

Exploring the Impact of Nakba on Palestinian Society, Culture, and Identity

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Abstract

This study investigates the ongoing effects of the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe in Arabic) by delving into themes of displacement within Palestinian society, as well as the consequences of displacement, and how the Nakba permanently reshaped social structures through themes of resistance and hope for return. By using textual analysis from historical documents and oral testimonies, the paper examines how displacement redefined Palestinian society through the exploration of Zionism in the earlier emergence of a Jewish state. Findings revealed that displacement has shaped culture, self-identity, and familial structures while becoming intertwined with the Palestinian identity of exodus and resilience.

Introduction

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the displacement of ethnic Palestinians to neighboring countries left a permanent hole in the preservation of cultural identity and the hope for return. The effects of the Nakba, meaning ‘catastrophe’ in Arabic, left a long-lasting impact on Palestinians of that generation and generations to come. Through Nakba, it is discovered that the immediate consequences on Palestinian society through their displacement experiences in the diaspora, the impact on familial structures, and the post-adaptations of cultural production and evolution through Palestinian identity.

This paper essentially explores the varying impacts displacement had on Palestinians, but also how the Nakba permanently reshaped cultural identity, social structures, and resistance.

Methods

This paper examines historical documents, biblical texts, and oral testimonies from academic scholars, such as Abdel Razzaq Takriti, Susan Slyomovics, Nur Masalha, and Rosemary Sayigh. The paper had a qualitative approach, which focused on the interpretation of historical and thematic analysis that compared narratives of displacement on political development. The study emphasizes how cultural, interpersonal, and societal shifts operate together to reflect the Nakba's lasting influence.

Background

To understand the political and historical impact of the Nakba, it is essential to trace the historical ideologies that led to the creation of a Jewish state and the later displacement of Palestinians. For decades, Jewish nationalists used political ideology to justify the establishment of a Jewish state. Zionism, the political nationalist movement, coined the term *Hityashvut* to establish a new Jewish state. *Hityashvut*, meaning ‘colonization’, was not only the start of the destruction of a country, but it was also the start of the destruction of the ethnic people of the Palestinian identity.

Political Zionism

Originating in the late 19th century, primarily by Jewish historians, was the ideology of Political Zionism. This movement not only aimed to rewrite the history of the homeland of Judea, but also the history of the Jewish people. The connection of Judaism to the land of Palestine was set by two Jewish historians who used and reconstructed Jewish and non-Jewish texts and sources to prove the connection of Judaism to the ancient homeland in Palestine. This new definition of European Nationalism was seen as a radical break “from two thousand years of Jewish tradition and rabbinical Judaism” (Masalha, 2012).

David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi's reinterpretation of history sought to show that Israel had a clear link between the ancient state of Israel and Judaism. Their reinterpretation of Zionism was supposed to show that Israel is the holy land for Jews, and not a colonial project. This marked a departure from traditional Judaism, which initially reserved the return to the Holy Land as an act for the Messianic era only, not a modern return. (Masalha, 2012).

The German Völkisch Theory, in a book written by Nur Masalha that explored the leading events for the establishment of the Jewish State, was mentioned and was adopted by Zionists to prove their right to the land of Palestine: "People of common descent should seek separation and form one common state." (Masalha, 2012). By forming one common state, this made it a national self-determination rather than a colonial act.

Antisemitism

Antisemitism is the prejudice against individuals of Jewish descent. The prolonged Antisemitism of the Jewish Diaspora in Europe, which led to the Holocaust, urged the creation of a new nation for Jews. Zionism thus gained great traction due to the antisemitism in Europe, especially with notable events such as the Holocaust, which left about 6 million Jews murdered and over hundreds of thousands displaced. These displaced Jews were sent into Displaced Persons (DP) camps, eventually leaning towards a bigger push of Zionism as a religious ideology rather than a political one.

Religious Zionism

Religious Zionism differs from political Zionism in a few distinct ways, notably that the establishment of a Jewish state was seen as a divine right for the Jews rather than a political one, where it was justified in faith and biblical prophecy. According to the Hebrew Bible, God made a promise to Abraham by giving Him land:

"On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates...' - Genesis 15:18-21

Palestinian Ethnicity

What seemed to be misdirected and left upon was the question of the Palestinian ethnicity. The Palestinians have occupied their land since even before the Ottoman Empire, as Jesus, a prominent figure in Biblical and Islamic scripture, was a Palestinian.

