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Reframing Palestinian Return: A New Al-Shabaka Policy Circle

By: Ahmad Barclay, Dena Qaddumi · November, 2012

"I dream of us no longer being heroes or victims; we want to be ordinary human beings. When a man becomes an ordinary being and pursues his normal activities, he can love his country or hate it, he can emigrate or stay. However, for this to apply there are objective conditions that are not in place. As long as the Palestinian person is deprived of his homeland, he is obliged to be a slave [to] that homeland."
–Mahmoud Darwish, quoted in Badil's Systematical Approach

Two discourses have dominated the return of Palestinian refugees over the past two decades. The first – fuelled by the Oslo process – understands return through a lens of realpolitik: Any implementation of Palestinian return must conform to the demographic, economic and political will of the Israeli establishment. This approach was most recently seen in Mahmoud Abbas's statement that he no longer has the right to live in his hometown of Safad. The second addresses the individual and collective right of return with reference to international law, humanitarian conventions and UN resolutions. The discourses are not mutually exclusive, nor are they the domain of one particular social group, Palestinian, Israeli or otherwise.

However, the Palestinian perspectives in these two discourses have this in common: they are both essentially defensive in nature. The Oslo-fuelled discourse seeks "creative solutions" to accommodate Zionist exceptionalism – specifically the desire for an ethnocracy guaranteed by a Jewish majority. The rights-based

discourse attempts to defend against efforts to undermine, obfuscate or negotiate away the established rights of Palestinian refugees. Neither discourse directly addresses the immediate needs and aspirations of Palestinians themselves, whether they are refugees, internally displaced or non-displaced.

Last year's May 15 march by tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees on Israel's de-facto borders challenged the geopolitical constraints on the existing discourses on return. It especially challenged Israel's hegemony of spatial power and the "sanctity" of geographic boundaries by presenting the image of a possible, different reality. The sudden and large-scale return of refugees simply choosing to walk home seemed capable of overtaking the limited imaginings of both realpolitik and rights discourses.

In a region witnessing an upsurge in grassroots political movements, the time has come for political discourses that consider the possibility of very sudden and dramatic change, while remaining cognisant of everyday lived realities. Furthermore, at a time when the struggle for Palestinian rights is becoming increasingly visible globally, and when the taboo on questioning the Zionist project in the West is slowly being overcome, Palestinians may have an opportunity to shift the mainstream discourse on return. This could be done by accepting the unequivocal recognition of the individual and collective right of return as a given and by focusing instead, on the aspirations of Palestinians – both outside and inside Palestine – toward shaping the future of their homeland.

And, if we are to be straightforward about return, it must be acknowledged that the Palestine of today is not that of the nostalgic image of pre-1948. As a society, Palestinians themselves have transformed, partly due to the varied experiences and consequences of dispossession. Yet in spite of the best efforts of a century of settler colonialism, Palestinians remain a majority in much of their homeland, albeit under de-facto Israeli control, and most refugees and IDPs live just tens of kilometres from their original homes. It also must be recognized that a significant

Jewish-Israeli settler community exists in Palestine/Israel today, the majority of which has known no other home.

As such, we would argue that any discussion of return should be grounded in the notion of decolonization. Given the nature of Palestinian displacement, the implications of this decolonization straddle the borders of historic Palestine. Furthermore, it can neither morally nor practically be reduced to the removal of the settler community. Instead, we believe that to defeat the zero-sum logic of competing ethnic nationalisms, decolonization must be understood as the act of unsettling the colonial apparatus and ideology of Zionism, and bringing about the political, judicial, economic and spatial processes necessary for restorative justice.

The existing discourse on the right of return touches upon defining what Mahmoud Darwish describes as "objective conditions that are not in place." Yet it is his insistence on envisioning the future as a state of the "ordinary" that seems most poignant today. Adopting a long term vision along the lines suggested by Darwish would allow us to invest our creative energies in the actions and mechanisms towards "returning" to such a condition, rather than in envisaging complex future polities in pursuit of a single elusive "solution."

There is no need to start from scratch. The challenge is to build a cohesive narrative and define a clear political horizon on the foundations of 64 years of on-going actions toward return. Beyond the expansive work of Salman Abu Sitta, which asserts the feasibility of the full repatriation of Palestinian refugees, some projects have begun to address the "practicalities" of return. Recently, for example, Badil and Zochrot embarked on a series of joint initiatives to think about the specifics of Palestinian return. Nor do such initiatives need not be framed in the abstract. The multi-faceted struggle of the people of Kafr Bir'im and Iqrit to return to their villages, and the determination of the people of Al-Araqib to engage in decades-long direct action to reclaim their ancestral lands, offer precedents of physical return on a local and communal scale. It is also possible – indeed

essential – to draw lessons from cases of refugee return and reparation elsewhere in the world.

To provide a space in which to further develop these approaches, Al-Shabaka is launching a policy circle on return. With the participation of Palestinian activists and thinkers from inside and outside of ancestral Palestine, together with other key voices who can offer critical and constructive perspectives, the Al-Shabaka Policy Circle aims to contribute to a new framework for discourse and action. Decolonization will be the central theme around which to frame the political, spatial, socio-economic and symbolic aspects of exercising return. It is hoped that this accessible platform will encourage viable policy formation and strategic planning for return by exploring the specific avenues of action open to Palestinians to realize their rights in the present and build the capacity to do so in future.

Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, is an independent, non-profit organization. Al-Shabaka convenes a multidisciplinary, global network of Palestinian analysts to produce critical policy analysis and collectively imagine a new policymaking paradigm for Palestine and Palestinians worldwide.

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