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REMEMBERING THE PALESTINIAN NAKBA: COMMEMORATION, ORAL HISTORY AND NARRATIVES OF MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

This year Palestinians commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Nakba—the most traumatic catastrophe that ever befell them. The rupture of 1948 and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the Nakba are central to both the Palestinian society of today and Palestinian social history and collective identity. This article explores ways of remembering and commemorating the Nakba. It deals with the issue within the context of Palestinian oral history, ‘social history from below’, narratives of memory and the formation of collective identity. With the history, rights and needs of the Palestinian refugees being excluded from recent Middle East peacemaking efforts and with the failure of both the Israeli state and the international community to acknowledge the Nakba, ‘1948’ as an ‘ethnic cleansing’ continues to underpin the Palestine-Israel conflict. This article argues that to write more truthfully about the Nakba is not just to practice a professional historiography; it is also a moral imperative of acknowledgement and redemption. The struggles of the refugees to publicise the truth about the Nakba is a vital way of protecting the refugees’ rights and keeping the hope for peace with justice alive.

1948 was the year of the Nakba. It saw the establishment of a settler-colonial Zionist state on 78 percent of Mandatory Palestine. It also symbolised the Palestinian Nakba (the ‘disaster’ or ‘catastrophe’)¹—the

¹ One of the first authors to label 1948 the Nakba was Dr Constantine Zurayk, a distinguished philosopher of Arab history and liberal intellectual, in his book *The Meaning*

destruction of historic Palestine and ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the Palestinians. In 1948 the expulsion and dispossession of the Palestinians was carried out as an integral part of the infamous Plan Dalet and through the systematic use of terror and a series of massacres, of which the massacre of Deir Yasin in April 1948 was the most notorious. The Israeli state delegates the job of acquiring, settling and allocating land in the country to the Jewish National Fund (JNF), a quasi-governmental racist institution whose own mandate is to build a homeland for the Jewish people *only* (Abu Hussein and McKay 2003; Lehn and Davis 1988). This year Palestinians in Britain and throughout the world will commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Nakba and will reflect on its real essence—as the most traumatic catastrophe that ever befell the Palestinians.

The year of the Nakba is a key date in the history of the Palestinian people—a year of dramatic rupture in the continuity of historical space and time in Palestinian history. Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi likens the Nakba to the ‘ineluctable climax of the preceding Zionist colonization and the great watershed in the history of the Palestinian people, marking the beginning of their Exodus and Diaspora’ (Khalidi 1992: xxxi). As Palestinian scholar Elias Sanbar puts it:

That year, a country and its people disappeared from maps and dictionaries ... ‘The Palestinian people does not exist’, said the new masters, and henceforth the Palestinians would be referred to by general, conveniently vague, terms as either ‘refugees’, or in the case of a small minority that had managed to escape the generalized expulsion, ‘Israeli Arabs’, a long absence was beginning.²

Sanbar was referring to the infamous statement made by Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1969³ (Meir, who herself migrated to Palestine in 1921, was born in the Ukraine as ‘Golda Mabovitch’ and was known as ‘Golda Myerson’ from 1917 to 1956). Sanbar was also articulating the exclusion of the Palestinian Nakba (a mini-holocaust) from Western discourses on Israel–Palestine. The Nakba has become in Palestinian history and collective memory the demarcation line between two

of the Disaster (Ma’na al-Nakba), a self-critical analysis of the socio-economic causes of the Arab defeat in 1948, written almost immediately after the 1948 war. The term also became the title of the monumental 6-volume work of Palestinian historian ‘Arif Al-‘Arif entitled: *The Disaster: The Disaster of Jerusalem and the Lost Paradise 1947–52 [Al-Nakba: Nakbat Bayt al-Maqdis Wal-Firdaws al-Mafqud, 1947–1952]* (Beirut and Sidon, Lebanon: Al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, 1958–1960 [Arabic]).

² Sanbar (2001: 87–94); Sa’di and Abu-Lughod (2007: 4); Sanbar (1984). Sanbar’s work is situated at the crossroads of personal and collective history. See Sanbar (1994; 1996; 2001; 2004).

³ *Sunday Times*, 15 June 1969; *The Washington Post*, 16 June 1969.

contrasting periods; it changed the lives of the Palestinians at the individual and national levels drastically and irreversibly; it also continues to inform and structure Palestinians' lives (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Nabulsi 2006: 16). Denied the right to independence and statehood, the Palestinians were treated after 1948 as 'refugees' (*lajin* in Arabic) – either as a 'humanitarian problem', deserving the support of international aid agencies and, more specifically, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Sanbar 2001: 87–94), or as an 'economic problem' requiring 'dissolution' through resettlement and employment schemes (Masalha 2003).

The Nakba resulted in the destruction of much of Palestinian society, and much of the Arab landscape was obliterated by the Zionist state – a state created by the Ashkenazi Jewish Yishuv, a predominantly European settler community that immigrated into Palestine in the period between 1882 and 1948. From the territory occupied by the Israeli state in 1948, about 90 percent of the Palestinians were driven out – many by psychological warfare and/or military pressure and a very large number at gun-point. The 1948 war simply provided the opportunity and the necessary background for the creation of a Jewish state largely free of Palestinians. It concentrated Jewish-Zionist minds, and provided the security, military and strategic explanations and justifications for 'purging' the Jewish state and dispossessing the Palestinian people.⁴ Today some 70 per cent of the Palestinians are refugees; there are more than five million Palestinian refugees in the Middle East and many more worldwide.

But the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Nakba and the displacement of the Palestinians did not end with the 1948 war and the Israeli authorities continued to 'transfer' and dispossess Palestinians during the 1950s (Masalha 1997; Boqa'i 2005: 73). Israel instituted a military government and declared Palestinian villages 'closed military zones' to prevent displaced Palestinians from returning. The Israeli army and the JNF became the two Zionist institutions key to ensuring that the Palestinian refugees were unable to return to their lands, through complicity in the destruction of Palestinian villages and homes and their transformation into Jewish settlements, national parks, forests and even car parks. The JNF also planted forests in the depopulated villages to 'conceal' Palestinian existence (Boqa'i 2005: 73). In the post-1948 period the minority of Palestinians (160,000) – who remained behind, many of them internally displaced – became second-class citizens, subject to a system of military administration by a government that confiscated the bulk of their lands.

4 For extensive discussion of Zionist ethnic cleansing policies in 1948, see Masalha (1992; 1997; 2003).

Today almost a quarter of the 1.3 million Palestinian citizens of Israel are 'internal refugees'.⁵

The founding myths of Zionism and the Israeli state, which dictated the conceptual removal of Palestinians before, during and after their physical removal in 1948, and the invention of euphemisms such as 'transfer' and 'present absentees', have been extensively discussed elsewhere.⁶ The main focus here is on 'remembering' the Nakba and commemorating its 60th anniversary within the context of Palestinian oral history and narratives of memory. Memory accounts of the traumatic events of 1948 are central to Palestinian history and the Palestinian society of today. With millions still living under Israeli occupation or in exile, the Nakba remains at the heart of Palestinian national identity (Nabulsi 2006: 16). Palestinians, hardly surprisingly, perceive their catastrophe as something unique, after all the Nakba brought about a dramatic rupture in modern Palestinian history. Palestinian author Salman Abu Sitta's description of the Nakba is a case in point:

The Palestinian Nakba is unsurpassed in history. For a country to be occupied by a foreign minority, emptied almost entirely of its people, its physical and cultural landmarks obliterated, its destruction hailed as a miraculous act of God and a victory for freedom and civilised values, all done according to a premeditated plan, meticulously executed, financially and politically supported from abroad, and still maintained today, is no doubt unique (Abu Sitta 1998: 5).

Although the ocean of refugee suffering is bound to be perceived as unique by the Palestinian people, it is, however, resonant with all extreme human suffering, including historic Jewish persecution and suffering in Europe. Surely the Nakba and ongoing Palestinian suffering are a reminder of the reality of the suffering of Jews in Europe. Some observers have remarked that that it is precisely because of the Jewish Shoah that the truth about the Nakba and the continuing horrific suffering of the Palestinian people have remained invisible to enlightened public opinion in the West (Davis 2003: 18). Of course acknowledging the truth of what took place in Europe can never morally justify the uprooting of another people outside of Europe and the destruction of historic Palestine.

⁵ For an historical overview of 'Palestinian Internally Displaced Persons inside Israel', see release by BADIL Resource Center, 6 November 2002 at: <http://www.badil.org/Publications/Press/2002/press277-02.htm> (accessed 25 March 2008); also Kamen (1984: 5–91); Cohen (2000).

