ROUNDTABLE | POLITICS

70 Years of Nakba: Where Can Palestinians Go from Here?

By: Amal Ahmad, Irene Calis, Haidar Eid, Razi Nabulse · May, 2018

The Palestinian people have perhaps never been more in need of a forward-looking vision to shape their struggle. In facing the 70th anniversary of the Nakba, or catastrophe and the creation of Israel, on May 15, they also face a myriad of circumstances and actions that threaten to derail their quest for rights.[1]

These include the US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the accompanying move of the US embassy there; Israeli plans to annex the West Bank; and the continued Israeli violence toward the Palestinians in Gaza who are peacefully protesting the shocking conditions in which they live and calling for their right to return to the lands from which they were expelled in 1948. At publication, Israeli snipers had killed more than 90 Palestinians in Gaza and injured thousands.

Against this background, we asked Al-Shabaka analysts to propose a vision that would resonate with the greatest number of Palestinians – whether one-staters or two, refugees, exiles, citizens of Israel, or those under occupation and siege – and to map out some ways to get from here to there.

Razi Nabulse recommends using the Nakba itself by considering it not only an anniversary, but also a destructive system and continuous manifestation of the essence of Zionism that Palestinians must dismantle. **Irene Calis** echoes Nabulse with her argument that Palestinians must recognize that the problem is not

occupation, but Zionism, and proposes a collective and strategic recalibration of political action that is focused on Zionism, de-colonization, and emancipation.

Amal Ahmad calls on Palestinians to formulate strategies instead of fixating on solutions by concentrating on Israel's strategic interests and understanding that Israel sees Palestinians, wherever they are, as a threat to its interests. **Haidar Eid** also urges a vision that includes all segments of the Palestinian population, arguing against the reduction of the Zionist project to a military occupation of one part of historic Palestine. He points to the demands of the BDS movement – freedom, justice, and equality for all Palestinians – as an example of a way forward.

Razi Nabulse: The Nakba as a Way Forward

Seventy years after the Nakba, the central question remains: Is the Nakba an anniversary or a system that continues to govern the present and shape the future? Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Nakba is its ability to be both. It is first the memory of the establishment of the Jewish state at the expense of Palestinian physical, social, and political structures. Yet the Zionist structures founded in the Nakba's aftermath have also continued to dismantle the remaining Palestinian structures. The Nakba thus represents the anniversary of the creation of the system that has been enforcing policies of ethnic cleansing and dismantlement.

Writing about the Nakba at this stage is to write about its potential role in rebuilding the Palestinian national project, a project that has effectively collapsed. Could the Nakba constitute the foundation for such an effort? This question may not offer new knowledge on the study of the Nakba, but it has a political aspect and requires a political answer. The foundation would incorporate both parts of the Nakba: a historical review that addresses the anniversary, as well as a strategic objective to dismantle the Jewish state and its structures. Deliberating

this question in Palestinian circles is in itself a qualitative leap in political thought through which Palestinians can overcome hurdles that have been undermining the Palestinian political system.

The decades since the Nakba have been characterized by fragmentation and a gradual break from clear definitions of the conflict. It is the right time politically for Palestinians to return to the Nakba as the chapter of the Palestinian-Zionist conflict that most clearly captures its essence: a colonialist movement seeking to eliminate Palestinian existence physically and symbolically.

This understanding should inform the policies needed to create a political platform that strives to thwart the Zionist goals that were only temporarily achieved in 1948 and that persist to this day. Indeed, the Zionist movement carries on with the same institutions and colonial spirit on which it was institutionalized after the Nakba, the Zionist organizations that sponsored the Nakba continue to operate in the West Bank and the Negev, and the ideological framework from which the state derives legitimacy for its existence – a democratic state for Jews – still stands.

The view of the Nakba as a one-time event and an anniversary rather than a continuous manifestation of the essence of Zionism is therefore deficient, and the question that should be asked is not about the past, but the present and future: Will there be a new Nakba?

Israel neither seeks to annex the population in the West Bank nor impose its legal sovereignty over those densely populated areas. Nor is Israel interested in the two- or one-state solution. It has not left any stretches of land that could form a contiguous Palestinian political entity in the West Bank, and it has severed and blockaded Gaza. Rather, Israel is working toward a larger project, namely expanding its borders and expelling another large segment of the Palestinian population.

