

## Foreword

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**T**his book addresses the complicated and multilayered intersections of the Holocaust and Nakba, a challenging theme that has been central to some of my major intellectual and literary works. While working on the second volume of my novel *Children of the Ghetto*, I came across a shocking Israeli term that encapsulates the very essence of the ambiguity created by the Zionist project in Palestine. The labels generally used to describe Palestinians, such as “saboteurs” and “terrorists,” are not surprising, as these labels are gleaned from a long-standing colonialist vocabulary. However, these labels bear many connotations, as yesterday’s terrorist may become tomorrow’s prime minister, as was the case with Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir of Israel. He may also be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, as was the case with Yasser Arafat before his being returned to the “terrorist” enclave during the second Palestinian Intifada, his siege in the Ramallah compound, and his eventual death.

The term that so shocked me is *Sabonim*, which became widely used shortly after the establishment of the Jewish state. It pointed to the survivors of the Holocaust who had made their way to the “Promised Land.” The term carries dual meanings: a metaphoric allusion to cowardice and a literal meaning deriving from the origin of the word *sabon*, meaning soap, found in both the Arabic and Hebrew languages. This is a reference to one of the alleged barbaric practices of the Nazi Holocaust, which was to produce soap from the bodies of its victims, an unfounded claim which was held by many as true at that time. *Sabonim* is the parallel to the term *Muselmänner* (Muslims) used to describe the weak among the Jews in Nazi camps, who were so identified in advance of being taken

to their deaths. The term *Muselmänner* is analyzed brilliantly in the chapter by Gil Anidjar in this volume.

I would like to begin with these two terms, *Sabonim* and “Muslims.” I was faced with the ambiguity of “soap” for the first time when visiting an installation by the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum at the Arab World Institute in Paris in 1996. She had created a cartographer’s map from 2,400 blocks of the famous Nablus soap, clearly etched with the borders of the Israeli occupation in Palestine. The heady aroma of the Nablus soap had permeated the open areas and corridors of the institute and had captured all my senses. My own interpretation of the artist’s interesting choice of material was that the very smell of soap made from Palestinian olive oil should represent the antithesis to the occupation and that the smell of the land should ultimately be able to overcome the violence, the borders, and the occupation. The astonishing reaction from some Israelis to this installation was that using soap was a racist sanctioning of Nazi crimes. On being confronted with this interpretation of the Palestinian artist’s work, I became at a loss for a way to find a common understanding of terminology between victim and oppressor. Indeed, does the possibility of discovering a common vocabulary exist? If the Palestinian artist is not to be allowed to use Nablus’s soap for fear of stirring up a Zionist interpretation of her art that destroys the very essence of its humanity, how then are Palestinians to express their tragedy? Or must their tragedy be obliterated because a more tragic narrative was crafted in the gas chambers of a racist Europe? Must victims be further victimized by the silencing of their voices and the enforcement of their acceptance of their gradual elimination by those who claim to be the very descendants of the victims of the Holocaust?

In this context, what is the true meaning of the word *Sabonim* that became prevalent in Israel? How can a true understanding of its multiple meanings be reached?

The other term I want to consider, “Muslims,” is now a blanket term used to paint every Muslim and Arab as a potential terrorist amid the reemergence of racism and fascism in the world. Consequently, a heavy tax of humiliation and death must be levied on the collective Muslim and Arab worlds.

In the death camps of the Nazis, the word had an entirely different meaning; it was used to indicate that the “Muslim” is marked for elimination. There, on the verge of imminent death, the meanings of words becomes confused; in fact, words lose all meaning because the silence of the victim becomes the only language befitting the horror of genocide.

I do not want to analyze these two terms; I merely mention them to point out that miscomprehension is a defining facet of language. The assertion that language is a means of communication merely highlights only one function of language. In fact, language also creates a spectrum of nuances for the meaning of

words, such that, oftentimes, the implicit is more significant than the apparent. The Arab linguists of old referred the verb “to speak” in Arabic to its root, “Kal-ama,” which translates to the verb “to wound,” intimating that a word is a wound to the soul. We must, therefore, probe the true meaning of words through the association between the wounds they inflict and human suffering.

Similarly, as several of the chapters in this book demonstrate, the terms “Holocaust” and “Nakba” are both surrounded by a shroud of ambiguity.

