

Remembering the Nakba, Here and There, Then and Now

Return Symposium on “Independence Day”, May 8, 2019

by Umar al-Ghubari

We have chosen to remember the Nakba and talk of return precisely at a time when Israelis celebrate the 71st anniversary of the establishment of the Jewish State, for the sake of which, on the way to which, and as a result of which the Zionist movement and the state in the making have brought a terrible disaster to the Palestinian people. The Palestinians have not yet recovered from this national trauma.

The uprooting of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland as both external and internal refugees, preventing them from returning to their homes, the destruction of Palestinian towns and village with barely a trace, the expropriation of their lands and assets, the Judaization and Hebraization of the entire country and the erasure of the Palestinian-Arab-Oriental history, identity and memory of the local space are only some of the crimes of Zionist colonialism.

The completion of the occupation of Palestine in 1967, the military rule over the West Bank, the blockade on Gaza, the ongoing forced exile of some seven million Palestinians, the patronizing, racist and brutal policies towards all Palestinians, including Israel’s nominal Palestinian citizens – all testify to the ongoing nature of the Nakba.

The Nakba is the necessary outcome of Zionism. Just as Zionist ideology is ongoing, so is the Nakba. The Nakba is integral to Zionist ideology and practice. The colonialist “desolate land” propaganda, through the occupation of Khubeiza – where the 2019 March of Return was held – and the Deir Yassin massacre in 1948; through the organized deportation of the people of Majdal (now Ashkelon) in 1950, the Kafr Qasim massacre in 1956, the 1967 occupations, the land grabs and the killing of civilian demonstrators on Land Day in 1976 and in the 2000 Intifada, military checkpoints and other restrictions on the freedom of movement, targeted killings, the recent sniping of demonstrators in Gaza and the constant obsession to rule and be the master at all costs – all are part of a single-minded worldview.

Over the years, Zochrot has been active in teaching the Israeli public about the Nakba and its injustices, calling upon Israeli Jews to acknowledge their responsibility for the Nakba and promote justice and redress. We have spoken Nakba in Hebrew and managed – despite our limited resources – to open the eyes of quite a few Israelis. We have done so through tours, lectures, workshops, films, booklets, maps, games, and our website and iNakba app.

When we approached the issue of justice and redress, the question of the refugees' right of return naturally arose as one of the basic tenets of justice. In Zochrot, support for that right was taken for granted – it was obvious. Just as important and perhaps more challenging was the question of practicalities. How is return to be realized? Where? What will its implications be? Its costs? What practical steps need to be taken?

Thus, we started speaking not only the Nakba in Hebrew, but also Awda – return. We are well aware that promoting the return of Palestinian refugees in the current political reality in Israel/Palestine, in the Middle East and internationally may sound like a daydream or fairytale. Nevertheless, we are also aware of the fact that no just solution for the Palestinians would ever be possible without realizing their right to return.

Therefore, we are determined to raise the issue in every possible forum, to make sure it remains on the public agenda, and to oppose Israel's somewhat successful policy and tactics of denying, dismissing and violating the right of return. In the Israeli context, any discussion of the return is considered barely legitimate. Most Israelis find it convenient to push it aside and are happy not to lose any sleep over it. In fact, most Israeli human rights organizations do not include the right of return on their agenda.

This silence with regard to realizing the return serves the Israeli policy and perpetuates a status quo determined by a Zionist Jewish State to serve the interest and peace of mind of most of its Jews, in order to continue Zionist-Jewish control and maintain the Jewish majority created here by the force of arms – the arms that uprooted its indigenous population.

At the same time, most Palestinian organizations and parties active in Palestinian society within the State of Israel, in the Palestinian Authority and in the diaspora do not highlight the right of return as a key item on their agenda, and certainly do not lead a real struggle to implement it. No organization has any practical plan or suggestions for realizing the return.

Campaigning for civil rights in the shadow of the Israeli identity, a Palestinian struggle for removing the siege on Gaza, demands to reduce the number of military checkpoints within the West Bank, demonstrations against house demolitions and for prisoner release are all important. Nevertheless, focusing on them may push the struggle for realizing return, whether deliberately or not, beyond the horizons of political imagination, and with it the necessary strategic emphasis on a permanent solution of liberation, equality and real democracy.

Having begun dealing not only with the right of return but also with the practical aspects of realizing it, we face a broad and complex subject that requires learning, understanding, preparation and planning. Because return will have radical

implications for our space, in political, demographic, socioeconomic, cultural and environmental terms.

This discussion is part of the shaping of the discourse of return and its inclusion in the Israeli discourse. We call upon society, including the Jewish public, to recognize the necessity of return and imagine the post-return space.

The film *Future of Return* that you are about to watch is yet another link in the ongoing discussion on practical return. Twenty minutes summarize a fascinating process whereby a group of Israelis grappled with the question of practical return of Palestinian refugees to the villages in the Beit Shemesh area west of Jerusalem. The process involved several weeks of studies, tours and discussions. It raised direct questions about the future return and freed the participants mind to imagine a space unchained by the current narrow-minded politics. This represents a small step of challenging the Israeli political obvious and think outside its box.

To watch the film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWkeghOmWXI> (Hebrew with English & Arabic subtitles)