Palestine can be traced back to the ancient Canaanite civilization, as not only is it standing in one of the world's oldest civilizations, but its establishment in the Middle Eastern region was before the emergence of monotheistic religions. Palestine was controlled for over 4 centuries by the Ottoman Empire, and after the fall of the empire, Palestine was imperialized by the British as part of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, which remained under their imperialism until the Nakba in 1948. This is evident that the State of Palestine has been under imperialism and foreign dominance since the beginning of time. (Masalha, 2012; Shlaim, 2004).

Definition of Nakba and its Significance

Nakba, which means catastrophe in Arabic, was the turning point in shifting Palestinian resistance and identity, defined as the mass displacement of Palestinians amidst the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The significance of Nakba was not only an immediate post-colonial approach due to the displacement but was a turning point in shaping Arab resistance and the approach and the hope for Return. The Nakba explores themes of statelessness that continue to shape Palestinian identity and resistance as a condition of exile (Masalha, 2012; Pappé, 2006).

Nakba has regained international attention amidst the new genocidal events that occurred in the Gaza Strip in October 2023, showcasing how the occupation was not only aggressive in their forced displacement of the Palestinians in 1948, but also how the oppressors attempted the same fate, which resulted in many scholars comparing these events to the 1948 displacement (Takriti, 2020).

Historical Context Leading to the Creation of the State of Israel in 1948

As mentioned briefly, Zionism originated as an ideological nationalist revival movement in the late 19th century, mainly and predominantly in Central and Eastern Europe. Jews have been persecuted in Europe for centuries as the pressure for assimilation and leaving the Jewish faith was growing. Palestine was seen by observant Jews as the sacred state for pilgrimage, in their religious scripture and Torah, but the idea of colonial settlement was never pictured before, especially as in Judaism, it is written to wait until the end of the times for their promised Messiah before the sacred return to Eretz Israel, the Jewish name for Palestine.

During the First World War, Zionist support grew tremendously, whereas the movement was starting to be backed by politicians, like Lloyd George, the British prime minister of the time, and British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour.

Balfour's promise to help the Jews colonize Palestine was tremendous, as *the Balfour Declaration* was established in 1917, publicly announcing their support for the new Jewish State. The growing support for the establishment of a new Jewish state was not only backed by the already tremendous Zionist Movement but also by the British Government. This resulted in growing tensions between the Ethnic Palestinians and the Jews, thus leading to the Nakba in 1948, which oversaw the displacement of over half a million Palestinians.

In an article by The University of Oxford's A. Shlaim, exploring the War and the events that led to the creation of the State of Israel under Occupied Palestine, while also mentioning the historical documents that were set upon by Israeli Historians, it is noted that the United Nations called for the establishment of two states. These two states, the Jewish Israel and the Arab Palestine, were rejected by Palestine and the Arab leaders at the time. Although the State was created, this gave an advantage to the Jews and prompted the exodus of the ethnic Palestinians.

Purpose of the Research

Within researching the traumatic impact and the following results of Nakba, this paper seeks to list the harrowing circumstances the displaced generation went through after the events of 1948. While also exploring the root and the background of the Zionist movement, with its origin, to gain a wider perspective on the exodus. Displacement stories, lost and depopulated villages, and the lack of medical equipment for children are ones of the main topics in this paper, exploring a wider narrative and a bigger issue that is still impacting the Palestinian identity. Furthermore, the loss of culture and heritage amid the exodus and the role of literature, music, and art in the preservation of the Palestinian identity will be deliberated.

Family dynamics were disrupted, Palestinian communities were widely uprooted, and cultural output during exile eventually evolved as a result of the historical trajectory of Zionist expansion and imperial control. This research examines how political events changed daily life, identity, and communal memory based on these entwined experiences.

Importance of Exploring its Impact on Palestinian Society, Culture, and Identity

Understanding what truly happened amidst the exodus of the Palestinians is a chance to not let their memory go. Several experiences, testimonials, and stories shed light on the traumatic events that occurred in the late forties, while also putting forth the permanent effect the displacement had on these refugees. In a book that explores the Palestinian Nakba and the memorial aftermath, Susan Slyomovics, in the chapter speaking about the destroyed Palestinian Village of Qula, wrote “Writing is a political act that not only represents the past but also, within the Palestinian Israeli context, molds the past” (Slyomovics, 2007).