While the term “Holocaust,” which is used to describe the catastrophe inflicted on Jews in the Nazi death camps of World War II, has become accepted by historians and by academia in general, there remain dissident voices that either deny the Holocaust’s very existence or cast suspicions over the number of its victims. These voices may be currently inconsequential, but they embody a worrying trend accompanying the rise of the fascist right in Europe and the United States. It carries within it the seeds of a neo-anti-Semitism that may take on several forms, of which Islamophobia is but one.

On the other hand, the term “Nakba,” which is used to describe the catastrophe of the Palestinians, suffered many interpretations. The term, which was coined by Constantine Zuryak, the Damascene historian, in 1948, was not easily assimilated into Arab vocabulary, and has only now taken its place as an autonomous definition of the Palestinian tragedy. Despite the current acceptance of the defining power of the term, Israeli law still prevents the Palestinian victims, residing in Israel, from commemorating their Nakba.

The Holocaust embodies the essence of European racist ideologies, with their various philosophical, political, and religious roots. We may need to search for the birth of anti-Semitism among the pages of historians’ records of the Crusades or of the Spanish Inquisition following the “*Reconquista*” of Andalusian Spain. However, anti-Semitism reached its pinnacle with the barbaric “Final Solution” that the Nazis implemented in Europe.

The Palestinian Nakba is linked to a different historic phenomenon, one defined by European expansionist colonization: the “civilizing mission” that resulted in the colonization of wide regions, particularly in Africa, where it spread from Algeria in the north through Rhodesia and South Africa. The Zionist project was, according to its founding fathers, a part of this phenomenon.

As compellingly argued by Honaida Ghanim in her chapter in this book, Zionism succeeded in amalgamating two different issues: the Holocaust and the Zionist project. It did this by painting the establishment of the State of Israel on the land of Palestine, after expelling its inhabitants, as the logical answer to the Holocaust.

It is true that the starting point of the founding fathers of the national Jewish project was the anti-Semitic reality that led to the pogroms in Eastern Europe

in the nineteenth century, but their answer to the permeating anti-Semitism of their day was not the only or inevitable solution. Jewish options included national and cultural integration such as the Bund; another option was the rejection of the idea of a national state; this rejection was endorsed by Orthodox Jewish currents because it contradicted Jewish religious beliefs. A third option was total integration, as advocated by the adherents of Liberalism and Marxism. Only at a later stage, and in conjunction with the British Mandate in Palestine after World War I, did the Zionist option overpower the other possibilities; it began to take root after World War II. However, the Zionist option remained faithful to its colonialist beginnings. It was, as hinted at in the introductory chapter in this book by Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, concurrently a national project and a colonialist enterprise, wherein lies its inherent contradiction, which bears no resolution.

In all probability, the fusion of the Holocaust and the Zionist project was the one myth on which the State of Israel built its “legitimacy” and which continues to be the weapon of choice in the face any criticism levelled against it. The mere mention of inhumane Israeli practices; illegal settlements in the West Bank; the siege of Gaza, which the Israelis have turned into the world’s largest ghetto; or the systematic ethnic cleansing in Jerusalem produces loud laments of anti-Semitism, made possible by the alchemy of linguistic equivocation.

The Palestinians refrained from utilizing the term “Holocaust” to describe their own catastrophe; they used different terminology for this purpose. This is further indication, if further indication is necessary, of the essential difference between the two historical events, in both the circumstances surrounding them and in what they signify. Even though some Israeli practices may be reminiscent of those of the Nazis, it is a mistake to fall into the trap of making such comparisons, as it would only lead to obscuring issues that color the present. This is an error committed by many Israelis, Jews, Palestinians, and Arabs, and it is no less grave than the mistaken belief by some of the Palestinian leadership in the 1940s that the enemy of their enemy was their friend, which led them into the great folly of cooperation with the Nazis.

Refusing to fall into the trap of such a comparison is crucial not only because of the enormity of the pure evil created by the Nazi horror machine but also because of the inherent difference between the two events. The Holocaust, as a major episode in human history, highlights the ever-present possibility of sliding into racism; it ought to be a continuous reminder for the whole of the human race of the importance of standing vigil against the insidious encroachment of racism and of refuting its very assumptions. The Nakba, on the other hand, is an embodiment of the same colonial expansionist reality that gave birth to the apartheid regime in South Africa, causing people everywhere to unite in

the struggle, led by the African National Congress, against the shameful regime, culminating in its eradication.

