
Memory of the Nakba and its Effects on the Formation of the Palestinian Identity

ABSTRACT The Nakba, or loss of Palestine in 1948 to the Zionists, led to the expulsion of most of the Palestinian people from their homeland to neighboring countries and all around the world. This was a severe blow for the Palestinians, and it was expected that their identity would wither, and this may have been the case had it not been for the memories they kept from the pre-Nakba and Nakba periods. These memories became so important that up to the present they act as a pivot for Palestinian identity during the diaspora. This article argues that these memories still bind the Palestinian people together and give them a sense of common and national identity. **KEYWORDS** Nakba, Palestinian people, 1948 war, 1967 war, refugees, Palestine, diaspora

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that every nation has a history that reflects its identity and culture. The history of Palestine is full of memories that express the glory of its people and its courage in the face of the devastation wrought by the Zionist project.

The Nakba of 1948 is central to these bitter memories, remembered by generation after generation of Palestinians. For the Palestinians, not only does the Nakba represent the defeat of the Arabs in the war—when most of the local population lost their homes, lands, and other possessions without warning, and suffered the unimaginable pain and anguish of separation from relatives and friends—but also it left a deep and irreparable wound in the heart of the Palestinians themselves. This feeling of extreme grief, fear, anxiety, despair, shame, and impotence overshadows all they do and is something they cannot be rid of. In spite of this, the tragic suffering of the Palestinians has not received much sympathy, and little consolation has been offered as it was eclipsed by the profound impact of the Holocaust. The mantra of “a land

without people for a people without land,” which was propagated around the world, guaranteed the success of the legitimacy of establishing an Israeli state on the land of Palestine despite the fact it was home to one million Arabs before the Nakba.

How would the Palestinians prove their identity as a Palestinian people? What evidence do they have of having owned the land of Palestine in the face of the denial of other parties, especially the extreme Israeli one, which claimed that there was no such thing as the Palestinian people?

Memory is an effective means that can prove the attachment of the Palestinians to their land, and the legitimacy of this attachment especially for new generations of Palestinians. For memory is not just a personal matter: it is related to what is called “collective memory” which results from social interaction and communication. There is no individual memory except for that which is created through the social exchanges and interactions within a certain social frame, even if they are the most private memories. Individual memory acquires its social meaning through collective memory. Collective memory is among the most efficient means through which it was possible to research collective identity.

A community with memories has its identity strengthened through remembering the past. Any community cannot prove its identity by itself unless it remembers its history and revives the images of things, matters, and events that played a pivotal role in its history. (Asman 2015, n.p.)

Collective memory acts as the material, moral, and spiritual knowledge, and science of a certain group, and the collective awareness that results from it is related to the unity of the group, its solidarity, and continuity. In addition, the reality and sentiment provided by collective memory constitutes the basis of the identity of a given group. This is how building and keeping collective memory contributes to developing collective identity, or to be more accurate, it can be said that the formation, change, construction, and reconstruction of collective memory is deeply related to the construction of identity and its change.

Based on this, the Nakba of 1948 for the Palestinian people represents an important element in the collective memory of the Palestinians, it being a key moment in their history. The memory of the Nakba has provided a vast volume of historical sources to research Palestinian identity. The armed struggle to secure the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland forms a part of this identity and will continue to do so. This is

why it is important and necessary to seriously study the memory of the Palestinian Nakba and its role in building Palestinian identity.

THE PRINCIPAL THEMES OF THE MEMORIES OF NAKBA

The Nakba is considered a symbol of the collective memory of Palestinian society. It also represents a break in the stream of the natural development of Palestinian history which was previously characterized by the settled life of the Palestinians in their indigenous homeland. On the other hand, it characterizes their tragic current conditions where they find themselves in a state without shelter, security, or stability. It is human nature to remember the good things of the past whenever life is difficult, as part of a desire to escape from reality and go back in memory to the past. Remembering authenticates existence and identity. There are many themes related to the Palestinians' memory of Nakba that form the basis of this study.

