

Al-Nakbah in Arab Thought

The Transformation of a Concept

Anaheed Al-Hardan

The establishment of the state of Israel in Palestine in 1948 is referred to as *al-nakbah*, the catastrophe, in Palestinian and wider Arab discourses. Some have retrospectively argued that denoting 1948-as-catastrophe rendered the event akin to a natural disaster or calamity, obscuring questions of political will, agency, and responsibility.¹ A more comprehensive understanding of the articulation of 1948 as a nakbah, however, comes from placing the term in its “universe of discourse.”²

A reading of the nakbah’s universe of discourse needs to take place within the context of the historical and political changes that took place in the Arab East in the wake of 1948. Initially, these changes saw Arab nationalist thinkers, members of the pre-1948 Palestinian leadership, early historians, officers who took part in the battle for Palestine, and nationalist leaders and activists write about the cataclysmic events that shook the Arab East. Together, they theorized 1948-as-catastrophe within the context of the ascendant Arab nationalist liberation project and its related modernization discourses.³

In this article, I demonstrate how the nakbah was always a concept. It was first articulated, defined, and contested in a specific post-1948 Arab universe of discourse with antecedents in the nineteenth-century Arab renaissance (*al-nahdah*) and late Ottoman-era Arabism and later post-Ottoman anticolonial Arab nationalism.⁴ The notion of 1948-as-catastrophe was to eventually be eclipsed by the defeat of the June War (1967).⁵ This is because the new defeat would briefly take precedence as the new nakbah/*naksah* (setback), before the nakbah in both its old and new *naksah* guises disappeared from the literature altogether. In conclusion, I sketch how the nakbah’s eventual reemergence in its contemporary Palestinian

1. See, for example, Khoury, “Rethinking the Nakba.” This echoes the argument made by the Syrian Marxist professor of philosophy al-Azm some forty years ago in his *Al-Naqd al-Dhati*, to which I return below.

2. I borrow “universe of discourse” from Edward Said’s use of Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse to explore Orientalism in his seminal book of the same name (273).

3. The works examined in this article are limited to this group, given the importance of Arab nationalism and its derivative ideologies and political currents in the first two decades after the 1948 catastrophe. I take up the work of al-Azm in the post-1967 period by way of comparison with the nationalist position on the new defeat as yet another nakbah/

naksah (setback). The works of Islamists and communists is beyond the scope of this article.

4. For a comprehensive examination of *al-nahdah* thinkers and their intellectual production and legacies, see the classic Hourani, *Arabic Thought*.

5. The June War (Harb Huzayran), often referred to in English as the “Six Day War,” a translation of its Hebrew name, refers to the Israeli military defeat and occupation of parts of Egypt (Sinai Peninsula and Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip), Syria (Golan Heights), and Jordan (Jordanian-controlled West Bank) in June 1967. See Louis and Shlaim, *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*.

rather than Arab universe of discourse has led to the meanings that we today associate with the (ongoing) Palestinian catastrophe.

It is important not to conflate this discursive reading of the transformation in the various meanings of the *nakbah* with Palestinians' memories of and narratives on 1948. A catastrophe responsible for the wholesale destruction of societies and communities, as was the case for the major part of Palestinian society in 1948, does not simply "appear" and "disappear" for its survivors and their descendants. Rather, the larger historical and sociological issues that this article explores revolve around the relationship between power, knowledge, and "coloniality" in the writing of the history of the vanquished and the contemporary societies of the colonized.⁶

Thus, that the *nakbah* became plausible in English only after it was articulated by the Israeli "new historians," whose "new" scholarship was merely articulating what Arab intellectuals, historians, and political leaders and activists had taken up since 1948, sheds light on a constellation of colonial power relations. These underpin when the history of the vanquished is finally allowed to enter its annals, under whose terms and in which form and with what content. Moreover, these same constellations of colonial power relations enable the writing of the contemporary societies of the colonized and neocolonized without a serious consideration of their intellectual and theoretical production. Thus, the writing of history, society, and theory remains in the domain of those that a contemporary colonial Eurocentrism has long proclaimed to be the beginning and the end of history—today the heirs of colonial Europe, or the "West"—while the vanquished of yesterday and the colonized of today remain outside of it.⁷

Conceptualizing the War for Palestine:

Al-Nakbah, the Arab Catastrophe

Constantine Zurayk (1909–2000) is often credited with first using the term *nakbah* in order to describe the then ongoing war on the Palestinians and its outcomes in his *Ma'na al-Nakbah* (*The Meaning of the Catastrophe*) (1948). Zurayk was a historian, educator, and interwar-generation Arab nationalist thinker and scholar. His intellectual legacy includes a large number of books, edited collections, translations, and articles. He received a PhD in philosophy from Princeton University in 1930 and took up the position of assistant professor of history at his alma mater, the American University of Beirut (AUB). Zurayk had a long and distinguished career in public life. Most relevant to his analysis of 1948 is the fact that he served as the first envoy on the first Syrian delegation to Washington, DC (1945–46) and as the deputy delegate on the Syrian delegation to the United Nations Security Council in the critical pre-1948 years (1946–47).⁸

In his brief foreword, Zurayk begins by telling the reader that his examination of the calamity of the Arabs in Palestine is an attempt to think through "the suffocating crisis" that has enveloped the Arab nation. His foreword frames the rest of his mediations in an explicitly pan-Arab nationalist framework.⁹ It is within this context that his mediations on the war-as-catastrophe unfold in the rest of *Ma'na al-Nakbah*. In the first part, Zurayk sets out what he sees as the "gravity of the catastrophe,"¹⁰ and it is here that he first uses the term *nakbah*. He states: "The defeat of the Arabs in Palestine is neither a mere setback nor a simple passing evil. It is a catastrophe [*nakbah*] in every sense of the word, and a calamity that is greater than any other that has afflicted the Arabs in their long calamity and tragedy ridden history."¹¹

Zurayk's use of the term *nakbah* in order to describe the war on the Palestinians as a catastrophe was, in the first instance, in relation to the

6. The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano argues that the contemporary hegemonic global distribution of power has an element of "coloniality" insofar as its origins lie in a specific modern/colonial, racialized, Eurocentric system of capitalism that was established through the conquest and settler colonization of the

Americas, the extermination of the indigenous population, and slavery. See Quijano, "Coloniality of Power."

7. For a critique of Eurocentric history and philosophy, see Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism."

8. al-Azmah, *Qustantin Zurayq*, 5–6; I wish to thank Huda Zurayk for her input on her late father's biography.