The Holocaust and the Nakba are similar in that they are both relevant to the essential struggle of humanity against racism. The necessity for the memory of the Holocaust to survive as a collective human memory is only made possible by adopting a solid stance against expansionist colonial occupations, of which Israel is the last remaining rampart in today's world.

Do we stand facing two memories that are in need of being harmonized?

Addressing the Nakba as a memory is a trap that many may fall into, regardless of their intentions. The Holocaust has become a collective human memory that must be preserved and whose lessons must be internalized. It was a barbaric event that took place in a recent past and, in that sense, has become part of history and an inescapable truth imbedded in the collective human psyche. It must be protected from Holocaust deniers or those who attempt to use it to excuse any form of oppression, ethnic cleansing, or racism.

The Nakba is an inherently different issue. The Nakba's initial bloody chapters were written with the forceful ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948. Yet, during the Oslo Accords between the Palestinians and the Israelis in 1993, the Nakba appeared almost like a nebulous memory that was put to rest by both parties through mutual compromises (see Nadim Khoury's chapter in this book). However, it was the very Oslo Accords that proved to be a mirage, because they were construed differently by each party: the Palestinians understood them to be the end point to the occupation of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza as well as the starting point for the establishment of their own state on 20 percent of their historic homeland. The Israeli establishment understood them to be a compromise that would allow them to continue to build settlements and to annex Palestinian land in exchange for allowing Palestinians the right to remain on part of their land and to assert self-rule over the affairs of their designated Bantustans. This proves the error of some Arab historians who considered the Nakba a historic event whose place is set firmly in the past.

The everyday reality of life in Palestine clearly indicates that the 1948 war was merely the beginning of the catastrophic event. It did not end when the cease-fire agreements of 1949 were signed. In fact, 1948 was the beginning of a phenomenon that continues to this day. The debate around the existence of a master plan for the expulsion of Palestinians must now be approached differently, particularly since Walid Khalidi conclusively proved the existence of such a plan—the Plan Dalet—which was reiterated by Ilan Pappé in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. The actual implementation of the expulsions was also documented by the Israeli historian Benny Morris.<sup>1</sup> The fleeing or expulsion of Palestinians from their villages and towns in 1948 does not give Israel the right to

deny them return and to confiscate their homes and their lands under the pretext that these are “absentee properties.” The Absentees’ Property Law, which reached peaks of absurdity by referring to the “present-absent” person, is, in fact, worse than the act of expulsion, because it transforms the expulsion from an event into a continuous state of affairs. Suffice it to study the events surrounding what are referred to as the “uprooted villages” within the borders of Israel, such as Saffuriyya—whose tragedy was described by its own poet Taha Muhammad Ali—to understand that the Nakba is a continuing story. The inhabitants of Saffuriyya, who had remained on the land of their forefathers despite fleeing their village and who had taken refuge in neighboring Nazareth, are banned from visiting their destroyed houses or their land; their properties were confiscated, and they remain “present” as citizens of Israel yet “absent” as rightful owners.

Land appropriation by the Israeli state has not ceased; even peasants who have escaped the absent-present categorization suffer from the expropriation of their agricultural properties for the declared Israeli objective of Judaizing the land.

The Nakba continues to this day even for those Israeli Palestinians who were denied their label of national identity as “Palestinians” and are now referred to as “Israeli Arabs.” The truth behind the current situation is perhaps best illustrated by the destruction of the village of al-‘Arāḡib in the Negev by Israel more than a hundred times within six years; each time it was rebuilt by its stubborn original inhabitants, with the help of Arab and Jewish activists.

While the continuing Nakba is obscured from view in Israel by the laws and legislation approved by the Israeli parliament, the Nakba is very conspicuous in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. Those lands occupied in 1967 are subject to military laws, while settlements proliferate in every corner: from Jerusalem, which is being suffocated by Jewish settlements, to the West Bank, through to the Jordan Valley. Repression, administrative detentions, and outright killing have become daily institutionalized practices. Israel, in fact, has built a comprehensive apartheid system shored up by settler-only roads that circumvent Palestinian cities, the wall of separation that tears up and confiscates Palestinian cities and villages, and the many checkpoints that have made moving from one Palestinian Bantustan to the next a daily ordeal.