THE DIVISION OF PEOPLE AND THE BREAKING OF SOCIAL TIES BETWEEN MEMBERS OF SOCIETY

During the war, Palestinians fled in terror in order to protect themselves and their families from danger. This led to the destruction of the traditional Palestinian social structure and the break-up of family, tribal, and other social ties. Stories and narratives are numerous in interviews, memoirs, and oral history records that testify to how people were scattered and dispersed under the impact of extreme fear and terror during the war, and how they left their family, friends, relatives, and broke ties and relations with society.

The effects of the Nakba on Palestinian society are not limited to the fracturing of ties between members of society and of the total collapse of the social structure. This is because the Nakba led not only to the division of the people who stayed within the borders of Palestine—those who lived in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip or were scattered in neighboring Arab countries—but also to a division at a psychological level between the “ones who remained inside” and the “ones who fled abroad.” Therefore, alienation among the above-mentioned groups is determined by the geographical dimension and also extends to the realm of ideas and sensibilities.

As Edward Said states, the Palestinians who had Israeli nationality in the 1970s were among a special group of the Palestinians who lived within the border (Said 1999). It was easy for the refugee and exiled Palestinians to have doubts about them. The dominant assumption was that they had changed

because of the effects of the Israelis on them because they held Israeli passports, spoke Hebrew, and had lost their self-awareness while dealing with Jewish Israelis, in addition to dealing with Israel as a real state rather than as a Zionist entity. They were assumed to be different because the Palestinians outside were Arabs who lived in Arab states (Said 1999, 5). This is why it was considered that those “from inside”—in the eyes of those outside—were assumed to have lost their special Palestinian identity and to have been integrated into Israel. Those who remained inside Palestine, however, had to fight to regain their land.

In reality the ones inside did not have an easy life under Israeli military rule, but were deprived of support and understanding, and their communication with the outside was cut off. In their opinion, “the ones outside” represented an essential part of the Palestinian people and had gained the support of the international community and national organizations. They “inside” had become foreigners in their own country, surrounded by Jews and Jewish culture while witnessing with their own eyes the Judaization of their lands. This is why geographic, psychological, and mental distance and barriers affected the unity of the Palestinian people.

THE DOMINANT FEELING OF BEING UPROOTED AFTER THE FORCED DISPOSSESSION OF PALESTINIANS FROM THEIR HOMES AND LAND

The Palestinian people have a special passion and nostalgia for their homeland. This is evident in the main characteristics of Palestinian collective memory, wherein the memories of the Palestinians are full of desire and longing for their homeland before the Nakba. Despite the passing of the years, the Palestinians were able to remember their houses and streets in all their details, as if they had never left or been separated from them. But what is ironic is that all these houses, streets, buildings, and other Palestinian geomorphological characteristics, to which the sentiments, feelings, and memories of the Palestinians were attached, are all destroyed and all those remains are in ruins. In their place are landmarks and sites that express Judaic or Hebraic Israeli culture. Hence, nothing proves the existence of the Palestinian people and their right to their land but themselves and their collective memory. The more this memory is strengthened, the stronger the power of persuasion that this piece of land was indeed a homeland for the Palestinian people where successive generations lived.

Palestinian literature does not lack expressions of love for the country and a longing for it. For example, the famous activist and Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani evocatively describes in his novel *Rijal Fil Shams* (Men in the Sun) (2013) the feelings of the Palestinians towards their country:

Abu Qais rested his chest on the dewy soil, and the earth began to beat under him: a tired heartbeat, it roams in the sand trembling and then crosses into his cells. [...] Every time he throws his chest over the dirt, he feels that. Coming to the light. The pocket is like a security in the heart of the earth still, since it first lay there, it makes a hard way the deepest depths of hell, when he said it once to his neighbor who shared a field, there, in the land he left ten years ago, he replied sarcastically: “This is the sound of your heart you hear it when you stick your chest to the ground,” i.e., nonsense, malignant! And the smell, then? The one that, if you inhaled it, would flow into his forehead, eight dreads in his veins? breath words tell him that he smells his wife’s hair when she comes out of the bathroom and has taken a bath. [...] The smell of the earth while he was lying on top of it, he thought that he was smelling the hair of his wife when she comes out of shower after she had taken a cold bath [...] the same smell, the smell of a woman who had a cold shower and spread her hair on his face while it was still wet. The same heartbeat: as if you take between your bended palms a tiny bird [...]. (Kanafani 2013, 7)

