What Does Israel Fear from Palestine?

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ALSO BY RAJA SHEHADEH

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To Andrew Franklin –
friend, publisher and long-time editor

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PART ONE

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of hope in the world. The Cold War seemed to be over. In the summer of 1987 David Bowie sang at the Berlin Wall, as if preparing the way for what would happen there two years later when, on 9 November 1989, the spokesman for East Berlin's Communist Party announced a change in the city's relations with the West. Starting at midnight, citizens of the GDR would be free to cross the country's borders. The Wall had fallen.

Meanwhile in South Africa positive developments were taking place that culminated in elections being held on 27 April 1994 in which all South Africans, whatever their colour, were able to vote. When South Africa repealed the Population Registration Act – by which rights were withheld on the basis of racial segregation – the apartheid system was effectively ended.

The first question I want to ask here is why hopeful events like these that resulted in the resolution of long-standing endemic injustices didn't inspire the Israeli government to end the occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, resolve outstanding issues between Palestinians and Israelis and usher in a lasting peace? Then there are two related questions: why didn't the world put its weight behind moves to make this happen; and, thinking about the current situation, what role might the Gaza war, with its terrible human toll, play – if any – in bringing about the beginning of a global shift?

There are no simple answers, but I want to suggest some new ways to think about these problems.

In the past, when I asked left-leaning Israeli friends why the end of apartheid in South Africa was not an inspiration for Israelis, I received two different answers. The first was that the whites in South Africa lost whereas the Israelis have not. This idea distressed me, because it indicated that they believed the end of white

supremacy meant defeat for the white population. They apparently couldn't see that it was in fact a victory for both sides. The second, more convincing, answer was that the Israelis did not see their situation as being in any way akin to apartheid and so did not think that it needed a similar resolution.

Some readers might be wondering why I was asking these questions when the answer is obvious. The world made an effort to get the parties together in 1991 with the convening of the International Peace Conference in Madrid in the presence of Arab states and Israel. And this effort eventually ended in 1993 with the signing of the Oslo Accords, celebrated by the famous handshake on the White House lawn between Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, which was shown repeatedly on TV screens all over the world. But before I elaborate on why I believe these events offered only illusory hopes, I want to go back to the second answer given by Israelis to explain the lack of any positive inspiration and the failure to link the apartheid regime

in South Africa and the situation in Israel/Palestine.

To understand the difference between how Israelis see the history of their state and how Palestinians see it, we need to go back to the formative events of 1948, the year the state of Israel was established, and reflect on the Nakba, or 'Catastrophe', which is the term used by Palestinians to describe what happened then.

Israel talks of the 1948 war as its war of independence. This is strange, because by doing so the country is suggesting that it gained its independence from the British. But it was the British who, in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 – over a century ago – promised the land, with its majority of Palestinian Arabs, to the Jews. The declaration stated that 'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people …' And it was the British who worked throughout the British Mandate over Palestine from 1922 to 1948 to facilitate the creation of a Jewish state there in accordance with the terms of that mandate. I would suggest that the real

reason why it makes this claim is that Israel was anxious to position itself within the group of decolonised nations.

The new country proceeded without delay to reinvent history in such a way as to exclude any recognition of the presence of the original non-Jewish inhabitants, not only forcing most of them out but also removing any sign of their former presence and history in the land. In support of this, Israel treated the Bible as a historical document and used it to back up the claim that the land had belonged to Jews from time immemorial, having been promised to them by the Almighty.

In other words, in 1948 there was an attempt to rewrite the entire history of Palestine: this was year zero, after which a new history would begin with the in-gathering of Jews to their historic homeland, Israel. The towns and villages from which the Palestinians were forced out were quickly demolished and a worldwide campaign was waged to seek contributions for planting trees in the forests that were established where these villages had once stood, in

order to completely conceal their prior existence. In some cases new Israeli towns and kibbutzim were constructed over these ruins and Hebrew names were given to them. The National Naming Committee was a public body appointed by the government of Israel to replace Arabic names that had existed until 1948 with Hebrew ones, although traces of the Arabic names haunted the process. Thus the name of the famous Ramon Crater in the Negev is derived not from the Hebrew adjective *ram* (meaning 'elevated'), as Israeli guidebooks state, but from the Arabic Wadi Rumman (Valley of Pomegranates), and Nahal Roded was formerly Wadi Raddadi.[1] A new geography was in the making, transforming the country where Palestinians had once lived.

For the Israeli Jews there was a lot to get to grips with and much energy was expended in building up the new nation, an Israeli Jewish nation, in a land that had in large part belonged to another people, the Palestinian Arabs. But while this was a mission for the Israeli Jews, for the Palestinians it was another story.

