

On a River Heading Home

by Rami G. Khouri

Released: 14 May 2008

BEIRUT -- The fact that both Israeli independence and the Palestinian *nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 are now acknowledged virtually simultaneously around the world is a great achievement for the Palestinians -- just as the creation of Israel was a miracle in the eyes of the world's Jews. The two big stories 60 years after 1948 are the strength and vitality of the Israeli state, and the depth, vigor and relentless quest for life, land and liberty of the Palestinian people.

We are almost equally matched in numbers -- about seven million each -- and in our indomitable spirit. We are both attached to the same land, for which we fight passionately, each having resorted to militancy, heroism in their own eyes, and terrorism in the eyes of the other. We have both suffered exile and disenfranchisement -- from Babylon to Burj el-Barajneh -- along with death, despair and denial. We each know what it means to be scapegoated, caricatured and abused. And we both entered the 21st Century with widespread international recognition and support.

The parallels between Palestinians and Israelis are so deep that they are scary. The main difference is that Israel has a sovereign state and the Palestinians continue to suffer statelessness, dispersal, occupation and exile. This is not an eternal fate, though. I am certain the Palestinians will have their state one day soon, for three basic reasons: They deserve one by any moral standards; they are allocated one by prevailing global legal standards; and, they insist on making statehood happen through their own dogged determination and persistence.

For 60 years, many Israelis and their friends abroad have tried to disqualify the Palestinians from peoplehood and statehood. They have used every trick in the book to make us disappear, without success. They called us Communists, rejectionists, terrorists, a fabricated community, evil anti-Semites, Nazi sympathizers, lazy international parasites, and many other terrible things. Yet the Palestinians never disappeared nor were disqualified from achieving their national rights, because collectively they never embraced evil, but only hope, humanity and an end to exile.

Despite the troubles they have suffered for 60 years, the prevalent feelings among Palestinians are self-confidence and pride. You see it in the eyes of every Palestinian man, woman and child, -- even the dead ones, even the babies in little coffins lined up after an Israeli air attack on Gaza.

I for one am proud of many things as a Palestinian. I am proud that despite our exile and suffering, our tens of thousands of dead in political battle, we still pursue openings for a negotiated peace with Israel. I am proud that thousands of people around the world march in parades supporting my right to statehood. I am proud of our Palestinian artists, millionaires, scientists and writers -- men and women whose spirit has never been defeated -- who reacted to exile with exuberant self-improvement, who defeated their refugee status with education and entrepreneurship.

I am proud of Palestinians who built much of the commercial and physical infrastructure of the Arab oil-producing states. I am especially proud of the Palestinians who seek out Israelis and Jews around the world to explore a shared route to justice, statehood and mutual humanization -- and who often find Israelis who recognize my right to live in peace, security and national integrity alongside their Israeli state.

Pride is a powerful sustaining force, especially when it shuns the extremes of envy or arrogance. It overwhelms humiliation, and neutralizes statelessness. Palestinians without passports or even identity cards that make them recognized, legal human beings still have pride. Palestinians living in poverty, in wretched refugee camps, have pride to export. They have little money, and few belongings, but you walk into their crowded little cinderblock homes and they will offer you tea, coffee, sweets and every other goodness of the human spirit.

It is useful to repeat for anyone who might be interested: Pride is a river that buoys you, carries you forward, and ultimately takes you home. It is the confluence of self-confidence and hard work, standing on an indestructible foundation of political certitude, acknowledged legal rights, and sheer human dignity. If you take away one thing from all the television specials on the Palestinian *nakba* this week around the world, please note the serenity that defines all the Palestinians -- young or old, rich and poor, in Palestine or in exile, free or occupied, citizen or stateless.

Call us terrorists, call us stupid, call us long-nosed killers, call us political fools who fail to heed history's summons, call us anything you like. Words this week mean very little. Because this week -- as Jews, Zionists, and Israelis already learned for themselves -- we are fortified by the certitude of the inevitability of our own national reconstitution. The first and hardest step on that road has been achieved: the universal acknowledgment of our *nakba* alongside the commemoration of Israel's birth. Israel controls and colonizes the land, and kills and jails thousands of Palestinians, but in the battle for minds and in the domain of survival, we have fought them to a draw.

Seven million proud Palestinians are not going anywhere, except home. The sooner Israelis, Jews, and Zionists recognize the furies and demons of their own successful national reconstitution in our eyes, the sooner we will all have a chance to live in mutual peace, dignity and security. This week marks the beginning of the fourth generation of Palestinians who insist on living as free, dignified citizens, in their own sovereign state, on their own ancestral land.

Rami G. Khouri is Editor-at-large of The Daily Star, and Director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, in Beirut, Lebanon.

Copyright © 2008 Rami G. Khouri