9. Zurayk, *Ma'na al-Nakbah*, 197.

10. *Ibid.*, 199.

11. *Ibid.*, 201.

performance of the seven Arab states who entered Palestine after the Zionist movement declared the establishment of the state of Israel. It was therefore also in relation to the Arabs' consequent colossal failures and human, material, and morale losses as manifested in, inter alia, the dispossession of the inhabitants of Palestine. The gravity of the catastrophe for Zurayk is further compounded by the Arab states' inability to thwart the Zionist movement despite the justness of the Palestinian cause. He does recognize, however, that the enemy that the Arabs faced was not only the Zionist movement in its physical colonialist manifestation in Palestine, but a movement aligned with imperialism. In view of this, the Arabs must look inward, he contends, toward their own weaknesses and failures, accept their share in the making of the nakbah, and learn from their mistakes. This is all the more urgent given that the establishment of the state of Israel is the beginning of what Zurayk projects to be a long-term battle with settler colonialism in Palestine.¹²

It is this call for introspective critical self-reflection that Zurayk diligently carries out in *Ma'na al-Nakbah*, making the case for the special duty of the intellectual in this regard, especially in times of national calamities and disasters.¹³ With this sense of urgency and duty, Zurayk sets out both short-term and the needed fundamental long-term solutions to the catastrophe. He argues that the short-term remedies include raising immediate awareness of the real and imminent danger that Zionism poses; immediate investment in state-based military, economic, and political capabilities; Arab unification; the enlistment of popular forces as a resource for the struggle against Zionism; and, finally, bargaining with the "Great Powers" in the greater interests of the Arab nation.¹⁴

Despite these immediate solutions, however, Zurayk argues that the battle with Zionism is ultimately a long-term one. This is because the root cause of the catastrophic defeat is based on the regressive pan-Arab condition. Of paramount centrality to this condition is the continued lack of the political Arab nation, despite its existence in

both the geographical and linguistic sense. As a result, the only way to resolve the war-as-catastrophe is through "a total and fundamental change in the Arab condition, an all-encompassing revolution in all our ways of thinking, working and living."¹⁵ This is a process that encompasses both short- and long-term modernization plans—including industrialization, separation of state and religion, scientific training, and learning from the achievements of other civilizations—and whose end goal is a unified Arab nationalist entity. Ultimately, Zurayk concludes, "The catastrophe [nakbah] that has befallen us today is thus the marker of our internal state of affairs."¹⁶

Ma'na al-Nakbah is a remarkable text of its time given that it appeared with a clear future-oriented vision when compared to other contemporaneous texts that were the last echoes of the world that the nakbah itself had destroyed. Zurayk places the nakbah's making at the doorstep of the Arab states while being acutely aware of the collusion between Zionism and European and American imperialism. He also sees the eventual resolution of the nakbah as ultimately a pan-Arab affair predicated upon the Arab states' ability to radically transform and modernize their social, economic, and political systems and to unite. The meaning of the nakbah for Zurayk is not "the superiority of one nation over another, but rather, the distinction between one system and another."¹⁷ Thus, for Zurayk, the Zionist movement is part of the modern world, while the Arabs still lack the most basic modern political necessities like a unified nation-state, a national economy, a military, and so forth.

It is within these discursive parameters that Zurayk first argued for the 1948 war on Palestine and the Palestinians as a nakbah. His book therefore sheds light on the nakbah's universe of discourse in terms of the discursive dimensions within which the 1948 war-as-catastrophe was first conceptualized and articulated in 1948. This conceptualization of 1948-as-catastrophe would become implicated in the changes that resulted from the end of direct French and British colonial

12. *Ibid.*, 201–4.

13. *Ibid.*, 207–9.

14. *Ibid.*, 213–24.

15. *Ibid.*, 221.

16. *Ibid.*, 238.

17. *Ibid.*, 227.

rule and the deposition of the postindependence regimes that they left behind. These political realities, in turn, allowed for the articulation and rearticulation of the nakbah in different ways in the first two decades of its aftermath.

Before turning to these significations and shifting meanings of 1948, I examine the different ways in which the 1948 war was articulated and understood in its aftermath through reading texts that were contemporaneous with Zurayk's own. These are the texts of the pre-1948 generation of Palestinian leaders and notables that constitute their attempts to come to terms with the consequences of what was ultimately their colossal failures in Palestine.

Early Works, 1948–67

Palestinian Arab Evaluation and Historicization of the Defeat

The immediate aftermath of the nakbah saw successive military overthrows of the ancien régimes that presided over the catastrophic Arab defeat during the war. It also saw the publication of Palestinian Arab texts that belonged to a pre-1948 experience and worldview. These were texts of men who were either directly or indirectly involved in the pre-1948 Palestinian national movement. These men's texts, broadly speaking, attempted to explain or shed light on the reasons for the nakbah.¹⁸ Two of these men also published early histories of the war on Palestine.¹⁹

What the majority of these men also shared was the fate of banishment or exile that their thirty-year failed direct or indirect leadership had wrought upon the Palestinians. Despite this backdrop, these texts—especially those of a reflective or explanatory nature—have very little, if any, introspective critical self-reflection on what may have allowed for and led to the nakbah.²⁰ The

self-criticism that did exist was mostly general and limited. For example, in his *Ibrat Falastin (The Lesson of Palestine)* (1949),²¹ Musa al-'Alami, who had worked in the British colonial administration and as a result played a limited political role under British colonial rule,²² argued that

there were two phases to the battle of Palestine. In the first phase the burden of defense was thrown on the shoulders of the Palestinians. . . . The fundamental source of our weakness was that we were unprepared even though we were not taken by surprise . . . that we proceeded along the lines of previous revolutions . . . that we worked on a local basis. . . . our arms were poor and deficient . . . our aims in the battle were diverse.²³

According to the historian Mustafa Kabha, Muhammad Nimr al-Hawwari was the first and perhaps only member of the pre-1948 generation to directly point the finger of blame. Al-Hawwari did this in his Nazareth-published *Sir al-Nakbah (The Catastrophe's Secret)* (1955) after he was allowed to return in the wake of the nakbah.²⁴ Kabha argues that the book's implications are that the secret of the nakbah, or its cause, is Muhammad Amin al-Husayni, the man who was at the helm of the pre-1948 Palestinian national movement under the British.²⁵ Others have argued that "social auto-criticism permeates Palestinian and Arab discussion of the [1948] war . . . [like] criticisms of disorganization, disunity, self-interest, and 'backwardness.'"²⁶ Thus, while self-criticism did indeed exist, and ranged in scope from al-'Alami's and others' more general assessment of the causes of failure to al-Hawwari's more direct assigning of responsibility for this failure, what was lacking in these early texts was a thorough and a far-reaching Palestinian Arab self-criticism rather than the prevalent Arab self-criticism. This was not a lack in terms of who the author of a text in question was

18. See al-'Alami, *Ibrat Falastin*; al-Ghuri, *al-Mu'amarah al-Kubrah*; al-Ghuri, *15 Ayyar 1948*; al-Husayni, *Haqa'iq*; al-Hawwari, *Sir al-Nakbah*; Darwazah, *al-Qadiyyah al-Falastiniyyah*; and Zu'aytar, *al-Qadiyyah al-Falastiniyyah*. An abridged version of al-'Alami's text and the full text of Zu'aytar were published in English.