⁶ See Masalha (1992; 1997; 2000; 2005); Gabriel Piterberg, 'Erasure,' *New Left Review* 10 (July–August 2001), at: http://www.newleftreview.net/NLR24402.shtml#_edn23 (accessed 16 September 2004).

Categories of Palestinian Refugees and the Internally Displaced Population⁷

Reliable figures on the Palestinian refugee and displaced population are not easy to find, as there is no centralised agency charged with maintaining this data. UNRWA administers the only registration system for Palestinian refugees. But UNRWA includes only those displaced in 1948 (and their descendants) who are in need of assistance and located in UNRWA areas of operation—the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. BADIL, a Bethlehem-based Palestinian non-governmental organisation, estimated that there were more than 7.2 million Palestinian refugees and displaced persons at the end of 2005. This includes Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948 and registered with the UNRWA (4.3 million); Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948 but not registered with UNRWA (1.7 million); Palestinian refugees displaced for the first time in 1967 (834,000); 1948 internally displaced Palestinians in Israel (355,000); and, 1967 internally displaced Palestinians (57,000).⁸

Categorisation and definition of the Palestinian refugees and internally displaced Palestinians across the Green Line have to be understood against the background of three different political entities and three different historical periods: Mandatory and historic Palestine, the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and the 1967 occupied territories. Delineating the difference between ‘refugees’ and ‘internally displaced’ Palestinians is further complicated due both to the lack of internationally recognised boundaries between Israel and Palestine and to the fact that the Israeli legislature does not recognise the term ‘refugee’ (*laji* in Arabic) as far as the Palestinian Arab inside Israel is concerned (Davis: 2003: 100). There are, however, several distinct categories of Palestinian refugees and internally displaced Palestinians across the Green Line—the first and second categories are often referred to as ‘present absentees’, under the Absentees’ Property Law of 1950.⁹ They are present physically but legally and conceptually

⁷ The author gratefully acknowledges the very useful information provided by Terry Rempel, of Badil Resource Center in Bethlehem, on the various categories of the internally displaced.

⁸ ‘How many Palestinian refugees are there?’ at: <http://imeu.net/news/article0038.shtml>

⁹ The term relates to the status of the internally displaced under Israel’s 1950 Absentees’ Property Law. *Laws of the State of Israel*, Vol.4, Ordinances, 5710 (1949/50): 68–82. The original draft law was amended to prevent internally displaced Palestinians and those refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from returning to their homes. In the case of the latter, Israeli officials were concerned that if the West Bank and Gaza Strip fell under Israeli jurisdiction in the future, Israel would be obligated to allow the refugees to return to their homes. For critical comments on the law, see Segev (1986: 80); Korn (1991: 91–6); Gabriel Piterberg, ‘Erasure,’ *New Left Review* 10 (July–August 2001).

absent in relation to their homes and lands of origin. Acquiring the Kafkaesque title of ‘present absentees’ (Masalha 2005a: 23), the internally displaced had their property and homes taken by the state, making them refugees and exiles within their own homeland. To complicate matters of categorisation and definition, Palestinians internally displaced from west to east Jerusalem in 1948, for example, were considered ‘refugees’ due to the creation of a functional ‘border’ between the two sides of the city – i.e., the 1949 armistice line. Setting aside the legal implications of Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank (including east Jerusalem), and the Gaza Strip, the removal of the physical barrier between west and east Jerusalem in 1967 would suggest that 1948 refugees from western Jerusalem residing in the eastern part of the city were no longer refugees but ‘internally displaced persons’. These general categories are:

- 1948 Palestinian refugees: this is the largest category of refugees driven out from what became Israel in 1948 (over 5 million refugees, most of them residing in the UNRWA areas of operation – the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria).
- 1948 Internally Displaced Palestinians in Israel: the largest group of internally displaced Palestinians is located inside Israel and consists of those originally displaced and dispossessed of their homes and lands during the 1948 war or immediately after. They originate primarily from 44 villages located in northern Palestine.¹⁰
- Post-1948 Internally Displaced Palestinians: A second and smaller group consists of those Palestinians inside Israel who have been displaced since 1948 due, primarily, to internal ‘transfer’ and eviction, land expropriation, and house demolition. A large sector of this group is comprised of Palestinian Bedouins in the Negev.¹¹
- 1967 Internally Displaced Palestinians: A third category of internally displaced persons is comprised of those Palestinians displaced within the West Bank, including east Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip during the 1967 war. This does not include 1967 Palestinian refugees who are often referred to as ‘1967 displaced persons’ due to the fact that at the time of their displacement the West Bank was under Jordanian control – i.e., they did not cross an ‘international border’ to seek shelter in Jordan.
- Post-1967 Internally Displaced Palestinians: The fourth category of internally displaced Palestinians are those Palestinians displaced within the West Bank, east Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip after 1967 due to land expropriation, house demolition, revocation of residency rights in

10 ‘Overview: Palestinian Internally Displaced Persons inside Israel’, BADIL Resource Center, 6 November 2002 at: <http://www.badil.org/Publications/Press/2002/press277-02.htm> (accessed 25 March 2008)

11 On displacement in the Negev see Abu-Rabia’ (1999: 31–3).

Jerusalem, and other forms of internal transfer including more recently, forced separation along ethnic, religious and national lines. This group also includes a large number of Bedouin.

There are no precise statistics on the internally displaced Palestinians either in Israel or in the 1967 occupied territories. Overall the data on the internally displaced Palestinians and their social and economic conditions have serious shortcomings. As with other groups of internally displaced persons worldwide, there is a lack of comprehensive and systematic data. There is no registration system for internally displaced Palestinians¹² and official data on the current status of Palestinians inside Israel and in the 1967 occupied territories does not distinguish between internally displaced Palestinians and the general Palestinian population. As with refugees, it may be assumed that internally displaced Palestinians have relatively lower standards of living than Palestinians who are not displaced. However recent surveys of the 1967 occupied territories suggest that Israel's military response to the second Palestinian uprising (al-Aqsa Intifada of 2000) has led to a narrowing of the socio-economic gap between refugees and non-refugees.¹³ Nevertheless distinctions between refugees and non-refugees remain according to area of residence—i.e., camp populations as compared to non-camp populations. In general, data on the current status of internally displaced Palestinians is characterised by its uneven quality and uncertainty and is derived largely from historical documents, news reports, and human rights documentation.

Silencing the Palestinian Past

Since 1948 Palestinian attempts to constitute a coherent narrative of their past have often been challenged and silenced (Khalili 2007: 60). In the Israeli collective memory, Palestine of 1948 was 'a land without a people for a people without a land' (Masalha 1997). Yet, not only was the country never empty, an abundance of archival and documentary evidence shows a strong correlation between the Zionist 'transfer solution' and the Nakba (Masalha 1992). By the end of the 1948 war, hundreds of villages had been

12 Early registration and census information exists for 1948 internally displaced Palestinians. Internally displaced Palestinians requiring assistance were originally registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Initial registration files for 1948 internally displaced include 6 boxes consisting of 11,304 family cards and 5,155 correction cards. Each card contains the names, ages, sex, occupation, past address, and 'distribution centre' to which the family was attached. For more details on the UNRWA registration system see, Tamari and Zureik (2001: 25–60).

13 See *Palestinian Public Perceptions on their Living Conditions: The Role of International and Local Aid during the Second Intifada*, Report VI (Geneva: Graduate Institute of Development Studies, University of Geneva, September 2003).

completely depopulated and their houses blown up or bulldozed. The main objective was to prevent the return of refugees to their homes, but the destruction also helped to perpetuate the Zionist myth that Palestine was virtually empty territory (Masalha 1997) before the Jews entered. An exhaustive 1992 study by a team of Palestinian field researchers and academics under the direction of Walid Khalidi details the destruction of 418 villages falling inside the 1949 armistice lines.¹⁴ The study gives the circumstances of each village's occupation and depopulation, and a description of what remains. Khalidi's team visited all except fourteen sites, made comprehensive reports and took photographs. The result is both a monumental study and a kind of memoriam. It is an acknowledgement of the enormous suffering of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees (Khalidi 1992).

Of the 418 depopulated villages, 293 (70 percent) were totally destroyed and ninety (22 percent) were largely destroyed. Seven survived, including 'Ayn Karim (west of Jerusalem), but were taken over by Israeli settlers. A few of the quaint Arab villages and neighbourhoods have actually been meticulously preserved. But they are empty of Palestinians (some of the former residents are internal refugees in Israel) and are designated as Jewish 'artistic colonies' (Benvenisti 1986: 25; Masalha 2005). While an observant traveller can still see some evidence of the destroyed Palestinian villages, in the main all that is left is a scattering of stones and rubble. But the new state also appropriated for itself both immovable assets including urban residential quarters, transport infrastructure, police stations, railways, schools, libraries, churches, mosques as well as personal possessions including silver, furniture, pictures, carpets, etc. (Khalidi 1992).