Israel is thus only concerned with and actively working toward controlling the largest area possible with the fewest number of Palestinians possible. In practice, this has prompted Israel to expel Palestinians with the aim of establishing a "democratic" entity in which Palestinians constitute a minority under Jewish hegemony. The expansion of this entity in size and influence is Israel's constant and central obsession.

Irene Calis: Getting the Problem Right

Palestinians are at a dire juncture: Any true forward-looking vision calls for an end to business-as-usual strategies. It is no longer possible to evade the repercussions of a "conflict resolution" approach to a situation of settler colonialism that is grounded in an erasure of the indigenous people. Without radical changes to collective thinking and action, Palestinians are moving ever closer to their indigenous North American brothers and sisters in a settler state with no post-colony future to speak of.

Status quo approaches are not only failing Palestinians but actively working against the goals of liberation. Palestinians must take back the power to imagine what is and is not possible from the political elite and institutions that are still entrenched in colonial outcomes.

This begins first and foremost with "getting the problem right." As Steve Biko forewarned, the central issue of apartheid South Africa was not the system of apartheid itself but the worldview of white supremacy on which it was based. His political assessment anticipated what has happened post 1994: Dismantling the political framework of apartheid has not dealt with the structural privilege of whiteness, which continues to delimit the life chances of black bodies.

Biko's warning is ever prescient for Palestinians. The unfettered investment in "the peace process" and statehood has distracted Palestinians from the illogical nature

of undertaking such an enterprise in an indigenous-settler relationship. Through the Palestinian Authority (PA) and other institutional bodies, years have been invested in the fallacy that peace and statehood can be negotiated within the context of a settler colony. Palestinians can no longer overlook the basic fact that anti-colonization must precede any state-building initiatives.

Statehood is not synonymous with peace; these terms have become bankrupt because they do not address the ideology that underpins the erasure of Palestinians and the colonizing practices of the Israeli state. The problem, in other words, is not occupation, but the Zionist project. Any political outcome in which Zionism remains privileged as a benign or just ideology ensures a future that sustains the current status quo for Palestinians.

Zionism requires Palestinian dehumanization. Therefore, getting the problem right – Zionism, not occupation – is essential to Palestinian strategic efforts. All Palestinians across space and time are a "threat to Israeli daily life" in a national mythology in which they should not exist. This is intrinsic to the political order of Israel and is the thread that unifies the diversity of Palestinian experience.

Getting the problem right also requires an honest collective reckoning regarding the role of the PA in perpetuating the colonial status quo, and as a key obstacle to alternative outcomes. As with the ANC of South Africa today, the PA is drawing on its anti-colonial origins as the basis of its credibility. This has become a well-worn myth that must be viewed against its actual legacy in relation to Palestinian aims for emancipation. The claim that the PA is indispensable to a Palestinian future goes against the evidence of its complicity in the colonial structure, its hierarchical and elitist aims that are divorced from the demands of ordinary life, and its active role in crushing popular resistance. We prop up the legend at the expense of our political futures.

Indeed, Palestinians do not need leaders who court the perpetrator. What is

needed is a political program with a social vision of human emancipation at its core. This political program will be realized through the efforts of everyday heroes rather than through the political elite, and partnered with popular initiatives across the globe. These efforts will first reclaim Palestinian emancipation instead of being buffered from this aim by a colonial model of indirect rule.

While there are no clear steps in an anti-colonial struggle, there are concrete directions Palestinians must take that encourage a new political vision. These involve a collective and strategic recalibration of political action that is focused on Zionism (not occupation), anti-colonization (not statehood), and emancipation (not a bankrupt peace).

Palestinians must pool their resources with other indigenous-settler struggles and heed the warning signs of a similar "final status." Any alternative path requires a radical re-imagining of what is thinkable and unthinkable, beyond what has been circumscribed. No one can *give* us our preferred future

Amal Ahmad: Strategies, Not Solutions

The Palestinian people will commemorate the Nakba under dire and worsening conditions. If there is one thing to be learned from the past 70 years, it is the vital importance of understanding the Israeli state's objectives and strategies so as to better formulate and execute a successful forward-looking resistance strategy. However, it is not evident that this point is fully appreciated in the Palestinian polity.

Despite clear signs that no sovereign Palestinian state is forthcoming, important questions need to be debated more vigorously by Palestinians within and outside the occupied territories, including: What benefit does Israel derive from its "no-state solution" strategy? What *are* Israel's national strategic objectives? How does an ongoing occupation fulfill, and not hinder, those national strategic objectives?