19. al-'Arif, *al-Nakbah*; al-Khatib, *Min Athar al-Nakbah*; al-Khatib, *Ahdath al-Nakbah*.

20. For a critical discussion of this lack in Palestinian self-criticism through the narrative of failure as triumph see Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 192–201.

21. Alami, *The Lesson of Palestine*, 374.

22. Hourani, "Musa 'Alami."

23. Alami, *The Lesson of Palestine*, 374.

24. According to Benny Morris, al-Hawwari may have been a Haganah Intelligence Agency agent. The Haganah was the Zionist prestate paramilitary organization that later formed the nucleus of the incipient Israeli army during the nakbah. See Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee*, 111.

25. Kabha, "Ishkaliyyat Kitabat al-Tarikh," 21.

26. Hasso, "Modernity and Gender," 491.

but who or what the object of criticism was. As a result, what the pre-1948 generation of men did not produce was a thorough analysis of the failures of the Palestinian national movement during its brief thirty-year leadership under British colonial rule in Palestine.

Thus, the degree and quality of Palestinian Arab self-criticism sheds light on what could and couldn't be articulated in the immediate aftermath of 1948. The nakbah was only partly the result of the Palestinians' own failed leadership during thirty years of British rule in Palestine.²⁷ It was also the outcome of inter-Arab disunity, rivalry, and alliances against Transjordanian regional ambitions in particular.²⁸ The texts of these men were therefore written within, and constrained by, their particular historical moment and its associated intellectual, geographical, and political locations and limitations. In view of this, these texts shed light on the milieu of the major capitals of the Arab East in the years that immediately superseded 1948, where most of the texts were published. They also shed light on the discourses that were circulating in these capitals. It is therefore more instructive to read these texts for what they tell us about these discourses than they were both engaging with as well as a part of.

One text that is particularly important in this regard is Muhammad Amin al-Husayni's *Haqa'iq 'an Qadiyyat Falastin (The Question of Palestine Facts)* (1954). This is because of al-Husayni's important role in the pre-1948 Palestinian national movement, until an arrest warrant issued by the British during the Palestinian uprising against them (1936–39) forced him to leave Palestine.²⁹ Al-Husayni's book is a collection of ten extended essays that initially appeared as responses to a series of questions put forth by the editor of the Egyptian *al-Masri* newspaper. In his foreword to the first edition of the book, al-Husayni states that the "colonist" and Zionist "lies and fabrications" were successfully spread in the Arab world,³⁰ particularly during the first year of what he calls the "disaster" (*al-karithah*) and "the Palestinian migration to

the neighboring Arab states."³¹ The lies and fabrications that al-Husayni is alluding to can in part be discerned through the editor's questions. This is especially the case for those questions that are more accusatory in tone. These point the finger of blame at the Palestinian leadership, including al-Husayni, and the people of Palestine more generally, for bringing the disaster upon themselves.

These series of questions, coupled with al-Husayni's claims in his foreword and his defensive responses throughout, shed light on the various meanings associated with the nakbah and its universe of discourse in the wake of 1948. To begin with, the term *nakbah* for 1948 was not universally used during the time of (at least) the first publication of the book in 1954; al-Husayni's preferred term is *al-karithah*. Second, given the editor's accusatory questions, the understanding of nakbah as the Zionists bringing a catastrophe on the Palestinians was not universally accepted in the years immediately following 1948. In fact, what seems to have also been associated with the nakbah is the notion that the Palestinians brought it upon themselves: either through land sales to Zionists, by not putting up a fight, or by instructing the people to leave.

The political scientist Salih 'Abd al-Jawwad has argued that the historical Arab narrative "categorically rejects Israeli allegations that Arab leaders ordered Palestinians to evacuate their villages, even if, in some cases, residues of this myth remain in the popular discourse, mainly because Palestinian refugees listened to Israeli-sponsored, Arab-language radio, which was used to wage psychological war."³² Nevertheless, in al-Husayni's text, these accusations seem to have been part and parcel of the meaning of the nakbah or what was interchangeably referred to as "the disaster" in some Arab circles during the early years. Of course, this does not absolve the Israeli state of its responsibility for the mass dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948.

There were also two early attempts to historicize the nakbah by two men who belonged to the

27. Khalidi, "The Palestinians and 1948."

28. Rogan and Shlaim, *The War for Palestine*.

29. Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine*, 85–108.

30. al-Husayni, *Haqa'iq*, 6.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Abdel Jawad, "Arab and the Palestinian Narratives," 75.

same pre-1948 generation of leaders.³³ The first is Muhammad Nimr al-Khatib's *Min Athar al-Nakbah* (*In the Wake of the Catastrophe*) (1951), republished as *Ahdath al-Nakbah aw Nakbat Falastin* (*The Events of the Catastrophe or Palestine's Catastrophe*) (1967) in the wake of the June War. There has been a recent revival of interest in the latter book given that al-Khatib provided what was probably the first written account of the Tanturah village massacre.³⁴ This was one of the approximately seventy documented nakbah massacres whose notoriety came to light in English because it was the subject of a lawsuit in Israel in 2000.³⁵ The other book is 'Arif al-'Arif's six-volume *al-Nakbah: Nakbat Bayt al-Maqdis wa al-Firdaws al-Mafqud* (*The Catastrophe: Jerusalem's Catastrophe and the Lost Paradise*) (1956–62). Al-'Arif's *al-Nakbah* is an encyclopedic documentation of the military, political, and diplomatic events that shook Palestine. It covers the period that begins with the adoption of the United Nations Partition Resolution 181 on November 29, 1947, and ends with the last armistice agreement between Syria and the Israeli state on July 20, 1949.