For the disenfranchised it was a confusing time. Over 700,000 Palestinians who were forced out during and after the 1948 war had to manage to survive after losing their land, their property and their whole way of life. For the Palestinian minority who managed to remain in their villages and cities in what became Israel, it was an equally bewildering time, especially when they were forced to celebrate Independence Day in the country that had usurped their own.

This is best evoked, using satire and self-deprecating humour, by the dramatist Salim Dau in his play *Sag Salem*, in which he describes how Palestinians in Israel were taught in school the same myth that whole generations of Israeli youth have been brought up on – namely that Israeli Jews fought and won their independence from the British. Not only does this deny the presence of the Palestinian Arabs from whom the land had to be wrenched, but it also falsifies history by failing to credit the British contribution to the creation of Israel, most notably through the Balfour Declaration of

1917 and the very terms of the British Mandate in Palestine. Moreover, it places Israel rather strangely in the family of nations that have overcome imperialism and secured their independence from colonisers. Salim Dau and his fellow villagers knew that once you became a citizen of the new state you had to celebrate its Independence Day, otherwise you'd be viewed with suspicion.

What was young Salim to make of this, when his fellow villagers were not allowed to return to their homes and were called 'infiltrators' when they tried, as if returning to the place they had lived all their life was an act of sabotage? And how strange it must have been for those who had just lost everything to have to swallow their pride and celebrate the Independence Day of the country that had caused the Nakba.

At a performance of his play in Ramallah's Cultural Palace in the summer of 2013, Salim offered us a different take. In satirical mode he informed us, his Ramallah audience, that the only time he and his fellow villagers felt free was on Israel's Independence Day, when they

had time off work. The women would prepare food and everyone then crowded into trucks – no parking tickets were issued that day – and headed off for a picnic, cheering and singing loudly when they drew near a police car. They would reach Lake Tiberias in northern Israel early, spread out their rugs close to the water and start their barbecue fires, singing and dancing all the while. As he described it, 'Every year a few people died swimming. Why not? We Arabs drown in their independence. Then in the evening we would feel sad and depressed at having to return home. Here our freedom ends … so that the freedom of others, which is democracy, can begin.' This last phrase Salim declaimed loudly, as one chanting a slogan.

While he and the other estimated 160,000 Palestinians who managed to stay in what became Israel had to endure their strange new fate, the generation of Palestinians born in the West Bank after 1948, on the other side of the Armistice border or Green Line, lived under Jordanian rule in almost total ignorance of what was happening in neighbouring Israel.

The conceit goes that prior to the 'return' of the exiled Jews there was a land devoid of people. The Palestinians who happened to be there only arrived when the first Zionist colonisation began, because this created economic opportunities for them. Otherwise the land was fallow, an empty desert waiting for 2,000 years for its original and true owners, the Jews, to return and populate it once again. It is no coincidence that this is the exact justification given by colonialists throughout history the world over.

Ridiculous as this account might now sound, it was widely held at the time and continues to be propagated and, what is even stranger, accepted by most people in the world. There is still no Hebrew word for the greatest catastrophe that the establishment of Israel caused the Palestinians which we call our Nakba. And recently commemoration of the Nakba in Israel was made illegal by law. Insisting on this version of reality in his meeting with President Macron in Paris on 10 December 2017, the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu,

said that before they could come to the negotiating table, the Palestinians would have to recognise the historic reality that Jerusalem has been the capital of Israel for 3,000 years. As evidence for this, he turned to the Bible.

That the Palestinians must accept this travesty as a prerequisite for moving towards peace confirms that even the most absurd definition of reality is determined by those with power. For nearly fifty-seven years Israel has had the power to deny the applicability of the secular law of nations, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including eastern Jerusalem – all occupied territories recognised as such by the community of nations – and instead to base its claims on the Bible.

On 5 November 2018 Netanyahu stated, 'Power is the most important thing in foreign policy. "Occupation" is nonsense. There are powerful states that have occupied and transferred populations, and no one talks about them.'[2]

*

The loss of Palestine in 1948 came as a shock and led to decades of despair for Palestinians. They had not believed that the small Jewish community in Palestine would succeed in driving out most Palestinians from their homes and replacing them with Jews. In part, this was a failure of imagination, due to the experiential gap that existed between the zealous Jewish fighters, many of whom had been witnesses to the Holocaust, and the unsuspecting Palestinians. And this was horribly similar to what happened to us after 1967, when as a result of the June War Israel conquered and occupied the West Bank, the Golan Heights, Gaza and Sinai. We also failed to imagine that Israel could get away with settling over 750,000 Israeli Jews in our midst in the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem. It used to take us a whole year to build a single house. The idea of the Israelis commandeering an entire hill, building houses for a Jewish settlement and managing to supply it with water and electricity at speed was beyond us. How could we have imagined that in these remote locations new settlements

would be established that would sweep away the olive groves, changing the entire character of the area we knew and replacing our terraced hills with a concrete landscape, row upon row of uniform houses and straight, multi-lane highways?

