**JPRS: Palestinian Refugees in the shadow of the demand for “Israel’s Jewishness”**

May 25, 2017

By: Hisham Naffa

Palestinian Return Centre

<https://prc.org.uk/en/post/3692/jprs-palestinian-refugees-in-the-shadow-of-the-demand-for-israel-s-jewishness>

Despite all the attempts at escaping or avoiding the Nakba, it still finds its way back into Israeli awareness. Facing locked doors, the Nakba enters through unofficial windows, and wedges itself deep into the Israeli public awareness. It is a matter of accumulation - quantitative, at first, then qualitative. For example, the word “Nakba” has been employed in Hebrew, using the Arabic lexeme, in the context of the last elections; this is a curious issue, surely, but it is also a serious one. A certain Israeli writer described the final elections’ results as “a Nakba to the peace camp”. Another wrote that the surprise of the last elections and the increased power in the hands of the already-governing Likud party was “a Nakba to pollsters”. A newspaper ran the following headline: “The Nakba of Polling Institutes - A Catastrophe Foretold.” Yet another commentator spoke of “the media’s Nakba”. Just like “Intifada”, the Nakba as a lexeme and as an idea is bound to sink into the Hebrew language and the Israeli awareness.

The Israeli political right wing has come up with many laws aimed at preventing the idea of the Nakba from infiltrating into the Israeli public awareness. In November 2014, the ministry of culture called to halt all economic support to a movie theater in Tel Aviv, because it had hosted the “Nakba Film Festival”, organized by Zochrot (“Remembering” in Hebrew, an NGO working to promote acknowledgement and accountability for the ongoing injustices of the Nakba).1 Even the Supreme Court, in January of 2012, ratified the Nakba Act2, which had been part of a dirty flow of racist laws brought forth by the school of settler MKs. The Nakba Act gives the finance minister the authorization to impose fines on institutes receiving money from the state, in case said institutes organize any events commemorating “Israel’s day of independence or the creation of the state as a day of mourning” or any activities denying “the definition of the state of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.”

After repeating the “recognition of Israel as a Jewish state as a prerequisite for a settlement agreement” mantra for so long, Benjamin Netanyahu confessed: Palestinians must give up on the right of return (November of 2013).3 Therein lies the deepest political meaning of “the state’s identity”: a mere veneer hiding the imposition of policies, and a new manifestation of the Israeli logic of no-ism. It is as though he was composing a new opus of separation barriers between the reality of ongoing occupation, colonisation and dispossession of refugees, and any possibility for an agreement that would be permanent and just (or, rather, semi-just; no one will rebuild the destroyed Palestine). All these infinite no’s: “No!” to ending the occupation and dismantling its militaristic, colonialist, political and economic apparatuses; “No!” to the return to the borders of 1967 and all that this entails in terms of sweeping all settlements away and retreating from occupied East Jerusalem, and “No!” to respecting or implementing any of the refugees’ legitimate rights, as stipulated in Resolution 194 of the General Assembly.4

What does it even mean for any state to demand that a foreign party in a negotiation process take part in determining its own character, as a prerequisite for any settlement with said party? We could argue, with a hint of irony, that by demanding the aforementioned, the Israeli government is giving up on some of its sovereignty, assuming the matter of sovereignty is a decision to be taken exclusively by a state as an internal affair. Any state’s character is a sovereign decision, an internal affair - the Israeli authorities themselves doubt the legitimacy of their own state, and they will continue to do so even if they get recognition from Palestinians (and all Arabs). Casting this doubt away requires that the state face its own history and the crimes perpetrated as it was created over the debris of Palestine. There are two available options: the state can either confess and face its own actions, which might stop many of the monstrous, psychopathic, continuous behaviors symptomatic of the Sisyphean escape from the crimes perpetrated; or it can refuse to confess and keep on searching for impossible legitimizations for the crimes.

In the first scenario, if Israel were to officially recognize the perpetrated crimes, it would be contributing considerably to the path of reconciliation - the reconciliation with the Palestinian people, its victim, and perhaps even with its own self. However, this sadly remains way beyond the horizon, seeing as the state’s institution still has a colonialist tendency and practice: it is surrounded by the Arab orient, but imagines it is located right across from Los Angeles. Ehud Barak, former commander in chief, put it this way: Israel’s situation can be likened to a ‘villa in a jungle.’5 For this pompous, war-profiteering millionaire, the surrounding Arabs are, at best, wild beasts or groups of savages. In the second scenario, if Israel refuses to recognize that which it has perpetrated, the ruling Israeli circles might as well demand that the Palestinian people take part in this act of denial and disavowal of the atrocities committed against their own selves. Demanding that Palestinians recognize a Jewish Israel is equivalent to demanding they give legitimacy to the institutional Zionist narrative - “an historic right” to Palestine, a (Jewish) people in a land without a (Palestinian) people; the criminal is essentially demanding that the victim sign his decree of innocence.6 However, hidden behind this idiotic device is a concrete and direct political aim, carefully and meticulously planned. It is obvious that the issue that most haunts the official Israeli institution is that of the refugees. The mere act of delving into this issue, let alone recognizing the responsibility for it, would implode the larger part of the official Israeli narrative, filled with holes that it has accumulated over the last decades. The cover usually provided by the institution’s spokespeople, justifying why they would not even venture anywhere near this core issue is a “demographic” one - that is, the one directly linked to this divine belief that grants the state certain divine identities.

