

No one seemed to care

Growing Up Palestinian

Fawaz Turki

In the year 1948 Israel became a state and I became stateless. For the next twenty-five years Israelis were building a nation and I was inhabiting a world of nothingness in which I experienced no halcyon period, no moment when my very essence as a man was not negated and my very rights as a human being were not dismissed. In 1948 the world applauded the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. I was a Palestinian, and the Jewish homeland was being established in my country, at the cost of displacing me and creating in us all a nation in exile.

Tired of historical arguments and counterarguments, quotes and counterquotes, I have spent a restless part of my growing-up years trying to define my status in this world of nothingness that I have been forced to inhabit; I have searched for human and political resolutions for the reciprocal nexus that binds the political to the existential in my reality, for the link between my father's past and my own present, between this generation of Palestinians and Israelis.

As I do this, however, I feel acute anger engulfing me to see my people living as third-class citizens in Israel, living under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, living in refugee camps in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, and fragmented around the world, unable, like me, to enjoy the privileges that other people take for granted. As I do this, my world becomes more intolerable. As I do this, I feel as if I am both the observer and the observed in a kinetic, desperate dance sequence that I do not comprehend and have no control over.

We have indeed always been desperate dancers along the continuum of our history. And that part of the history of my people I have lived begins for me in 1948, when the Israelis had their day and we our eclipse.

The events of that period crystallize the tension that was to rule the lives of my generation of Palestinians. Expelled from Palestine, we were not allowed to return. The image of the exodus of a million people fleeing their homeland, the image of



frightened, anxious faces of men, women and children heading to the borders with the memory of the horrible massacre of Deir Yessein still with them, is inscribed in our minds. It is embossed in our culture. However, like all refugees, like all noncombatant victims of a war, we waited in camps for the war to end and the guns to become silent in order to return ultimately to our farms, to our villages, to our towns and cities and to all the intangible realities that we had known in Palestine and that, like the embroidered shirts we wore and the *dabki* tunes we composed, took us two thousand years to form.

But at that time someone dubbed us "the Arab refugees" and argued that the Arab refugees were Arabs anyhow; they shared with other Arabs their language, culture and traditions. And, like the hungry peasants who were urged to eat cake in the absence of bread, we were told to be resettled in underpopulated regions in host countries. Billion-dollar loans were to be made available for that purpose.

What people did not know and understand, and what people still do not know and understand, is that for us to have done that would have been for us to negate our very essence, our very consciousness as a people. It would have been to negate our myths, our idiom, our metaphor. To negate our traditions and our ethos. To negate that delicate, exquisite nexus that binds a man to his ancestral land. To have settled in host countries would have been to negate all those things that we had derived from Palestine.

Had the world not stood with its back to us, and had it come closer to listen in on what we had talked about in the isolation of our refugee camps, they would have realized the absurdity of the argument

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and the degradation of the notion of our resettlement.

Although we lived in Arab states, we looked upon our situation there not only as temporary but as being in the *ghourba*, an alien country. The *ghourba* is now part of the mythology of the Palestinian psyche, difficult to isolate and identify, but in those years directly after 1948 the word meant simply to be physically outside one's homeland. As the years rolled by, the *ghourba* acquired the added, mystical significance of meaning not only to be detached from Palestine but also from the mainstream of things that governed other men's lives. The *ghourba* meant to have the painful experience of being an alien in an alien place—whether this was an Arab country adjacent to Palestine or elsewhere in the world. An examination of Palestinian literature and art of that early period after our expulsion would reveal how preoccupied—restlessly, passionately—Palestinians were with the metaphor and the vision of the Return.

Like many Palestinian kids, I grew up in a refugee camp and in the streets. I grew up with violence and exclusion and alienation as I grew up with my skin. I grew up knowing and resenting the fact that I was the member of a persecuted minority. I grew up to be reminded every day, as it were, that I was a Palestinian, as if sensing there was something wrong with my identity. And I grew up to become more Palestinian than I had been when I left Palestine.

The experience of a Palestinian who stayed behind in Israel ("Israeli Arab" is the sobriquet for him) must surely be more terrifying than that of a Palestinian who fled in 1948. But ours was devastating enough. In Beirut it was to the Aliens Section at the Ministry of Interior that we had to go, to line up, to get our never-granted work permits, stateless travel permits, residential permits, UNRRA permits and other degrading and wretched documents. The world of exclusion, a world where you are told that you are different, that you are less than others are in the scheme of things, is a terrifying one for a child to grow up in. I recall, when I ultimately went to school—and after three years of peddling in the streets and acquiring a street education, school was an exciting event in my life—our class was planning to go on a camping trip in Cyprus. Naturally I wanted to go. Much passion and excitement. Planning and saving of allowances. Packing of gear and scout leaders issuing instructions. Then I discovered that I and two other pupils in the class could not go on this trip. We were stateless, I was informed, and had no valid travel documents. We stayed behind.

I did not then understand the significance of it all other than that we were "different." We were apart, outside and beyond the reach of what other

people took for granted. A subtle nuance was being added to the consciousness of our culture, of our Palestinianness. A schism was slowly forming in the nexus that linked us to those around us. We were going through a metamorphosis in our national psyche. We were looking at ourselves in the mirror of our Arab history, and the mirror was cracked. The image we saw was blurred.

No one seemed to care. To the Arab ruling classes ours was a cause to be taken custody of and used for mercenary political ends. To the Israeli ruling classes we were not supposed to exist as a people but as objects to be oppressed, deported, imprisoned and denied their human rights. To the world we were a people to whom you sent food rations and blankets and powdered milk and U.N. "tourists" with cameras to take pictures of our tents and with charts to take statistics of our misery.