Immediate Impact of Nakba on Palestinian Society

The ramifications and the immediate consequences on Palestinian Society due to the Nakba were not only widespread but also enduring. To truly understand the effects of this displacement, it is crucial to know the harrowing testimonials and experiences these Palestinians have endured. These Arabs were forced to leave their homeland, undergoing mass expulsions and destruction of property in the name of the new Jewish state, to have this space for the new Jewish settlers. The immediate social and economic consequences were grave, as these families had no means of providing for their children with the sudden displacement and the disrupted development of their lives. One important piece to acknowledge is the urgency of these effects as well. The displaced Palestinians faced dire situations and circumstances almost instantly, such as the economic consequences of the financial insecurity this may have created for ones native to a land they are refugees from.

Displacement and Impact on Refugees and Their Experiences

Due to the forced expulsion, it is evident to note the displacement, and the refugee experiences the Palestinians have endured. Susan Slyomovics, in a chapter mentioning Palestinian Villages, notes that there are several Palestinian villages that no longer exist. These villages, which had tribes and ethnic familial structures for thousands of years, were evacuated amid the exodus of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Slyomovics explores the *Destroyed Palestinian Villages* project, by the newly appointed director of Birzeit's Center for Research and Documentation of Palestinian Society at the time, Abdel Jawad. Oral testimonies were taken, and Abdul Jawad sought new facts about the villages. In Qula, a village in the Ramla district that was destroyed in 1948, Abdul Jawad tape-recorded survival testimonials of exiled Palestinians from Qula, speaking of the treacherous conditions and experiences they have gone through.

Palestinians did not leave by their own accord, as people have assumed for several years. In the fate of Qula Village, Abdul Jawad obtained several testimonials of the men of the village fighting for the freedom of their village, many dying protecting. Slyomovic (2007) explained the following concerning the aftermath of Qula:

Attempting to secure the center of the country, primarily the Lydda-Ramla plains and foothills, the 32nd infantry battalion of Israel's Alexandroni Brigade, consisting of three companies (one of which was an armored battalion), seized Qula on July 10. The Transjordanian Arab Legion, helped by inadequately armed villagers constituting a local militia, defended Qula, and on July 16, they regained Qula, only to lose it the same day to Israeli units. (p. 33)

The families who fled the conflict of Qula went on foot to the West Bank, which was held by Transjordan at the time. It is credible to note that the ones who stayed behind in Qula were the ones who were not able to flee from the massacre, the elderly and disabled. According to Abdul Jawad's research, the ones who stayed in Qula "were shot or burned to death in their homes." Slyomovic (2007). The casualties of the conflict were listed by Slyomovic (2007) as follows: In Qula, seven people were killed, six women and one man, among them an elderly woman refugee from al-Abbasiyya who was found burned in the school, another old woman from Kafr 'Ana, and the butcher. Villagers discovered their dead when they returned to Qula in search of belongings, accompanied by a Jordanian officer, the day after the Israeli army's final takeover. (p. 34)

The depopulation of the Ramla district was only the start of the ongoing aggression brought on by the State of Israel. Familial structures and the relationships between families were at an all-time low amidst the change of culture due to the conflict. Not only were people killed by the occupation, but dire living conditions were also considered to be at stake.

Children faced inadequate conditions post the exodus and displacement, citing that three different kinds of narratives were seen of children dying told by women who witnessed the conflict. One of them was death by sickness, according to Sayigh (2007), this was the "real biological death of a woman's child".

Sayigh (2007) recalls the story of a woman who gave birth to a boy in a cave after fleeing from her village, only to have that boy pass away seven days after birth due to the inadequate conditions. Sickness and lack of medical equipment were a reality for many women, who had their children pass away from diseases that could have been treated if not for the forced displacement. This is one of the themes of the psychological toll the displacement had on women. A personal tragedy that meets the loss of safety.

Strike operations were set against Arabs, and according to Plan Gimmel, or Plan C, it had called for striking Arab means of Transportation, damaging Arabs' properties, printing press, and even going to the extent of harming them physically (Khalidi, 1988).

