

Obama and the Muslims: Which Truths Must Be Spoken?

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If there was one passage in the speech that President Barack Obama gave in Cairo on June 4, that alarmed Israelis aligned with the Netanyahu government, and destabilized Rush Limbaugh, Liz Cheney and a host of American neocons, it was neither his insistence on halting Israeli settlements, nor his declared readiness to negotiate with Iran without preconditions, nor his acknowledgement of Hamas as a political force, but a statement that broke a fundamental taboo regarding official Israeli historiography. After reviewing the persecution of Jews throughout history, culminating in the holocaust, Obama went on to state:

“On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the Palestinian people – Muslims and Christians – have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than 60 years, they’ve endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps They endure the daily humiliations – large and small – that come with occupation. So let there be no doubt. The situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own.”

Then, he referred to the “displacement [of Palestinians] brought about by Israel’s founding....”

Although cloaked in the ultimate euphemisms, of “dislocation” and “displacement,” contrived by his creative speech-writers, Obama’s reference to Palestinian expulsion as an integral part of the process leading to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 is not only historically significant but immediately relevant to the internal dynamic unfolding inside Israel today. It is not a matter that U.S. presidents routinely refer to.

The late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said insisted that the events of 1947-1948 must be viewed in terms of “different but intertwined histories.” We could witness this in commemorations last year: If the Israelis celebrated the 60th anniversary of their state in 2008, the Palestinians worldwide mourned six decades of exile, provoked by the deliberate expulsion of their people from their land, under the command of then-Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion. The term they use is “Nakba,” or “catastrophe,” a bit more apt than the euphemisms “dislocation” and “displacement.” But, call it what you will, what occurred was massive expulsions, or ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people from their historic lands. Once the United Nations had decreed the partition on November 29, 1947 (with questionable legal validity), the Zionist forces under Ben-Gurion launched the operational phase of their project to de-Arabize not only the land allotted to a Jewish state, but also other land they coveted. From late November until May 14, 1948, the date the complicit British had set for

their withdrawal, the Zionists succeeded in moving, with military precision, to drive the native inhabitants from their land.

If one reads the accounts of these events, written by and about Ben-Gurion, one finds no trace of such a scheme. Instead, their fairy tale version has it that the Zionists would have welcomed Arab cooperation in building the new state, but the Palestinians preferred to leave; that force was never exerted to drive them out; that if any violence occurred, it was in only response to anti-Zionist attacks. And, besides, recounts Ben-Gurion in his memoirs, the Arabs who had been there for centuries, had been lazy do-nothings, had not cultivated the land or developed industry; therefore, it was better for the Zionists to take over. Moreover, the Jews, he wrote, had a biblical mandate to the land, having been there thousands of years before, whereas Arab nationalism was a recent phenomenon.(1)

In 1961, Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi published a major exposé of the real story, entitled, "Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine." In it, he detailed how the Zionist movement had carefully planned the expulsions, according to Plan D (Dalet) and executed them. In 1988, on the fortieth anniversary of the Nakba, Khalidi's groundbreaking research was reprinted in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, and the text of the Zionists' project, the original Plan Dalet, was published in English for the first time. In the 1980s, in response to his exposés, a number of Israeli historians, dubbed the "new historians," made their debut, reviewing, or revising the official Zionist version of events. Among these scholars are Tom Segev, Simcha Flapan, and others.

Most recently, one extremely courageous "new historian," Ilan Pappé, published his research on the Nakba, in a volume entitled (without euphemisms), *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, which has also happily been issued in German. Pappé documents in painstaking detail how Ben-Gurion and his "Consultancy" (the general staff group he put together for the task), planned the Nakba. With geographical-strategic profiles of the cities and towns, their political, religious and ethnic composition, their economic activities, and so forth, they drew up a master plan for attacking, occupying, emptying and destroying one locality after the other. They gave specific orders to their armed bands (Haganah, Stern Gang and Irgun) to attack Palestinian cities and towns, terrify the residents, round up the civic leaders, executing some, blow up homes and other buildings, in order to cause the panicked residents to flee. The documentation he provides from primary sources like Ben-Gurion's diaries, is as unassailable as it is chilling. And it confirms, in spades, the research of Walid Khalidi, this time from an Israeli source.

All this has been known to Palestinians and other Arabs, who lived through these traumatic events, for decades. It has also been known to those Israelis involved, but has been deliberately covered up by the official, mythological account.

Now, in walks an American President who, in an address to the Muslims of the world, touches upon the Nakba. To be sure, not in so many words, but, a rose by any other name is still a rose, and anyone who knows anything about the history of Israel, knows what he was referring to. He did not speak of 1967 as a landmark, but referenced "60 years," i.e. going back to 1948.

Thus, the hysterical reaction by Rush Limbaugh and Liz Cheney, to Obama's having presented the suffering of the Jews and of the Palestinians as "morally equivalent." Bush's former speech-writer David Frum, the man credited with having coined the provocative term

“axis of evil,” was also apoplectic. This is taboo: although it has not been so openly debated in the U.S. media, the issue of the Nakba is fundamental for Arabs. And it carries with it the issue of the right of return, i.e. the right of those Palestinians driven out in 1948, to return to their homes in what is present-day Israel.