In some of the poems of the famous Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, similar imagery is used. The homeland is featured as a mother, a lover, a worker, a dream, etc. In his poetry he writes of the diaries of a Palestinian wound (Kanafani 2013, 7):

Oh, my arrogant wound
My homeland is not a back-bag
and I am not a traveler
I am the lover and the earth is a beloved [...].

In his other poems, a young lover from Palestine personifies the homeland whose eyes, name, body, language, silence, death, etc. represent unwavering Palestinian characteristics (Kanafani 2013, 9). Darwish imbued his love, hopes, and deep feelings towards his homeland—Palestine—in every written verse and in every creative image of his poems.

Home signifies the roots of a human being, and a homeland signify the roots of a people. One of the causes of the Palestinian people’s misery is the

feeling of homelessness, of being without a home or roots. With regard to the meaning of home and country, they are best expressed by Hicham Sharabi, when he stated:

There is no expression in the Arabic language that corresponds to the English expression (home), or the German expression (Haymat) to denote one of the deepest human relations. We express it in our classical language with the word Watan [country], or Masqat Ra's [place of birth] or Baytul Ajdad [ancestors' house]. This expression derives its true meaning only from direct experience, such as that experienced by the people of Jaffa and all those who emigrated from Palestinian towns and villages. It becomes longing or longing for the homeland or the birthplace—or the city, the neighborhood, and the house in which the individual grew up and tasted the first kind of happiness in his life—a part of his inner life that cannot be torn off. This place—which transcends the mere tangible—becomes a symbol of everything that has passed and its birthplace to the world. It becomes something over time. He cannot know peace and security—except when traveling and that is weak—the meaning of homeland and the meaning of nostalgia. How we know it. A person does not truly own his homeland until he loses it. (Sharabi 1991, 1)

Based on this, it can be said that the deep love and intense longing that rages within the Palestinian people for their home, the streets, the city, the homeland, and other places are not just a result of a desire to continue the Palestinian way of life, which is what refugees have long suffered from, but an important psychological reaction to the bad experiences of the Palestinians since the Nakba. The excessive sense of homelessness stemming from these bad situations accentuates the significance of the country and land which they used to be part of and that they unexpectedly lost. This extreme contrast pushes the Palestinian people to hold on to the memory of the homeland, and this memory is like a magnet that attracts to it its sons and daughters wherever they are.

THE ABSENCE OF SECURITY DUE TO THE SUFFERING OF THE NAKBA

The Nakba left deep scars and wounds in the hearts of the Palestinian people which cannot be removed. Of course, the majority of Palestinians cannot forget the suffering of their displacement from the motherland and what they witnessed in years of exile, which included traumatic scenes and experiences, and devastating upheavals. Said describes exile, saying:

It is one of the most depressing destinies, and in pre-modern times, deportation was a punishment. In particular, because it did not mean only years of a person living lost without a goal, away from his family and familiar places, rather it means that he is like an outcast, never feeling as if he is surrounded by his family and friends. He does not agree at all with his surroundings, does not take comfort in the past, does not give him the present and the future except bitterness. (Said 1996, 57)

These words may be the most accurate description of what exiled Palestinians feel, those who have tasted the bitterness of the Nakba and its aftermath.

