

Sedek

A Journal on the Ongoing Nakba

Towards return
of Palestinian refugees

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63 YEARS OF THE PALESTINIAN NAKBA:

NOTES FROM THE BADIL-ZOCHROT SEMINARS ON
PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF PALESTINIAN REFUGEES' RETURN

A k r a m S a l h a b

Over the past 63 years the Palestinian people have continuously and unceasingly been expelled from our homes and properties and forced to live in exile, refugee camps and ever-smaller ghettos in Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. As Palestinians take stock of our struggle for justice over the past 63 years, we continue to dream of the day when we will realize our rights, return to our homes and receive compensation for the loss and trauma we have suffered.

The forced transfer of Palestinians in 1948, known as the Nakba or 'catastrophe', was achieved by the direct forcible eviction of Palestinians and by massacres committed against us aimed at encouraging us to flee. Over 700,000 Palestinians were forced from their homes by Zionist militias, and subsequently the State of Israel, and flung far and wide in refugee camps and countries away from the villages, towns, orchards and olive groves in Palestine that we call home. Since the initial ethnic cleansing of 1948, Israeli forcible transfer has continued in various forms as Israeli practices displace Palestinians throughout historic Palestine. Jewish Israelis living in the 'mixed cities' and elsewhere need only look out of their windows to see the Nakba continuing in their neighborhoods, on their streets and to their Palestinian neighbors.

For Palestinians living in forced exile, the 63rd commemoration of the Nakba is a time to reflect on the unending despair in which they have lived since being expelled from Palestine. As a consequence of Israeli denial of Palestinian rights by refusing them the right to return to their homes, Palestinian refugees have remained extremely vulnerable to repeated displacement. Today, many Palestinian refugees live in hellish conditions on the borders of Syria and Iraq or remain stranded, once again, on the border between Libya and Egypt. Thousands more remain

undocumented, unable to work or study, while others have had refugee camps and homes destroyed around them multiple times in a recurring story of dispossession and displacement.

For Palestinians, therefore, the right of return is more than just a mechanical implementation of internationally sanctioned rights but about ending the very real suffering that we continue to experience today. It is about addressing a deep sense of belonging, of having a home, and of being reunited with history so that we can break with it, or as the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish put it:

I dream of us no longer being heroes or victims; we want to be ordinary human beings. When a man becomes an ordinary being and pursues his normal activities, he can love his country or hate it, he can emigrate or stay. However, for this to apply there are objective conditions which are not in place. As long as the Palestinian person is deprived of his homeland, he is obliged to be a slave for that homeland.

In short, no just solution will be achieved without affording Palestinian refugees our legitimate rights.

For the past 20 years, the Palestinian struggle has taken a detour down the road to negotiations, only to find a dead end. The 'peace process' has failed to deal with Israel's discriminatory regime of occupation, colonialism and Apartheid, and has ignored our legitimate aspirations; instead reducing the noble concept of peace to nothing but a misnomer, a weapon to be brandished by the powerful to silence an oppressed and dispossessed people seeking freedom and justice. We want a genuine peace in which Palestinians and Israelis work to realize people's rights, foremost amongst them the right to return. If there is to be a discussion it must be about how we

live together as equals, not whether Palestinians are human enough to be entitled to their rights in the first place.

It is precisely this objective that has been the driving force behind BADIL and Zochrot's joint action to discuss the practical aspects of refugee return. How Palestinian refugees will go back home and how this is to be done fairly, efficiently and in a manner that also protects the rights of the receiving community are all crucial questions which we need to address in the process of returning Palestinian refugees.

For Palestinians, working to design mechanisms for refugee return is part of a process of self-awareness in which we begin to understand that the denial of our right of return has lead us (quite understandably) to view our rights as a 'dream', the implications of which we have yet to work through in any considerable detail. We highly value our rights because they have been denied us for so long, but we also need to consider the mechanisms through which we can realize them, what sort of society we wish to build after we return and how we can make life beautiful for all those living here. To do this we will need to accept that the Palestine we will be returning to is not the idyllic 1948 Palestine that we know from grainy photographs, but a real and living place in which we will have to reconcile the tragedies and crimes of the past with the possibilities and hopes of the future.

The result of our discussion about how to realize refugee return not only helps us explain our struggle with a greater degree of specificity, but also makes achieving our rights feel tangible again. Looking at and discussing how we can reclaim spaces from which Palestinians have been excluded for so long reinvigorates our resolve by giving a clearer picture of what we are struggling and fighting for – equality, return, freedom and justice,

and how these noble ideals will look in the real, ever complicated, world.

The process we have begun is immensely complex, and a few problems are worth mentioning. As a Palestinian organization 'representing' refugees, BADIL has been ever-conscious of moving between speaking about and speaking for the Palestinian refugees whose homes, lives and hopes were the subject of discussion in our seminars. Durable solutions for refugees can only be brought about by the inclusion of refugees in formulating the mechanisms through which it is to be facilitated and, ultimately, by their choosing which solution to displacement is most suitable for them and their families. As such, and given the long history of Israel, UN and Arab attempts to impose solutions against the will and behind the backs of Palestinian refugees, we have emphasized that discussion in our seminars amounted to no more than our personal musings and suggestions. The substance of the project can only be legitimated if/when the project is discussed and endorsed by Palestinian refugees themselves.

Furthermore, working with Israelis is a sensitive matter because of the way in which such engagement has been conducted in recent years. Since the advent of the 'peace process' most work between Israelis and Palestinians has fallen foul of the definition of normalization, namely participating in a project, initiative or activity that is designed to bring together Palestinians and/or Arabs with Israelis and is not explicitly designed to resist or expose the occupation and all forms of discrimination and oppression inflicted upon the Palestinian people. This has resulted in many Palestinians negatively viewing projects that parade Palestinians and Israelis together abroad, while ignoring the substance of Israeli denial of Palestinian rights. We have avoided this criticism by clearly basing our joint efforts on the realization of

universally recognized rights and not on embellishing their continued denial.

Nevertheless, differences in the group did surface. One such issue was whether one should use refugee return as an opportunity to address other social injustices, specifically, whether property should be distributed fairly or whether it should be restituted to its original owners directly. For many of the participating Palestinians, deviating from the normative framework of rights undermined the strength of our argument and the whole principle on which it was based, thereby setting a dangerous precedent.

Although a degree of consensus was eventually reached on the issue, the disagreement (which importantly ran along ideological as well as national lines) identified a point of friction with the potential to resurface in future discussions as well as clarifying the need to clearly state common points of departure from the outset of the discussion.

Despite these problems, the success of the project so far and the enthusiasm of the participants is very encouraging. During the seminars conducted with Zochrot, we began to collectively imagine a truly profound world inspired by a deep understanding of history and its lessons. Our vision, however, looks delicate and idealistic in the face of intransigent Israeli refusal to allow refugees to return to their homes and to pay compensation to Palestinian victims, thus reminding us that the only way to ensure Israel protects and promotes the rights of Palestinians to self-determination, sovereignty and return is by building pressure on the Israeli state to do so.

For this reason, efforts to produce a positive vision for how refugee return will be practically implemented needs to be developed in conjunction with a realistic program aimed at compelling Israel to end its decades-

long denial of Palestinian rights. Israelis too can assist in this regard by supporting the campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with international law. It is within this campaign for Palestinian rights that the seeds of true solidarity, equality and justice between Israelis and Palestinians are to be found.

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