The destruction of Palestinian villages and the conceptual deletion of Palestinians from history and cartography meant that the names of depopulated Palestinian villages and towns were removed from the map. The historic Arabic names of geographical sites were replaced by newly-coined Hebrew names, some of which resembled biblical names. In his recent book, *A History of Modern Palestine*, Israeli historian Ilan Pappé remarks:

[W]hen winter was over and the spring of 1949 warmed a particularly frozen Palestine, the land as we have described ... –reconstructing a period stretching over 250 years had changed beyond recognition. The countryside, the rural heart of Palestine, with its colourful and picturesque villages, was ruined. Half the villages had been destroyed, flattened by Israeli bulldozers which had been at work since August 1948 when the government had decided to either turn them into cultivated land or to build new Jewish settlements on their remains. A naming committee granted the

14 Palestinian author Dr Salman Abu-Sitta produced and distributed a map on the occasion of the 50th. anniversary of the Nakba showing that Palestinians left from 531 villages in what was mandatory Palestine.

new settlements Hebraized [sic] versions of the original Arab names: Lubyā became Lavi, and Safuria Zipori . . . David Ben-Gurion explained that this was done as part of an attempt to prevent future claim to the villages. It was also supported by the Israeli archaeologists, who had authorized the names as returning the map to something resembling 'ancient Israel' (Pappé 2004: 138–9).

The disappearance of Palestine in 1948, the deletion of the demographic and political realities of historic Palestine and the erasure of Palestinians from history centred on key issues, the most important of which is the contest between a 'denial' and an 'affirmation' (Said 1980; Abu-Lughod, Heacock and Nashef 1991). The deletion of historic Palestine from cartography was not only designed to strengthen the newly-created state but also to consolidate the myth of the 'unbroken link' between the days of the biblical Israelites and the modern Israeli state.

Post-1948 Zionist projects concentrated on the Hebraicisation and Judaisation of Palestinian geography and toponymy through the practice of re-naming sites, places and events. The Hebraicisation project deployed re-naming to construct new places and new geographic identities related to supposed biblical places. The new Hebrew names embodied an ideological drive and political attributes that could be consciously mobilised by the Zionist hegemonic project. The official project began with the appointment of the Governmental Names Committee (*Va'adat Hashemot Hamimshaltit*) by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion in July 1949. Ben-Gurion had visited the Negev in June and had been struck by the fact that no Hebrew names existed for geographical sites in the region. The 11 June 1949 entry for his War Diary reads: 'Eilat . . . we drove through the open spaces of the Arava . . . from 'Ein Husb . . . to 'Ein Wahba . . . We must give Hebrew names to these places—ancient names, if there are, and if not, new ones!' (Ben-Gurion 1982, vol.3: 989). The Governmental Names Committee, which included members of the Israeli Exploration Society and some leading Israeli biblical archaeologists, concentrated in its initial efforts on the creation of a new map for the Negev (Abu El-Haj 2001: 91–94).

Throughout the documents produced by the Governmental Names Committee, there were reported references to 'foreign names'. The Israeli public was called upon 'to uproot the foreign and existing names' and in their place 'to master' the new Hebrew names. Most existing names were Arabic names. The committee for assigning Hebrew names in the Negev held its first meeting on 18 July and subsequently met three times a month for a ten-month period and assigned Hebrew names to 561 different geographical features in the Negev—mountains, valleys, springs, and waterholes—using the Bible as a resource. Despite the obliteration of many ancient Arabic names from the Negev landscape,

some Arabic names became similar-sounding Hebrew names, for example 'Seil 'Imran' became 'Nahal 'Amram', apparently recalling the father of Moses and Aaron; the Arabic Jabal Haruf ('Mount Haruf') became Har Harif ('Sharp Mountain), Jabal Dibba ('Hump Hill') became Har Dla'at ('Mount Pumpkin). After rejecting the name Har Geshur after the people to whom King David's third wife belonged, as a Hebrew appellation for the Arabic Jabal Ideid ('Sprawling Mountain'), the committee decided to call it Har Karkom ('Mount Crocus'), because crocuses grow in the Negev.¹⁵ However the sound of the Arabic name Ideid was retained in the nearby springs, which are now called 'Beerot Oded' ('the Wells of Oded'), possibly after the biblical prophet of the same name.¹⁶ The committee report of March 1956 stated:

In the summarized period 145 names were adopted for antiquities sites, ruins and tells: eight names were determined on the basis of historical identification, 16 according to geographical names in the area, eight according to the meaning of the Arabic words, and the decisive majority of the names (113) were determined by mimicking the sounds of the Arabic words, a partial or complete mimicking, in order to give the new name a Hebrew character, following the [accepted] grammatical and voweling rules (quoted in Abu El-Haj 2001: 95).¹⁷

In the north, the depopulated Arab village of Balad al-Shaykh, near Haifa, which housed the grave of the legendary Sheikh 'Izz ad-Din al-Qassam (1882–1935), became the Jewish town of 'Nesher'. Many of the Palestinian houses and shops are still standing and are occupied by the Jewish inhabitants of Nesher. 'The cemetery is visible and is in a state of neglect' (Khalidi 1992). Throughout the country the Hebraicisation project included renaming Muslim holy men's graves and holy sites into Jewish and biblically-sounding ones. 'In the fifties and sixties', Meron Benvenisti writes:

the location and "redemption" of holy men's graves was in the hands of the religious establishment—especially the Ministry of Religions—and of Ashkenazi Haredi groups . . . According to an official list, issued by a group known as the Foundation of the World and appended to a book [entitled: *Jewish Holy Places in the Land of Israel*¹⁸] published by the Ministry of Defence, there are more than 500 Jewish holy places and sacred graves in Palestine (including the Occupied Territories). Many of these, albeit not the majority, are former Muslim sites (2002: 282).

15 Don C. Benjamin, 'Stories and Stones: Archaeology and the Bible, an introduction with CD Rom', 2006, at: http://www.doncbenjamin.com/Archaeology_&_the_Bible.pdf, note 78, p.254.

16 Yadin Roman, at: <http://www.erezt.com/archive/jan3000.htm>.

17 Approximately one-fourth of all geographical names were derived from the Arabic names on the basis of the similarity of sounds. Abu El-Haj (2001: 95).

18 Michelson et al (1996).

In the centre of the country, among the many Judaised Muslim holy places were two sites: Nabi Yamin and Nabi Sama'an, located one kilometre east of the Jewish town of Kfar Sava – a Jewish city itself named after a Palestinian village destroyed in 1948 (Kfar Saba). Until 1948, Benvenisti writes, these two sites were

sacred to Muslims alone, and the Jews ascribed no holiness to them. Today they are operated by ultraorthodox Jewish bodies, and members of the religion from which they were taken do not set foot there, despite the fact there is a large Muslim population in the area (Benvenisti 2002: 276–7).

The tomb of Nabi Yamin was renamed the grave of Benjamin, representing Jacob's youngest son, and Nabi Sama'an became the grave of Simeon. Jewish women seeking to bear offspring pray at the grave of Benjamin:

The dedication inscriptions from the Mamluk period remained engraved in the stone walls of the tomb, and beside them hang tin signs placed there by the National Center for the Development of the Holy Places. The cloths embroidered with verses from the Qur'an, with which the gravestones were draped, have been replaced by draperies bearing verses from the Hebrew Bible (Benvenisti 2002: 277).

Jewish settlements were established on the land of Palestinian villages. In some cases these settlements took the names of the original Palestinian villages. For instance, the Jewish settlement that replaced the destroyed village of Beit Dajan village was named Beit Dagan; Kibbutz Sa'sa' was built on Sa'sa' village; the cooperative moshav settlement of 'Amka on the land of 'Amqa village; moshav Elanit (tree in Hebrew) on the land of al-Shajara (tree in Arabic) village (Wakim 2001a, Boqa'i 2005: 73). Al-Kabri in the Galilee was renamed 'Kabri'; al-Bassa village renamed 'Batzat'; al-Mujaydil village (near Nazareth) renamed 'Migdal Haemek'. In the region of Tiberias there were 27 Arab villages in the pre-1948 period; 25 of them – including Dalhamiya, Abu Shusha, Hittin, Kfar Sabt, Lubyah, al-Shajara, al-Majdal and Hittin – were destroyed by Israel. The name 'Hittin' – where Saladin famously defeated the Crusaders in 1187 – was renamed 'Kfar Hittin'. Nearby the road to Tiberias was named the 'Menachem Begin Boulevard' and heavy iron bars were placed over the entrance to Hittin's ruined mosque; the staircase leading to its minaret was blocked.¹⁹

Fifty-six years after the Nakba, in March 2004, Israeli journalist Gideon Levy published an important article in *Haaretz*, entitled 'Twilight

¹⁹ Gideon Levy, 'Twilight Zone/Social Studies Lesson', *Haaretz*, 31 March 2004, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/410906.html>.