Not only was giving birth not safe, but any means of transportation were seized to the point of inflicting physical harm if those displaced did not agree to each new rule. Stories like these are what some may imagine would have happened if medical equipment were not subdued, or transportation was not seized, the displacement not only inflicted psychological harm on the Palestinians, but also shaped their resistance by hearing such stories for years.

Impact on Family Structures and Relationships

Cultural talks about honor and the stereotypical patriarchal stance around men impacted the spoken experiences Palestinian men have endured, in the name of shame. The men's inability to protect their land, their women, and even keep their villages brought a sense of "humiliation" (Sayigh 2007). In traditional Palestinian families, young men within marrying age are known to be the protectors and the fighters for their village and family. The exodus not only impacted their honor but also changed the structure of the family.

Due to the exodus, the forced displacement affected the natural flow of a traditional Palestinian family's roles and structures, especially the men's economic means as the sole providers for their families. The displacement drove these families to refugee camps, which had a permanent effect on their mental well-being. Sayigh (2007) mentioned the talks of death around refugee camps, to be "metaphors of death, paralysis, and non-existence when describing their first years as refugees." (Sayigh, 2007).

Psychological and emotional ramifications were set in stone due to the loss of their homes and their lands; as these were not just homes, they were ancestral pieces of history that were passed down from generation to generation. This represented an eradication of memory, belonging, and lineage. The eradication of villages and homes, unable to return to them, created what Slyomovics (2007) calls a "haunting absence," where loss became intergenerational and memory itself a form of survival.

Cultural Impact in the Diaspora

The cultural ramifications due to the Nakba in the diaspora led to a strong willingness to preserve history and heritage. Palestinians still wear their cultural clothing at weddings, such as the Thobe, a handmade dress that used to be the traditional piece of clothing for Palestinian women is now a symbol of perseverance often worn at weddings, and cultural and religious social settings such as Eid gatherings, the celebration of breaking fast after Ramadan, or Henna Night, a pre-

wedding ceremony where the bride and her guests design henna on their hands. Another traditional clothing is the Kuffiyeh, which is the traditional handmade head covering that Palestinian men wear. This headpiece is now a symbol of resistance, as not only Palestinians began wearing it, but also non-Palestinians. Today, the Kuffiyeh is worn modernly at weddings, graduation ceremonies, and peaceful protests. This shows the perseverance that is accompanied by clothing, the resistance, and the willingness to preserve culture, with wedding traditions still preserved alive through the strong cultural presence and ability to preserve their traditions and values. Palestinians now sing about Palestine and *Awda*, the return to their land.

Palestinian diaspora has not only brought awareness to the displacement, but also arts, literature, and music, started to be produced in the name of preserving Palestinian culture. The immense resilience Palestinians had gone through not only gave them hope but showcased the unique cultural identity they are reviving.

Ongoing Conflict of Nakba

The ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine and the remaining hope for peace are dimming, with the occupation's expanding aggression against the Palestinian population and the weakened representation of the Palestinians. The military occupation and the expansion of the occupation shed light on the future outlook of the region; the hope for return and peace continues to diminish, and the prospect of the *Awda*, hope for return, is a controversial topic viewed by the Israeli side.

Several Palestinians, many are women and children, have been martyred or displaced since the ongoing recent conflict between the two sides since October 2023, and its escalating violence, with two cease-fire deals falling through and failing. These recent atrocities have shed a paralleled comparison on past aggression, such as the 1948 Nakba. The recurring instances of displacement, cultural exodus, and forced migration shed light on how the Nakba is not just one event, but the same story of displacement and forced migration that generations and generations of Palestinians have gone through.

Conclusion

Furthermore, although the hope for return is diminishing and the weakened political representation set upon by the occupation, Palestinian identity continues to show its resilience and what generations upon generations have sustained from the continued aggression of the illegal occupation. These Palestinians have endured the forced exodus from their ancestral homes and endured traumatic conditions from the aggression, but that will never let their history go forgotten. The Palestinians have shown their resilience and have gained universal respect for their cause and their right to return, something that will never go unnoticed.

The recent aggression has shed more light on the Palestinian story and gained global recognition, with thousands of popular figures showing public support. Singers, actors, educators,

and activists around the world are progressively using their platforms to campaign for Palestinian rights. This change has shown how decades of exodus continue to shed light on the story of resistance, reaffirming that the Palestinian narrative will never be erased.

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