Said also writes:

For me, there is nothing that affects my life more painfully, and paradoxically this is what I long for—more than my many travels into various countries, cities, residences, languages, and environments. These travels kept mobilizing me throughout those years. [...] Whenever I travel, I carry with me a big volume of luggage that I am not in need of. Even if my trip does not go beyond the city center, it requires packing a hand bag stuffed with more items than the actual flight time would require. In my analysis, there is no escape from it. Therefore, I concluded that I was driven by a secret fear, it is my fear of not returning [...]. (Said 2000, 2)

It is true that Said lived in several places during his lifetime, but his experiences cannot be compared with the trauma experienced by most Palestinians because he grew up in a rich family with a passport issued by the United States of America. He received a Western education from an early age, so wherever he was—in Egypt, the United States, or Lebanon—he did not suffer the hardship and poverty-stricken life that other Palestinians suffered. But he engaged in and was committed to the struggle of the Palestinian people throughout his life and became a representative of the Palestinians in the United States. He writes of how in essence the Palestinians in exile are subsumed by misery, real suffering, and psychological harm, which turn into a feeling of insecurity that makes Palestinians feel they are alien to their surroundings. This feeling cannot be erased as it becomes like one's shadow and has a remarkable impact on the present and future quality of their lives.

In addition, among the causes of insecurity among the Palestinians after the Nakba were the violence and terror they experienced as a people in exile. Terrorist acts against the Palestinians were numerous, as cited by Yasser Ali in his book *Al-Majazer Al-Israiliya Fi Haqqi Al-Shaab Al-Filastini* (The

Israeli Massacres Committed against the Palestinian People) (2009), of which the massacre of Deir Yassin was the most terrifying. There are many accounts, stories, and oral records related to it that articulate the fear, despair, pain, and grief felt as a result of these inhuman acts which nurtured in the Palestinians a deep commitment to the Palestinian cause and an unflagging demand to return to their land.

INSISTENCE ON REMEMBERING THE PRE-NAKBA ERA

If the Palestinians are asked about their life before the Nakba, many will reply by saying, “we used to live in paradise,” or we had a “happy life,” or “a good life,” and many similar expressions. What was in the past became beautiful memories which could not be erased from their minds. Their past life, with all its minutiae, remained deep in their hearts and minds. Shafiq Hout shows us a micro-image of the landmarks in the life of the Palestinian people before the Nakba, as if he were a guide roaming the streets of Jaffa in the 1940s. Through his eyes we see:

The bus crossing the square heading to the left to enter Al-Salahi market, one of the other commercial streets in Jaffa was the meeting place for the orange merchants who, by working in this trade, had long-standing experience and extensive information about every orange grove. [...] All orange merchants used to start their day by having coffee in Dawood coffeeshop with its huge yard and tall trees. Some of them would order “Foul” (Beans) from the Kahla restaurant. There, around the same table, you could see Saeed Baidas, Mohammed Abdul Raheem, Ibrahim Hout, Khalil Hout, Hajj Deeb Hamdan, Abou Hashem Al-Qudsi, Hamdan Mursi, Ibrahim and Zaki Barakat, Abdul Muhsen Hijazi, Mohammed Ali Al-Qattan, and others [...] at the end of the market there were vegetables stalls and a restaurant, its main frequenters were from the rural areas, and from Gaza which had strong commercial relations with Jaffa [...]. (Hout 1991, 33)

Though one cannot find words such as “beautiful” or “happy” in this description, it is not hard to feel the sense of security, stability, serenity, and freedom embedded in the scenes described. It is also easy to feel the longing and aspiration of the writer to return to that life.

Zainab remembered her rural life before the Nakba:

We used to pick 65 boxes of tomatoes per day, Omar, Khamees, my sister-in-law and I used to pick tomatoes, onions, garlic, and other vegetables, so we used to have diversified sources of income. [...] My father-in-law used

to own a large piece of land; he used to depend on his money and his land
[...]. (Ali 2013, 33)

Many stories and memories are unanimous in expressing positive sentiments of pre-Nakba Palestine, such as “we used to live in heaven,” whether they describe scenes of urban or rural life. Compared with their life before the Nakba, most Palestinians after it became refugees with no identity other than that of refugee. They suffered for a long time because of the absence of legitimate documents and licenses at border crossings when they had to travel. What is more depressing is that this problem was not confined to the refugees, but extended to all Palestinians who are obliged to pass through detailed and exhausting checks and other similar exhausting formalities. Palestinians made the comparison between the past and present after they were forcibly expelled from their homeland, leaving suddenly without prior preparation and without enough of their necessary belongings, which rendered their life afterwards full of hardships.