Zone/Social Studies Lesson'.²⁰ The article describes an excursion to the hidden side of the Galilee – the ruins of depopulated Palestinian villages in eastern Galilee and the Tiberias region. The guided tour was organised in commemoration of the 'Land Day' of 1976, organised by three NGOs: the Haifa-based Emile Toma Centre, the Association for the Defense of the Rights of the Internally Displaced in Israel (ADRID) and Zochrot (Remembering). Founded in 2002, Zochrot is a group of Israeli citizens working to raise awareness of the Nakba. The March tour was led by Palestinian guides from the Galilee. Levy writes:

Look at this prickly pear plant. It's covering a mound of stones. This mound of stones was once a house, or a shed, or a sheep pen, or a school, or a stone fence. Once – until 56 years ago, a generation and a half ago – not that long ago. The cactus separated the houses and one lot from another, a living fence that is now also the only monument to the life that once was here. Take a look at the grove of pines around the prickly pear as well. Beneath it there was once a village. All of its 405 houses were destroyed in one day in 1948 and its 2,350 inhabitants scattered all over. No one ever told us about this. The pines were planted right afterward by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), to which we contributed in our childhood, every Friday, in order to cover the ruins, to cover the possibility of return and maybe also a little of the shame and the guilt.

The JNF put up a sign: 'South Africa Forest. Parking. In Memory of Hans Riesenfeld, Rhodesia, Zimbabwe'. The 'South Africa Forest' and the 'Rhodesia parking area' were created atop the ruins of Lubyia village, of whose existence not a trace was left. Here was a big village whose sons and daughters are now scattered throughout the world and who continue to carry the memories with them.²¹ Dr Mahmoud 'Issa, a son of Lubyia and a Danish citizen, who accompanied Levy on this excursion, made a film in Danish (with English subtitles) about his village. Dr 'Issa, an oral historian, also published a book based on interviews with refugees from Lubyia.²² Levy writes:

Deep in the grove, one can find a single wall that survived from the village, as well as a stone archway that covered a cavern used to store crops. The dozens of wells that belonged to the village ('Issa says there were more than 400) are surrounded by barbed wire. They are wrecked and full of garbage left behind by hikers in the South Africa Forest who must have thought that the JNF had dug big trash cans in the ground. How were they to know that these were freshwater wells?²³

²⁰ A earlier version of this article appeared in *Haaretz*, 31 March 2004, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/410906.html>.

²¹ Levy, 'Twilight Zone/Social Studies Lesson'.

²² See also Issa (2005: 178–196).

²³ Levy, 'Twilight Zone/Social Studies Lesson'.

Subaltern Groups, Palestinian Oral History and the Historian's Methodology

As is the case with other subaltern groups, Palestinian oral testimony is a vital tool for recovering the voice of the subaltern: peasants, the urban poor, women, refugee camp dwellers, and bedouin tribes. An important feature of the Palestinian oral history effort from its inception has been its popular basis with the direct participation of displaced community (Gluck 2008: 69). Since the mid-1980s this grassroots effort has shown an awareness of the importance of recording the events of the Nakba from the perspective of those previously marginalised in Palestinian elite and male-centred narratives. Although gender (both female and male) imagery and symbols have always been prevalent in Palestinian nationalist discourses (Khalili 2007: 22–3) – the Palestinian National Charter of 1964 (revised in 1968) and the Palestinian Declaration of Independence of 1988 had both imagined the Palestinian nation as a male body and masculinised political agency (Massad 1995: 467–83).

In 2002 the editors of a special oral history edition of the Beirut-based *Al-Jana – the Harvest: Arab Resource Centre for the Popular Arts* – pointed out that individual initiatives were being undertaken even before the 1980s, when more projects began to develop with institutional support, especially from NGOs. One of the earliest projects was first proposed in 1979 by two Birzeit University scholars, Dr Sharif Kanaana and Dr Kamal Abdel Fattah. In 1985 the University's Documentation Centre launched a series of monographs on the destroyed villages.²⁴ Since 1993 this work has been overseen by Dr Saleh Abdel Jawad (Gluck 2008: 69). From 1983 onwards Dr Rosemary Sayigh, in particular, pioneered working with Palestinian women in the refugee camps of Lebanon on an oral history project. Sayigh and other oral historians, who advocate a fresh examination of Palestinian history from an oral history perspective, have been working in a field in which there are already dominant elite narratives which rely on official documentation and archival material. This oral history approach has both challenged and complemented archival historiography. Sayigh's original contribution to the field of oral history has made it possible for the victims, the subaltern, the marginalised and women to challenge Zionist hegemonic and Palestinian elite narratives.

This 'history from below' approach was given a major boost in the 1990s with the publication of Ted Swedenburg's seminal work on the great Palestinian rebellion of 1936–1939: *Memories of Revolt: The 1936–1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past* (1995). Earlier in

²⁴ See for instance Kanaana and Zitawi (1987) 'Deir Yassin', Monograph No.4, Destroyed Palestinian Villages Documentation Project.

1990 Swedenburg commented on the internal silencing of the Palestinian past and popular memory by the PLO leadership:

Perhaps the sensitive nature of the subject of infighting during the [1936–39] revolt is one of the reasons why PLO, which funded numerous projects in Lebanon during the seventies and early eighties, never supported a study of the [revolt] based on the testimony of the refugees living in Lebanon. Maybe the resistance movement was hesitant to allow any details about the internal struggle of the thirties to be brought to light because bad feelings persisted in the diaspora community. (1990: 152–3; also Swedenburg 1991: 152–79)

Clearly more accounts of memory and research are still needed on Mandatory Palestine and the events surrounding the Nakba as experienced and remembered not just by particular subaltern groups but by the whole non-elite majority of Palestinian society.²⁵

The storyteller (al-Hakawati) is part of a long tradition in Arab society and culture. Story telling and oral history was deployed in the post-1948 period by the Palestinian refugee community as an ‘emergency science’. Individual accounts of struggle and revolt (thawra), displacement and exodus, survival and heroism served as a buffer against national disappearance. Narratives of memory and oral history became a key genre of Palestinian historiography—a genre guarding against the ‘disappearance from history’ of the Palestinian people (Sanbar 2001: 87–94; Yahya 1998). In recent decades two distinct historiographical approaches concerning the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem have evolved. Recent debates about 1948 tell us something about the historian’s method and the meaning of the ‘historical document’ (Pappé 2004: 137). Methodologically, many historians have displayed a bias towards archival sources; Israeli historians, in particular, believe they are both ideologically and empirically impartial (Masalha 2007: 286), and that the only reliable sources for the reconstruction of the 1948 war are in the IDF archives and official documents. This bias towards ‘archives’ has contributed to silencing the Palestinian past. The silencing of the Nakba by Israeli historians follows the pattern given by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance). (1995: 26)

²⁵ More recently Rochelle Davis (2007: 53–76) has examined the way Palestinian memorial books, written by ordinary people, recollect memories of village places in pre-1948 Palestine.

Morris (1987), Masalha (1992) and other historians could not resist the opportunity presented by the availability of mountains of Israeli and Hebrew archival sources on 1948 and the Mandatory period. However, as in the case of other subaltern groups, Palestinian oral testimony is an important tool for recovering the voices of the victims of the Nakba: the Palestinian refugees (Pappé 2004a: 188). Furthermore in recent years, more and more historians have been paying attention to the idea of 'social history from below' – or 'from the ground up' and thus giving more space to the voices and perspective of the refugees, rather than that of 'policy-makers'; and also incorporating extensive oral testimony and interviews with the refugees. In that sense, the oral history of the Nakba is not only an intellectual project dictated by certain ideological commitments; it can provide an understanding of the social history of the refugees 'from below' that Palestinian elite narratives and political history often obscure.

