

The Palestinian Family and 1948: The Need for Research

Fatma Kassem*

The year 1948 is a defining year in the history of every Palestinian, individually and in the community as a whole. Though the dispersion and dispossession of our communities began with the Nakba – catastrophe – in 1948, we have been experiencing a continuous process of communal deprivation and fragmentation ever since. In order to understand the true impact of the legacy of the Nakba on our communities today, we must delve deeper into the forgotten truths of the past.

Before 1948, the family was the primary social unit of the Palestinian community, providing its members with security and safety. These familial relations were linked to places; their towns and villages of origin were the key element of social relations within communities throughout Palestine. In many cases, these links between place and social relations are exemplified by extended families taking the name of the neighborhood in which they lived; neighborhoods such as Fanos in Ramleh or Abdel el Hadi in Lyd. In the wake of 1948, uprooted Palestinian families carried the name of their cities or villages as their family names, becoming known as 'Hifawis' (from Haifa), 'Safdis' (from Safad), 'Saforis' (from Saforia), and so on. These place-names created a tie to the place and allow families to connect across time and space, an aspect of identity that becomes uniquely important after the dispersion of 1948.

By adopting their cities of origin as familial identifiers, the place became ingrained as the defining aspect of a family. Thus a family without its place was no family at all. These are wounds that Palestinians continue to feel. The shattering of the family through displacement has given rise to feelings of isolation, sorrow and agony that still accompany many Palestinians.

Since 1948, many Palestinian families in Israel have been torn from their homes and hence from the web of Palestinian social structures. They have been uprooted: pre-1948 Palestinian communities from cities such as Safad, Bisan, Tabaria and Asqalan have entirely vanished. These cities are now exclusively Jewish cities, known in Hebrew respectively as Tsfat, Beit She'an, Tiveria, and Ashkelon. By renaming the place the occupiers disenfranchise its original inhabitants. The majority of Palestinians who once lived in these cities became internally displaced peoples and refugees neighboring Arab states: Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Up to 500 Palestinian villages were destroyed outright. In cities such as Lyd, Ramleh, Akka, Haifa, and Yaffa, a handful of pre-1948 residents become homeless. These people stayed in their hometowns but were unable to return to their homes. Many of these homes became the property of Amidar, a state housing authority. They continuously witness the occupation of their ancestral homes, present but unattainable. Their homes are no longer theirs but remain a physical presence in their daily lives.

This constant presence and the pain associated with it translates today into the ongoing violent exemplified in many forms in emotional, mental, economic and political conflict with the Jewish State of Israel. These Palestinians – citizens in name but not in deed – are stateless in their homeland. They live under the forces of ongoing colonization, a colonization that claims the transcendental power of God and historical atrocities toward the European Jews, with alliance with the imperial power and supported by the international community, while simultaneously subjecting the Palestinians to severe and continuous deprivation, humiliation, and discrimination. Palestinians are robbed of their families, their social infrastructure, and their homes.

This dispersion – this shattering – is accompanied by an abject sense of defeat and hopelessness. Palestinians have historically experienced fractures to their family and community lives that have profound consequences on their modern livelihood. How Palestinians think, feel, and act in their daily lives as a result of this displacement has yet to be comprehensively researched.

The realities of 1948 encourage us to ask many questions. How do the events of that year affect Palestinian daily life, individually and collectively? How do they shape their social and emotional experiences? How does the familial experience of the Nakba affect the familial experience today, both within and between clans?

Limited research has been undertaken on some of these questions, and some of the answers are part of the collective knowledge of the people. Yet the complete answers to these questions are critical if we are to understand how the events of 1948 continue to affect the individual, the family, and the community. In order to think strategically and move towards our ideal society, it is crucial to consider the influence of 1948 on Palestinian lives today.

The catastrophe of 1948 affected all members of family and community. Families lost their sense of support and security. They were wrenched from their communities and their homes, and in many cases torn apart. Many witnessed the death of their relatives on the roads of expulsion but have never dealt with their traumatic experiences, because for them the experience is not yet over. For those whose family members were expelled to other cities or other countries, the impossibility of seeing these relatives has only sharpened their grief. Beloved family members died far from home and family, as strangers in a strange land.