In addition, life in the camps was very hard because many families had to share one tent, as described in this account:

We had to bear dirt and filth on our bodies because we could not have a bath for a long period of time. We are ashamed to speak of this way of life, even on occasions when we have to [...] we lived like animals [...] it was a hard life. Up to seven families from various villages had to share one tent. The tents were never sufficient, so some families went to live in caves. There was overcrowding and disease causing the death of many elderly people and children [...]. (Sayigh 1979, 108)

THE SELECTION OF PRE-NAKBA MEMORIES AND THEIR MEANING

In order to perform a thorough study of Palestinian memory, we should answer the following questions: Was life before 1948 all good? Why did people retain only beautiful and happy memories?

First, the pre-Nakba life for the Palestinians was a happy life, despite poverty and hardships, because they used to live in their own homes, cultivate their own land, and earn a living, and this was the core of their happiness. This drastically differs from their life after the Nakba, where extreme poverty prevailed. The villagers were expelled from their homes, they were alienated, their property was stolen, and they suffered from exile. That is why their former life appeared beautiful and happy compared with their present conditions, characterized by extreme difficulty and hardship.

Second, no one in the world went through the same suffering as the Palestinian people, who bore pain and shed tears because of the war and because they were forcibly displaced from their homeland.

In addition to the aforementioned causes, the most important factor lies in choosing the memory, which emerges due to certain conditions or social occasions. Evoking a memory from the past serves the present interests of individuals, according to the theories on collective memory. Based on this, memories could serve as evidence of the rights of the Palestinians to their land and the extent of their attachment to this stolen land, in light of the continuous denial of their rights by the Israeli government and its attempts to shed doubt on their identity as a people. Abundant past memories with their details, and their deeply embedded emotions in the collective memory of the people, show that the suffering of the Palestinian people and their present conditions are not just and are not part of a natural historical journey. That is why they deserve that the international community gives importance to their case, and that they justly gain the right to return to their homeland, and a natural life and history.

However, it is not possible to store all that happened in the past in the mind, since forgetting is natural. Hence, the incidents and experiences that are remembered depend on the conditions people live in, and these conditions and interests might impact the choice of what is recalled (Peng 2014). For memory is like stored goods that might be selected and be narrated when there is need for it, yet it might be affected by the period and conditions of storage. These memories, which an individual does not need in their daily life, might gradually fade and be left to be forgotten, and a person may never recall it until they are in need of it another time. This is how difficulties in the life of the Palestinian people before the Nakba were forgotten and are never remembered by anyone.

On the other hand, past incidents and experiences are not remembered as accurately as aforementioned. They change and mutate according to conditions. That is why events look different when a person remembers them based on different conditions. When a Palestinian remembers their past, only good and positive things for them and their community come to their mind. To protect their interests and the interests of the community, the Palestinian people tend to reconstruct their collective memory to validate, by repeating tragic incidents, their suffering, and the injustice of Israeli actions.

Based on this, memory is not completely reliable. It may not show everything that happened in the past as it really did. But this does not mean that

remembrance has no meaning. On the contrary, its meaning lies in revealing a person's attitude towards remembered events and how they give them their importance, as well as explaining what happened in the past. Therefore, it is possible to know the position of the Palestinian people in relation to the Nakba and the experiences related to it, and it is also possible to examine their choice of remembered material, the intention behind the act of remembering, and the effects of this type of remembering.