Of course the two sets of methodologies can complement each other. But, also crucially, in recent years Palestinian authors have been producing memories of the Nakba, compiling and recording oral testimony and studying annual commemorations. While many authors in the West continue to rely on Morris and his publications, as a key source for recovering and reconstructing the past, at least some authors, influenced by the emergence of post-colonial and post-modern studies in recent decades, are beginning to raise question marks concerning the reliability and 'objectivity' of the IDF archives. Moreover it is important to point out that a report by an Israeli officer from 1948 is as much an interpretation of the reality as any other human recollection of the same event; archival documents are never the reality itself (Masalha 2007: 286); the reality of 1948 Palestine can only be reconstructed using a range of sources. Even historians who rely extensively on written documents often resort to guesswork and imagination when reconstructing the past from official documents (Pappé 2004a: 189). Therefore the vitality and significance of Palestinian oral testimony in the reconstruction of the past is central to understanding the Nakba. The most horrific aspects of the Nakba – the dozens of massacres that accompanied the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Nakba, as well as a detailed description of what 'ethnic cleansing' was from the point of view of the one 'ethnically cleansed' – can only be recovered when such an historiographical approach is applied (Pappé 2004: 137).

In the context of rural and peasant Palestinian society, oral history is a particularly useful methodology; throughout much of the twentieth century the majority of the Palestinians were *fellahin* (peasants); in 1944 sixty-six percent of the Palestinian population was agrarian with a literacy rate, when last officially estimated, of only fifteen percent (Esber 2003: 22). Their experiences in the fields, in their villages and in exile are largely absent from history-writing and much recent historiography

(‘Issa 2005: 179–186). Moreover the Nakba itself, and the political instability and repression faced by the dispersed Palestinian communities since 1948 have also impeded Palestinian researches and studies (Khalidi 1997: 89). In *Palestinian Identity*, Rashid Khalidi argues that modern Palestinian historiography has suffered from ‘inherent historical biases’ and that

The views and exploits of those able to read and write are perhaps naturally more frequently recorded by historians, with their tendency to favour written records, than those of the illiterate (Khalidi 1997: 98).

The Palestinian elite and intellectuals produced and published a number of Nakba memoirs. However, in the absence of a rich source of contemporary Palestinian documentary records, oral history and interviews with Palestinian (internal and external) refugees are a valuable and indeed essential source for constructing a more comprehensible narrative of the experience of ordinary Palestinian refugees and internally displaced Palestinians across the Green Line. While Louis Starr notes that memory is ‘fallible, ego distorts and contradictions sometimes go unresolved’, nevertheless

Problems of evaluation are not markedly different from those inherent in the use of letters, diaries, and other primary sources . . . the scholar must test the evidence in an oral history memoir for internal consistency and, whenever possible, by corroboration from other sources, often including the oral history memoirs of other on the same topic. (Starr 1984: 4–5)

Taken as whole, Palestinian oral history and refugee recollections give a good idea of reality. However in the case of the Palestinian Nakba, oral history is not merely one choice of methodology. Rather its use can represent a decision as to whether to record any history at all (Esber 2003). Oral history is the major means of reconstructing the history of the Palestinian refugees and internally displaced Palestinians as seen from the perspective of primary subjects. Oral history has been of such importance in the recollection and collective memorisation and memorialisation of the Shoah. The Israeli national memorial at *Yad va-Shem*, the ‘Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance’ institution, is predominantly based on oral history and millions of pages of testimony. It was established in 1953 by a Knesset act and located in West Jerusalem. According to its website, *Yad va-Shem* is a vast, sprawling complex of tree-studded walkways leading to museums, exhibits, archives, monuments, sculptures, and memorials. It has been entrusted with documenting the history of the Jewish people during the Holocaust period, preserving the memory and story of each of the six million victims, and imparting the legacy of the Holocaust to generations to come through its archives, library, school, museums and recognition of the ‘Righteous Among the Nations’.

The archive collection of *Yad va-Shem* comprises 62 million pages of documents, nearly 267,500 photographs along with thousands of films and videotaped testimonies of survivors. The Hall of Names is a 'tribute to the victims by remembering them not as anonymous numbers but as individual human beings'. The 'Pages of Testimony' are symbolic gravestones, which record names and biographical data of millions of martyrs, as submitted by family members and friends. To date *Yad va-Shem* has computerised 3.2 million names of Holocaust victims, compiled from approximately 2 million pages of testimony and various other lists. The collections of *Yad va-Shem* include tens of thousands of testimonies dictated, recorded or videotaped by survivors of the Shoah in Israel and elsewhere. The testimonies are in all of the languages spoken by the survivors. A second type of testimony consists of the forms filled out by survivors or relatives of the victims containing information about individual victims, such as their names, place and date of birth, place of residence, vocation, place and circumstances of death and so on. 2 million pages of testimony have been digitised in order to be accessible to the public in the institution's Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names which went online in September 2004.²⁶ However, in contrast to the Israeli national memorial at *Yad va-Shem* and other holocaust museums (including the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum in Oświęcim, Poland, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum) there is no 'Nakba museum', no 'Nakba Hall of Names', no 'Central Database of *Nakba* Victims' Names', no tombstones or monuments for the hundreds of Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948. The hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns destroyed in 1948 are still forced out of Israeli public awareness, away from the signposts of memory.

However there are some interesting developments. Since 2002 the Nakba Archive in Lebanon has recorded more than 500 interviews on digital video with first generation Palestinian refugees living in the country about their recollections of 1948. This project was conceived as a collaborative grassroots initiative in which the refugees themselves were encouraged to participate in the process of representing this historical period. The project, which consists of about 1,000 hours of video testimony with refugees from over 135 villages in pre-1948 Palestine, has its work centred on the twelve official UNRWA camps in Lebanon. But it has also conducted interviews within unregistered refugee 'gatherings', and with middle class and elite Palestinians living in urban centres in Lebanon. Apparently six duplicate sets of the interviews have been produced, along with a detailed database and search engine and copies of the archive will be held at the Institute for Palestine

²⁶ *Yad va-Shem* website at: http://www.yad-vashem.org.il/about_yad/index_about_yad.html.

Studies in Beirut, Birzeit University (Palestine), the American University of Cairo, Oxford and Harvard universities.²⁷ The project is also part of the 'Remembrance Museum' which is being established by the Welfare Association in Palestine. According to its website the Welfare Association's Remembrance Museum will be

a national museum, to operate as an independent, non-profit organization, for the purpose of recording and reflecting Palestinian history. A technical team of specialists in a variety of fields is engaged in planning the museum project. The museum is to be based in Jerusalem but satellite locations are being considered in Birzeit, Bethlehem and Abu Dis until a suitable Jerusalem location can be identified. The museum will concentrate on the last 300 years of Palestinian history and will contain permanent and multimedia exhibits, a library and research center, and an educational resource center.²⁸

Furthermore those of us who have used Israeli archival sources know that there are still many files of the Israeli army from 1948 which are still closed and not accessible to the historian or the public. But what are the overall historiographical implications of the debate on 1948? The first point concerns the military historiography of 1948 which tends to dominate Israeli and Western historiographies. The clashes taking place in Palestine during the late Mandatory period have been treated as part of an overall war between the Arab and Israeli armies. Such a paradigm calls for the expertise of military historians (Pappé 2004a: 185–186). Military historians tend to concentrate on the balance of power and military strategy and tactics. They see actions and people as part of the theatre of war, where events and actions are judged on a moral basis very different from that applicable in a non-combatant situation. The writing of the military historiography of 1948 inherently tends to favour the victorious Israeli army. Israeli revisionist historian Ilan Pappé argues that the events of 1948 should be examined within the paradigm of 'population transfer' and 'ethnic cleansing' and not just as part of military history. The UN partition plan of November 1947 did envisage some form of bi-nationalism for Palestine-Israel; the UN certainly did not envisage an exclusive (ethnically cleansed) Jewish state in 1948. This means that the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 by the Israeli army was part of the *domestic* policies implemented by an Israeli regime *vis-à-vis* its own Palestinian citizens. The decisive factors in 1948 were ethnic ideology, colonial settlement policy and demographic strategy, rather than military plans or considerations (Pappé 2004a: 186). In my work *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought* (1992)

27 <http://www.nakba-archive.org/>.

28 <http://www.welfareassociation.org/english/special.htm>.

I show that 'transfer' – a euphemism for expulsion and 'ethnic cleansing' was from the start an integral part of Zionism and that much of the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Nakba was not related to the battles taking place between regular armies waging war.