It is important to be aware of what hides behind the Israeli demand - its rulers are not satisfied with the recognition of Israel’s sovereignty; they seek to blackmail and enforce a sovereignty of a very specific kind -namely an ethnic, or rather a religious sovereignty- as they continue their efforts of transforming Jewish culture and traditions into distorted political tools, which they use to justify mortal sins. This is precisely what Zionism has done to Judaism (two different ideologies, we must always remember). In the past 8 years, the Israeli government has made the point of “recognizing Israel’s Jewishness” a pivotal point. In the beginning of November of 2016, the right-wing government stated it considered the denial of the “state’s Jewishness” to be the essence of the conflict! This is what we should call “a preemptive condition”: imposing the outcomes of a negotiation process before it even starts. This condition is exceptional and quite bizarre in the matrix of international relations. Not only is it a result of a radical, racist and bigoted auto-seclusion practiced in the Israeli situation, essentially excluding anyone who is not Jewish, but it is also an extremely clever political tactic. The official Israeli approach to the state’s definition as “Jewish” is not a mere cultural or symbolic issue - it is an actual mathematic issue, measured using demographic tools: the number of Jews versus the number of Palestinians. This institution is not content with demanding recognition of the state as “embodying the right of Jewish self-determination” - self-determination being the most common justification, generally, for modern nation states; instead, it demands that the whole world recognize its own ideological definition of itself. Put another way: the institution seeks to impose the basic tenets of the Zionist movement - an ideological movement - as if they were universal rights that must be recognized by all.

This gives rise to two major things: first, it allows the Zionist movement to clean its hands of the ethnic cleansing perpetrated by its different institutions during and after the Nakba of 19487 and, second, it gives it a chance to argue that implementing the rights of Palestinian refugees is not possible because it would harm the state’s Jewishness. The issue of the state’s Jewishness, then, goes beyond the symbolic battlefield; it is part of the planned and strategized Israeli policies. Ever since the Nakba, at every stage, there has been one issue that has troubled and haunted the Israeli institution, namely that of the rights of Palestinian refugees, whom it expelled from their homes by force with weapons and whose villages it destroyed by the hundreds. History, with its many political twists and turns, has forced the Israeli institutions to officially recognize the existence of the Palestinian people, thereby recognizing its right to self-determination in an independent state. Before the early 1990’s, the Palestinian cause mainly appeared in this institution’s discourse whenever it discussed annexing some of the Palestinian lands it had occupied in 1967 to Jordan or Egypt, as if the conflict was a mere matter of redrawing borders. However, the national Palestinian struggle, blooming in the form of a popular Intifada in December of 19878, imposed with unprecedented quality and force an official Israeli recognition of this people’s self-determination.

Thus, ever since the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations began, the Israeli institution admits (only in discourse, it should be noted) the possibility of the creation of a Palestinian entity (of some sort). If we scan the current Israeli political map briefly, we would see that most of its constituents state this, however begrudgingly. Even Benjamin Netanyahu does. Of course, a mere statement is of no use; the actual Israeli practices cast very serious doubts over the intentions and aims hidden beneath all the protocol statements made. This is most obvious in its disrespect towards any of the agreements it signs, and in all the brutal and recurring military incursions, whose political aim is to destroy the institutional infrastructure of Palestinian politics, whether in the West Bank in the beginning of this century, or later on in the Gaza strip. The objective, of course, is to prevent the establishment of even the tiniest nucleus of an independent Palestinian entity. Although the Israeli institution argues and claims to officially accept the creation of an independent Palestinian entity, we need to break through this declaratory sound barrier and get to the content, the content being the official and actual Israeli stance regarding the rights of Palestinian refugees. To this day, the Israeli approach has been based on disintegrating, or even scattering, the Palestinian cause: on the one hand, the Israeli institution insists on a step-wise formula, which has infamously become known as “Gaza and Jericho first”.9 On the other hand, it scatters the different issues encompassed in the Palestinian cause across different time points in the future, then diligently postpones them using militaristic and colonialist powers. This, of course, is besides the fact that it deals with the whole ordeal as if it began in June of 1967, in order to shelve the oldest and most difficult files - those of 1948, and especially the refugees file.

