan Kanafani, and Mahmud Darwish, were themselves refugees. Others like Emile Habibi, Samih al-Qasim, Tawfiq Zayyad, Fadwa Tuqan, and Anton Shammas (who writes in Hebrew), were not, but for whom the experiences of the Nakba and rootlessness still deeply impacted their work.

One sees the impacts of the Nakba and the longing for aspects of pre-1948 Palestinian life in other dimensions of modern Palestinian culture. The deep attachment to the land, perhaps best expressed in the commemoration of Land Day each year since March 1976, is one such way. So is the growing trend of Palestinians visiting the sites of destroyed villages, and of setting up a "virtual Palestine" in cyberspace. The longing for the past can also be seen in other staple features of modern Palestinian culture: the teaching of traditional handicrafts like embroidery to younger generations; the reverence for olive trees, symbols of rootedness and connection with the land; and the wearing of the kufiyya (also called shamagh or hatta), the white or checkered cloth head covering worn by male Palestinian peasants, as the symbol of Palestinian struggle.^{xix}

Palestinian intellectual life similarly continues to be impacted tremendously by the Nakba. Palestinian dispossession created a thirst for education (something from which a person cannot be dispossessed) that has led to Palestinians achieving some of the highest levels of education, particularly university education, of any Arab people. Modern Palestinian scholarship, and the

emergence of what generally can be called the field of Palestinian studies, began with Palestinian refugees writing about the trauma of the Nakba. Academics in exile like Walid Khalidi and Edward Said produced cogent historical works and political essays dealing with 1948 and its effects. The Institute for Palestine Studies and the PLO's Palestine Research Center devoted great efforts at collecting and producing books and journals, as well as preserving photos and archival material relating to Palestinian history.

Another result of the Nakba's impact on Palestinian intellectual life has been the exposure of Palestinian students to a wider variety of disciplines, training, intellectual currents, and educational experiences than most other Arabs. The dispersal of 1948 meant that Palestinians outside historic Palestine who sought higher education did so in a number of universities in countries throughout the Middle East, as well as Europe and North America. The same applied for those inside Israel; the fact that no Arabic-language universities exist in Israel meant that many students who could not gain entrance into Israeli universities sought higher education did so in Eastern Bloc countries thanks to scholarships arranged by the Israeli Communist Party. The fruits of this academic diversity in education have included the intellectual debates and vibrant scholarship characteristic of Palestinians today.

Conclusion

This short paper has tried to demonstrate how the legacy of the Nakba is of incalculable importance in understanding present-day Palestinian life. The Nakba did more than throttle the emergence of a Palestinian state, and create the refugee problem. By shattering and disintegrated a society, and leaving various pieces of that society in various countries and in various stages of rebirth and growth, it shaped the way that Palestinian socio-economic, political, and cultural-intellectual life has developed in the past 60 years. With a society divided among several different countries, subject to external control, "normal" social development was warped. With a weak economic base characterized by the sudden dispossession of a largely agrarian society, and with refugees dependent upon international aid for survival, thwarted the development of a Palestinian national economy. The "normal" struggle of classes for power was immensely complicated by the lack of a viable territory on which the political process could take place.

Current controversies and developments within the Palestinian body politic in particular cannot be understood without making references to these historical developments. This is particularly true of the emotional debates about the refugees' right of return, about securing a geographically-contiguous state, and the ongoing rivalry between the Hamas-led government in Gaza and the Fateh-PLO-PA government in the West Bank. What happened in 1948 has everything to do with these attitudes and disputes, and negotiators would do well to keep this in mind rather than castigate Palestinians for their quarrels and alleged "lack of realism."

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- ⁱ No reliable figures exist, although one sometimes encounters the figure of approximately 10,000 killed.
- ⁱⁱ Justin McCarthy, "Population," in Philip Mattar, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, revised Edition (New York: FactsOnFile, Inc., 2005), 395.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Michael R. Fischbach, "Land," in Mattar, *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, 294. Beyond the West Bank and Gaza, Syria also controlled a miniscule amount of Palestinian territory, near the al-Himma hot springs, after the war.
- ^{iv} For the various figures on the internal refugees within Israel (the "present absentees" in Israeli parlance), see Nur Masalha, "Present Absentees and Indigenous Resistance," in Nur Masalha, ed., *Catastrophe Remembered: Palestine, Israel and the Internal Refugees. Essays in Memory of Edward W. Said (1935-2003)* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005), 11-12.
- ^v For a discussion of the various figures cited for the number of abandoned villages, see Michael R. Fischbach, *Records of Dispossession: Palestinian Refugee Property and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 3-5.
- ^{vi} See Salman Abu Sitta, *Atlas of Palestine 1948* (London: Palestine Land Society, 2004).
- ^{vii} Fischbach *Records of Dispossession*, 274-75. See also Michael R. Fischbach, *The Peace Process and Palestinian Refugee Claims: Addressing Claims for Property Compensation and Restitution* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006), 41.
- ^{viii} Fischbach "Land," 294.
- ^{ix} Fischbach *Records of Dispossession*, 275-77; Fischbach *The Peace Process and Palestinian Refugee Claims*, 42-45.
- ^x Yusuf al-Sayigh, *al-Iqtisad al-Isra'ili* [The Israeli Economy] (Cairo: League of Arab States, Institute for Higher Arab Studies, 1966), 107-09. See also Fischbach *Records of Dispossession*, 320-22, 381-82 and Fischbach *The Peace Process and Palestinian Refugee Claims*, 44-45.
- ^{xi} Sami Hadawi, *Palestinian Rights & Losses in 1948. A Comprehensive Study*. Part V: An Economic Assessment of Total Palestinian Losses written by Dr. Atef [sic] Kubursi (London: Saqi Books, 1988), 113, 187.
- ^{xii} Fischbach "Land," 294.
- ^{xiii} Fischbach "Land," 295.
- ^{xiv} Fischbach *Records of Dispossession*, 272-76; Fischbach *The Peace Process and Palestinian Refugee Claims*, 45.
- ^{xv} Sayigh *al-Iqtisad al-Isra'ili*, 108-10. See also Fischbach *Records of Dispossession*, 322, 382 and Fischbach *The Peace Process and Palestinian Refugee Claims*, 45.
- ^{xvi} Sara Roy, updated by Martha Myers, "Gaza Strip," in Mattar *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, 172; Don Peretz, "West Bank," in Mattar *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians*, 531.
- ^{xvii} Fischbach *Records of Dispossession*, 277.
- ^{xviii} Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, and the Institute for Palestine Studies, 1997).
- ^{xix} By wearing his trademark black-and-white kufiyya, Yasir Arafat did as much as any Palestinian to highlight the political symbolism of the kufiyya – even though as an urbanite raised in Egypt, he did not grow up wearing this quintessentially rural type of headdress.