

A Tale of Two Nakbas: Hezbollah, Syria, and Historical Memory

by ERIC DRAITSER

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Last week, millions around the world marked the 67th anniversary of the Nakba – literally “the disaster” or “the catastrophe” in Arabic – commemorating the seizure of Palestinian land and transformation of historic Palestine into modern Israel. Naturally, there is little ambiguity among pro-Palestine activists that the Nakba represents the opening salvo in the ongoing war perpetrated by Israel and Zionism against the people of Palestine; it is the continuing war of gradual (and not so gradual) erasure of Palestinian culture, Palestinian ethnic identity, and Palestinian collective memory. The weapons in this war range from Israeli bombs, to Zionist propaganda that seeks to dehumanize the Palestinian people, robbing them of both their agency and their humanity, their land and their livelihoods.

But these facts are only controversial when facing the barrage of pro-Israeli propaganda either in the media, or as parroted by liberal Zionists whose humanity and compassion somehow does not extend to a tiny strip of land called Gaza, or the disjointed and disfigured territory known as the West Bank. Indeed, most people of conscience have come to see the self-evident injustice of the Nakba and the occupation; they recognize the apartheid and continuing oppression of the Palestinian people, correctly believing this struggle to be one of the great injustices of the contemporary world.

However, there is another Nakba, another catastrophe, that is ongoing today that even many pro-Palestinian voices fail (or

choose not) to see – the war on Syria, Iraq, and indeed much of the region. For while 1948 saw the destruction of whole villages, extermination of families, displacement of millions, and the stealing of land throughout Palestine, so too have the last few years seen a similar phenomenon in Syria and Iraq. But while the rape of Palestine is a cause around which millions all over the world can unite, the war on Syria and Iraq has left much of the international movement divided. Many even today refuse to see this continuing war as even a war at all; it is “sectarian conflict,” it is “merely a proxy war,” and many argue that “all sides should be condemned.” But is this really true? Or, are these merely the empty platitudes of intellectual and moral cowards who prefer to stick with just Palestine because Syria and Iraq are “not their issue”?

Hezbollah, Syria, and Historical Memory

While there are many proverbial ostriches with their heads in the sand, there are forces in the region who have taken a stand with their brothers and sisters in Syria, chief among them Hassan Nasrallah and the Hezbollah organization. Hezbollah has been fighting side by side with the Syrian Arab Army on the ground in Syria since at least early 2013, and has won strategically significant military victories countless times in the intervening months. Perhaps even more striking however is the intellectual fervor with which Nasrallah and Hezbollah have defended the very concept of resistance to Saudi/Qatari-sponsored wahhabi (takfiri) extremism espoused by the Al Qaeda-affiliated al Nusra Front, ISIS, and the myriad other foreign-sponsored terror organizations waging war on Syria and Iraq.

In a widely disseminated speech given by Nasrallah marking both the 67th anniversary of the Nakba and the significant victory by allied Hezbollah and Syrian military forces in the mountains of Qalamoun on the Syria-Lebanon border, Nasrallah noted that:

While we mark the Nakba of the Palestinian people, we are also dealing with a new Nakba and that is the scheme by ISIS and its supporters who are trying to divide the Ummah [nation]...we have to study the causes of [the] Nakba and identify the responsibilities in order for the contemporary generations to learn from the past experience, which included the noble stances of the mujahidin and the martyrs and comprised those who betrayed their Ummah [nation] for the sake of private interests.

Nasrallah, always a powerful and charismatic speaker, here strikes a powerful note in drawing a direct parallel between the Nakba of 67 years ago, and that of today. Not only does his statement imply the similarity of many of the outcomes – displacement of millions, ethnic cleansing, mass killings – it also makes a qualitative comparison between the two, noting both tacitly, and at times overtly, that the Western-backed, Gulf-sponsored war on Syria, Iraq, and the whole region is connected to a powerful, international imperial project designed to remake the region in the interests of colonial powers.