Pappé makes another important point which centres on the difference between macro and micro histories. The Israeli 'New Historiography' of 1948 has remained largely macro-historical. This is partly due to the nature of the Israeli archival material. In general Israeli archival sources give us a skimpy picture of 1948. This means that a detailed description of what happened in the case of each Palestinian village and town remains largely elusive. Often a document produced in 1948 by an Israeli army officer refers briefly to an occupation of a Palestinian village, or to the 'purification' of another. Pappé points out that Palestinian oral history can produce historically accurate accounts of 1948, showing that the same events in 1948 appear in a detailed and graphic form in accounts of memory, often as a tale of expulsion, and sometimes even massacre. Israeli historians who reject Palestinian oral history may conclude there was no massacre until the precise documentary sources assure them otherwise. Avishai Margalit (2003), Alessandro Portelli (1997) and others argue that 'Memory is *knowledge from the past*. It is not necessarily *knowledge of the past*;²⁹ and that oral history tells less about events in history and much more about the significance of the events. But written documents are also often the result of a processing of oral testimonies (Pappé 2004a: 186). Therefore refugee memory accounts could be as authentic as the documented ones. But also the narrative of individual villages and towns in Palestine can *only* be constructed with the help of Palestinian oral history. Consequently oral history is a crucial methodology for pursuing further research on the Nakba. Although oral history is not a substitute for archival material, it can supply crucial material for filling gaps and be cross-referenced with archival sources and documentary evidence.

The Nakba as a Key Site of Palestinian Collective Memory

Collective memory and commemoration have played an important role in nation-building processes and as a vehicle for victims of injustice and violence to articulate their experience of suffering. Narratives of memory and commemoration have also been part of grassroots initiatives to bring to life marginalised and counter-narratives that have been suppressed, either by hegemonic discourses or the unwillingness on the part of repressive regimes to acknowledge the past (Makdisi and Silverstein 2006).

29 Quoted in Fierke (2008: 34).

In the case of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine the Nakba has been a key site of collective memory and history that ‘connects all Palestinians to a specific point in time that has become for them an “eternal present”’ (Sa’di 2002: 177). While Palestinian national identity took roots long before 1948, Palestinian memory accounts of the post-Nakba period played a major role in the reconstruction of Palestinian national identity and the emergence of the PLO in the 1960s; in recent decades there has been an intense relationship between the Nakba and the articulation of Palestinian national identity (Sanbar 2001: 87–94; Sa’di and Abu-Lughod 2007: 4; Sa’di 2002: 175–198; Khalidi 1997; Fierke 2008: 34; Slyomovics 1998; Sayigh 2007: 135).

In the absence of a Palestinian state, which would have been expected to devote material and cultural resources to commemorative events and memorialisation projects, Palestinian refugee communities in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East have actively promoted Nakba commemoration and memorialisation (Khalili 2005: 30–45). Since 1948 Palestinian refugees from individual villages marked ‘their’ Nakba, or the anniversary of the date of the fall of their village. At the same time, however, for many years the topic of the Nakba was hardly broached in Palestinian film-making—a memory too painful to evoke (Bresheet 2007: 160–163). In *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (2007) Ahmad H. Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod show how in the last decade this has changed dramatically, with Palestinian filmmakers examining the history and the memories of this cataclysmic event. The book provides excellent accounts of memory of the Nakba in a number of recent Palestinian films. It also explores concepts of home and exile, identity and its relationship to memory, and exilic cinema and its characteristics, cinematic use of narrative devices and storytelling and the struggle between two opposing narratives: the hegemonic (Zionist) narrative which tries to displace, replace and suppress the narrative of the indigenous people of Palestine (Sa’di and Abu-Lughod 2007). Of course as Palestinian film-maker Omar al-Qattan (2007: 191) points out, ‘There is no single Palestinian memory’ of the Nakba—‘rather, there are many tangled memories. A collective memory or experience is in its nature complex and elusive, constantly changing with time’. *Nakba: Palestine, 1948 and the Claims of Memory* (2007) and *Catastrophe Remembered* (2005) are two of the recent collections which explore the complex narratives of the Nakba. Drawing on the works of memory theorists such as Maurice Halbwachs (1980) and Pierre Nora (1996; 1997; 1998), Sa’di and Abu-Lughod show that authors dealing with Palestinian narratives of memory have not always been sensitive to the complex and multi-layered relationships existing between collective memory, oral history and historiography. As a result, studies of Palestinian collective memory have been largely divorced from the broader

political context, national narratives and national identities, elite discourses and the class structures which inform and shape them (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007).

Ten years ago, in 1998, there was a remarkable proliferation of Palestinian films, memoirs and archival websites—all created around the 50th anniversary of the Nakba. In conjunction with this 50th anniversary, several films were released, including Edward Said's *In Search of Palestine*, Muhammad Bakri's *1948*, Simone Bitton's film about the poet Mahmoud Darwish: *Et la terre comme la langue* (Bresheet 2007: 160–87). More Nakba films have recently been released in conjunction with the 60th anniversary, including Maryse Gargour's *La Terre Parle Arabe*, with which I have been personally involved.³⁰ Also since 1998 several 'online archives' have been created on oral history and refugee experiences and recollections of the Nakba.

Palestinian social history and refugee experience and stories about places from their past that appear in oral history collections, autobiographies, novels, poetry collections and memorial books focus on both the symbolic and the emotional connections of Palestinians to their former homes and villages. It is also the 'documentary evidence' that proves their existence and legal right to the land of their ancestors. Their memory accounts of Palestine before 1948 reflect the beauty of the landscape, richness of the land and of village and city lives. These narratives about the land testify to the intimate and intense experience of everyday life on the land—the names of the valleys and wadis, hills, shrines, streets, springs and water wells, cultivated fields and vineyards; the importance of all kinds of trees (olive, almond, grape) and other natural elements in memories of the past (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). Hand-drawn maps marking the places of importance to the villagers, personal documents, personal memories and oral accounts all intertwine to create a larger picture and a collective narrative of life before the Nakba (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). Interestingly, however, Sa'di and Abu-Lughod (2007) show how until recently little research has been carried out in order to understand the underlying power claims within the context of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would have referred to as the Palestinian 'symbolic marketplace' (Bourdieu 1977); narratives of memory are the archaeology of a people criss-crossed with individual experiences—narratives of suffering and *sumud* (steadfastness), of courage and resistance born out of anger and revolt against oppression (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007).

30 This documentary film has recently won three international awards, including the palmars de la 13eme edition du prix international du documentaire et du reportage mediterraneen.

Internal Refugees and Nakba Commemoration: Articulating a New Narrative on the Site of the Village of Origin

Storytelling and memory accounts have always been central to the struggle of the internal refugees—internally displaced Palestinians inside Israel. Since 1948 the ‘villages of origin’ have been the centre of memory accounts and the important provider of ‘legitimacy’ for the internally displaced persons and for their struggle for return. Moreover in recent years the local campaigns of the internal refugees have reflected a strong relationship between memory accounts, refugee identity, and the desire to return to the place of origin. These three inter-connected dimensions are closely linked to the current grassroots struggle of the internal refugees. ‘Socialisation’ of the place of origin, promoted by many grassroots activists of the displaced communities, was aimed at creating a territorially-based identity which centred on the village of origin. This, in turn, helped to empower and renew the struggle for return. Most of the activities of the internally displaced inside Israel have had a strong physical connection to the village of origin. These initiatives, which include annual Nakba commemorations, visits to destroyed villages, and summer camps, have taken place not only within the boundaries of the village of origin, but also outside it. These activities include issuing pamphlets about destroyed villages, printing new maps, lobbying Arab parties and politicians, petitioning the Israeli courts, and generally articulating the new ‘narrative’ of the village of origin (Boqa’i 2005:101; Masalha 2005a: 46–7).

The grassroots struggles of the internal refugees residing in host villages in Galilee has to take into account ‘daily’ issues and living conditions.³¹ However their political activism, which centres on the village of origin, is directed more against the Israeli government and its quasi-governmental arm the JNF. While becoming an important symbol for the provision of ‘legitimacy’ for the internal refugees, the village of origin also provides a collective identity for the internally displaced within the host village. The village of origin shapes the perception of both the past and the future, and more specifically the collective memory, refugee identity and desire to return. Social protests which centre on the village of origin embody elements of indigenous resistance directed against both the Israeli authorities and the ‘status quo’ in the host village. Through their grassroots struggles, the internal refugees articulate a new and more assertive programme which can only be fulfilled through return to the village of origin (Boqa’i 2005:101; Masalha 2005a: 43–51).

