

The ongoing Arab grief

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Until now, Arab denial of the reasons for the 1948 catastrophe leaves its meaning locked in echoes and beyond reach, writes **Azmi Bishara**

The Nakba is a rupture in Palestinian history. Palestinian society was uprooted, the Palestinian city destroyed, and with each the dream harboured by Arab elites and middle classes between the world wars of building an independent Arab nation and catching up with the modern world. The Palestinian peasant who had vied with the forces of nature on his land with his hoe was ejected from that struggle and that harmony. Whereas once his dreams were woven with the fragrance of basil and olives, the lazy crawl of time and the seasons revolving slowly but surely like a waterwheel, his dreams fell into the hands of politicians, balances of power and international resolutions; his rites becoming seasonal conferences calling for return, the transistor radio proclaiming the promise of liberation and the fragrance of place evaporating in a haze of nostalgia.

The Nakba is a rupture in modern Arab history because afterwards history became the repercussions of reactions to the Nakba in the course of which the dialectic of relations with the enemy supplanted and then became identified with the internal dialectic. The Arabs were stunned by what happened, but that collective shock marked the beginning of modern Arabism -- the Arabism of ruling regimes as opposed to the Arab nationalist ideas and movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They regarded what happened as an aberration of fate and insult that took the shape of the "alleged state of Israel". The Palestinians, meanwhile, were displaced or removed from place and time. They fled from 418 locales that, before the expulsion, were just beginning to unify their diverse rural rhythms into a single national time reflected in the mirror of the mandate. They fled to cities around the Arab world that could not absorb them and formed belts of refugee camps that soon became synonymous with the poor and rural migrants. However, since Arab cities had not yet merged into a single Arab nationalist time, the Palestinians, although initially welcomed, became akin to a rape victim in underdeveloped societies, unaccountably held at fault for the crime against them and whose taint overshadowed any sense of solidarity.

Nonetheless, the Palestinians were welcome ideological guests, and as soon as they caught on to this they held on to it and forged from it impenetrable armour -- even if that came at the cost of taking part in falsifying bitter realities. Ideology is a safe refuge for Arab regimes. When they have it in for another regime, they vent their anger on the other regime's citizens as though they were hostages. How do they go about that? With all the pitiful means at their disposal, such as making life hell for those undesirables at the borders. For the Palestinian people after the Nakba, life was a protracted hell on Arab borders. The recent crisis of the Palestinian refugees on the Iraqi borders and from there to Brazil palpably confirms that the Arab Nakba continues.

An entire generation of Palestinians that once had used the word "nakba" when speaking of the "calamity" that struck a person when his cow or horse died had to suddenly deal with the term in a previously undreamed of collective sense: the loss of a country, or the loss of their villages that had not yet been forged into a country; and the tedium of trudging barefoot in search of refuge and the sense of alienation in other countries that had to be forged into nations even though they had been spared the Zionist calamity.

It is impossible to forget the Nakba because it derailed Arab history and the history of the Arab psyche. Sixty years after the beginning of the Palestinian tragedy and the ongoing Arab grief we still have caution against regarding the Nakba as a loss of Arab virility, whose condition has been deeply suppressed and that manifests itself as mass hysteria that turns against the Palestinians as the cause of the affliction (in 1948) and then suddenly swings to celebrating the Palestinians for restoring Arab dignity (post-1967). Because of this tendency, we must caution against turning the memory of the Nakba into a process of collective self-therapy that probes the Arab subconscious, for memory when diverted into such a process loses its role and function as an instrument for identifying and addressing what stalled the Arab process of modernisation.

It is impossible to forget the Nakba because, in addition to ensconcing the state of Arab fragmentation, it transformed Arab nationalism from a confident, self-assured project for the unification of a people with a common language, history and dream of national expression in a modern Arab state, into a fiery ideology that grew increasingly strident the greater the gap between it and reality. Moreover, there emerged a tendency among the Arab nationalist left to train its vehemence on Arab reactionary-ism, alone, as though Zionism could be exonerated because it was an irrevocable given. Indeed, the criticism of Arab reactionary-ism became to some degree a bridge for the expression of admiration for Zionism by juxtaposition.

Meanwhile, a trend in Islamist ideology was shaped by both the left and the reactionaries it criticised, instead of by the drive to harmonise the national and pan-national projects, as occurred during the period between the two world wars. Then, finally, the acceptance of the reality of Israel became virtual official ideology whose shortcoming is not that it is "moderate" but that the alleged "moderateness" is founded upon the a priori acceptance of the impossibility of justice. No political ideology has been spared the distortion sewn by the colonialist presence of Israel in the Arab world.

Commemorating the Nakba is not to hark back to some fictitious paradise that existed beforehand. Such mythologising transforms the Nakba into a victory of evil over good, a natural catastrophe that descended like a curse on that "Eden". Palestine, like all other countries of the Levant and the rest of the Arab world, was awakening to modernity, grappling with its priorities as mediated by the coloniser and colonial institutions, modern education and elements of imported technology. Palestine was building its new modern urban life in Haifa, Jaffa and other cities. Palestinian and Arab nationalism were coalescing in tandem with the rise of an intelligentsia, an urban working class and a bourgeoisie. It is not a coincidence that mythical memory should overlook the emerging modern city and focus on the village alone. The great majority of Palestinians were poor and simple country folk with little communication between their villages.