The consequences of the continuing Nakba are nowhere clearer than in Jerusalem and Hebron, where settlers plant their communities among Palestinians, closing roads and turning ordinary chores into a daily nightmare. They reach the peak of inhumanity by transforming Gaza into the biggest open-air prison in the world.

In an effort to distinguish between a memory and the present, I have taken the liberty of belaboring the point in order to emphasize my hypothesis that

the Nakba is not a past event that “happened” seventy years ago but is a continuing, painful journey that began in 1948 but endures to this day. Memory of a past event, however agonizing, can be addressed through remembrance and by requiring those guilty of instigating evil to face up to what they have committed, in preparation for turning the memory of the event into a collective human memory. The present, on the other hand, needs to be addressed through serious efforts to change its inequities here and now. Political, intellectual, and ideological tools are required as cohesive agents to bring together all those who stand against colonialist occupation, regardless of their nationalities and ethnic or religious affiliations.

Hence the error of asking for the mutual recognition of the Holocaust and the Nakba becomes clear. I, speaking as a human being above all else, and as a Lebanese by birth and a Palestinian by affiliation, declare that I have no prerequisites for recognizing the horror of the Holocaust, and it is, in fact, my duty to keep its memory alive. The Holocaust is my responsibility as a member of the human race, despite it having been a product of European fascism. As such, my deeply ingrained moral duty is to be an active participant in the struggle against anti-Semitism as well as all other forms of racism anywhere in the world. I am proud to walk the path charted by my mentors before me: members of the Lebanese and Arab intellectual activist groups who formed the Anti-Fascism and Nazism League in Beirut in 1939 and were imprisoned for it by the Fascist Vichy occupation regime at the time. This path leads me to continue the struggle against the Zionist colonialist occupation project in Palestine. For me, the issue is one of principle and is nonnegotiable; it also applies to the continuing Palestinian Nakba. Two wrongs do not make a right, one crime does not wipe out another, and racism is not remedied by counterracism. The continuing Nakba suffered by Palestinians should act as a wake-up call for the collective world conscience, instigating an effort to defeat the last remaining phenomenon of colonialist occupation in the world.

The mutual recognition of the Holocaust and the Nakba is an affront to moral sensibilities. A solid moral stance is divorced from any form of negotiation, and the interplay of moralistic mirroring is irrelevant here. In this context, it is meaningless to speak of two sides being considerate of each other, nor is empathy a relevant concept; there merely exists a perpetrator and a victim, and there is no space for equating the two.

The Nazi criminal in the Holocaust was the product of racism, an abhorrent ideology that should be continually repudiated and combatted in whichever guise it presents itself. The continuing Nakba, on the other hand, is the product of the colonialist occupation, which internalizes racism and seeks to ethnically cleanse the land of its people by pursuing justification through several avenues

such as the “civilizing mission,” religious evangelism, and the concept of the “Promised Land.”

In both cases, which are quite distinct in nature, negotiation is inappropriate; racism must be totally eradicated and the colonial occupation must be dismantled while preserving the rights of those who are recently part of the landscape, because a crime is never erased by the committing of another.

The Holocaust and the Nakba are not mirror images, but the Jew and the Palestinian are able to become mirror images of human suffering if they disabuse themselves of the delusion of exclusionist, nationalist ideologies. The oppressed Jew in Nazi Europe is not only the mirror image of the Palestinian but that of every human everywhere, just as the Palestinian is the mirror image of all expelled and oppressed peoples everywhere. In fact, he is the mirror image of the refugee tragedy playing out in the footsteps of the third decade and the painful cries for help emanating from Syrian, Iraqi, Libyan, Somali, and Afghani refugees as they wade through the sea of suffering and death once called the Mediterranean Sea.

This is how the *Sabonim* and the *Muselmänner* become parallel mirrors reflecting the pain of a common human tragedy.

In this vein, we begin to understand Edward Said’s description of the Palestinians as the “victims of the victims,”<sup>2</sup> and we find our way back to the optimism of the human will amid the pessimism of the intellect. We rediscover the human values that are under the very threat of obliteration by the counterforces of capitalism, barbarism, racism, tyranny, and extremism. To my mind, this is the central challenge raised by several of the chapters in this timely and important book.

## NOTES

1. Walid Khalidi, “Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 1, (1988):4–33; Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
2. Edward Said, “The One-State Solution,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 10, 1999.



The  
Holocaust  
and  
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