

The Human Being, Palestinian Society, and the Nakba

Marwan Dwairy*

The horror of the Nakba (catastrophe) was the greatest crime committed in this region in the twentieth century. The search for references about the Nakba has led to political documentation and analyses of the events, to the commemoration of the Nakba, and to a great deal of literature on the subject. However, one finds few social or psychological studies of this catastrophe. This omission is all the more reprehensible given that there are approximately 5,210,000 electronic sources that discuss the relationship between psychology and the Holocaust in Europe, the majority of which analyze the relation between the Jewish victim and the Nazi aggressor. These sources have undoubtedly played a role in garnering sympathy for the Jews and for Israel, and possibly in creating “understanding and tolerance” for Israel’s aggressive practices. Perhaps this volume of *Jadal* will invite similar social and psychological research into the Nakba.

Research into the effects of the Nakba with regards to social and psychological factors is worth undertaking if it stems from a systemic and non-reductionist perspective. That is to say, we must analyze the dialectic relationship between the Nakba and social and psychological factors, and view the Nakba as a part of an ongoing political, social, cultural, and psychological process. Such a process brought about the Nakba and was influenced by it, and was not an isolated event that unexpectedly befell the Palestinian people, leaving its mark on society and on the Palestinian human being. The Nakba occurred within the framework of a mentality and an Arab and Palestinian consciousness that preceded and outlasted the Nakba, at the very least until the “Naksa” (setback) in 1967. It was characterized by a misinterpretation of the reality, ignorance of the nature of international conflicts and interests, underestimation of the enemy and overestimation of the self, and by a lack of clarity concerning the various alignments and alliances within the region and the world. This worldview also failed to discriminate between who could be relied on and who ought to be treated with caution.

The term “Nakba,” used to refer to the war of 1948, signifies the political and cultural consciousness that prevailed at the time. This consciousness regarded it as a sort of predestined fate or natural disaster and did not recognize any self-responsibility for what had occurred. This same consciousness laid responsibility – and perhaps still does – exclusively on external factors such as colonialism, Zionism, and the nation’s enemies. There is an infantile ideology innate within this consciousness, according to which we would have been able to live in peace

had it not been for the presence of external enemies. It is infantile because it constitutes a total misreading and misunderstanding of conflict in the world, and fails to understand the need to ensure peace by being prepared to confront the nation's enemies rather than by protesting against the very existence of these enemies. Why was the war not named "the war in defense of the homeland," for instance, or "the defeat of the defense of the homeland"? These designations imply an awareness of a conflict between two sides from which a critical examination of its role in and responsibility for the outcome of the war cannot be avoided.

What do we mean by the word "Nakba"? Is it an event that occurred in a specific space and time, an ongoing process, or the effects of a disaster that befell the Palestinian people? The prevailing belief is that the Nakba was a disaster that took place in 1948, during which Israel captured the country and turned the majority of the Palestinian people into refugees without a homeland. But was not the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages and the denial of the return of the refugees also part of the Nakba? Were not the imposition of military rule for nearly twenty years and the decades of land confiscation part of the Nakba? And are not the ongoing stuck towards refugees' issues and the second wave of refuge in 1967 a natural continuation of a Nakba that has not yet come to an end? These questions suggest that the Nakba is not an event that took place and ended in 1948 but an ongoing process that moves within a conflict and a balance of powers in which we – the Palestinians and the Arabs – constitute one side. Consequently, we bear responsibility for this process and for steering it towards its end. Moreover, the catastrophic effects of the Nakba are not confined solely to the loss by the Palestinian human being of his or her house, land, homeland, and family, but also the loss of part of his or her dignity, freedom, and right to a decent life. The Nakba traumatized the prevailing mentality, and resulted in the loss of individual and collective self-confidence and the dream of independence. It relegated Palestinians to a state of humiliation and alienation both within their homeland and in exile.