At the age of eighteen I went to study in England on a scholarship. I returned to Beirut at the age of twenty-two. "You need a work permit," I was told when I looked for employment.

Nothing had changed. Suddenly the pain and pressure of being a Palestinian was becoming intolerable.

"Nasser will help us," my father would mutter to me in his own incoherent way. "It won't be long now before we return."

"To hell with Nasser! To hell with them all!" I would shout back.

I belonged to another generation of Palestinians that had grown up in the *ghourba*, a generation that had acquired its own ethos, its own idiom and its own value-structure. Its own anger.

In the Middle East we had by far the highest literacy rate. We had 64,000 university graduates, only 2,000 less than Israel had trained in the same period. The cream of the intellectual elite in the Arab world was predominantly Palestinian. The best poets and artists and novelists were those who had come from the *ghourba*. But Palestinians also had the highest rate of psychosomatic ailments in the Arab world—and if you want to know why, ask any Palestinian who lives in Israel to tell you what it feels like to be a third-class citizen. Ask a Palestinian to narrate to you the conditions of having lived under Jordanian occupation and now under Israeli military occupation. Ask any Palestinian child to tell you how he interprets his reality in a refugee camp in the mud of the winters and the dust of the summers. Ask me—as no one has bothered to ask for twenty-five years—how I felt to be without a homeland, my very existence dismissed from all sides.

How long can you oppress a man and kick him and spit on his very soul? How do you expect him to react when you rob him of his very sense of worth? How long does it take before he outlives his patience?

People did not stop calling us the Arab refugees and start calling us the Palestinian people till we took to armed struggle. We did what other fringe people, unnoticed people, have done to remind the world that we exist. To remind the world that we have a grievance, that we have national aspirations and that we want to right the wrong that has been committed against us.

As a Palestinian I do not look upon the Israeli people as ruthless colonists; I do not want to "drive them into the sea"; I do not want to kill them. I recognize the agony the Jewish people have had across their history as a people without a homeland—who else would understand this agony more than a Palestinian? I just question their right to create a homeland, in my homeland, at the cost of negating *my* right to have a meaningful existence in my country and to enjoy like other men a sense of purpose, a sense of direction and a sense of worth. Also, as a Palestinian who has acquired an ideology founded on the principles of social justice and freedom, I would join any battle, sign any petition, march in any demonstration that would end the persecution of Jewish minorities in the world, be they in Russia or elsewhere. However, there is a great deal of hypocrisy inherent in the proposition that someone from Russia, simply because he happens to be of the Jewish faith, has more right to live in Haifa than I do—where I was born, as were my forefathers, as were my traditions.

It is frustrating to a Palestinian when he sees how people in the West view the conflict in the Middle East simply and simplistically as one between the Israelis and the Arabs. Two people. Two interests. Two visions. Nothing is more naively conceived—except when the conflict in Vietnam was seen as one between the Buddhists and Catholics and the conflict in Ireland as one between Protestants and Catholics.

There are three forces at play in the Middle East now. The Arabs, the Israelis and the Palestinians. The cause of each is at times different from the others, at times not. To the Palestinians the enemy is not the Israeli people but the Israeli ruling classes and the Arab ruling classes, as well as American imperialism and its economic, political and military machinations. Hence Hussein of Jordan is as much the enemy of the Palestinian people as Moshe Dayan is. Because Hussein is an Arab, and Faisal of Saudi Arabia and Hassan of Morocco and Sadat of Egypt are Arabs, does not mean they have the interests of the Palestinians at heart, nor does it mean that they have not in the past sold out, and will not in the future sell out, the Palestinian people at the first opportunity. What these worthy notables want, and what the Palestinians want, is not by any means identical. How many Palestinians fell victim to tor-

ture and imprisonment and deportation and death at the hands of Hussein and how many at the hands of Israeli military authorities is often blurred. They have competed for the honor.

Because I have lived outside my country since the age of eight, Palestine has ceased to me to be a mere geographical entity. It has become a state of mind. The embodiment of my consciousness and the totality of my being. I am used to living outside it, in the *ghourba*. It is a painful experience, but I have learned to tolerate it, for the *ghourba* is now my *homeland*. But this is also a negation of my being.

Hence when I speak of wanting to return, I am not talking about regaining my right to live in Haifa; I am talking about regaining the right to do it, the right to regain my sense of worth. Embedded in the very nature of the struggle of the Palestinian people is the rejection that they be relegated to a state of national limbo, that they do not "exist," that Palestine is not their country, that they are not human beings.

Among Palestinians there are individuals who have brooded over this as they grew up. They could find no way out, through or around their dilemma. Then there came a point in 1967 when we became refugees for the second time and in 1970 when we were massacred in Jordan and practically every family lost a loved one. Among those individuals some lost their minds and formed little secret organizations to employ violence as a means of expressing their fathomless frustration and anger.

I condemn the use of terror. But the violence of the oppressor or the master to subdue his slave and silence his voice is not the same as that used by the slave to break his chains. As a Palestinian I am merely struggling, in my own way, to go back to my homeland to live again like a normal human being. But maybe more than that, I am also struggling for something that I was not able to identify till I went on a speaking tour in the U.S. quite recently. It came to me in two separate "questions" by two separate persons in two separate cities at two separate audiences.

"If it were not for Israeli hospitals in Jerusalem," I was told, "all Palestinian babies would have died of malnutrition and disease. . . ."

"I was in Israel and the occupied territories a short while back," a man enlightened me. "And I could see how you people have never had it so good, living well, in houses with TV sets, and you drive cars. . . ."

This is another extension of my struggle: To fight against the right of any person to degrade me and my people in such a manner. The majority of us have managed to retain our sense of humanity and perspective even in the face of degradation such as this that has characterized our existence for a quarter century. Others have picked up a gun.