There are two forms for the proposed political settlement of what is termed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (a misleading term, since it presupposes and imposes a power balance between the two sides, despite the fact that one side expelled the other, then occupied and colonized the land, while the other side was a victim of these violent practices). The first form is the creation of two, independent states; the second is the creation of a single, shared state. There are different debates in that respect. Some are dichotomous in nature (“either this or that”), while others prefer to put the matter in its historical context, calling for the need to first end the occupation of the lands occupied in 1967 and the creation of an independent Palestinian state, and to then achieve conciliation (which is not the same as settlement) between the two peoples, a step which could perhaps lead to living in a future shared state. However, no matter how diverse these debates are, it is holding on to the rights of refugees that keeps things in perspective and contributes to shaping a solution that is clearer and more implementable. Holding on to the rights of refugees is a prerequisite for any form of conciliation, no matter how impossible such conciliation seems to be at the moment.

It is thus important to deal with the issue of ambiguity in the form of settlement that stipulates creating two states. It is an issue that came about as a result of the changes in the politico-historical process. The Israeli institution rejected this settlement outright for years, even though it is a variation on a formula agreed upon globally, in the form of the Partition Plan.10 When it had to accept the Plan, albeit diplomatically, it changed the content, or rather undermined it completely, by transforming the equation and deleting its major variable: refugee rights. This is where different parties started using the term “the two-state solution”, which led to a state of ambiguity and borderline confusion, since different speakers mean different things by it. The content of these “two states”, as declared by the PLO, is radically different from that proposed by the major Zionist parties in Israel. Neglecting this gap in the intentions of different parties with respect to the settlement formula has led to many a (controversial) debate, even among those championing the same, single cause - Palestinians, namely. Rather than having a debate based on serious intellectual or practical attempts at clarifying the different possibilities given the actual reality, and building a political vision accordingly, the debate digressed into purely theoretical margins. Rather than viewing the debate between the two settlement formulae from an historical perspective that would enable us to lay the matters clearly on the ground, the debate/controversy has been ideologicalized to a near-absolute dichotomy, far removed from the necessary political reading of reality.

The important matter is to pose the following question: how can the rights of Palestinian refugees be achieved and implemented in each case, or in each phase of the proposed settlement agreements? Many were right to consider that the first step should be an Israeli recognition of the cause, and of the responsibility of being the causer and, in consequence, a recognition of the cause’s implications and its responsibility to contribute to its resolution. Some think this is “impossible” in the two-state framework. We could argue that perceiving this as an impossibility is perhaps a result of not noticing the substantial difference that would take place if the Israeli institution were to reach an advanced state of political growth, by assuming and acknowledging responsibility. Every political project may seem a dream in its first phase; the same was true for decades, for example, regarding the recognition of the right for an independent Palestinian state. But history is always a complicated process, and though it constantly begets more complexities, it does open new horizons as well. It should be made clearer, on a popular level, that there is no contradiction between achieving the rights of the refugees and the settlement according to the two-state view, except in the official Israeli framework, which insists on Israel’s Jewishness. Changing perspectives could clarify the fact that the struggle for changing the ideological identity of this state is tightly linked, in the long term, to opening a real horizon and resolving the refugee file, and vice versa. The two processes are intertwined. This also applies to a possible, subsequent phase of the settlement, such as living in a single state after achieving a reconciliation that goes beyond official agreements. The question remains: how will all this be implemented in practice? Therein lies the role and the need for political negotiation. It is high time we pull this process out of its old quadrangular cells, marked by postponement and avoidance of venturing into dangerous waters. Here, it is worth mentioning that to argue that “the Israeli institution will simply reject this” is controversial, since it sequestrates the Palestinian will preemptively, thereby nullifying the struggle! Nothing has ever been achieved in the context of the cause of the Palestinian people except through its struggle, even when the Israeli institution was at its most adamant. We need to reformulate the Palestinian dream/project, which by now suffers from broken bones, the most urgent of which is that internal fracture.

To sum up, the resolution of the Palestinian issue will remain impossible as long as the colonialist structure imposed by the Israeli institution remains in place. Therefore, any settlement that does not include, in its core, granting refugees their rights, according to the wishes and choices of each refugee, will be a mere formality, subject to the prevailing colonialist structure. It is also important to note than dismantling this colonialist structure serves the Jews as well, since it would liberate them, both politically and morally, from taking on the role of human and economic shield to this project based on domination. Dismantling the colonialist structure is what would make the Israeli Jews’ presence in this part of the world natural. The Palestinian cause is about liberation, and not only for the Palestinians!

Hisham Naffa` is an editor and journalist with al-Ittihad,

a Haifa-based daily newspaper.

He also writes a political column for the Beirut daily al-Akhbar.