And of course, on a human level, does one really doubt that the Zionist terrorist groups-cum-death squads such as Irgun (led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky) and Lehi (led by Avraham Stern) which massacred men, women and children and drove Palestinians from their ancestral lands were substantively different from the ISIS and Nusra death squads of today which perpetrate similar crimes against Christians, Alawites, Sunnis, and Shia Muslims throughout Syria and Iraq? Certainly the victims of either group would argue that such crimes cannot be seen as anything other than comparable. And so, seen in this way, Nasrallah's relativism in regards to the Nakba of 1948 and that of today is clearly and undeniably apt.

Nasrallah's claim that this new war is "trying to divide the Ummah" is critical to understanding both the importance of Hezbollah's involvement in it, and the significance of the war

for the Arab world, particularly in the Syrian theater. Not only does he articulate the fundamental understanding that the sectarian nature of the conflict is not some logical outgrowth, but rather is an integral part of its character and the agenda of those that support it, but he also makes plain both the practical and symbolic importance of Syria to the broader anti-imperialist, anti-colonial project.

For decades, Syria has stood as a model of a multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious secular nation in a region full of chauvinist, ethnic supremacist regimes such as those in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Israel, and elsewhere. It is a country where sectarian divides, though very real, were almost never problematic, and where national solidarity, patriotism and allegiance to the nation stood above any religious sectarian differences. Syria represented a triumph of what once was called Arab nationalism and Arab socialism, despite the fact that many self-proclaimed socialists today are quick to denigrate its accomplishments in that regard. Syria stands for progress in many ways: respect for the rights of women and minorities, equality under the law, and religious tolerance. Chief among its tremendous accomplishments has been the continued defense of, and legal protections for, Palestinian victims of the Nakba and their descendants.

In this way, Hezbollah and the Syrian government are natural allies. Both have stood defiant against Israel while many of their fellow Arab states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, etc.) have sought accommodation with Tel Aviv for material benefit. Both Hezbollah and Syria have refused to abandon the Palestinian cause, with the former having taken on and defeated Israel on the battlefield, and the latter providing political, economic, and diplomatic support to Palestine and Palestinians, both within and without its borders.

From this perspective, it is essential to see the current war against US-NATO-GCC-Turkey-Israel sponsored terrorists as both a new Nakba, and a continuation of a decades-long struggle. As

Nasrallah correctly pointed out, "We faced a Nakba then, we face a new and more dangerous one now."

The Politics of Nakbas, New and Old

The inescapable connections between what could be called the historical and contemporary Nakbas are myriad. From the way in which each served the political agenda of the Western imperial establishment, to the impact that each has had on the map and political, social, and cultural character of the region, both events have served to fundamentally transform the Middle East, and the entire Arab world. However, in examining these far reaching impacts, one cannot help but be struck by the politics manifested today by all the interested parties. Indeed, it is the politics of today's Nakba that, in many ways, complicates any understanding of both the importance of the historical Nakba, and that of the Nakba of today.

An examination of the key players in 1948 reveals that, much to the chagrin of those ostensible allies of the Palestinians and of oppressed peoples, the players are by and large the same, thereby giving credence to Nasrallah's "Two Nakbas" construction. For in 1948, in the wake of the Holocaust and World War II, it was the United States, France, and Britain who created the State of Israel out of the sands and hills of Palestine, thereby leading to one of recent history's deepest, and still bleeding, wounds. These same imperial powers have been the main instigators of the contemporary Nakba, providing weapons, training, financial and diplomatic support to terrorist groups in the war on Syria which, along with the criminal US war in Iraq, lead directly to the creation and expansion of ISIS. In this way, the ultimate responsibility for both Nakbas rests at the feet of Washington, London, and Paris (to say nothing of Riyadh, Doha, Ankara, and Tel Aviv).

Perhaps, in this light, one can begin to see that the Nakba narrative is, in effect, a colonial narrative, and that the war raging in Syria and Iraq today is merely a new chapter in

the history of Western colonialism – or neo-colonialism, as it were – in the Arab world. With its lucrative energy reserves, strategic location, and historical and politico-religious significance, the Middle East remains one of the shining jewels of the imperial crown.

And yet, despite all these connections, despite the obvious and painfully self-evident continuity of these struggles, many pro-Palestinian elements still choose to see the historical Nakba in a vacuum, opting instead to side with the oppressors and colonial lackeys in the conflict today.