A prominent Israeli novelist has repeated what many other Israeli propagandists have said, that the establishment of Israel was nothing short of a miracle. As revelations from the recently opened archives confirm, it was no miracle at all. Given the balance of military power and planning, it was predictable that the Zionists would win the 1948 war against the so-called seven Arab armies that fought to prevent the establishment of the state. The real miracle was Israel's success in ridding the land of its people, while continuing to deny what happened without any international rebuke or pressure to implement the Palestinians' right of return. Despite all our attempts at writing about the situation, we Palestinians seem not to have made a dent in the way these events were seen by Israelis and indeed the outside world.

So how did the Arabic word *nakba* come to be used to describe what happened in 1948? The hostilities between Israeli and Arab forces that eventually led to the forcing out of the majority of the Palestinian Arab inhabitants of what became Israel were a defeat for the Arab side and a resounding victory for the Israeli side. The Arabic word for defeat is *hazimeh*. But this was not the word chosen to describe what happened. Why?

A defeat usually means that a society or nation suffers a setback, has its values called into question. It might take many years for it to pull itself together, rebuild what it has lost and perhaps rise again. This is what happened in 1945 to Germany and to Japan after the Second World War. To different extents both had all or parts of their territories occupied by the victors. And both soon developed into powerful nations. But the case of Palestine is different.

What happened in Palestine was the utter dissolution of the nation. The people were forced out of their homeland and dispersed,

one part in the Gaza Strip under Egypt, another in the West Bank and East Jerusalem under Jordan, and the rest scattered in refugee camps in surrounding countries. Yet they were not defined within the UN Refugee Convention as refugees. The Palestinians who were forced out of their homes in 1948 were not regarded by Israel as refugees. That would have implied that Palestine was their country, to which they should be allowed to return. On both counts this was not how the Israeli authorities saw it, and they did their best to make sure the return would never happen. In addition, the Palestinian refugees were not placed under the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) when it was established in 1951. Rather than be placed under the UNHCR and be subject to the legal regime of international refugees established in 1951, they were accorded special status and a unit was created by the UN specifically to take care of them. This was the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), from whose title the word 'refugees' is remarkable by its absence (although the full name includes

'for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East'). The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol excludes Palestine refugees as long as they receive assistance from UNRWA. And yet this did not stop the right-wing Israeli government from doing its best to destroy that organisation. The latest attempt was during the current Gaza war, when Israel accused ten UNRWA employees of participating in the 7 October 2023 killings, leading major donors to withhold their funding to UNRWA, which provides services to nearly 6 million Palestinian refugees in three countries and in the Occupied Territories, including eastern Jerusalem.

With the creation of Israel, Palestine ceased to exist. To this day Israel refuses to recognise the existence of the Palestinians as a nation entitled to exercise self-determination. This situation became starker with the outbreak of the Gaza war, as in the course of fighting Hamas the Israeli army has proceeded to kill tens of thousands, to destroy homes and to demolish Palestinian universities, museums

and historical sites as though to obliterate Palestinian existence.

To describe what befell the Palestinian nation in 1948 a word stronger than defeat with a different connotation was needed. After much deliberation, the word that came to be used was *nakba*, because what happened was no less than a total catastrophe. Yet catastrophe denies the victim agency: it is as though a physical catastrophe, a natural disaster, befell the Palestinians in the face of which they were powerless. Until the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the late 1960s, Palestinian refugees had no voice and were generally passive. The PLO gave them agency and they embraced the armed struggle against Israel.

The Israeli version of what happened in 1948 is the dominant narrative, and it is a narrative supported by that most popular of books, the Bible, not to mention by sympathy in the wake of one of the worst atrocities in modern history, the Holocaust. It was against this background that the Palestinians had to tell the world their version of what befell them in 1948

and we are still not successful in getting this across.

In his essay 'Permission to Narrate', the Palestinian scholar Edward Said pointed out that even as Palestinians were supported by the legality, legitimacy and authority of international law, resolutions and consensus, which is the case to this day, US policymakers and media outlets simply refused to 'make connections, draw conclusions, [and] state the simple facts'. This refusal remains a mainstay of US media and politics, including a rejection of the central truth that the Palestinian narrative 'stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine'.[3]

The Nakba was the most central and formative experience of my life. I was born, after it occurred, in the town of Ramallah in the West Bank, where my family was exiled from their coastal home in the bustling city of Jaffa. All the talk as I grew up was of the lost land and the shock and horror of what had happened to us, with evidence of the suffering all around us.