

On Nakba Day, Israelis Forced to Confront a Guilty Secret

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We repost this article first published in 2014 to commemorate the 73rd anniversary of the Nakba.

For 66 years Israel's founding generation has lived with a guilty secret, one it successfully concealed from the generations that followed. Forests were planted to hide war crimes. School textbooks mythologised the events surrounding Israel's creation. The army was blindly venerated as the most moral in the world.

Once, “Nakba” – Arabic for “Catastrophe”, referring to the dispossession of the Palestinian homeland in 1948 – would have failed to register with any but a small number of Israeli Jews. Today, only those who never watch television or read a newspaper can plead ignorance.

As marches and festivals are held today by Palestinians across the region to mark Nakba Day – commemorating the expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and the erasure of more than 500 villages – Israelis will be watching.

In fact, the Israeli media have been filled with references to the Nakba for the past 10 days, since Israel celebrated its Independence Day last week. The two anniversaries do not quite coincide because Israel marks its founding according to the Hebrew calendar.

While Israeli Jews were trying to enjoy guilt-free street parties last week, news reports focused on the activities of their compatriots – the Palestinians who remained inside the new state of Israel and now comprise a fifth of the population. Estimates are that one in four of these 1.5 million Palestinian citizens is from a family internally displaced by the 1948 war.

More than 20,000 staged a “March of Return” to one destroyed village, Luby, buried under a forest near Tiberias and close to a major Israeli highway. Long tailbacks forced thousands of Israeli Jews to get a close-up view as they crawled past the biggest nakba procession in Israel's history.

For others, images of the marchers waving Palestinian flags and massively outnumbering Israeli police and a counter-demonstration by Jewish nationalists were seen on TV news, websites and social media.

The assault on Israel's much cherished national mythology is undoubted. And it reflects the rise of a new generation of Palestinians no longer willing to defer to their more cautious, and traumatised, elders, those who directly experienced the events of 1948.

These youth see themselves as representing not only their immediate relatives but Palestinians in exile who have no chance to march back to their village. Many of Lubya's refugees ended up in Yarmouk camp in Damascus, where they are suffering new horrors, caught in the midst of Syria's civil war.

Palestinians in Israel are also being galvanised into action by initiatives like prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to legislate Israel as a Jewish state. They see this as the latest phase of an ongoing nakba - an attempt to erase their nativeness, just as the villages were once disappeared.

Palestinians are making a noise about the Nakba on every possible front - and not just on Nakba Day. Last week media around the world reported on one such venture: a phone app called iNakba that maps the hundreds of destroyed villages across Israel. Briefly it became one of the most popular iPhone downloads, connecting refugees through new technology. iNakba visibly restores a Palestine that Israel hoped literally to have wiped off the map.

The app is the initiative of Zochrot, an Israeli organisation that is jointly run by Jews and Palestinians. They have been finding ever more creative and provocative ways to grab headlines.

They arrange regular visits to destroyed villages that a growing number of curious Israeli Jews are participating in, often in the face of vehement opposition from the communities built on the rubble of Palestinian homes.

Zochrot has created a Hebrew information pack on the Nakba for teachers, though education officials ban it. Last year it staged the first Nakba film festival in Tel Aviv. It is also creating an archive of filmed interviews with Israeli veteran fighters prepared to admit their part in expulsions.

Zochrot also held last year the first-ever conference in Israel discussing not just the principle but how to put into practice a right of return for the millions of Palestinian refugees across the region.

Palestinian youth are taking up the idea enthusiastically. Architects are designing plans for new communities that would house the refugees on or near their old lands.

Refugee families are trying to reclaim mosques and churches, usually the only buildings still standing. Israeli media reported last month that internal refugees had been attacked as they held a baptism in their former church at al-Bassa, now swamped by the Jewish town of Shlomi.

Workshops have been arranged among refugee groups to imagine what a right of return might look like. Youth from two Christian villages, Iqrit and Biram, have already set up

campes at their old churches, daring Israel to hound them out like their grandparents. Another group, I Won't Remain a Refugee, is looking to export this example to other villages.

The size of the march to Lubyas and the proliferation of these initiatives are a gauge of how Palestinians are no longer prepared to defer to the Palestinian leadership on the refugee issue or wait for an interminable peace process to make meaningful progress.

"The people are sending a message to the leadership in Ramallah that it cannot forget or sideline the right of return," says Abir Kooty, an activist with the Lubyas march. "Otherwise we will take the issue into our own hands."

Meanwhile, progress of a kind is being made with Israeli Jews. Some have come to recognise, however reluctantly, that a tragedy befell the Palestinians with Israel's creation. But, as another march organiser notes, the struggle is far from over. "That is a first step. But now they must take responsibility for our suffering and make amends."

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