The formation of the past through remembrance is an act of self-discovery and differentiation from others. Therefore, when a person recalls past experiences, they are actually formulating the past for their own sake. Then they determine their place through everything they have gone through in order to know "Who am I?", "Where did I come from?", and then they know "Where will I go to in the future?" Thus, it can be said that the identity of a person stems from the process of forming their past through the stories, interpretations, and narratives that contribute to the formation of individual and communal identity. On the other hand, identity also affects these anecdotes and interpretations of the past. Experiences and memories related to the Nakba and what preceded it also helped in terms of the crystallization of an independent Palestinian identity and its stability in the hearts of the Palestinians, while this identity prompted the Palestinians to create a beautiful past that was good for them and "a lost paradise." Based on this, it is not difficult to understand why all that remains in the minds of the Palestinians themselves from the pre-Nakba era is good memories free of grief or misery. It is also easy to understand their continuous longing for their land and homes, and their insistence on remembering the experiences of the Nakba and its painful details, despite the passing of several decades.

Despite the fact that Palestinian identity stems from that beautiful collective past, it lacks historical records, statistics, archives, and other detailed information which could be used to reconstruct the past society and features of its life without a total reliance on the information and records made by British or Zionist institutions. This information, collected and preserved by non-Palestinians, is difficult to verify in terms of its truthfulness, realism, and impartiality. But it is clear that it was not originally collected to serve the historical continuity of the Palestinian people and their legitimate interests. Therefore, Palestinian history should be written by the Palestinians, those who lived on the land of Palestine for generations, because people cannot benefit from their history and achieve progress unless they record it themselves. The Palestinians cannot prove and confirm their legitimate and

natural right to the land of Palestine without writing their own history. Likewise, they do not find sufficient legal arguments to justify their struggle to defend their land and recover it unless their argument is based on past history.

The interest in history and the preservation of the past has an important role in defending one's homeland, culture, and identity, and protecting it from external threats, especially for the Palestinians. Through writing and codifying their own history, they can demonstrate to the international community their difficult life and their dire situation, and convince it that the Palestinians have been subjected to inhuman and unjust acts, which gives legitimacy and rationale to their struggle to build their national identity, establish their independent Palestinian state, and render their experiences and calamities real and lasting. There is fear that they "may become forgotten" or "as if they never existed."

Therefore, it can be said that preserving a people's past means preserving and protecting their identity. While the common people preserve their past through abundant acts of remembrance, transmission, and oral tales, Palestinian intellectuals contribute through creative writing to build the unique past of the Palestinian people. Among these is Walid Al-Khalidi, who showcased details of the past life of the Palestinians through nearly five hundred photographs which he includes in his book *Before their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians 1876-1948* (Qabla Al-Shatat: Al-Tarikh Al-Musawar Lil SHaab Al-Filastini 1876-1948) (2006). Through these pictures and his text, the writer not only records Palestine's past, which today has begun to fade, but also has proven the reality of the existence of a Palestinian society on Palestinian land before its destruction.

Another photographic album, *Jaffa Itrou Madina* (Jaffa the Scent of a City) (1991), depicts the past epoch of Palestinian society in all fields, whether social, economic, cultural, or political. The album consists of testimonies of several Palestinians, and contains 175 photographs and features the residents of Jaffa of all ages, professions, and occupations performing their daily life. In addition, it includes photographs of factories, coffeeshops, schools, and ceremonies. With these images, the author succeeds in featuring the daily life of the ordinary Palestinians in the past in order to inform readers about the life of the Palestinians before the Nakba, and this enables readers to empathize with them. On the other hand, the history of the people of Jaffa is preserved in this book alongside the history of the whole

Palestinian people. Therefore, these pages are preservers of the people's past and of collective memory.

Of these examples there are also *The Palestinian Nakba and the Lost Paradise* (Al-Nakba Al-Filastiniyah Wal Fardaws Al-Mafqoud) (2013), by Aref Aal-Aref, and *In Order Not to Forget: Villages of Palestine Destroyed in 1948 and the Names of their Martyrs* (Kay La Nansa: Qura Filastin Allati Dammaratha Israil Sanat 1948 Wa Asmaa Shuhadaiha) (2001), by Al-Khalidi and others. These books record the life of the Palestinians and Palestinian society before and during the Nakba, and give a detailed account of the loss and destruction of Palestinian cities and villages.