31 On the adjustment patterns among Palestinian internal refugees inside Israel, see Al-Haj (1986: 651–673).

In recent years grassroots organisations and NGOs set up by Palestinians inside Israel have waged a never-ending battle for the preservation of both Nakba memory and the material heritage of the refugees (Masalha 2005; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007).³² However, in contrast to the Israeli holocaust museum at *Yad va-Shem* in Jerusalem, there is still no central database of Nakba victims' names, no tombstones or monuments for the hundreds of villages ethnically cleansed in 1948. What is also more chilling is the fact that the Deir Yasin massacre of 9 April 1948 took place within sight of the place which became the holocaust museum in Jerusalem; only a mile from where Jewish martyrs are memorialised lie the Palestinian martyrs of Deir Yasin, whose graves are unknown and unmarked. In fact *Yad va-Shem* itself is situated on the lands of Deir Yasin, as is the city of Jerusalem western (Jewish) cemetery (Davis 2003: 25). The irony of *Yad va-Shem* and Deir Yasin is breathtaking; no Israelis and foreign visitors to *Yad va-Shem* go to Deir Yasin and in dedication ceremonies at *Yad va-Shem* no one ever looks to the north and remembers Deir Yasin (McGowan 1998: 6–7).

For Palestinians Deir Yasin has remained a potent symbol of the collective Nakba. But in Israel the ghosts of Deir Yasin, Lubyā, Kafr Bir'im³³ and the hundreds of villages destroyed in 1948 are rendered completely invisible. Dr 'Azmi Bishara, a leading Palestinian intellectual from the Galilee, writes:

The villages that no longer exist were forced out of [Israeli] public awareness, away from the signposts of memory. They received new names—of Jewish settlements—but traces [of their past] were left behind, like the *sabr* bushes³⁴, or the stones from fences or bricks from the demolished houses . . . The Arab villages have no tombstones and there are no monuments to them. There will be no equality and there will be no democracy [in Israel], and there will be no historic compromise [between Israelis and Palestinians]—until they receive their tombstones. The Jewish site cast out utterly the other, the 'local' i.e., the other who was in that place. The response of the [Israeli-Jewish] Left to the [Palestinian use of the] nomenclature of the collective memory was that this matter must be removed from the [Jewish-Arab national] compromise, [that] there is no room in the compromise of history. History itself will prove that it must be part of the compromise—in order for the victim to forgive, he must be recognised as a victim.³⁵

³² See also Gideon Levy, 'Twilight Zone/Social Studies Lesson', *Haaretz*, 31 March 2004, at: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/410906.html>; Benvenisti (2000: 267–69).

³³ On the story of Iqrit and Kafr Biri'm see, Ozacky-Lazar (1993).

³⁴ *Sabr* is the Arabic name for a type of cactus which flourishes in Palestine.

³⁵ 'Azmi Bishara, 'Between Place and Space', *Studio* [Hebrew] 37, October 1992, quoted in Benvenisti (2000: 267).

An interesting development in the struggles of the internally displaced, which are centred on the villages of origin, has taken place among the second and third generations of internal refugees. Younger activists have made the village of origin a key project of collective memory and identity, and have expressed a stronger belief in future return than the older generation of internal refugees.³⁶ The same younger generations have also learned from their fathers' attempts to return without success in the past, taking into account the political developments that have taken place among Palestinians inside Israel. As Dawud Bader, a member of the second generation of internal refugees and one of the leaders of the Association for the Defense of the Rights of the Internally Displaced in Israel (ADRID), put it:

the internally displaced persons in Israel faced difficult experiences and bad conditions in the past. During the early years of military rule, displaced people could only find a shelter to live quietly and to try to advance themselves. Later, and gradually, the younger educated generation became more involved in political and national issues. The displaced persons became more advanced in many fields. They became more involved in confronting the Israeli authorities and their discriminatory policies. Israel doesn't distinguish in its policy between displaced persons and non-displaced persons in the fields of land confiscation and ethnic-national discrimination.³⁷

Younger generations of internal refugees began to recover the past and reconstruct memory accounts of the village of origin through various means. Until the 1980s the stories and memories of the older generation had largely existed in oral form, and within the social context of the host village. Since the early 1990s younger generations have been trying to articulate a new narrative of return and memorialisation. In this regard, the internal refugees have been more fortunate than the Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, owing to the possibility of physical access to the villages of origin, providing individuals and local groups with the opportunity to 'experience the village of origin'. As Secretary-General of ADRID Wakim Wakim explains:

Our task is not only to confront the grandsons of Zionism on the issue of displacement, or to rewrite the Palestinian Nakba narrative, systematically and comprehensively; it is more than this. We aim to organise the displaced

³⁶ The vast majority of the Palestinian younger generation in Israel believed that the solution for the refugees and displaced persons must be based on UN resolution 194 (67 percent); while only slightly more than 50 percent of the older generation agreed with this position. The younger generation also believe that it is possible to implement resolution 194 (67 percent)-as opposed to only 40 percent of the older generation. See Zureik (1999).

³⁷ Interview with Dawud Bader, 28 October 2002, Shaykh Dannun village, quoted in Boqa'i 2005: 102).

communities through the popular committees and relevant associations, and under the [umbrella] of the Displaced Committee [ADRID], as an organised national forum, and by encouraging the local committees to organise visits [to the villages of origin], by publishing bulletins to strengthen the belonging of the de-populated village as a microcosm of Palestine, by organising summer camps for displaced children, and by protecting the holy sites in the depopulated villages. (Wakim 2001a)

Visits to the villages of origin, preserving holy sites, holding summer camps and marches within the boundaries of the village of origin, have become key components of the internal refugees' strategy in their attempts to articulate a new narrative based on the village of origin. These activities aim to encourage displaced people to 'rediscover' the village of origin themselves, and to empower their memory, sense of belonging and identity. During the commemoration of the Nakba in 2000, ADRID organised, in coordination with the local refugee committees, more than 20 marches and trips to the villages of origin (Badil 2002a).³⁸ In 2003 most of the Nakba commemoration activities were held in the villages of origin (Said 199; Boqa'i 2005:103).³⁹

The protection and preservation of the original villages' Muslim and Christian holy sites are carried out on both local and national levels. In March 2002 displaced people from al-Ghabisiyya organised public prayer in front of the closed village mosque. The participants had asked the Israeli authorities to re-open the mosque which has been closed since 1997.⁴⁰ Some of the voluntary and semi-religious activities in the villages of origin have been carried out by the Islamic-led Al-Aqsa Association, which has been looking after and cleaning remaining old mosques and cemeteries. In 1994, the Al-Aqsa Association presided over the voluntary work of restoring the cemetery in the depopulated village of Husha. Similar activities were also carried out in the old village of Balad al-Shaykh (Cohen 2000). The Al-Aqsa Association has continued to lobby the Israeli authorities for the re-opening for prayer of all old mosques in villages of origin. This campaign has had some successes, including the decision by the Israeli Ministry for Religious Affairs in the mid-1990s to spend some NIS300,000 (around \$70,000) on repairing some mosques in villages of origin (Sa'id 1999; Boqa'i 2005: 103).

³⁸ Most of the IDPs national activities in the commemoration of the *Nakba* were held under the slogan of 'Their Independence. Our *Nakba*'. See ADRID press releases, 8 May 2000; 17 April 2001; 14 April 2001.

³⁹ While the village of origin was the 'centre' of the 2003 *Nakba* commemoration activities of the internally displaced people inside Israel, the Palestinian refugees have tried to focus on another 'symbol' of the *Nakba*: namely the refugee camp. Approximately half of the 2003 *Nakba* commemoration activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip took place inside refugee camps. See Boqa'i and Rempel 2003.

⁴⁰ *Al-Itihad*, 3 March 2002.

Since 1987 displaced persons from Kafr Bir'im village have been organising annual summer camps on the site of this depopulated Arab village (Magate 2000). Working in coordination with various Arab NGOs, several village committees have organised summer camps in the villages of origin. During these summer camps, individuals from the first generation of displacement are often invited to come to give talks about life in the village before the 1948 Nakba. Organisers of the Kafr Bir'im summer camps summed up the purpose of the events: 'it's not to talk about the village, but rather to live it 24 hours a day' (Sa'id 1999; Boqa'i 2005: 103–104).