Obama’s mention of this highly sensitive issue should have an impact inside Israel. In fact, in the last weeks, the Nakba has become a political football. A number of Knesset members presented a bill in late May, calling for any commemoration of the Nakba to be banned and punishable by a penalty of up to three years in prison. The move, subsequently watered down to deny government funds to anyone honoring the Nakba, was supported by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This is interesting, indeed. Whenever a political body, be it a government or parliament, calls for something to be penalized, one must take a closer look at it, and ask why. This bill bears uncanny similarities to a law on the books in Turkey, to wit, the infamous Paragraph 301 of the Constitution, which makes it illegal to state or write anything about the genocide against the Armenians in 1915. This law has proven impotent in front of the growing ranks of Turkish intellectuals, among them murdered editor Hrant Dink, who have spoken out, to say the genocide occurred and demand it be dealt with by the Turkish political class and people.

The same is true in Israel. The Nakba occurred, and no law on the books can erase that fact. Herein lies the significance of Obama’s reference. Yes, the Israeli settlements must be frozen, as per prior agreements; in fact, to conform to international law, all the settlements on Palestinian land should be dismantled. And, yes, there must be a return to the negotiating table. The existing blueprints for peace (the Arab peace plan of 2000, the Road Map,) not to mention peace agreements already signed, provide workable solutions to end the conflict. But even if the new U.S. Administration were to wield the political clout it possesses, perhaps by withholding funds from Israel (as Washington did in 1991, to force Shamir to go to the Madrid peace conference) to extract an agreement, this would not mean peace. The historical truth must be acknowledged.

The current Israeli government is, at any rate, the least likely candidate to buckle under to U.S. pressures. Netanyahu, after all, is the man for whom the American neo-conservative faction of Richard Perle, et al, drafted a policy in 1996, one which he only too readily accepted. This was the “Clean Break” doctrine, which called for a “clean break” with the Oslo accords and everything they implied. The “Clean Break” document explicitly urged Israel to tear up the earlier agreements with the Palestinians, to engage in “hot pursuit” against them in the Occupied Territories as well as Gaza, and to promote regime change, in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Iran, all to the greater glory of a Greater Israel, the new nuclear-armed hegemon in the region.(2) Judging from past performance, and recent statements, the Netanyahu-Lieberman government will under no circumstances acquiesce to any reasonable offer coming from the Arabs and backed by Washington. There will have to be a political change inside Israel, before such a peace plan could even be sketched on the agenda.

Even in the improbable case that Netanyahu, under duress, were to sign on the dotted line, such an agreement would be no more than a piece of paper. As earlier treaties, with Egypt and Jordan, have shown, peace is not merely the absence of war. It is a qualitatively new relationship between former adversaries, whereby each views the other as an equal human being, something which can certainly not be said of the way Egyptians, Jordanians and Israelis view one another today.

The peace of Westphalia in 1648, which ended centuries of religious conflict, was forged on the basis of two noble concepts: that each side embrace the commitment to “forgive and forget” whatever atrocities occurred during conflict; and, that each strive to work to secure the benefit, or interest, of the other. Several nations in Europe, among them France and Germany, embraced this principle in making peace after having fought each other in two catastrophic world wars in the last century. Former enemies can become allies – if they face the truth.

In the Israeli-Palestinian case, this means that the historical record must be recognized. The Israeli policy has been to “forget” only too readily, in the sense of eradicating any record of what happened. But, to be able to “forgive and forget,” one must first acknowledge the wrongs done; Israel, its government and people must own up to the Nakba and to recognize its injustice. Then, and only then, could it be possible for Palestinians, three generations later, to pardon those responsible for their crimes.

Despite the loud noises coming from the extremist camps in Israel against any such development, there is the movement of the “new historians,” of Israeli intellectuals who have used their access to primary sources in the state archives, to document the ugly story of the ethnic cleansing that paved the way for the founding of the Israeli state. There is also the Zochrot, an organization committed to making the truth about the Nakba known. Not to mention the plethora of journalists, freedom activists, and cultural initiatives, spearheaded by Daniel Barenboim’s West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, who are working to establish a new understanding between the two peoples, as a prerequisite to peace.

These processes are in motion, and can become powerful forces for change in political direction inside Israel. The shock of the war Israeli waged against Gaza at the end of 2008 into January 2009, fuelled this dynamic inside Israel, and abroad. That brutal aggression against a hapless civilian population, ripped up the taboos reigning in Europe, against any questioning of the wisdom or morality of Israeli policy. Ongoing investigations, sparked by the United Nations entities there (which were treated as an enemy force by Israel), will yield their fruits. Pressure will continue to mount, to bring to light the truth about that war, and the policy thinking behind it. Israel will continue to reject any cooperation with such investigations and to issue reports whitewashing the Israeli Defense Forces’ behavior in Gaza. Official Israel will continue to balk at any initiative to shed light on the Nakba. But to no avail. Truth has a way of making itself known.

Once the historical record of 1947-1948 becomes a matter for open public debate inside Israel, and internationally, then there will be hope that this centuries-long conflict, manufactured by imperial, geopolitical forces on a much higher level, may be overcome. If the American President contributed in any way to initiate this process of truth-seeking, he has done his part.

(As a postscript, it might be added that another, not insignificant comment that Obama made in Cairo, addressed the method of struggle in the resistance. Acknowledging Hamas as a political force with a Palestinian following (which also raised the blood pressure of some in Tel Aviv and Washington), Obama drew the comparison to the civil rights struggle of American Blacks, which was waged through the non-violent resistance of Martin Luther King and others. That resistance movement succeeded because it challenged the oppressor with a morally superior attitude, which proved to be unassailable. Obama’s brief reference here again echoed the lessons of Westphalia.)

NOTES

1. David Ben-Gurion, The Test of Fulfillment: Can Zionism Be Achieved? American Palestine Committee, New York, 1942; Recollections, Macdonald Unit 75 London, 1970.

2. A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm, 1996, Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, Jerusalem, www.iasps.org/strat1.htm.

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