Hamas, despite its reputation (fair or unfair) as a resistance force and bastion of anti-imperialism, has repeatedly sided with the Muslim Brotherhood and its patron Qatar, as well as Saudi Arabia – Hamas having shifted their allegiance away from Syria, Hezbollah and Iran, and toward the US proxy monarchies of the Gulf. As Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh stated in 2012, “I salute the heroic people of Syria who are striving for freedom, democracy and reform.”

Indeed, despite the support for Palestinian liberation provided by Damascus, Hamas opportunistically allied with the satraps of Western imperialism believing, with some justification at the time, that the tide had turned against Assad and Syria, and that they would benefit most from being on the winning end of the war. But of course, that is not what happened, and the steadfastness of Syrian resistance to the international war against them has led many in the Palestinian political establishment to question that decision of a few years ago.

While it may be understandable, Hamas’s betrayal of their Syrian and Hezbollah brothers has not gone unnoticed. As Syrian President Assad defiantly explained in 2013, “This was not the first time they had betrayed us. It happened before in 2007 and 2009. Their history is one of treachery and betrayal... [I wish] someone would persuade them to return to being a

resistance movement [but it's doubtful]... Hamas has sided against Syria from day one. They have made their choice." Although Iran has recently attempted to restore relations with Hamas for their political interests, it seems that what relationship there may have been between Hamas and Damascus and Tehran is a thing of the past.

And this is precisely the problem. Hamas's failure to overcome the sectarian allegiances and political opportunism of their ostensible Muslim Brotherhood and Qatari friends has left them, in many ways, politically isolated. For while Riyadh, Doha, and Ankara shed crocodile tears over the plight of the Palestinian people, these are the same countries falling over themselves to do business with Israel and serve the Western imperial system in whatever way they can. Seen from this perspective, the victims of the historical Nakba have, through political miscalculation and betrayal by their political elites, estranged themselves from the victims of the contemporary Nakba. Moreover, they have burned the bridge that linked them with the forces of resistance in the region.

Of course, no analysis of this issue would be complete without an obligatory public denunciation of the "pro-Palestinian" groups that have done yeoman's service for the Empire in its war on Syria and Iraq. From NGOs and centers of online and grassroots activism, to the allegedly anti-imperialist media outlets, the international campaign against Syria, Hezbollah, Iraq and Iran has been seemingly a force of nature. While no one should be surprised that Al Jazeera, a news outlet bankrolled by the Qatari royal family, would be the leading edge of anti-Syria propaganda, some might be surprised to find that other pseudo-alternative outlets have joined in the imperialist disinformation campaign. These same outlets that claim to stand for truth and justice in Palestine eagerly cheerlead the war on Syria. Such duplicity serves to illustrate the political crisis that has befallen the Resistance movement and those who support Palestinian

liberation.

To see the Palestinian victims of the Nakba and its ongoing effects in a political vacuum is to do a disservice to the spirit of the Resistance. To allow the imperialists to divide the movement along sectarian lines – make no mistake, this is true for many who support Palestine but call for Syria's destruction – is to provide aid and comfort to the enemy. To separate the two Nakbas and deem one legitimate while the other illegitimate is to expose oneself as the greatest of hypocrites.

Naturally, such conclusions will not be met with applause by many. This writer, like others who have made similar comments, will likely receive angry emails and abusive tweets. But this is a small price to pay for speaking the truth when many others seem afraid or unwilling to do so. It is an infinitesimally small price to pay when one considers the countless sons and daughters of Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon who have spilled their blood to save their families, their homes, their people.

This writer believes it essential to place Palestine in the broadest regional and historical context, and to proclaim loudly that there can be no liberation of Palestine without a regional and international alliance and realignment, so that the divide is no longer sectarian but ideological. Either the Palestinian leadership is allied with the forces of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggle, or they are in league with the forces of reaction and subservience to Empire. In this existential struggle, there can be no middle ground. There can be no separation between the historical and contemporary Nakbas. In this tale of two Nakbas, there is only one acceptable outcome: victory, justice, liberation.

Eric Draitser is the founder of StopImperialism.org and host of Counterpunch Radio. He is an independent geopolitical analyst based in New York City. You can reach him at

ericdraitser@gmail.com.