In al-'Arif's early attempt to historicize the war, he also defined the nakbah, when he argued,

How can I not call it [the book] "The Catastrophe"? We have been afflicted by a catastrophe, we the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular, during this period of time in a way in which we have not been subjected to catastrophe in centuries and in other periods of time: our homeland was stolen, we were thrown out of our homes, we lost a large number of our sons and of our young ones, and in addition to all this, the core of our dignity was also afflicted.³⁶

For al-'Arif, the namesake of his book derives from the nakbah as the subjection of the Palestinians and the Arabs to catastrophe. He details the ways in which the nakbah unfolded in the first four volumes of the book. However, the emphasis is clearly on not only the Palestinians but also the Arabs. Thus, the pan-Arab remains important, and the nakbah cannot be understood outside of this context. It is both the Arabs and the Palestinian Arabs

who have been afflicted. The main point is that as early as 1956, the nakbah had already encapsulated various and competing significations: the pan-Arab nationalist catastrophe, the catastrophe brought about by Zionist and imperial collusion, the catastrophe brought upon the Palestinians by their own leadership or by the people themselves, and the catastrophe wrought on the Palestinians in particular, and the Arabs in general, in Palestine. It was also referred to as the disaster, the catastrophe, and the Palestinian migration (*al-hijrah al-falastiniyyah*).

Thus, when read together, the texts that circulated in the immediate aftermath of 1948 shed light on the multiple and at times even contradictory significations of 1948-as-catastrophe. These multiple significations of 1948 were articulated within discourses that were circulating in response to, and in dialogue with, the changing realities of the time: the coming to the fore of the pan-Arab nationalism of the interwar years in the wake of 1948; the Palestinians' failures under the British; the geopolitical loss of Palestine and consequent retreat in Palestinian state-based nationalism; and the changing political map of the Arab East in the wake of both the nakbah and the new post-World War Two world order. The changes in the political map were the most important and defining features of the new post-nakbah Arab reality, realized through successive military coups in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. These coups and the related political changes that swept the Arab East allowed for the pan-Arab dimension of 1948-as-catastrophe to gain further prominence, particularly in the first decade following the nakbah.

The Dawn of a New Post-Nakbah Arab Era

In his seminal study of the reemergence of the post-1948 Palestinian national movement, the political scientist Yezid Sayigh argues that the nakbah coincided with the beginning of three significant historic processes in the Arab region. These were "the formation or consolidation of independent national states, the emergence of a

33. See al-Samadi, "al-'Alim al-Da'iyah," and "'Arif al-'Arif," 3:150–51.

34. al-Khatib, *Min Athar al-Nakbah*, 118–20.

36. al-'Arif, *al-Nakbah*, 1:3.

35. Abdel Jawad, "Zionist Massacres," and Esmeir, "Law, History, Memory."

37. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, 25.

distinct Arab-state system, and the replacement of colonial domination with US-Soviet rivalry.³⁷ The nakbah was therefore both the end and the beginning of two distinct chapters in the history of the post-Ottoman Arab East: the end of direct colonial rule through the League of Nations' sanctioned mandate system and the beginning of US imperial domination and Soviet influence in the region.

Coming at both the beginning and the end of these critical historical junctures, the nakbah sent tremors across the Arab East. Retrospectively, one of the most important consequences of these tremors was the institutionalization of militarism in the Arab world. This institutionalization allowed for the further articulation of the pan-Arab nationalist significations of 1948-as-catastrophe. It also gave these significations yet another dimension that departed from Zurayk's Arab nakbah in significant ways. This is because "the tension and conflicts between the civilian-military leadership during the Palestine War were partly responsible for the armed coups d'états that shook the Arab world to its core after 1949."³⁸ Within this context, the texts to emerge during the dawn of this new post-nakbah era reflected this schism and were grounded in the various political currents and movements that were, hand in hand with the military men, rising to prominence after 1948.³⁹

One of the nakbah's most significant political tremors shook Egypt, where as early as 1952, the Free Officers led a military coup dubbed the "July Revolution" and deposed the British-era monarchy.⁴⁰ Gamal Abdel Nasser emerged as the leader of both the Free Officers and eventually Egypt. He was also a major (*sagh*) in the Egyptian army brigade that was under siege in the village of al-Fallujah (Gaza subdistrict) from October 1948 until February 1949, during the nakbah.⁴¹ Syria, on the other hand, would see more than one military coup by the time of the July Revolution in a pat-

tern that would mark Syrian politics for the next two decades.⁴² In 1958, Iraq followed suit with a military coup that overthrew the British-era monarchy, led by, inter alia, 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, a nationalist officer in the Iraqi Army. King Abdullah of Transjordan, which became Jordan, was assassinated in Jerusalem in 1951. Although succeeded by his son, his grandson, King Husayn, became the de facto leader in 1952 and foiled a failed military coup in 1957.⁴³

A text to emerge during this era that demonstrates the extent of the changing ideological and political realities in the Arab world is Abdullah al-Tal's *Karithat Falastin: Mudhakkarat 'Abd Allah al-Tal, Qa'id Ma'rakat al-Quds (The Disaster of Palestine: Memoirs of Abdullah al-Tal, Leader of the Battle of Jerusalem)* (1959). Al-Tal was a colonel in Transjordan's Arab Legion during the war on Palestine and was appointed as the military governor of Jerusalem in October 1948.⁴⁴ He was also privy to and took part in the Transjordanian and Zionist secret meetings and negotiations that began at the end of 1948.⁴⁵ After learning of King Abdullah's intention to send him away as a military attaché to a foreign embassy, he resigned in June 1949 and secretly left Jordan five months later.⁴⁶ He eventually arrived in Egypt where the authorities, according to him, granted him political asylum.⁴⁷ While in Egypt, al-Tal was tried in absentia for his alleged role in the 1951 assassination of King Abdullah, a topic that is only mentioned in passing in his book.⁴⁸

The most important contribution of the book is al-Tal's disclosure of the secret negotiations and agreements between Transjordan and the Zionist movement prior to the entry of the regular Arab armies into Palestine. He also reveals those that he personally took part in prior to the formal Rhodes Armistice negotiations between Israel and the neighboring Arab states (1949). The publication of al-Tal's disclosures at the height of

38. Gerges, "Egypt and the 1948 War," 156.

39. See, for example, Nasser, *Philosophy of the Revolution*; al-Bitar, *al-Fa'aliyah al-Thawriyah*; al-Tal, *Karithat Falastin*; and Qamhawi, *al-Nakbah*.

40. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, 25–26.

41. al-Tal, *Karithat Falastin*, 434–35.

42. Hinnebusch, *Syria*, 25.

43. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, 26–33.

44. al-Tal, *Karithat Falastin*, 355–58.

45. See *ibid.*, 437–544.

46. *Ibid.*, 586.

47. *Ibid.*, 598.

48. *Ibid.*, 587–99. He does, however, state that he began plotting a military coup, which never materialized, as early as December 1948.

Nasserism, in the wake of the Suez War (1956), and in Egypt demonstrates how the various meanings and discourses associated with the Arab nakbah were changing yet again.⁴⁹ Moreover, it demonstrates how they were being molded by the changes and political visions brought about by the military coups.

Al-Tal's foreword captures the relationship between the changing political realities and parameters of discourse on 1948 when he tells the reader,

When I wrote those memoirs, some ten years ago, the Arab nation was passing through one of the most dangerous periods of disintegration and disunity . . . a period during which some Arab leaders helped the colonists establish a criminal state in the heart of the Arab homeland. . . . There is a stark difference between the period during which these memoirs were written and the period during which these memoirs are being published. . . . [We are now in] a stage which allows for reassurance and hope for comprehensive Arab unity.⁵⁰

Al-Tal's book is therefore part of the clear line that was being drawn between the ancien régime and the new military leaders. This is the line between those who allowed for, and indeed colluded in the making of, the nakbah and those who now promised a new dawn of Arab unification, decolonization, and independence. Thus, while the nakbah continued to be entangled in discourses that emphasized its pan-Arab dimensions well into the late 1950s, these discourses also posited the nakbah within the context of a definite rupture with the old order that made it possible. In addition, they posited it within the context of the promise of a new dawn that was to be or was being brought about by the military coups and the emergent ideological currents and movements of the time.

Nasser's own mediation on the July Revolution in his *Falsafat al-Thawrah* (*The Philosophy of the Revolution*) (1954) demonstrates these different

points. It underscores the way in which the meaning of the nakbah came to encapsulate, in the first instance, the need for Arab unification and liberation, the ultimate path toward the liberation of Palestine. In his book, Nasser argues that "it is not true that the revolution of July 23rd started on account of the results of the war in Palestine."⁵¹ The revolution, Nasser argues, was the cumulative result of the Egyptian people's hopes and aspiration for independence and self-determination.

Where Palestine and its nakbah do figure for Nasser are in terms of their encapsulation of the political pan-Arab space of the revolution. As he puts it: "The fighting in Palestine was not fighting on foreign territory. Nor was it inspired by sentiment. It was a duty imposed by self-defense."⁵² This self-defense makes Palestine a part of what Nasser refers to as the "Arab circle,"⁵³ of which Egypt and its revolution are also a constitutive part. This makes Palestine's nakbah a catastrophe to the project of the becoming of the Arab nation in the political sense, or independence and unification. Reflecting on the relationship between his experiences in the Egyptian army in Palestine and the subsequent Egyptian revolution, Nasser tells us that, after the siege in al-Fallujah, "I came home with the whole region in my mind one complete whole . . . one region, the same factors and circumstances, even the same forces opposing them all."⁵⁴ Rather than bringing about the July Revolution, Palestine's nakbah brought home the extent to which 1948 was a pan-Arab nakbah, and its resolution therefore only possible through unification and decolonization: in other words, the liberation, in the first instance, of the Arab circle.

This conception of Palestine and its nakbah shares similarities with and departs from Zurayk's 1948-as-catastrophe. The similarities lie in the pan-Arab nationalist vision of liberation. The significant departure is the way in which this conception of the nakbah was part of a discourse that discredited the old order while legitimizing the

49. The Suez War, or the Tripartite Aggression (al-'Udwan al-Thulathi in Arabic), saw Israel, Britain, and France invade Egypt in October 1956, shortly after Nasser nationalized the Canal in July 1956. US and Soviet diplomatic and economic intervention, however, led to

their withdrawal. This gave a major boost to Nasser and Nasserism. See Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, 19.

50. al-Tal, *Karithat Falastin*, ii.

51. Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, 26.

52. *Ibid.*, 63.

53. *Ibid.*, 62.

54. *Ibid.*, 64.

military as the “men on horseback . . . saviors and redeemers.”⁵⁵ In relation to the rise of militarism vis-à-vis Nasserism in particular, while the nakbah continued to be pan-Arab, “thinking about it became part of the building of a military force capable of withstanding and defeating Israel, which could not be achieved without a new Arab reality, a reality that was promised by “Arab nationalism.”⁵⁶ Thus, the discursive dimensions within which the nakbah was articulated as early as 1954 were shifting yet again, to contain yet more meanings, as they responded to the quickly changing political realities and currents on the ground.

These early years also saw Palestinians organize as part of the emergent Arab nationalist movements of the time. The two most significant in this regard were the Arab Nationalists Movement (ANM), greatly influenced by Zurayk’s ideas, and the Ba’th Party. The nakbah, as part of and central to the Question of Palestine, occupied an important place in these different movements and their political literature. However, this was only as part of the broader question of Arab liberation.⁵⁷ This continued to be the case when calls began to be made to organize Palestinians qua Palestinians for the battle of liberation within the context of the emergence of armed Palestinian groups and the “Arab-Arab conflict.”⁵⁸ This is because these calls were still made within the parameters of a broader Arab struggle for liberation. As Naji ‘Al-lush, a member of the Ba’th Party who would later join the Palestinian Patriotic (National) Liberation Movement (Fatah), put it in his *al-Masirah ila Filastin (The March to Palestine)* (1964), “The establishment of a revolutionary movement, the organization of the Arabs of Palestine, and the release of their energies is important and necessary for the liberation of Palestine as long as this organization remains aware of the parameters of its struggle, and comprehends that it is first and foremost a struggle for [Arab] unity and liberation.”⁵⁹

It was only with the emergence of Fatah that calls were made for “a total Arab battle that takes a regional Palestinian face as a cover for itself.”⁶⁰ This call to bring Palestinians on board qua Palestinians to the battle of liberation, and the liberation of Palestine as the path toward Arab liberation, would be realized only in the wake of the June War. The outcomes of that war, “by discrediting Arab authority and weakening state control, created the opportunity for the rise of the Palestinian guerrillas as regional actors.”⁶¹ This also led to the assumption of the task of Palestinian liberation by Palestinians and the eventual eclipse of the 1948 nakbah in Arab thought by the second defeat.

