

Remapping Palestine and the Palestinians: Decolonizing and Research

ISSAM NASSAR

The abrupt and sudden disappearance of Palestine in 1948 was multidimensional in nature. In a short period of time, the world of the Palestinians collapsed. The familiar home was nowhere to be found for a large number of the Palestinians who found themselves refugees in the lands of the others. Even those who physically escaped the turmoil lost the right to continue to be Palestinians with some becoming the “Arab minority” in Israel and other becoming Jordanians in eastern Palestine that was renamed “the West Bank.” Palestine, the land and the country, ceased to exist and its people were denied the right to continue to claim it as their home. Expulsions, destruction of cities, town, and villages, loss of life and exile were but the concluding chapter in the disappearance of Palestine. In more than one way, the Palestinians have been unfortunate that the land they call their homeland is such an ancient land historically connected with holy texts of various religions. For at the age of the colonial expansion of Europe, religious texts were employed in the attempt to conquer this land. Ironically, in the plan to conquer Palestine, the people of the land were rarely considered. In fact, the conquerors rarely even acknowledged the very presence of a population in Palestine. In many ways, the point can be made that the absence of the Palestinians from Palestine was a matter that predated their physical absence by decades as far as colonial imagination was concerned. In the European, and later on, Zionist, politics, travel narratives and visual representations of Palestine, the Palestinians failed to be present. To illustrate this point, let us take the example of visual representation of Palestine, particularly in the arena of photography, in the period that pre-dates its disappearance and the role that might have played in constructing an image of the land as if it was uninhabited.

The first photographic images of Palestine appeared shortly after photography itself was invented in 1839. For the first half a century or so, most photographs that were brought into Europe from Palestine were of places connected with the Bible and not of the people, the towns and the villages. In fact the people of Palestine rarely appeared in the early photographs and that in itself did not seem to be a matter of concern for most

viewers at the time. The amazing ability to see the land but not the people was not necessarily a coincidence in the case of photography. The absence of the Palestinian population from most photographs partially reflected both the fact that they were also absent, at some level, from the mind and consciousness of the European or American photographers and a desire to cleanse the holy land from signs and evidence of histories other than the Judeo-Christian one. Palestine was reduced to a location that could attest to the truth of the biblical story, rather than recognized as a real place in this world.

Eventually, images of Palestinians started to appear in the photographs and “carte de visite” both as exotic Orientals (Sheiks, Harems, Bedouins and Clergy) and as illustrations of the biblical ancestors’ appearance. In both cases, the premise of the framing eye of the photographer was to remove the photographed individual from history and place him/her in a context more relevant to Europe and its relation to Palestine than to the “real” lives of the native population. Peasants appeared in the photographs with captions that referred to them with anglophile biblical names and were classified into biblical categories of people to whom the European viewer would relate (Samaritans, Jews, Mohammedans, Saracens...etc). And when the “ethnographic” divide was not used, “biblical careers” were introduced and images of fishermen, shepherds and carpenters started to flood the tourist market.

With the birth of Zionist movement in the late nineteenth century, the emphasis on presenting the land but not the people quickly became a trademark of the Zionist imagination of Palestine. What was historically a Christian imagination in nature was soon adopted by Zionism and given a Jewish twist. The Zionist organization was by the turn of the twentieth century already a full-fledged movement, which had held several conferences, assembled headquarters, delegations, and representatives “western world wide.” It had settlements in Palestine already and was more mobilized and organized than the native populations and by 1905, had already adopted the famous slogan “A Land without a People for a People without a Land.”

With the passing of time, new sets of images and

meaning were assigned to the Palestinians in the context of Zionist imagining of Palestine. And Palestinian Arabs started to gradually go in and out of the Zionist representations of the land as evident by early Zionist photography and cinema. Sometimes, the Palestinian was seen as a part of the landscape: as a shepherd with goats perhaps as the prototype of the forefathers the ancient Israelites. But on other occasions, the Palestinian was completely absent from the landscape or represented as the primitive native that cannot represent him/herself and ought to be represented by someone else who is viewed as more modern and more "legitimate." As the conflict between Jews and Arabs was heightened over the passing of time, the *essentialization* of the Palestinians started to take on new dimensions as images of Arabs started to demonstrate backwardness and lack of civilization - images that bring to mind the manner in which the White settlers in North America were representing the Native "Indians." Images of Palestinians were transformed into representations signifying senseless violence, cruelty and terrorism.

In this context, it is perhaps important to keep in mind the settler colonialist nature of the Zionist project, at least as far as the Palestinians are concerned. Jewish immigration to Palestine was not like immigration anywhere else in the world, for it was intended to be part of building a new Jewish society in places where it did not exist, at least for a considerable period of time. Immigrants were not expected, nor did they expect, to live within the existing society and mingle with the natives of the land. Instead, they joined already-existing Jewish colonies in Palestine where natives were not seen, except perhaps for the occasional passing shepherd. In other words, Jewish immigrants who came to Palestine as part of the Zionist project were more likely not to see the Palestinians and their society for they lived in exclusive Jewish communities in places relatively far from any obvious Palestinian presence. It should be no surprise then that the bulk of the immigrants of the *Yeshuv* continued to nurture ideas and images about Palestine that were dominate in the European cultures from which the immigrants themselves came. When the Palestinians started to vanish from the landscape as a result of the war of 1948, the members of the Jewish *Yeshuv* hardly noticed what was happening to their "invisible" neighbors.