There is a set of questions for which no clear answers in the literature on the Nakba exist. For example, has the "lesson of the Nakba" been learned? Has there been a change in Arab and Palestinian political and social consciousness relative to that of the period before the Nakba? If such a change has taken place, has it been a fundamental shift as deep as the wound itself? Has it been a superficial shift, or has it come as part of a general shift in political and social consciousness in the region and the world? Did this shift occur to the same extent and in the same direction among the leadership and the people, or did it happen in differently?

Any answer to these questions is a judgment or hypothesis that may be refuted or substantiated based on information currently unavailable to us. For example, some argue that the Palestinian people have learned the lesson of refuge and will not leave their homes, but will remain in their homeland under any circumstances. But is this really the case? And is the argument that the

Palestinian people no longer rely on their Arab “brothers” or the “Arab nation” as they did before 1948 accurate? And what about the claim that Arab citizens in Israel are the most politically aware of all Palestinians?

To answer the question of whether the lesson of the Nakba has been learned one must observe changes in Palestinian consciousness over time. Perhaps between 1948 and 1967 – and this is also a hypothesis – the Palestinian people continued to live in a state of denial about reality and the daily struggle to survive without ever reaching a point of reexamination. After the Naksa, a duplication of the Nakba, the Palestinian people experienced the collapse of their imagined reality and collective despair and dejection. This lasted until the October War of 1973. After this war there was a fundamental awakening of the Palestinian consciousness evident in the conduct of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and of the Palestinian leadership inside the Green Line. The first demonstration of this awakening was Land Day in 1976. This revival involved Palestinians assuming responsibility, taking the issue into our own hands, and ending our reliance on others. At the same time it provided a deeper understanding of the nature of the conflict and a clearer distinction between enemy and friend. However, such an analysis remains speculative pending in-depth research.

There are other questions for which the researcher will fail to find satisfactory answers. For example, are the Palestinian people suffering from psychological trauma – post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as psychological trauma is defined in Western psychological literature – or are they experiencing a different condition? Given that the Jews and Israel have adopted the role of the absolute victim, there is an understandable tendency among some to argue that the Palestinians are also victims and are suffering from psychological trauma. This implies suffering from PTSD, as experienced by Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Does this argument hold water? Let us consider the three basic symptoms of trauma: (1) dwelling on the events of the trauma in a futile and ineffectual manner through the automatic, involuntary recollection of the events in a way that paralyzes the normal functioning of the human being in his or her life; (2) a mental, emotional, or behavioral avoidance to deal with anything related to the trauma, pervaded by forgetfulness, a numbing of the senses, and withdrawal from anything connected to the location of the trauma; and (3) involuntary arousal, insomnia, difficulty in concentrating, and inappropriate emotional outbursts. Is this the situation in which the Palestinian people are living? Is this a prevalent condition and does it describe its current situation in Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Diaspora?

There is no doubt that the Nakba came as a terrible trauma, but trauma does not have just a single effect on human beings; trauma can break, paralyze, disturb, or disrupt, but it can also awaken, strengthen, unite, and construct. Thus the occurrence of the Nakba does not automatically mean that the Palestinian people are a stricken or traumatized people in the sense of incapacity or the loss of the ability to perform or survive, as in the case of PTSD. Anyone who observes the

condition of the Palestinian people will find that it is far from a state of incapacity, despite the fact that they are confronted by the most powerful forces in the world today. They are a people that refuse to kneel, and have put up a tireless resistance, generation after generation for over a century. The prevalent emotion among the Palestinian people – in today's Gaza, for instance – is possibly anger, but not fear or weakness. And it is not uncontrolled anger, but anger that is channeled into steadfastness and survival, and towards resistance. There is no question that some Palestinian individuals and Palestinian families have suffered and are suffering from PTSD. But is PTSD the prevailing condition of the Palestinian people?

When one attempts to give a general description of how Palestinians confront the ongoing Nakba, one must keep in mind the different methods employed by different groups. Some have adopted a nationalist, revolutionary, and optimistic stance, while others have assumed a position of surrender and despair. Some have connected their individual cause to the general nationalist cause, while others have preferred to disconnect and seek personal solutions for themselves and their families. Some, of course, have taken an opportunistic approach and perhaps even identified with the oppressor. Such trends are seen in similar situations throughout the peoples of the world. Such varied perspectives should prompt the researcher to try to comprehend the dynamics of these various methods of confrontation. For example, what is the subjective and objective mechanism that drives someone in the direction of a collective national response, and what is the mechanism that propels someone else towards submission and defeatism? The question requires in-depth research into such cases and into the process that influence the trends.

