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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

For Israelis, an Anniversary. For Palestinians, a Nakba.

By ELIAS KHOURY

IN 1948, during the war known to the Israelis as the war of independence, the historian Constantine K. Zurayk wrote the book “Ma’na al-Nakba,” later translated as “The Meaning of the Disaster.” The title struck a resounding chord, and nakba (catastrophe) became the term Palestinians used for the cataclysm that befell them that year.

I always considered the word “catastrophe” inappropriate. It rendered the perpetrator anonymous, and it exempted the vanquished from bearing any responsibility for their defeat. Like many members of my generation, born around the time of the war, I tended to place the blame for our defeat on the traditional Palestinian leadership under the sway of the mufti of Jerusalem, and the Arab regimes of the day.

But Zurayk was neither guileless nor naïve, as we had believed. He coined the term nakba deliberately to convey the impossibility of blocking the project for the Jewish state after the Holocaust.

I didn’t grasp the true meaning of the word until I worked in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. In the alleys and passages of the Shatila camp, I discovered the truth of the catastrophe. Villagers expelled from the Galilee had suddenly found themselves living in huts set up hastily to provide temporary shelter. But the temporary became permanent, and the people were forced to construct a nation for themselves out of words and memories. They gave the various sections of their camps the names of the villages they had fled, and they lived, as they said, “waiting” in a suspended time. Even when the waiting went on too long and became “exile,” they still refused to believe that no one would recognize and authenticate their tragedy.

These peasant farmers, who made up the majority of the Arab population of Palestine in 1948, did not discover that they had had a “nation” of their own until they lost it. They had been living in a historical continuity for hundreds of years, as a succession of invaders of different nationalities and ethnicities took control of their lands and communities. But they were astonished to discover that these new invaders did not wish to control the land in the manner of the former invaders; instead they wanted it emptied of its inhabitants.

The consternation of the Palestinians who told me the stories of their destroyed villages derives, essentially, from the absence of the world’s acknowledgment of them, the lack of credence given to what happened to them. After the Holocaust, it became virtually impossible to condemn any action of the Israeli state. In establishing the state of Israel, the West had found a solution to its moral obligations and a release from the disastrous burden of Nazism.

No one wishes to hear the Palestinian story. Their history has been written by the victors: Israel has thus succeeded in blotting out its “original sin,” as the French author Dominique Vidal referred to the situation. Were it not for the courageous voices of Israeli “new historians” like Ilan Pappé, the world would not have come to admit that a people had been expelled from their land in a comprehensive ethnic cleansing operation, given the name “Plan D” by Israelis.

As Israel celebrates the 60th anniversary of its independence, it is pointedly ignoring two truths: First, that there is another people, composed of the previous inhabitants of the country, who consider that anniversary to be a day of national disaster, and consider the nation of Jewish immigrants to have been built on the rubble of another nation, Palestine.

Second, that Israel’s continued occupation of the remaining portions of Palestine, in the West Bank and Gaza, has transformed the nakba from a historic incident to a daily reality, experienced by Palestinians through the invasive settlements, the wall of separation and the checkpoints that disconnect their lands and sever the links between them, making

their lives a hell on earth.

The peace process has failed, Yasir Arafat has died and the iron fist policy put in place by Ariel Sharon has led to the nearly total defeat of the Palestinian national movement. That defeat is also a product of the short-sightedness of the architects of the Oslo Accords, a framework for future relations between Israel and the anticipated state of Palestine, and the failure of the Palestinian leadership to find new methods of confronting the occupation in keeping with this two-state solution.

The defeat of the secular leaders of the Palestinian national movement has not given Israel the “peace of strength” it has sought since its foundation. Rather, it has brought the region to the brink of the abyss of fundamentalist tendencies.

What successive Israeli governments pretend to forget is that pushing the Palestinians to this destructive brink is not without a cost. Indeed, the Palestinians could drag Israel to the brink along with them. This would mean an open-ended state of war. Unfortunately, this is the direction in which rapidly unfolding developments are now propelling us, as witnessed in Gaza and now in Beirut, with Iran through its allies edging closer to a direct confrontation with Israel.

Israel has depicted the problem as rooted in the Arab world’s refusal to recognize Israel’s right to exist. But even after the majority of Arab states demonstrated their recognition of this right by supporting the Saudi peace initiative of 2002, nothing changed; in fact, things became worse. To Palestinians, the true problem lies in Israel’s rejection of the Palestinian right to an independent state, and in the prevailing Israeli culture’s refusal to recognize that Palestinians were themselves victims of forced expulsion from their lands.

Recognizing the sufferings of the victim, even if they are of the victim of a victim, is the necessary condition for an exit from this long and tragic tunnel. However, as the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci suggests, it is difficult to maintain the optimism of the will in the face of the pessimism of the intellect.

Pessimism of the will is what we are living today in the Middle East. It is a pessimism that warns not only of the danger of recurring episodes of catastrophe as Arab societies break apart, but of the dismal prospect of an endless war that will provoke future tragedies in the 21st century.

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