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## *Older Than 60 Years for Sure, But How Long Will It Persist?*

### **Al Nakba of 1948**

By KHALIL NAKHLEH

I am not really certain when we started labeling what happened to our people and our country, following the establishment of the state of Israel, as "Al- Nakba". But this is not really the important point. What is important, from my perspective as a Palestinian, is that there is a need to understand what happened to us in and around 1948; and why it happened the way it did; and what should we do to circumvent Al-Nakba from persisting into our future.

As it has been characterized officially, *Al-Nakba*, or "the catastrophe", is a shorthand euphemism for the disaster that befell the Palestinian people and society in historical Palestine, in and around 1948, when Israel declared itself to be an independent country. Thus, we started equating and associating the "independence" of Israel, or the 15th of May of every year since 1948, with our "catastrophe". By doing so, we reduced the evil that was willfully perpetrated against us, as a people and a society, to a commemorative date on our annual calendar; where our enemies celebrate and we mourn.

Al-Nakba should not be viewed as a "catastrophe" in the same sense as those sudden upheavals, destruction, etc, caused by inexplicable natural disasters, massive earthquakes, flooding, tornadoes, or an unexpected attack by meteorites from outer space. I want to argue here for the need to widen our conception of Al-Nakba, and to think of it as a disastrous process, whose seeds were consciously planted at least since the beginning of the last century, and whose clear targets were our displacement and alienation from our indigenous land, and our supplanting by Jewish-Zionist colonists being hurled at us from other parts of the world.

My call for re-focusing our conceptualization of, what was termed Al-Nakba, is certainly not to deny, or undermine, the evil that was perpetrated and impacted an entire society, history and territory. Al-Nakba stands as a critical marker in the life of at least three generations of Palestinians since 1947-1948; and it will be indelible in the minds of future Palestinian generations. It is, no doubt, a violent severance and interruption of the Palestinians from their past: from their familiarity with their daily surroundings, their immediate environment, and their natural connection with their milieu. It is a process that led to the cleansing (i.e., killing and expulsion) of at least 86% of the indigenous Palestinian population that lived in the area that became Israel; and the erasure of at least 531 of their villages and towns, with the explicit goal of creating an exclusive Jewish state in the same area. Al-Nakba is an ongoing process of "memoricide" (to use Ilan Pappé's term)-the wiping out of individual and collective memory, in the hope that it cannot be rekindled.

## **Al-Nakba Process: Agencies and Targets**

From the above perspective, and according to all available serious historical analyses, Al-Nakba was not a sudden happening that came from nowhere. What happened in 1947-1948 was a culmination of a colonial settler process, whose aim was (and continues to be) to dislodge the indigenous Arab population of Palestine and replace them with Zionist Jewish settlers from other countries. These settlers and their descendents spearheaded a systematic process, which started in the early twenties of the last century, of cleansing the land from its Palestinian population, and transforming it to become an extension of the globalized capitalist center. The process is continuing today, with the direct and indirect sanctioning of the US, Europe and a multitude of their client states and non-state agencies.

In order to arrive at a clear and deep understanding of this broad process, I propose to look at "Al-Nakba Process" on two levels: the phases of its development, and its targets. In terms of the phases, we can delineate three, somewhat overlapping, phases: (1) The Planning/Designing phase, (2) The Implementation phase, and (3) The Completion phase. Embedded in these phases, I would highlight three clear targets: (1) People, (2) Land, and (3) Institutions.

### **The Planning/Designing phase**

This is recognized to have begun with the holding of the first Zionist Congress in 1897. The idea of establishing a Jewish National Fund (JNF), with the goal of acquiring Arab-owned lands in Palestine (and the region), for exclusive Jewish use, was proposed during that first Zionist Congress, over hundred years ago. The idea of JNF was formally approved in 1901, and was registered as a company in Britain in 1907, with the explicit objective of acquiring lands and immovable properties "in Palestine, Syria, and in any other parts of Turkey and the Sinai Peninsula". It was later stipulated that the land acquired by JNF, irrespective of the means, and held by it, are "the inalienable property of the Jewish people, and only Jewish labor could be employed in the settlements." (Lesch). Subsequently, a British Commission concluded that "the land has been extra-territorialized. It ceases to be land from which the [Palestinian] Arab can gain any advantage now or in the future. Not only can he never hope to lease or cultivate it, but he is deprived forever from employment on that land " (Lesch) . In May 1954, and through an official memorandum from the Israeli government, the JNF was subsumed formally as a company within Israel. The signed Memorandum kept the objectives, as they were in the original registration, but identified the JNF's activities "in the State of Israel and in any area under its jurisdiction, for the purpose of settling Jews on these lands and properties." Furthermore, the JNF was recognized as one of the arms of the World Zionist Movement. (Abu Ras). It is estimated today that 13% (or about 2.5 million dunums) of the land area in Israel is held by the JNF; the majority of which are lands belonging to Palestinian refugees; lands which were taken over as a result of the ethnic cleansing process.

Thus, it is obvious that the Jewish National Fund has been the paramount Zionist agency of Al-Nakba-as the Zionist arm of the colonization of Palestine.

Establishing for Al-Nakba of Palestine followed a dual track: political- diplomatic and economic. The colonial settler process was codified (or formalized) in 1917 by the British Balfour Declaration, when the British Government committed itself to "view

with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." With the conclusion of WWI and the establishment of the League of Nations, Great Britain was designated by the League of Nations as the Mandatory power for Palestine in 1923. The preamble to the British Mandate incorporated the Balfour Declaration, with minor adjustments (Mallison in Abu-Lughod, 61).