All these works and narratives should not be considered historical books as much as books of forgotten memories. Their goal lies in featuring Palestinian society before the Nakba so that it is not forgotten. Memories are not equal to history, but they are not contradictory to it. Both are important and interrelated because they refer to the past and their contents are very similar. Memories are different from history because they are characterized by subjectivity, reconfiguration, and instability, but these characteristics help to reveal the individual's identity based on feelings and self-awareness. Studying collective memory does not concern itself with searching for truth or error, and it does not matter whether or not what is remembered is true. Its focus lies in the search and study of the selection of memories, their construction, reconstruction, and development.

Also, regarding the study of Palestinian memory, it is not important to specify which parts of past experiences are historical or mere memories. Therefore, it is not important to prove the reality or objectivity of experiences for the Palestinian people. This is not of great importance, but rather these experiences should be real for the Palestinians, and they should trust that their experiences and their lives are real and not imaginary, and that this is their history and their common past.

Based on this, we can find, through the countless stories of the Nakba generation, and the work of Palestinian intellectuals, that Palestinian society before the Nakba was "Paradise Lost." In the eyes of the Palestinians, their memories are the details and scenes of past lives—those rich memories manifest a beauty and happiness that has become so hard to emulate in the present time, far from home. That happiness, before the Nakba in "Paradise Lost" and despair after the Nakba, makes a huge difference. Therefore, the Nakba became an open wound in the hearts of the Palestinians, one that could not be healed.

THE MEMORY OF NAKBA AS A CULTURAL MEMORY, AND ITS ROLE IN STRENGTHENING COLLECTIVE MEMORY

What is common between Palestinians, young or old, rich or poor, man or woman, is the common experience of the Nakba and what it represented as a common feature that binds them together and distinguishes them from others, which makes them a group distinguished from other Arabs.

As is well known, the connection and communication between members of any group depend on language, religion, blood kinship, history, land, and other factors that bind all individuals together. On the other hand, members of a group feel a sense of belonging to the community, but this kind of bond is not fixed and changes according to circumstances. This is still based on a sense of belonging which is not constant, though it depends on a common history and culture. Therefore, a person may choose to withdraw from the group and belong to another because their identity might contradict their new interests dictated by different circumstances.

Based on this, there was an assumption that it would be normal that the Palestinians would choose new affiliations under their new circumstances after the collapse of their traditional society, and the ties between its members were broken after the Nakba in 1948. It is noteworthy that most Palestinians of the diaspora lived in neighboring countries. This means that they did not confront cultures different from their own because they were still living an Arab-Islamic life. That is why it was logical that they would become integrated into their host societies based on their political and economic interests. That is why, with the lack of a common economic status, the assumption was that it would be easier for the Palestinians to become gradually integrated into their host societies. In addition, there was an assumption that their collective memory might become weakened with time, thus weakening what binds them together until Palestinian society would be totally extinguished and thus the Palestinians would disappear as a people with time. This is what the Israelis hoped for.

But in fact, as we know, Palestinian identity did not disappear, nor did the Palestinian people, which indicates that the Palestinian identity is a cohesive force that continues to unite them as a society, and that their sense of belonging to Palestinian identity did not change and did not transform. Certainly, external factors prevent their affiliation to a new group and actually reinforce their original affiliation, that is, their affiliation to Palestinian identity. Of these external factors, there are the economic problems that face

the majority of Palestinians. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of resources and education, poor living conditions, and other problems have made it more difficult for Palestinians to integrate into their host societies. At the same time, documents and identity cards, that outside factors attributed to them such as “Palestinian refugee,” “Palestine afflicted,” and “Refugees,” unwittingly contributed to defining the scope of the Palestinian group and highlighted its characteristics, which increased the feeling of difference between them and the host community. This helped to reinforce their awareness of their affiliation as Palestinians.

However, it is not sufficient for any group to depend on external factors, whatever they may be. The most important factor for the social cohesion of a community is the force of attraction between its members, that is, the force that binds a person to those around them within one space, preserves common characteristic between members, and links the present with the past as well. It makes members depend, in the present and in the future, on their experiences, expertise, and memories, which contribute to maintaining the continuity and development of the group.

