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Memory of the *Nakba* in the Palestinian Public Sphere

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The *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 is the main event of modern Palestinian history. The status of this formative trauma is more important than other memories and symbols that were established in the Palestinian national consciousness. At the same time, this memory serves as the most intense and tangible embodiment of the story of the Palestinians' past, and as an interpretation of their existence in the present, and constitutes a kind of "Pillar of Fire" that marks the path of their future progress and long-term collective goals.

The modern nation-state has powerful instruments for instilling collective memory in the public sphere, such as: ceremonies whose purpose is to involve the public in commemorative activities, thus deepening its emotional identification with the collective memory; construction of memorial sites and monuments, which become part of the daily space; and naming streets and institutions. The French historian Pierre Nora called the variety means of bridging the gap between the past and the present "memorial sites," which include not only physical places, but also days of remembrance, textbooks, objects, and more.¹

The memory of the *Nakba* has undergone many incarnations since 1948, but it has never been forgotten, silenced, or pushed to the margins — a claim prevalent in the Palestinian historiographical narrative, but also in the Western and Israeli ones. The memory of this trauma lives on with great intensity at the popular level, especially in the family and community discourses, and in Palestinian artistic and cultural production. On the political level, the memory of the *Nakba* has evolved, but it never

¹ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History - On the Problem of Place," *Zmanim* [Hebrew], No. 45 (Summer 1993), p. 8.

completely disappeared. Thus, after 1967, the PLO – which sought to establish itself as a national leadership – tried to formulate Palestinian collective feelings in the form of political goals, and for this purpose, shaped the memory of the Nakba as a means of encouraging armed struggle and the right of return, with relatively little emphasis on the Nakba at the level of individual memory.

The signing of the Oslo Accords (September 1993) and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the summer of 1994 were important junctions in the Palestinians' history, which led to the establishment of a Palestinian government that governs Palestinian society in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Although it does not have full sovereign powers and its influence is limited by Israel, the PA has the means to shape the collective consciousness and memory of Palestinians, through its control of education, media, politics, and the public sphere.

The establishment of the PA also marked a change in the intensity and the means of commemorating the Nakba memory. In the background were two major events. The first was the signing of the Oslo Accords. Along with the outburst of joy and optimism, there was also a deep concern, especially among the refugees, about the possibility that the Accords would lead to Israel conceding the right of return. The second event occurred in May 1998, when Israel marked its 50th anniversary, and the Palestinians observed half a century since their catastrophe. The awakening that took place around this event stemmed from a Palestinian aspiration to create an alternative picture to the one Israel sought to present, along with a growing fear that the Nakba memory was fading, as a result of the time that had elapsed since this historical event and the declining number of Palestinians who had directly experienced it.

Nurturing the memory of the Nakba and emphasizing the right of return since 1998 have occupied a central role in the Palestinian Authority's pursuit of various goals: uniting the people around the government, while strengthening its domestic legitimacy; pushing back on the criticism that conducting political negotiations had caused the PA to turn its back on the grassroots Palestinian national goals; and mobilizing the public in times of struggle against Israel.

Consequently, May 15, was set as a state Memorial Day and was given the official name "Nakba Day." This Memorial Day was commemorated in the public sphere through a series of ceremonies: Mass rallies in Palestinian municipalities, the main one taking place in Ramallah; marches with signs bearing the names of the Palestinian settlements that were destroyed in 1948, as well as huge keys, a symbol of the houses that were destroyed and the longing to return to them; a moment of

silence or a siren sounding in honor of the day; and, the waving black flags in the streets and over the rooftops.

In addition to the ceremonies, the Palestinian Authority has decided to rename streets, squares, and state institutions, especially schools and military bases, after settlements that were destroyed in 1948, and in particular, those from which a significant portion of the refugees came. Thus, in Ramallah and al-Bireh, streets were named after villages located in the areas of Jerusalem, Lod, and Ramla: Kafr ‘Ana, Barfiliya, Bayt Nabala, Jimzu, ‘Imwas, ‘Innaba, Qalunya and al-Castel, and also in Qalqilya, where streets were named after the villages Kfar Saba and Miska, as well as in Tulkarm (Qaqun); and in the Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, streets were named after the villages of Yibna, Barbara, al-Majdal, Bashit, Bayt Daras, and al-Masmiyya.

The construction of monuments was relatively limited, possibly due to the basic budgetary constraints of the PA. In the established sites, the use of the most tangible and dominant symbol for the 1948 events – the key of return – stood out. This symbol appears in huge sculptures placed in main squares in Palestinian cities, such as the "Return Gate" erected on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Nakba at the entrance to the al-‘Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, topped by a large 10-meter metal key. Similar monuments were erected in the ‘Aqabat Jaber refugee camp in Jericho, and in the city centers of Rafah and al-Bireh.

Like the PA, the Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip also sought to anchor the memory of the Nakba in the public sphere, both to establish its contribution to the national effort in the collective memory and to place a competing narrative to the one promoted by the PA. Hence, Hamas promoted a variety of projects in the public sphere: presetting large maps of "historic Palestine" on the streets; fixing benches on the promenade along the Gaza coast with the names of the settlements destroyed in 1948; and, placing traffic signs that blend past and present and create a geographical space that combines reality and imagination. Thus, a road sign placed in Rafah provided direction to all settlements in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, but also to settlements engraved in the Palestinian "historical memory," such as Isdod (Ashdod) and al-Majdal (Ashkelon), which are no longer populated by Palestinians.

The Palestinian government’s effort to anchor the memory of the Nakba "from above" in the public sphere was combined with a "bottom-up" popular effort, which was more modest but began before the state initiatives. Since 1948, due to a lack of self-governance, Palestinians have acted voluntarily in the territories and diaspora

to commemorate the Nakba in the public sphere by naming businesses, cemeteries, and, at times, streets in the refugee camps after the names of their former settlements, as well as by creating murals in those streets.

During the last 25 years, the Arab public in Israel has also been involved in the effort to anchor the memory of the Nakba in the public sphere, an effort that is especially noticeable in localities with an absolute Arab majority. For example, in Umm al-Fahm, streets are named after the villages of 'Ayn Ghazal and Kafr Lam, which were located until 1948 near this city, and some of their inhabitants later settled there after their homes were destroyed; In Tamra, streets were named after the villages of Hawsha and al-Kassair, which were located in the Western Galilee; In Shefar'am, streets are named after Kafr Bir'im, Saffuriya, and Ijzim; And in Kfar Kassem streets are named after Deir Yassin, Yafa, and al-Majdal. In addition, monuments bearing the names of the destroyed settlements were erected. For example, a memorial site for the Land Day was created in Taybeh, engraved with the names of the settlements; and, a huge sign in the shape of a key was placed at the entrance to Umm al-Fahm.

The Palestinian Authority's effort to instill the Nakba memory into the Palestinian collective has been a success. It is a memory that enjoys a dominant status among all elements in the Palestinian system, constitutes a unifying element in an arena saturated with division and struggle, and harmoniously blends institutional and popular commemoration efforts. However, the commemoration of the memory of the Nakba in general, and the effort to anchor it in the public sphere in particular, has not been accompanied to date by national controversies regarding the meaning and values behind it, as has happened in the West, Israel, and parts of the Arab world (especially Egypt) regarding the symbols of their respective collective memories. This is probably due to the fact that the Palestinian national movement has not yet achieved the goal of independence, and perhaps only after achieving this goal will it be more natural for different questions and perspectives to arise than during a time when the collective is still being mobilized for the national struggle.

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