The June War and the New Nakbah/Naksah

The years immediately following the June War saw another wave of critical works, articles, and lectures that attempted to address and come to terms with the new defeat by nationalists, Marxists, and Islamists.⁶² This new defeat was seen as yet another catastrophe or disaster, one in a direct genealogical continuity and with the same root causes as the nakbah of 1948. Nasser referred to and deemed the outcomes of this new round of fighting a naksah (setback) to the project of pan-Arab unity and liberation.⁶³ Although the different works that emerged in the wake of 1967 assessed the new defeat in different ways, what they shared in common was the linking of 1967 and 1948.

Thus, thinking about the new defeat would come to subsume and eventually eclipse the nakbah of 1948. Once the Palestinian guerrilla groups took over the task of liberation in the wake of 1967,⁶⁴ this limited preoccupation with the 1948 nakbah conspicuously disappears from the literature of the post-1967 period altogether. By the early 1970s, all eyes were on what came to be called the Palestinian Revolution. This was the site where the guerrillas were actively taking part in and determining the ways in which the liberation

55. Gerges, “Egypt and the 1948 War,” 157.

56. al-Jabiri, *al-Khitab al-‘Arabi*, 116–35.

57. al-Sharif, *al-Bahth ‘an Kiyān*, 48–56.

58. *Ibid.*

59. ‘Al-lush, *al-Masirah ila Falastin*, 222.

60. al-Sharif, *al-Bahth ‘an Kiyān*, 91.

61. Sayigh, “Turning Defeat into Opportunity,” 244.

62. Some of the nationalist, Marxist, and Islamist works include al-Azm, *al-Naqd al-Dhati*; al-Bitar, *Min al-Naksah ila al-Thawrah*; al-Hafiz,

al-Hazimah; Zurayq, “Ma’na al-Nakbah Mujaddadan”; and al-Munjid, *Amidat al-Nakbah*.

63. Abu Lughud, “Min al-Nakbah ila al-Naksah.”

64. Sayigh, “Turning Defeat into Opportunity,” 264.

of Palestine was to unfold.⁶⁵ Eventually, the resolution of the nakbah via the liberation of historic Palestine would itself take a secondary place as the Palestinian guerrillas' focus shifted to the reversal of the Israeli gains made in 1967.⁶⁶ These political changes signaled the beginning of the disappearance of the Arab nakbah's universe of discourse and the eventual reemergence of the 1948 nakbah in a new, exclusively Palestinian discursive guise.

Zurayk's *Ma'na al-Nakbah Mujaddadan* (*The Meaning of the Catastrophe Anew*) (1967) was one of the texts to emerge in light of the new defeat. The title of his book, as well his main argument, connects to his first book on the nakbah. He begins the sequel by making this explicit link, when he states that while the first battle and disaster took place in 1948, "today, after nineteen years, the second battle has erupted and the new disaster [*karithah*] is no less horrific than the first, and its anticipated outcome will be no less severe for the Arab people; the event and its outcomes seem to be greater and more detrimental."⁶⁷ Quoting from his first book, he insists that he described the first defeat as a nakbah because it was indeed "a catastrophe [*nakbah*] and not a setback [*naksah*], and like it, and indeed more vicious than it, is what we have now been afflicted with."⁶⁸ In his insistence on 1948 and 1967 as catastrophes rather than mere setbacks, Zurayk seems to be directly contesting Nasser's response to the latest defeat.

Zurayk summarizes his earlier writing on the meaning of the defeat of 1948 because it has clear implications for the second defeat. He uses the sequel to emphasize yet again the scientific and state-based transformations that Arabs must undertake in order to transform their societies and, ultimately, their abilities to confront Zionism. Thus, the central thesis of *Ma'na al-Nakbah Mujaddadan* is that the reasons for the new catastrophe are the same reasons for the catastrophe of 1948. For Zurayk, the outcomes of the June War, like the outcomes of the war on the Palestinians in 1948, are fundamentally tied to Arab societies'

ongoing lack of modernization and unity. Once again, Zurayk argues, the core of the problem in 1967, like the core problem he analyzed in 1948, is based on Arab and Israeli societies belonging to "two different civilizational epochs."⁶⁹ The former is "premodern" and "backward" while the latter is modern, unified, and technologically, scientifically, organizationally, and industrially advanced. In conclusion, Zurayk quotes from his first book in order to underscore the "old meaning [of the nakbah] anew,"⁷⁰ without which there will be no resolution of the new nakbah.

Another important book to result from the defeat was the Marxist Syrian professor of philosophy Sadik Jalal al-Azm's *al-Naqd al-Dhati Ba'd al-Hazimah* (*Self-Criticism after the Defeat*) (1968).⁷¹ This book provides grounds for comparison with Zurayk's nationalist position on the new nakbah/naksah. Al-Azm's central thesis, like that of Zurayk, is that the defeat of 1967 is "tied directly to the prevalent economic, cultural, scientific and civilization conditions in the Arab nation, i.e., it was a reflection and expression of those conditions."⁷² Al-Azm advances this argument by drawing parallels between the reasons for the Russian defeat during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) and the reasons for the Arabs' defeat during the June War. For al-Azm, the main difference between these two defeats, which is also the most telling manifestation of the regressive civilizational condition of the Arabs that led to their defeat, is the Arabs' evasion of responsibility.

Al-Azm's insistence on the prevalent evasion of responsibility extends to the naming of the new defeat a nakbah. Rather than singling out Zurayk, al-Azm names the then head of the Department of Philosophy at Lebanese University. He argues that the very usage of the term *catastrophe* constitutes an evasion of responsibility: "Whoever is struck by a disaster [*nakbah*, in original in plural, *nakabat*] is not considered responsible for it. . . . This is why we ascribe disasters [*nakabat*] to fate, destiny and nature."⁷³ In addition to rejecting 1967 as (yet an-

65. See, for example, the collected works of nationalist thinkers from this period in Markaz Dirasat al-Wihdah al-'Arabiyyah, *Qira'at*, vols. 2 and 5.

66. Khalidi, "Observations on the Right of Return."

67. Zurayq, *Ma'na al-Nakbah Mujaddadan*, 996.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, 997.

70. *Ibid.*, 1031.

71. al-Azm, *Self-Criticism*, 16.

72. *Ibid.*, 38.