The Palestinians at that time could never have begun to fathom the Nakba, let alone its European and international causes, and it is unfair to pass judgment on the Palestinian attitude towards the UN partition resolution. When, in 1948, leaders of the Jewish *yishuv* (settlers)

proclaimed the independence of Israel and Zionist armies invaded and seized portions of Palestine that the partition resolution had allocated to the Arab state, the Palestinian power of resistance was very weak, having been depleted during the uprising of 1936-1939. The Palestinians did fight, using whatever meagre means at their disposal, but neither they nor neighbouring Arab regimes realised, or wanted to realise, the size and power of the Zionist project that had mobilised not only better- equipped forces but also numerically stronger forces. In other words, the Zionist army was larger than all the different Arab "armies" that had entered Palestine in 1948 and that had fought each other more than they fought the Zionist state.

In the aftermath of the Nakba, the emerging Palestinian urban leadership assimilated into other parts of the Arab world, its natural environment, through the pursuit of the Arab national project or through existing Arab regimes. In their new places of residence, Palestinian elites were highly instrumental in building the Arab city, in Kuwait, Amman and even Beirut. There has never been a scientific study of the extent to which Palestinians contributed economically, socially and functionally to Arab urbanisation, especially in those countries in which the provincial bigotry of conservative ruling forces are loath to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of "outsiders" and "refugees". Contrary to the general impression, Palestinian refugees were not a burden; they established active and productive communities that added qualitatively to the construction of Arab states from the outset.

Nor has there ever been an objective assessment of the early Palestinian urban and cultural elites that were initially instrumental in laying the foundations for the Palestine Liberation Organisation and that were naturally inclined to the Arab nationalist project and convinced that the Palestinian cause was an Arab cause, or of the part played subsequently by more rural and less urbanised Palestinian forces in detaching the Palestinian cause -- at least at the level of identity -- from the Arab nationalist one and bringing it into conflict as much against its immediate Arab environment (in Syria and Jordan) as against Israel.

The Arab regimes were defeated in 1948 because they did not take part in the fighting or because their engagement was governed by their conflicts with and conspiracies against one another. The Palestinians were defeated because they miscalculated their own timing and the strength of their enemy. Israel won for an endless number of reasons, from which we select the following: Arab armies did not actually engage Israel in battle and did not possess the will to combat; the Zionist project was the offshoot of a colonialist project, having been adopted as one of the missions of the British mandate over Palestine; waves of European anti-Semitism had reached unprecedented proportions in the form of the Nazi holocaust; the Zionist leadership had succeeded in building political, economic and military state structures in Palestine under the British mandate, long before the rise of the Nazis in Germany. Because it was a pragmatic and rational leadership, it assessed its own strength vis- à-vis that of its enemy and it planned and timed its moves accordingly.

Arab memory of the Nakba denied or ignored these causes instead of confronting them. Early denial was manifested in the claim that Britain had failed to understand where its true interests lay, or in the claim that the catastrophe was the result of a British-Zionist-reactionary Arab conspiracy (we still hear strong echoes of this today in the attempt on the part of some Arabs to convince the US, supplanting Great Britain, where its true interests lie).

The Arab relationship with the third cause for the Zionist victory in Palestine -- European anti-Semitism -- has been even more confused. The Arabs have varyingly denied the

holocaust and regarded it as a Zionist invention, minimised its magnitude and significance, and unjustifiably and incomprehensibly likened it to the Palestinian Nakba. Some Arabs, in the heat of anger and frustration, have scoffed that the Jews deserve what they get wherever they land. The Arabs reacted foolishly towards what was unquestionably a black mark on Europe and Western civilisation that the Arabs themselves had nothing to do with. It would not have hurt them to recognise that shameful historical reality in Europe, for it furnishes no moral justification whatsoever for uprooting another people outside of Europe. Nor is there any reason not to add it to the causes of the Nakba, for the Zionist movement did, indeed, use it very well to further its aims, as did Arab confusion in dealing with it.

Europe was more than happy to shed that weight of guilt by casting it onto the Arabs. Israel was more than happy to conspire with Europe in this regard by easing for it of the task of dealing seriously with its past and present. Israel still helps Europe separate the Jewish question of the past from European racism and xenophobia today and Europe, in exchange, helps Israel cast the burden of anti-Semitism on the Arabs and hastens to Jerusalem to participate in the celebrations of Israeli "independence" as though this event were of the stature of the international celebrations marking the establishment of the UN.

Palestinians who do not perceive this context fall in with it. They believe that international concern for the Palestinian cause is for their sake whereas, in fact, such concern is for Israel and the Jewish question.

The Palestinian cause has given rise to a global industry that thrives on conferences, seminars and studies. In this "peace process" era, all these activities are taking place in one way or another within the general framework of Jewish identity and the Jewish-Western relationship. The Palestinians are merely unwitting "extras", even if the industry has attracted many Arab and Palestinian political and intellectual elites who, too, now thrive on "the cause". But they are mistaken if they believe that international concern for the cause is a source of strength. It is not; it is a reflection of the European concern for ridding itself of the Jewish question as a factor in its own identity and shifting it onto Arab shoulders. What would be a source of strength is Arab concern for the Palestinian cause if translated into effective action at the regional and international levels and into practical determination to defeat Israel.

Like the first three causes of the Zionist victory, it would be of little avail to deny the fourth and to pretend, for example, that Zionism was purely a colonial myth concocted to mask an imperialist spearhead into the region and that the Zionists' democratic practices and the institutions they created in the course of a successful colonisation process were no more than a figment of propaganda about an oasis of democracy in the Middle East. This is where Arab imagination that seeks to "understand" the meaning of the Nakba could suddenly leap to the belief that the Zionist establishment is truly a divine miracle that will crush everyone that does not bow down and efface himself before it. If put on the spot, the Arab who is keen to "understand" the meaning of the Nakba will tell you that he favours peace with Israel even without realising justice for the Palestinians and the Arabs. This, he will insist, is not because of his admiration for Israel, but because what unites Israel is war. So with peace, Israel would soon implode under the weight of its internal disputes and contradictions.