This means that the western powers, which emerged victorious from the WWI, and established the League of Nations (and similarly, later on, the United Nations, following WWII), were committed to the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, and to its enforcement. In other words, the League of Nations, the British Mandate, and the United Nations were paramount political-diplomatic-economic agencies of Al-Nakba.

To solidify Zionist control over the land and other critical economic resources, prominent Jewish businessmen were given monopolistic concessions by the British Government, immediately following the imposition of the Mandate, in the twenties and thirties of the last century, in spite of the fact that "in each case the concession was contested by other serious claimants" (Lesch). Thus, the Zionist enterprise was allowed to control critical natural resources (e.g., Palestine Electricity Company, the development of minerals in the Dead Sea, the Palestine Land Development Company, etc), in preparation for Al-Nakba.

In the meantime, the system of Jewish-Zionist education was separated from that of the prevalent system of the indigenous population; and became fully centralized under the exclusive control of the Zionist Movement, to which it allocated about 40% of its budget. The objective was clearly to inculcate the mythical claim of Zionism in the new generations of settlers; to strengthen the Zionist colonial control of the land; and to prepare for a separate hegemonic Jewish presence in Palestine.

I am maintaining here that had Zionism not been a settler colonial movement, with the objective to establish an exclusivist "Jewish national home" in Palestine, and had it not received the political, economic, and military support of the major Western powers who emerged victorious from the two world wars, this whole process, most likely, would not have culminated in Al-Nakba. The recurrent insistence on dividing the land, to allow for a hegemonic and an exclusive Jewish state in Palestine, against the explicit will of its indigenous population, which, sadly, persists until this writing, is the direct prelude for Al-Nakba.

Any serious review of the machinations and deliberations, in the context of the U.N. and hegemonic Western powers, which sought to operationalize the "Balfour Declaration", leading to the creation of Israel, would have to conclude that the division of Palestine (regardless of the land area allotted to each group) was a sure recipe for cleansing the indigenous population living in that area, i.e., a sure recipe for Al-Nakba. If we are to reflect on the idea of partitioning Palestine, in order to accommodate Zionist aspirations, and Western capitalist plans, as early as 1937, as suggested by the Peel Commission, we see no serious effort invested in the UN context to avert Al-Nakba. Palestinian society then, as it is now, was completely exposed and vulnerable to external forces, as well as to the control of internal agents of those forces. Its internal social, economic and cultural structure lacked the required immunity to withstand those forces. Thus, a new Zionist-Jewish state was established in 1948 on a decimated indigenous, rural society, called Palestine.

The persistent push of the imperialist and capitalist centers then, and their client states, taking the cue from the Zionist movement, was for physically partitioning Palestine, to create a separate state for the Jews; it was never for establishing a just and democratic society in all of Palestine. This could have been possible to adopt then, had this been the goal. But this was never the plan of the Zionist movement; nor was it the intention of the Balfour Declaration, thirty years earlier; nor did it harmonize with the objective of creating a paramount Jewish colonization agency (the Jewish National Fund), nearly 46 years earlier.

### **Implementation and Completion Phase**

I shall not dwell in much detail under this section, because it is well documented, and it had been discussed by a number of historians, Palestinian and non-Palestinian, since the fifties of the last century; and documented and analyzed lately in a most comprehensive way by historian Ilan Pappé, in his fine book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006).

In a snapshot form, early cleansing operations started in December 1947. At the time, the Palestinians constituted two-thirds of the population (when they were nearly 90% of the population of Palestine at the beginning of the British Mandate in 1923). At the beginning of the cleansing operations, Palestinians owned about 97% of the land. As a result of the ethnic cleansing operations, 531 Palestinian villages were erased; more than 86% of the indigenous Palestinian population was destroyed, expelled, or became displaced. Thus only 14-15% of the indigenous Palestinian population (about 130,000-150,000) remained in their homeland, while the rest became displaced and homeless refugees.

While the Palestinian population remaining on their own indigenous land (in Israel) number today about 1.3 million, their land robbery continues, through government legislations. In 1967, the Israeli Knesset passed the "Law of Agricultural Settlement" that "prohibited the sub-letting of the Jewish-owned land of the JNF to non-Jews the law furthermore ensured that water quotas set aside for the JNF lands could not be transferred to non-JNF lands." (Pappé, 222). The Palestinian minority in Israel, which constitutes now about 18% "has been forced to make do with just three percent of the land." It is estimated that 70% of the land belonging to the Palestinians in Israel "has been either confiscated or made inaccessible to them." (Pappé, 223).

### **How do we circumvent Al-Nakba from persisting into our future?**

Based on the above, I am convinced that Al-Nakba process will persist recurring in the Palestinian future unless and until we, and all the forces in the world that do not want to see a recurring Nakba, embark unequivocally on the following steps:

1. Stop thinking and acting for the partitioning of historical Palestine, as a pretext to find a solution for the current unjust situation, resulting from the process of the last hundred years.
2. Work towards the dismemberment of the exclusivist, racist Zionist-Jewish-Israeli state, in favor of a democratic, non-hegemonic state, for all the inhabitants of historical Palestine.

3. Highlight the historical evil perpetrated against the Palestinian people, and work globally towards forcing the World Zionist Movement and the State of Israel to acknowledge their direct responsibility for perpetrating this historical evil, and for taking real measures to rectify it.

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