73. *Ibid.*, 40.

other) nakbah, al-Azm also rejects Nasser's naksah and singles him out for criticism. In his preface to the fortieth anniversary edition, he argues that he initially published his book with an insistence on using "defeat" in opposition to "setback." His was an attempt to therefore name "the defeat by its name publicly and clearly, without any attempt to hide or dilute the effect of the fire and napalm on its victims."⁷⁴

Thus, the main task of *al-Naqd al-Dhati* is to engage in a far-reaching self-critique, which, according to al-Azm, the Arabs had not only failed to do but are incapable of doing given their cultural, social, and political state of affairs. In conclusion, al-Azm ties the defeat of 1948 to 1967, foregrounding the role of class as well as its relationship to the Arab regimes and elites who were responsible for both defeats. It is this emphasis on class and his clear critique of Nasser in particular that distinguishes al-Azm's critique from Zurayk's. Looking to the emergent Palestinian guerrillas, al-Azm concludes that only a leadership committed to the cause of its people will be able to translate the sacrifices of the guerrillas into a popular mass mobilization. This mobilization ought to be for an armed and cultural struggle that would transform the Arabs' condition during their decisive post-1967 historical stage.⁷⁵

In an interview he gave in the late 1990s, al-Azm argued that intellectually, "the Arab World witnessed the emergence of a strong leftist wave immediately after the 1967 defeat, which extended to the 1973 October War."⁷⁶ This wave also coincided with the short-lived preoccupation with the new nakbah/naksah, of which Zurayk's and al-Azm's texts were an important part, before the thinking regarding the nakbah and its meanings becomes conspicuously absent from the literature. This disappearance can be understood through linking the opportunity that the June War provided for the emergent Palestinian guerrillas to follow an independent military course in relation to the liberation of Palestine.

Thus, the changing political reality's relationship to the intellectual terrain was first translated

through the outcomes of the June War understood as a new nakbah/naksah. By the mid-1970s, however, this intellectual preoccupation with nakbah, if only as part of the new defeat, would become subsumed by the guerrilla's revolution. This is because the Palestinian Revolution, especially for Arab nationalists, itself subsumed the struggle for Arab unity and liberation and came to encapsulate the hopes previously appended to the latter struggle and its related discourses. As the Palestinian movement's emphasis on liberation and return was gradually transformed, and as the regional order within which it operated also changed, the Arab nakbah would become a discourse of the past. The nakbah would eventually reemerge as part of an intellectual and activist response to these changed political realities, but under a different Palestinian guise.

The Palestinian Nakbah

While the June War saw the eclipse of the Arab nakbah and its eventual disappearance from Arab thought, the 1980s saw the beginning of a renewed intellectual interest in the nakbah. This took place in two different ways. The first was through Palestinians' own attempt to revive memories of their villages, towns, and ways of life in Palestine that the nakbah had destroyed. This interest in memories of historic Palestine was accelerated by the Oslo Accords, or the Palestinian-Israeli "peace negotiations" that began in 1993, taking place within the context of the threat posed to the refugees' right of return to their homes and lands as a result of these negotiations.⁷⁷ Second, it also took place alongside the partial declassification of Israeli government archives in the 1980s,⁷⁸ as well as the general rise in political, popular, and scholarly interest in memory that began in the 1980s and mushroomed after the collapse of the former Soviet Union.⁷⁹ In view of these different factors, this interest led to a particular emphasis on nakbah memories, particularly in refugee communities, and the generation of Palestine, the sole surviving witnesses to the Palestine that was now threatened by the Palestinian leadership's negotiations. It is

74. *Ibid.*, 17.

75. *Ibid.*, 136.

76. Talhami, "An Interview," 117.

77. Chomsky, *Fateful Triangle*, 523–65.

78. Abdel Jawad, "Zionist Massacres."

79. Olick, "Collective Memory."

within this context that the nakbah today exists with radically altered significations and in a Palestinian universe of discourse.

The institutional development of Palestinian attempts to memorialize their villages, towns, and catastrophe are usually institutionally traced to Birzeit University's Research Center in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). In the mid-1980s, the center published its first anthropological monograph in the "Destroyed Palestinian Villages" book series. The aim of the series, summarized in its first volume and replicated in subsequent volumes on different communities, was to ethnographically reconstruct the annihilated communities of pre-1948 Palestine.⁸⁰

The publication of books on destroyed villages has taken on popular, semi-scholarly, and nonscholarly forms by activists and individuals in exile, and the books have become a topic of scholarly research in English.⁸¹ This has also taken place alongside Palestinian oral history initiatives by activists, individuals, and institutions, within historic Palestine and beyond, with an emphasis on pre-1948 Palestine as well as the nakbah.⁸² These Palestinian attempts to revive memories of the pre-nakbah past and the nakbah were also followed by a scholarly interest in Palestinian memories in both English and Arabic and more recent oral history works on the 1948 nakbah.⁸³

Concurrent with these developments, the Israeli government's partial declassification of archives that pertain to the war on the Palestinians also renewed intellectual interest in the nakbah in the 1980s. These archives allowed for the so-called Israeli new historians and sociologists to establish that the forcible dispossession and destruction of the major part of Palestinian society did indeed take place during the nakbah.⁸⁴ The main conclusions that this group brought to the English-language academic sphere have been examined through the Arab nakbah's universe of discourse above: that the Arab coalition's war aims

were heterogeneous, uncoordinated, and competing; that the Zionist movement knew of this reality and fully exploited it; and that the movement had the military advantage over the Arabs throughout the war.⁸⁵ In short, this reconsideration of both the politics and the military operations during the war demolished the myth of Israel standing alone against the combined might of the Arab states against all odds. It also underscored the convergence between the interests of the Zionist movement and the Transjordanians at the expense of other coalition members and Palestinians in particular.⁸⁶ There is, however, nothing new or remarkable about such claims, apart from the fact that it is Israelis, rather than Palestinians and Arabs, articulating them and being heard when doing so.