Does Israel view the Palestinian "problem" separately by geographic region, or are all Palestinians part of the same threat?

The perils of neglecting to assess Israel's strategic interests correctly, and of instead mistaking Palestinian hopes and aspirations for answers, can be seen in the spectacular failure of the Oslo "peace process." Though the historic evidence all pointed to the lack of any Israeli interest in a sovereign Palestinian state, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)/Palestinian Authority (PA), desperate for a positive outcome and aided by the international community, invested 20 years into a grand delusion that set Palestinians back in terms of unity, leadership, and bargaining power. Poor assessments are particularly calamitous for Palestinians given their extremely adverse initial conditions and the presence of path dependency: Fragmentation and loss of bargaining power begets more of itself, resulting in a trap that is increasingly difficult to overcome.

Therefore, moving forward, conversations about *strategies* instead of *solutions* are likely to bear more fruit, with perhaps the most important topic the merits of fragmented versus unified strategizing. Again, the appropriate point of departure here is not Palestinians' hopes and wishes but rather an understanding of how Israel sees its strategic interests. For example, understanding that Israel views all Palestinians (in the occupied territories, in Israel, and in the diaspora) as part of the same threat to its interests makes it even more imperative that Palestinians everywhere should, through intergroup dialogue, highlight what it is that binds them together – such as the fact that they all face facets of oppression due to Israel's maintenance of differential rights for Jewish and non-Jewish people in the area under its control.

Palestinians must use such commonality as a platform for formulating a vision that is more likely to succeed politically than its predecessors. Such structured and strategic thinking is not a surefire way to any "victory," given the extremely adverse external environment, but it provides some hope of getting out of the trap

that Palestinians everywhere find themselves in today.

Haidar Eid: Rights for All Palestinians

Proposing a forward-looking vision for the Palestinian cause comes at a significant and dangerous time. The US – the "mediator of the peace process" – has recognized Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Israel, the US State Department no longer considers the West Bank an occupied territory, the refugee question is viewed solely from a humanitarian perspective, and the siege on Gaza has become a normalized matter of fact, even among Palestinians.

The UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia's 2017 report named Israel an apartheid state founded on the division of the Palestinian people into four segments: refugees, residents of lands occupied in 1967, residents of lands occupied in 1948, and residents of Jerusalem. A just solution to the Palestinian question must therefore address all four population segments as one Palestinian people.

While the PLO leadership has put forward a so-called Palestinian national project, it has failed to generate a democratic plan for liberation that accounts for all Palestinians. The national project is structurally self-contradictory in its call for the establishment of a state on 22% of historic Palestine while demanding the return of refugees to a state that defines itself as not the state of its citizens. The structural shortcoming also lies in the platform of the ruling elite, which fails to mention the third component of the Palestinian people: Palestinians living on the lands occupied in 1948. This failure of the Palestinian national project is essentially rooted in its reduction of the Zionist project to a military occupation of one part of historic Palestine, inhabited by only one-third of the Palestinian people.

It is time to propose alternative visions for liberation that go beyond partial and cosmetic solutions such as the two-state solution, or any solution that fails to

factor in the implementation of UN Resolution 194, which guarantees the refugees' right of return. Any solution that fails to account for the fundamental rights of all segments of the Palestinian people would recreate an Oslo Accords-like normalization process and fail to bring about a just peace.

The demands upheld by the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement (BDS), the largest coalition of Palestinian civil society actors, are significant in that they address the rights of all Palestinians – of 1967 Palestinians to liberation from military occupation, of the right of refugees to return and to compensation, and of the right of 1948 Palestinians to equality and unprejudiced treatment.

That the Palestinian national movement has turned a blind eye to the nature of the settler colonialism perpetrated by the state of Israel and reduced the Palestinian struggle to a movement aimed at liberating the territories occupied in 1967 has undoubtedly contributed to the Palestinian people's current existential problem. The BDS movement's efforts to raise awareness, the work of refugee committees, the activities of human rights activists in 1948-occupied territories, and Gaza's Great March of Return are strong indicators of the need to put forward an alternative platform that combines the different struggles of the Palestinian people.

1. *Al-Shabaka publishes all its content in both English and Arabic (see Arabic text here). To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.*

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