The loss of Palestine and the temporary disappearance of Palestinian identity that resulted directly from policies of the new state of Israel did not necessarily mean that most in the Jewish *Yeshuv* were fully aware of what had occurred. Indeed, it was only natural that the Palestinian trauma went almost unnoticeable since the Palestinians were absent from the Zionist consciousness to start with. And the fact that Israel enacted policies that considered the Palestinian national identity illegal

and illegitimate made lack of awareness about the Palestinians a chronic condition within the Israeli psyche.

Israeli denial of the mere existence of Palestinians as people with national political rights led to a policy of supporting traditional, reactionary and religious elements within the Palestinian community. Inside Israel the Palestinians were renamed "Israel's Arabs" and in the eyes of the law constituted a number of religious and communal groupings. In the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on the other hand, they were named the Arab residents of the administered territories of Judea, Samaria and Gaza. The Israeli policy of encouraging traditional as opposed to political leadership was consistent with the Old European colonial view that Israelis had already adopted where Arabs, as natives, were not suited to democracy. It was equally so with the internal logic of Zionism, which is based on blurring the distinction between nationality and religion: if Zionism made Judaism into a national identity, then why not consider Islam, Druze and Christianity as quasi-national identities, as well?

It would take the Palestinians and their national movement decades to finally place themselves on the map. Although the long path to Palestinian independence and freedom seem to be further away, the fact that the Palestinians have national rights seem to be a given nowadays. The re-emerging Palestinian identity gained legitimacy worldwide and was granted a certain degree of recognition by Israel with the signing of the Oslo Peace Process in 1994. The Peace process with all its faults and deficiencies signaled for the first time in the history of Israel a formal de-facto recognition of the existence of the Palestinians as a people. The result was the legitimizing of their national and political symbols and their very presence in the eyes of certain portion of the Israeli public. The previously outlawed Palestinian flag became legal and the establishment of cultural, political and governmental institutions was initiated. Such legitimization was perhaps the most positive of all the provisions of the agreement which otherwise reflected in its entirety the weakened position of the Palestinian National Movement represented by the PLO.

However, the Oslo process failed and Israeli settlement activities peaked both during and after the process had stopped. The Palestinians who were recognized as people with certain political rights during the process and had been given a kind of "independent Bantustans" were now besieged and barred from entering Israel. Settler bypass highway that were built at the height of the process to connect settlements in the Occupied Territories with Israel were now enabling Israelis to travel throughout the Occupied lands without having to see or encounter a single Palestinian. The combination of the bypass roads with the complete ban on the Palestinians of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from entering Is-

rael once again created a situation where the mere presence of the Palestinians is completely removed from the consciousness of the general Israeli public. This is making the Israeli army's attacks on the Palestinians, already demonized in the eyes of most Israelis, a simple and uncontested matter. Are we seeing a process that resembles what happened in 1948?

We cannot be sure, but the handwriting on the wall suggests that there are significant resemblances. The debate over "peaceful expulsion" of the Palestinians or what is often referred to, as "the transfer option," is part of the academic, political and popular discourse in Israel.

In this context, writing about the Palestinians means placing them on the map as a legitimate nationed group once again. Writing in this sense becomes an act of decolonization in the sense that it challenges assumptions, images and stereotypes not necessarily by refuting them directly, but by discussing the Palestinians without having to even qualify the reasons to do so. By engaging in historical, sociological and politics studies about the Palestinians, their history and society, we in fact normalize them and their lives in a way that a debate about how legitimate the Palestinians are will most likely be missing the point. This issue of *CSSAAME* presents an attempt to do exactly that. The articles that follow are not about the disappearance of Palestine, nor are they about roving the existence of the Palestinians. But the fact that the authors of the various articles discuss issues about the history and society of the Palestinians as a living entity turns the contributions in their totality into an attempt at "re-inhabiting" Palestine. The contributions span various disciplines within social sciences and humanities and cover a wide range of themes connected together only through the fact that they are about something Palestinians. Rochelle Davis, for example, narrates a history of an aspect of Palestinian life in Jerusalem during the two decades that preceded al-Nakba by focusing on a little known history of the first teacher's college in Palestine. The Arab College was a promising project that could have culminated in the first Palestinian university but instead vanished overnight like the rest of Palestine following the fall of the western suburbs of Jerusalem to Israeli control. Kimberly Katz, on the other hand, examined how Jerusalem was transformed into a Jordanian city and the role its incorporation as a Christian holy city played in legitimizing Jordan as the sovereign in east Palestine.

The Nakba is present clearly in the contributions of Ilan Pappé and Salim Tamari not because the both discuss it directly, but because it forms that background in which their discussions are grounded. Tamari looks at images of Palestine in the *imaginaire* of the Palestinians who returned to the country after the Oslo accords were signed. Pappé on the other hand, examines how a vision

of a shared, but divided, homeland can be a way out of the historic traumas of the two peoples who inhabit this land. Still the contribution of Tania Forte takes another angle in her essay in which she examines the debate within the Israeli academy regarding the Palestinians. Although many have written on a similar theme, especially as it relates to the *New Historians* in Israel and the *Nakba* debate, Forte's contribution however, takes a different approach to the debate altogether. For Forte shifts the discussion away from the ideological realm to that of academic practice.

The contributions of Elia Zuriek, Jamil Hilal, Sari Hanafi and Linda Tabar on the other hand focus on issues most relevant to the discussion of Palestinians society and politics nowadays. Zuriek examines the theoretical and methodological considerations that ought to be taken into account when studying the Palestinian society that he describes as a society in conflict and transition. Hilal, on the other hand, examines the potential and the problems involved in any discussion about democracy in Palestine and its political system now. Echoes of the same themes can also be found in the joint study of Hanfi and Tabar in which the agendas of the organizations of Palestinian civil society are examined particularly in light of the influence of globalization.