Moreover, this group of scholars disagree on the implications of their endeavor insofar as the moral and ethical questions of acknowledgment and restitution are concerned. On the one hand, Benny Morris, arguably the most notorious member of the group, has argued that it was necessary to inflict a catastrophe on the Palestinians in order to ensure the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.⁸⁷ Ilan Pappé, who has theorized Israel's actions as tantamount to the war crime of "ethnic cleansing," is, on the other hand, a methodological and ideological exception. He has called for the political and moral confrontation of the (ongoing) nakbah through Israeli acknowledgment of its foundational war crimes and the implementation of the right of return.⁸⁸

Most recently, genocide scholars have taken up the subject of the nakbah by building on Morris's and Pappé's scholarship in particular. For example, Martin Shaw problematized Pappé's use of ethnic cleansing to characterize Zionist policies and actions in 1948 given the notion's deployment of perpetrator language and its ambiguous relationship to the legal notion of genocide. This ambiguity, Shaw contends, can serve to narrow geno-

80. Slyomovics, "Book Review," 386.

81. See Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories*, and Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory*.

82. Sayigh, "Oral History."

83. See Kabha, *Nahwa Siyaghat Riwayah Tarikhiyyah*, and Masalha, *Catastrophe Remembered*.

84. Shlaim, "The Debate about 1948."

85. Shlaim, "Israel and the Arab Coalition," 80.

86. *Ibid.*, 100.

87. Shavit, "Survival of the Fittest?"

88. Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing*, 255–56.

cide to only one of its possible outcomes of total human extermination. He argues for an “international historical perspective” on genocide that focuses on genocide’s aims rather than means and that distinguishes genocidal violence from other types of violence through this violence’s civilian target and pervasive destructiveness. Within this broadened scope, he argues that the widespread destruction of Palestinian society in 1948 is partly genocidal. This is not, as per Shaw, because the Zionist leadership had, in a narrow definition of what constitutes genocide, a master plan of total Palestinian extermination, although the intent to remove the population was there. It is because the movement’s “specific genocidal thrusts developed situationally and incrementally, through local as well as national decisions . . . a partly decentered, networked genocide, developing in interaction with the Palestinian and Arab enemy, in the context of war.”⁸⁹

Shaw’s article led to an email exchange with Omer Bartov, an Israeli Holocaust and genocide scholar, which was published in the *Journal of Genocide Research*.⁹⁰ Put briefly, Bartov argued that some form of ethnic cleansing may have taken place in Palestine in 1948. However, he took issue with Shaw’s broad sociological definition of genocide, this broadness’s implication for the notion’s juridical utility, and his conflation of ethnic cleansing with genocide. He concluded that Shaw’s argument’s ultimate goal is to delegitimize the state of Israel and to foreground the Palestinian right of return to their homes and lands in the state. Shaw’s arguments have also been taken up by politically sympathetic scholars who have argued that he focuses on 1948 as a singular event at the expense of ongoing Israeli policies that can be characterized as genocidal.⁹¹ His international historical perspective on genocide, with its exclusive focus on European nationalism, has also been critiqued as coming at the expense of the inherent relationship between settler colonialism and genocide.⁹² Shaw has responded to his critics, and the conversation has continued.⁹³

Regardless of how the Palestinian nakbah has been conceptualized in English-language scholarship that resulted from the declassification of Israeli government archives, what is certain is that the definition and debate over the nature of the war crimes that took place in 1948 are still ongoing. This is because the mass forcible dispossession that set the Palestinians apart from other colonized people in the post–World War Two decolonization era is yet to be morally or politically acknowledged and resolved. In addition, at stake in these debates are the consequences of the nakbah, or the ongoing Israeli system of settler-colonial rule over historic Palestine, as it is a reality of the present and not merely the past. Finally, Palestinian refugees expelled in 1948 and their descendants did not need this scholarly awareness to finally comprehend the atrocities and devastation that were brought upon them and their families by the incipient Israeli state. Thus, that it took six decades for the nakbah to go from (ongoing) Israeli denial to an anglophone scholarly acceptability, minus its moral and ethical implications in relation to Palestinians’ right of return, is a fact to be framed in terms of the relationship between global power, colonialism, and knowledge production. The questions that need to be asked are why it has taken so long to listen to nakbah memories and testimonies in an alleged age of “never again,” and why this alleged listening is taking place without the moral and ethical implications enshrined in international humanitarian law.

Conclusion

The changes in the meaning of 1948-as-catastrophe since the establishment of the state of Israel and the destruction of the major part of Palestinian society is today largely taken for granted in the body of English-language work that has recently proliferated around the nakbah. The neglect of this trajectory of the nakbah in Arab thought speaks to larger questions. These revolve around who constitutes the subject of history and theory and who constitutes the object of a history and theory to be

89. Shaw, “Palestine in an International Historical Perspective,” 19.

90. Shaw and Bartov, “The Question of Genocide.”

91. Rashed and Short, “Genocide and Settler Colonialism.”

92. Docker, “Instrumentalising the Holocaust.”

93. Shaw, “Palestine and Genocide”; Rashed et al., “Nakba Memoricide.”

written about and for, insofar as the histories and societies of the colonized and the vanquished in the Global South more generally are concerned.

The nakbah today has come to exclusively signify the catastrophe of the Palestinian people. It also signifies the “ongoing catastrophe” given the lack of resolution of the Palestinian cause as well as the fact that Israeli settler colonialism has brought repeated catastrophes upon Palestinians, the latest example of this being the indiscriminate fifty-one-day slaughter in Gaza in July 2014. This latest round of Israeli war crimes left more than 2,000, mostly civilians, dead, of which more than a quarter were children, and more than 10,000 injured, a third of whom were children.⁹⁴ Israel bombed civilians, schools, mosques, and even hospitals during its latest war on the Palestinians. Its government officials’ rhetoric included open calls to “annihilate” Palestinians in Gaza and “concentrate” the remaining in the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, to starve the Palestinians into submission, and to ensure that everyone is killed, including mothers, lest they continue giving birth to “little snakes.”⁹⁵

It is this increasing brutality of unchecked Israeli military belligerence against an occupied and settler-colonized civilian population that underpins the notion of the “ongoing nakbah.” This notion has been taken up by scholars of settler colonialism in particular. They have argued that the nakbah needs to be thought of as a structure of Israeli settler-colonial rule over historic Palestine rather than a singular six-decade-old event.⁹⁶ Thus, the ongoing nakbah of today, like the Arab nakbah before it, is ultimately a response to changing political and historical realities on the ground. The core of the meaning of the nakbah today is an ongoing and ever increasingly violent Israeli system of control over all Palestinian lives. □□□□

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94. Palestinian Center for Human Rights, “Statistics.”

95. See Abunimah, “Israeli Lawmaker’s Call for Genocide”; Abunimah, “‘Concentrate’ and ‘Exterminate’”; and Abunimah, “Starve or Surrender.”

96. Salamanca et al., “Past Is Present.”

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