In 1998 ADRID, in coordination with local committees of internal refugees and Palestinian NGOs inside Israel, began organising the 'Return March' as a major annual event. The 'Return March' is held on the same day as Israeli 'Independence Day' – which is marked according to the Hebrew calendar – with the participation of thousands of displaced people and Palestinians inside Israel. One of the key slogans of the 'return march' is: 'their Independence Day is our Nakba/catastrophe'. The route of the return march included one of the host villages, ending with one of the villages of origin. In 1998, on the commemoration of the 50th. anniversary of the Nakba, the march started from the town of Nazareth and ended in the pre-Nakba village of Saffuriyya.⁴¹ In 2000 the march began in the host village of Kabul and ended in al-Damun village of origin. In 2001 it began in the host village of Yafa and ended in the Ma'lul village of origin. In 2001 there was also a march to al-Birwa village of origin (Wakim 2001a; Badil 2001), and in 2003 to Umm al-Zinat village of origin.⁴² Other national dates around which marches were held included Land Day, and the 1948 date of village occupation, for example a march was held on 28 March 1998 from Shaykh Dannun host village to al-Ghabisiyya village of origin. These marches expressed a strong protest against the Israeli attitude towards the internal refugees; the symbolic 'return' each year to the village of origin on exactly the same day as Israel's 'independence' is symbolically powerful (Boqa'i 2005: 104).

Palestinian NGOs inside Israel and local committees of the internally displaced have produced geographical maps and oral histories, pamphlets and books focusing on the experience of displacement.⁴³ Historical accounts of the villages of origin, especially those accounts focusing on the pre-Nakba period, have been produced mostly by the displaced communities themselves. These accounts of the villages of origins in the pre-Nakba era list names of families, names of sites and landmarks,

41 *Haaretz*, 15 May 1998.

42 ADRID press release, 26 April 2003.

43 In 1998 ADRID published a book written by the Palestinian journalist Wadia 'Awawdeh on this experience and on memory and identity.

the boundaries of the village, as well as including photos from the pre-1948 period.⁴⁴ 'Socialisation' of the village of origin, therefore, has been attained by commemorating the suffering of the internal refugees (and the Palestinian refugees as a whole) and remembering their places of origin. Collective commemoration and memorialisation have ensured that 'socialisation' processes have become central to the social protests of the internally displaced (Boqa'i 2005: 104).

Individual solutions for the Palestinian refugees will not suffice. There is a need to address the questions of land and property that have symbolic, religious, national, cultural and economic significance for the Palestinian refugee community as a whole. For Palestinians a main reason for the continuation of the Israel-Palestine conflict is the failure of the Israeli state to acknowledge 1948 as an 'ethnic cleansing' and the dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine and their descendants. As long as this historical truth is denied or excluded, there can be no peace, no reconciliation in the Middle East. Clearly recognition of the Nakba is central to the future of Palestine and Israel; recognition of the historic injury and injustice that were visited upon the Palestinians is a prerequisite for a just solution.

Remembering the Nakba is also vital because its most salient by-product was the Palestine refugee problem, the greatest and the most enduring refugee problem in the world. In the last two decades we have had major contributions by Palestinian authors, many of whose accounts have been based on oral history of the refugees themselves and 'social history from below'. Palestinian authors have also been producing data and memory accounts of the Nakba (Masalha 1992; 2005; Sanbar 1984; 1994; 1996; 2001: 87-94; 2001; Khalidi 1992; Abu Sitta 1998; Al-Azhari 1996; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Sa'id 1992; 1999; Ashkar 2000; Cabaha and Brazilai 1996; Wakim 2001; 2001a; Badil 2001; 2002; 2002a; 2003; 2003a; al-Qalqili 2001), compiling and recording oral history and encouraging annual commemorations designed to preserve the memory of the catastrophe, while emphasising the link between refugee rights, collective identity and the challenge of return.

Remembrance seems to be about the past. But the Nakba did not end in 1948. For Palestinians, mourning 60 years of al-Nakba is not just about remembering the 'ethnic cleansing' of 1948; it is also about marking the ongoing dispossession and dislocation. Today the Nakba

44 The local committee of al-Ghabsiyya, in coordination with ADRID, published a pamphlet on the village of al-Ghabsiyya in May 2002, '*Al-Ghabsiyya: We Still Have the Keys, the Story of an Uprooted Palestinian Village*'. And in May 2003, in coordination with the local committee of Umm al-Zinat, a booklet entitled: '*Umm al-Zinat: The Story of an Uprooted Palestinian Village*', was published by ADRID. The displaced committee of al-Damun village of origin published '*Al-Damun: My Village*' in May 2000.

continues: the ongoing forced displacement of Palestinians caused by land confiscation, continued closures and invasions, *de facto* annexation facilitated by Israel's 730-kilometre Apartheid Wall in the occupied West Bank, and the ongoing horrific siege of Gaza. Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem are denied access to land, water, and other basic resources. Today the Nakba continues through the 'politics of denial'. There are more than 5 million Palestinian refugees around the world, all of whom are denied their internationally recognised 'right of return' to their homes and land. The history, rights and needs of Palestinian refugees have been excluded from recent Middle East peacemaking efforts. The failure of both the Israeli state and the international community to acknowledge 1948 as an 'ethnic cleansing' continues to underpin the Palestine-Israel conflict (Masalha 2005: 4).

Institutionalising Nakba Commemoration?

The facts of the Nakba, the destruction of Palestinian society and dispersion of the Palestinian people in 1948, Israel's responsibility for 'ethnic cleansing', the denationalisation of the Palestinian refugees, the ocean of suffering in the last six decades and the gross and ongoing colonisation of Palestine and continuing violation of international law, morality and human decency by successive Israeli governments, are some of the issues which require redress. Many Palestinian activists believe that the struggle to publicise the truth about the Nakba would be better served by the institutionalisation of Nakba commemoration. Of course in Israel Holocaust commemoration is heavily institutionalised and Holocaust remembrance is a state-funded industry. In 1959 the Israeli parliament (Knesset) made Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom Hashoah) a 'nationalist' public holiday. In 1961 another law was passed that closed all public entertainment on that day; at ten in the morning, a siren is sounded when everything stops and everyone stands in remembrance. In the absence of a Palestinian state, the efforts to institutionalise Nakba commemoration in Palestine will remain patchy. But perhaps the last thing the Palestinians need is a state-controlled Nakba industry – modelled on the Jewish 'holocaust industry'. There is a need, however, for various grassroots projects such as educational workshops on the Nakba, a Nakba Museum and perhaps the institutionalisation of a Nakba Memorial Day as a *worldwide* event. Nakba remembrance at grassroots levels will bind this generation directly to the older one, and bind the exiled to Palestine. It will also protect Nakba memory against its denial in Israel and around the world, and will relocate the right of return at the centre of peacemaking in the Middle East.

Clearly there is a need for a new approach to peacemaking in Palestine based on a recognition that the root cause of the Palestine conflict is the Nakba. The righting of the wrongs inflicted in 1948, and the redressing of the evils inflicted on the Palestinians ever since, would allow both citizens and returnees to enjoy a normal and peaceful life on an equal basis in Palestine. But there can be no peace in the region until there is accountability, acknowledgement and acceptance of Israel's role in the continuing conflict. Public participation in peacemaking, and the inclusion of international human rights principles and the recognition of refugee rights are essential in any successful peace agreements.

Remembrance is also an act of hope and liberation. Edward Said once argued that to write more truthfully about what happened in 1948 is not merely to practice professional historiography; it is also a profoundly moral act of redemption and a struggle for justice and for a better world (Masalha 2007: 286). Remembering, as a work of mourning and commemorating, with its regime of truth, opens up new possibilities for attending to the rights of the victims of the Nakba (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). In English, 're-membering', which is made of 're' and 'membering', means reuniting things and putting the wreckage of a painful past together in ways which helps end suffering and helps the process of healing (Grey 2007). Collective amnesia and contemporary forms of silenced voices are not confined to the Palestinian refugees. Silenced voices are found in many countries among groups of migrant workers and asylum-seekers. These silences are partly due to racism and the lack of status granted to different groups, people who fall into the category of 'the despised Other'. These silences are often maintained because they serve racist and colonial interests, or vested interests (Grey 2007). In Palestine when injustice remains unaddressed, repetitive violence will continue to occur. How to break open the silence of injustice and many-layered oppressions, a key question we face in Palestine, is a key dimension in building truth and reconciliation. To quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu: 'it wasn't possible to move forward in South Africa without listening to the painful stories of victims of Apartheid in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission'. In 2002 Tutu said Israel was practising apartheid in its policies towards the Palestinians. He was 'very deeply distressed' by a visit to the Holy Land, adding that 'it reminded me so much of what happened to us black people in South Africa'.⁴⁵ In Guatemala, also, there is the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI): the truth-telling of memories of the killings that would enable healing. Truth telling projects should be part

⁴⁵ Cited by the BBC, 24 May 2004, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3743389.stm>.

of the solution in historic Palestine. Acknowledging and remembering the Nakba will help us to begin tackling the Palestine refugee problem.

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