Often men could not bear the sense of defeat and numerous sons, brothers, and husbands disappeared in the early 1950s and 1960s. I have heard many such stories from women in places such as Lyd and Ramleh. These women spoke of the ways in which the Nakba constantly reemerges in their daily lives. They spoke of the sorrow

and pain of their losses, as well as the insecurity and hopelessness that comes from the lack of transparent information inherent under colonial occupation. Their families will never again be complete.

The memories of this pain and fear continue to impact Palestinian family life today. Men have increased their supervision of women and tightened the borders of their freedom. In turn, women have sought to challenge some of these patriarchal boundaries. Cases of “family honor killing” are one instance of this gender struggle. Such practices have become more prevalent since the loss of the *watan* (homeland) and the stresses of close interaction with Jewish Israeli society, and threaten to result in further fragmentation of Palestinian family life. The absence of any public academic debate on such topics, along with the silence of male intellectuals and religious leaders of all faiths in the Palestinian community, can be seen as complicity in these killings. This issue of life and death must be scrutinized.

Palestinian experiences of 1948 and their particular consequences varied from family to family. Consider, for instance, women who were uprooted from their villages and became dwellers of the contested cities in Israel. They were forced to cope with the loss of their villages, families, and resources and had to learn entirely new ways of life in the new political, social, economic, and cultural conditions of the contested cities. Their stories follow a different trajectory since 1948 than, say, the stories of those who became refugees outside Israel or even the stories of their own sons and daughters. Hence the particular experience of one individual or one family in 1948 paves the way for a specific and unique experience of one individual or one family in 2010, 2020, or 2050. how and in which ways have to be followed and researched.

But the affects of 1948 do not affect families in a vacuum. Abandonment, enduring political violence, poverty, frustration, and sense of defeat are foisted upon Palestinians by the state yet the family remains the primary social support, In the absence of political engagement with the state, frustration is directed along traditional lines: within the community. We can see a trend of families using violence amongst and against one another even when small conflicts arise, such as land disputes between relatives. In other cases, a trivial personal conflict becomes a collective one. Frustration is often directed between groups: tensions arise between the original residents of contested cities and those who came from other villages and towns. Thus tensions throughout all segments of Palestinian society intensify.

In the events since 1948, further alterations to the familial community structure of Palestinian society occurred. Following Israel’s conquest of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, many family ties that had been broken apart in 1948 were renewed. Palestinian families reconnected through marriage to maintain their community relations. Yet after the first Intifada in 1987 many of these renewed connections

were once again broken. The Nationality and Entry into Israel Law affects thousands of Palestinian families, separating spouses and parents. Many Palestinians with Israeli citizenship refuse to give up their homes and rights as citizens in order to accompany their spouses to the 1967 Occupied Territories, and their spouses are not allowed to legally reside within the 1948 borders of Israel or to attain citizenship. The Israeli legal system is thus implemented to perpetuate the forced fragmentation of Palestinian families and communities. This system obstructs marriage and prevents Palestinians from forging links to their pre-1948 cities and villages. As a result, many families are institutionally separated and torn apart at their core.

Without research and publicity, these problems inherent in the post-1948 nature of Palestinian society will continue to worsen. They are tearing our communities apart from the inside and the outside simultaneously, wearing down our resistance and our solidarity. Palestinians of any status – ‘Arab Israelis’, internally displaced persons, and refugees – are all victims of the repercussions of 1948 and as such we should all take responsibility for the future of our communities.

For decades, the issue of Palestinian nationalism and on-going violence has overshadowed debate about social issues related to the family, parenting, women’s rights, and others. The rationale for silencing such debate is grounded in the assumption that nationalism is more critical to our goals as a people and our vision for the future than the social issues that plague us every day. However, our society will benefit from these discussions and such topics should become the subject of debate in our society and the foundations of our future. We must increase our own – and then the world’s – awareness about what is happening to us individually and collectively. This is essential to better understand the impact of 1948 on today’s communities. Such discussion will enable us to reconsider the family, the community, and thus the society and to create a better life and future from the lessons of the past.

***Dr. Fatma Kassem** is an independent researcher