

Catastrophe Day

YAWM AN-NAKBAH is held on the day following Israeli Independence Day. It is the day on which many Palestinians commemorate the expulsion of their grandparents and aged relatives from their ancestral homes and villages. Although this day has only been prominent in the Palestinian protest calendar since the 1990s it does mark a series of undoubtedly traumatic and tragic historical events.

On May 15-16, 1948, armies from Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon invaded Israel. They were rapidly and roundly defeated, and armistice agreements were signed during the spring of 1949. Egypt was left in occupation of Gaza, Jordan annexed the West Bank, and Israel was left in possession of the rest of the territory.

During, and after the war, some 260,000 Jews fled from Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and North Africa, and 750,000 Arabs were expelled or fled from Israel. Subsequently, hundreds of thousands of more Jews quit Iran and the Arab lands for Israel, many being deprived of all their possessions on the way - the result is that some forty per cent of Israel's modern population can trace their roots back to those who fled from Iran and the neighbouring Arab states.

Unlike the Jewish refugees who settled in Israel, much of the Palestinian diaspora has retained its refugee status, and have, for whatever reason, failed to become fully settled citizens of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. Consequently, the 'right of return' has remained uppermost in their minds. They are irredentists who demand that the results of the War of 1948 be unraveled by insisting that all those driven out of Israel sixty-three years ago, *and their descendants*, be allowed to return, in order to settle in their lost villages and to occupy their lost lands and houses.

The fulfilment of this demand, they know, would result in the collapse of the Jewish state, and the flight of some seven and half million Israeli Jews to Europe, North America, Australia, or anywhere else they could find to let them in. This desire appears to lie at the heart of Palestinian aspirations - the evaporation of the state of Israel, and the disappearance of its people.

Many left wing people in Britain want to endorse what they call the 'two-state' solution without fully recognising the religious, racial, and ethnic, intransigence at the heart of this struggle. Many more people on the left in Britain and around the world endorse this Palestinian aspiration by supporting what they often describe as a 'single secular state' between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean, encompassing the whole of the Palestinian territories and Israel, in which Arabs and Jews would be able to live in peace and harmony assured of equal rights in perpetuity. This utopian scheme is often welcomed by Palestinian organisations although they must surely know that the dismantling of the Zionist state could only be accomplished by its military defeat, in the course of which, most of the Jewish population would be prevailed upon to leave the territory by victorious Arab armed forces.

In Israel we have a state founded largely by refugees in 1948, which constantly faces existential threats from a mass of refugees, and their descendants, backed by two irregular armies - Hamas and Hezbollah - by the Palestinian Authority, and by all of the neighbouring Arab states. While Hamas's Charter (1988) makes clear that its *raison d'être* is hating and killing Jews, and destroying the "entity" known as Israel, it is perfectly willing to endorse a cease fire with the "entity"; it is prepared to back the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza, but it steadfastly refuses to recognise Israel.

Founding member of Hamas, Mahmoud Zahar, speaking last week, explained that recognising Israel would "preclude the right of the next generation to liberate the lands. . . . What," he wondered, "will be the fate of the five million Palestinians in the diaspora" if

Israel is recognised? However, Zahar insisted that Hamas is prepared to recognise a Palestinian state “on any part of Palestine” as opposed to Hamas’ proclaimed aim for a state “from the river [Jordan] to the [Mediterranean] sea.”

This is the heart of the problem. Full recognition of the State of Israel by the government of any future Palestinian state, without ‘the right of return’ for the refugees of 1948 and their descendants, would mean accepting that Israel is not only a legitimate state, but that it is here to stay. This is what Hamas, and it must be said, much of Fatah, is unwilling to contemplate. The Palestinian cause is not simply about freeing the occupied territories on the West Bank, or lifting the blockade of Gaza; it is about destroying the State of Israel demographically by ensuring that there are more Arabs in Israel than there are Jews - 23 per cent of Israel’s population is already Arab, and any mass return of refugees would clearly undermine the Jewish character of the country. ‘The right of return’ is an irredentist project which aims at reversing the effects of the military defeats suffered by Arab armies in their attacks on Israel, most notably in 1948, 1967, and 1973.

Similarly, Israel is determined to frustrate Arab aspirations by fracturing the territorial coherence of the Palestinian lands on the West Bank of the Jordan by legal finagling, by fraud, by evictions, by direct annexations, by denying the right of West Bank Palestinians living abroad to return to their own homes, and finally, by the deployment of economic clout. As a consequence, Israelis have created more than a hundred communities in Palestinian territory with a total population of over half a million of their Jewish citizens; they have built a dense network of roads to supply and defend these settlements - moving Israel Defence Forces throughout the West Bank at will. All these measures have consolidated Israel’s grip, and undermined all attempts by the Palestinian Authority to exercise sovereign control over its own territories.

Despite this unpromising situation on the ground the Palestinian parties, including Fatah and Hamas, are

planning to declare, unilaterally, the sovereign independence of a Palestinian state in September and hope to gain recognition for this move at the United Nations in New York.

This is the context in which we should understand last Sunday's mass demonstrations at Israel's frontiers with Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. This was a highly organized and well-orchestrated international plan to challenge, once again, the right of Israel to exist, by insisting that all those Arabs driven out of Israel in 1948, and their descendants, have a right to return 'home'. All the Palestinian parties know that the 'right of return' is non-negotiable as far as Israel is concerned. Consequently, the mass demonstrations on Israel's borders graphically emphasize Zionist intransigence and violence; they focus attention upon Israel's refusal to enter into meaningful negotiations. Evidently, the Palestinians hope that this novel form of Intifada will help them to garner support at the United Nations for the unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood which they plan to make in September.

No doubt the Syrian dictatorship was delighted by the opportunity provided this weekend by demonstrations against Israel to distract attention from its use of tanks, torture, and mass arrests, against its own citizens. Similarly, moves against Israel will help shore up the street cred of the Jordanian monarchy and of the military dictatorship in Cairo. These demonstrations on Israel's frontiers were a brazen attempt by Palestinian parties who, despite formal electoral procedures, are far from democratic, and for embattled Baathist and military dictatorships, to derail or distract the Arab democratic movement by refocusing it upon anti-Israel rhetoric, and by endorsing irredentist demands for the destruction of the State of Israel.

The Zionist state cannot surrender the West Bank until Palestinians fully accept the right of Israel to exist in perpetuity. This does mean accepting that 1948 cannot be unravelled, and rejecting, once and for all, the 'right of return'. Similarly, Palestinians cannot establish genuine sovereignty without the removal of Jewish settlements,

or at the very least, acceptance by the populations of these settlements, of the sovereignty of the Palestinian state, and the acknowledgement of their own full Palestinian citizenship. If Jewish settlers are unprepared to accept Palestinian sovereignty they must leave the territory of the Palestinian state and cross the frontier back into Israel.

Both scenarios are extremely unlikely. The Jewish Settlers are not going to accept Palestinian sovereignty and no government in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv is simply going to abandon them to their fate. The Palestinians are not going to surrender the 'right of return' - so the issue of the forthcoming struggles and wars will hinge upon whether one accepts the right of Israel to exist or not. Those on the left in Britain need to come clean now and acknowledge that by espousing the 'Palestinian cause', and by supporting the Palestinian 'right of return', they are rejecting Israel's right to exist.