There is another issue that imposes itself on the Palestinian human being and the Nakba. This is the fact that Palestinian society is a collective within which the individual is an indivisible part of a single entity. This characteristic raises a number of questions: what has happened to the system of the family, clan, or tribe? Has it been weakened, remained as it was, or taken a different form that gives an impression of change while concealing an enduring essence? What has been the role of these collective frameworks? What role have they played in the survival and steadfastness of the Palestinian human being? What has their political role been? Have they played a reactionary role always opposed to national goals, or have they had a role to play in supporting and consolidating these goals? These same questions can be asked of the role that religion has played in the Palestinian issue. The answers to these questions are not readily accessible or straightforward. Anyone who searches for a reactionary role that these collective or religious affiliations have played (and this is the predominant approach) will find evidence of it. However, if one looks for it one will find that they have often played a nationalist role, pushing their members towards militant and nationalist decisions and activities.

Perhaps because of the fatalism that lies behind the term "Nakba," it has played a unifying role in mobilizing all sections of the Palestinian people in an historic

march based on a common past and a single national goal. These sentiments were consistent with the prevailing consciousness. The Palestinians who remained in their homes, displaced within their homeland, and expelled to Arab states or the Diaspora were thus unified, despite their divergent experiences. The term “Nakba” thus played a formative role in shaping Palestinian national identity for various groups with different experiences. And this leads us – as researchers – to broach a question that appears unethical. However, to disregard it is to block off an important aspect of the truth and prevent us from fully comprehending the experience of the Nakba. Did the Nakba and its aftermath – in addition to the high price that was clearly paid – have any positive outcome for the Palestinian people? What would the Palestinian people have lost if the Nakba had not occurred? What if Palestinian national independence had been achieved, as it was for the Egyptians, Jordanians, Syrians, Lebanese and other Arab peoples? To answer such questions demands thought beyond the prevailing approaches in order to gain a more profound understanding of the Nakba and benefit from it in plotting our future course. Here is another question that may appear to be immoral, and might infuriate hotheads who lack the courage to undertake a critical examination, but must be asked for the sake of intellectual integrity. Is the road to national independence and achieving the right to self-determination the only way to guarantee the future of the Palestinian people? Or is the path of integration or federation also worth investigating and considering?

The significance of this question becomes clear in light of the experiences of others who have gained national independence from classical colonialism. These people have fallen victim to exploitation by leaders who opposed colonialism in the past, but now treat their homeland as their own personal playground. We might also compare experiences of most Third World countries that have attained political independence but today– as independent states – have fallen victim to globalized economic and cultural colonialism. We also view this question in light of the experiences of other peoples who have not achieved independence but have rather chosen integration or federation, and have managed to achieve greater justice, dignity, and prosperity than those in independent nation-states.

My aim in this introduction has been to offer an initial exploration into a systemic and dynamic view of the process of the Nakba, and to raise a number of questions that call for in-depth research. It is necessary to go beyond the prevailing national and ideological models, to dare to explore aspects that may be considered taboo. Here I find myself in total agreement with Edward Said’s definition of the intellectual as someone who dares to “challenge the prevailing norms and standards” and rebel against the “collective structure,” and is able to “represent the collective suffering of his people.” This is necessarily done not from the standpoint of a chauvinistic fanatic but from a moral standpoint that assiduously adopts universal human values, does not exclusively usurp the role

of victim, and does not tolerate the immoral practices of certain sections of his people.¹

* **Professor Marwan Dwairy**, Editor of this issue of *Jadal*, is a faculty member in the Graduate Studies program at Oranim Academic College

¹ Edward Said, *The Intellectual and Power (al-Muthaqqaf wa al-Sulta)*.