Generations of Catastrophe:
The Palestinian Problem at Half a Century

BY ELIE CHALALA

Both in the Arab world and diaspora, Arabs are remembering what they refer to in Arabic as *al-nakba*, the “uprooting” and the “catastrophe” that befell the Palestinians when Israel was carved out of their homeland in 1948.

Arab-Israeli peace accords aside, Arabs are still mourning, and as at most funerals, tradition prohibits comments which offend the mourners. But the tragic irony of the case is that there is more than one funeral in progress; more than one catastrophe to mark in solemn remembrance. Therefore, we must violate established customs by suggesting that the catastrophe of 1948 has produced other catastrophes in the Arab world, throwing Arab culture into a state of paranoia, opening the doors of Arab politics to ruthless forms of dictatorships, and laying Arab economies to waste.

The psychological disorder afflicting Arab cultural life since 1948 has not been healed by any peace agreement, as Arab intellectuals continue to bombard each other with charges of “sleeping with the enemy.” Most recently, a pro-Palestinian group in Lebanon decided to remember *al-nakba* through poetry, music, and panels featuring Jewish intellectuals born in the Arab world. But an orchestrated campaign of extreme nationalist Lebanese and Palestinian groups succeeded in canceling the panel, although the Jewish participants were a Moroccan author, an Egyptian psychologist, a Lebanese journalist, all known for their uncompromising support of the Palestinians.

In 1997, Lutfi al-Kholi, a prominent Egyptian progressive intellectual, attended a conference in Copenhagen, meeting Europeans, Jordanians, Palestinians and Israelis, all on the left or the liberal side of the political spectrum. When he returned to Egypt, he was ostracized even by the best of his friends, accused as an accomplice in the process of *al-tatbi*, meaning normalization of economic and cultural relations with the Israeli state. Al-Kholi remains under dark clouds.

The words of playwright Sadallah Wannous, uttered seven months before his death on the 49th anniversary of *al-nakba*, articulates much of the pains Arab intellectuals go through as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict. “Israel stole my age, wasted much of my capacities, and made me live in a time where talking about the beauty of a tree is a crime, because it means the silence on many crimes,” Wannous said in an interview with Syrian director Omar Amiralli, published in An Nahr Cultural

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Supplement. “I believe Israel, and I say it literally and not metaphorically, has stolen the beautiful years of my life, and has spoiled, for a man who has lived 50 years, much of the joy, and squandered much of his abilities.”

Even one of the Arab world’s most distinguished intellectuals has come under attack. Ali Ahmad Said, who goes by the pen name Adonis, is perhaps the most creative living Arab literary figure, often discussed as a potential candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yet recently he has been ostracized by zealot Arab intellectuals for attending a 1995 conference in Spain which included Arab and Israeli intellectuals. He is also accused of being an advocate of *al-tatbi*. Thus, an intellectual “state of war” drags on in a region where the number of illiterates has risen from 58 million in 1982 to 61 million in 1990; and it is expected to rise to 66 million by the year 2000.

Arab nations and politics were quite embryonic when catastrophe befell the Palestinians in 1948. Still fragile political institutions fell prey to the logic of war and military leadership. Preparations for war altogether supplanted political purposes. Thus, throughout the 1950s and 60s, officer factions took turns overthrowing civilian governments, then moved against each other in coup upon counter coup. By the time this struggle stabilized in the early 1970s, the flagrant violation of basic individual rights had become a fact of life. Decades of oppression, coupled with a greater command of the art of control, normalized fear, producing mass obedience to the state.

This domination appears to have fostered a sense of confidence and even arrogance in the governments, especially in Syria and Iraq. Feeling secure at home, Syria invaded Lebanon in 1976; Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, and Kuwait in 1990. The Syrian presence in Lebanon ended any semblance of democracy in that country, while the destruction wrought by Saddam Hussein on the peoples of Iran and Kuwait has been immeasurable. Both Assad of Syria and Hussein of Iraq used the 1948 catastrophe to justify their military adventures; Syria came to Lebanon to defend that country against Israel and Saddam went to Kuwait to unify the Arab world to face Israel.

The military regimes, born out of the catastrophe, and justified by the need to defeat Israel, squandered the region’s resources on armaments, unleashing one economic catastrophe after another. Yet few dared to speak out for fear of having their patriotism questioned. The authoritative 1997 book, “The Explosion of the Near East,” written in French by George Corm and reviewed by George Tarabishi in Arabic, paints a dark picture of Arab economies in the 1990s, showing the cumulative effect of years of economic neglect. The book states that Turkey has a Gross National Product (GNP) double that of Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon combined, although the Turkish population is but three-fourths of these countries. South Korea, whose economy stood at the same level as these Arab countries in the 1960s, now has a GNP five times greater than those four Arab countries (366 billion to 70 billion), while South Korea’s population is 43 percent less. Even if we expand the comparison to include the “oil rich” Arab states, the picture remains disheartening. The region’s GNP, including oil output, registered $510 billion in 1994, while Spain registered a GNP of $525 billion with a population of 40 million, compared to 252 million Arabs.
Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz, speaking with the London based magazine Al Wasat on the tenth anniversary of his receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, said political freedom is more needed by the Arabs than others. “The whole world is headed toward democracy. . . . If the Arabs fail to develop intellectually, politically, economically and in how to use media, they are on their way to perishing.”

Perhaps what is needed on the 50th anniversary of the 1948 catastrophe is the recognition that we are making a series of tragedies, of losses, generations of catastrophes that spring from the original. It is these generations of catastrophe the Arab world must find a way to change.