The binding force for the Palestinians after the Nakba was their common experiences and memories, which unites and distinguishes them from other Arabs. Before the Nakba, the Arabs inside Palestine were similar to those who lived outside it. However, after the Nakba, the destiny of the Palestinians differed from other Arabs who were able to establish their own states. The Palestinians were to suffer from expulsion from their villages, cities, and land, and from a diasporic existence, living without having a nationality or identity. In addition, their history and landmarks in that Holy Land were wiped out. Yet, this tragic destiny was a formative factor for them because it united all the Palestinians of various groups and classes. It enhanced the common and binding characteristics of the Palestinian group and distinguished it from other groups. It also contributed to narrowing the differences between rich and poor, and between various classes.

The memories of the Palestinians signify that the Nakba is not yet over, for it is still carved deep in their hearts, and its impact is still strong in their lives to the extent that for them it is the part of the “continuous present.” For these memories link the present and the past, making the latter continuously affect the former, which results in formulating a common identity that survives the challenges of time and preserves the continuity of this defined social group. This means that the Nakba was not only a turning point for the Palestinians but also became the source of an independent Palestinian

identity as well as their unique culture. For its stories are carved deep into the conscious of the Palestinians and are told by one generation to the next, and will never be forgotten. The Nakba for the Palestinians is like the genesis mythology that explains “Who are we?,” “Where did we come from?,” and “Where are we heading to?” Although it happened seventy years ago, the Nakba still guides the present and lights the path to the future. That is why the Nakba became the starting point for the modern history of the Palestinians and the reason for the current conditions in which they find themselves.

The Nakba has two essential roles in building Palestinian national identity, which are defined as “the Cornerstone” and “the dimension that conflicts with reality.” The first was most evident in the loss of Palestine in 1948, which every Palestinian refers to when they think of their current conditions and their causes. The current situation is the result of the Nakba, whereas the Palestinian became different from other Arabs and passed through experiences different from theirs, hence it is true to refer to the Palestinian identity as a primary one for any Palestinian. As for the second role, it is expressed in the contradiction between the present and the past. The gap widens whenever a Palestinian remembers their “lost paradise” and compares it with their current reality and the dire situation in which they live, as opposed to past memory. This contradiction has generated a driving force for generations of Palestinians to continuously fight and resist to reclaim their rights to return to their homeland and to fight for self-determination.

CONCLUSIONS

The Nakba is not just one of the incidents that occurred on the land of Palestine, but rather it is the succession of a series of historical transformations. Although Palestinian society collapsed after the Nakba and dispersed, and did not find any governmental or quasi-governmental body to rely on, the Palestinian community did not implode and disintegrate from within, but rather an awareness of the collective identity, that is, the Palestinian identity, grew within it. The Nakba became the incentive that forced them to unite in solidarity in the face of the tragedy and made them realize the existence of the increasing common characteristics amongst them, as well as the distinct characteristics they have which differentiates them from the rest of the Arabs.

Any social group, whether small or large, needs continuity if it has qualities common to all its members and which are distinct from others outside that

social group. As for the Palestinian community, the common and distinct characteristic of its members is their common experience of the Nakba, and the continuity of this group depends, to a large extent, on whether this common experience will be forgotten in the memory of the individual or in the collective memory. Therefore, the Palestinians cling to their memories of their land, cities, countryside, and past lives. This indicates that this type of memory is an eternal memory that cannot be forgotten, which contributes to the continuation of their collective identity. Perhaps this “Lost Paradise” in Palestinian collective memory can reinforce the Palestinians’ sense of belonging to a Palestinian identity, and make them build their past in line with their identity and interests as a group. Choosing the contents of memory, in the process of building collective memory, and building identity on Palestinian memories are two processes that interact with each other. This is what the Palestinians did, as the memories of their land and homeland and their happy life before the Nakba, and their stubborn adherence to this wounded memory, helped build their past and load it into their collective memory and identity. Thus, the Palestinian Nakba is considered to be the source of their identity, and it is what made of them a people who believes in “Return to Palestine is My Right and My Decision.” ■

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