

# AL-NAKBA – THE PALESTINIAN CATASTROPHE OF 1947-48

## WHAT IS AL-NAKBA?

“Nakba” means “catastrophe” in Arabic (“al-nakba” means “the catastrophe”). Throughout the Arab world, the word is used to refer to the devastation of Palestinian society and the dispossession of the Palestinian people resulting from the ethnic cleansing conducted by Zionist forces during 1947-48.

## WHAT IS NAKBA DAY?

The most important date on the Palestinian calendar, Nakba Day is observed throughout the world on May 15. It is a time to learn about the history of Palestine and Palestinians, and to remember the tragedy inflicted on the Palestinian people in 1947-48, which has yet to be rectified.

Nakba Day is also an occasion to celebrate the enduring vitality of Palestinian culture in the face of continuing hardships, and to reaffirm Palestinian aspirations for peace and self-determination.

## WHAT HAPPENED DURING AL-NAKBA?

- During the late 1930s and early 1940s, many among the European Zionist leadership in Palestine openly favored “transfer” of the indigenous Palestinian population to make way for a future Jewish state.
- As the colonial British Mandate of Palestine ended in 1947-48, clashes began and Zionist forces attacked Palestinian communities, in most cases driving out their inhabitants.
- In other cases, Zionist forces conducted massacres of civilians (e.g. 100 villagers at Deir Yassin, 200 at Tantura) in order to induce the rest of the Palestinian population to flee.
- Some 700,000 Palestinians – 2/3 of the Palestinian population – fled in panic at the Zionist attacks or were forcibly expelled by Zionist forces.
- Zionist forces depopulated over 400 Palestinian towns and villages, many of which were purposefully demolished. The newly established Israeli government confiscated refugees’ lands and properties and turned them over to Jewish immigrants.

- Israel has since refused to allow Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and has refused to pay them compensation, as required by UN Resolution 194 of 1948.

## WHAT WAS THE AFTERMATH OF AL-NAKBA?

Although before 1948 Jews had owned about 7% of the land in Palestine and made up only 1/3 of the population, following the conquest Israel was established on 78% of Palestine.

## WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AL-NAKBA?

The Nakba destroyed a thriving and diverse Palestinian society and scattered over the Palestinian people into diaspora.

The Nakba is also the source of the still-unresolved Palestinian refugee problem. Today, there are over 4 million Palestinian refugees worldwide. Many of them live in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip in poverty-stricken refugee camps.

## WHY IS NAKBA DAY ON MAY 15?

Although May 15 is the date on which Israel declared independence in 1948, Nakba Day is not a protest against Israeli independence. Israeli Independence Day, which follows the Jewish calendar, was celebrated on April 17, 2002.

## WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

Visit the following web sites:

- *Understanding the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict - The 1948 War and the Palestinian Exodus*  
[www.stanford.edu/~bgiddens/1948.htm](http://www.stanford.edu/~bgiddens/1948.htm)
- *Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center - Nakba Tribute*  
[www.alnakba.org](http://www.alnakba.org)
- *Palestine-Net - Destroyed Villages (1948)*  
[www.palestine-net.com/geography/cleansed](http://www.palestine-net.com/geography/cleansed)
- *Deir Yassin Remembered*  
[www.deiryassin.org](http://www.deiryassin.org)

(See reverse for testimonies from Al-Nakba.)

**COALITION FOR JUSTICE IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE**  
**([www.stanford.edu/group/cjip](http://www.stanford.edu/group/cjip))**

# TESTIMONIES FROM AL-NAKBA

## “SOLDIERS ORDERED US TO LEAVE”

Abu Salim Khawalid describes his expulsion from al-Ghanami village in northern Israel:

“It was April when the Israeli army entered our village. The soldiers came in the middle of the night. Dread overtook us. We were not prepared and we had not expected this. The soldiers ordered us to leave the village that very night and threatened that if we didn’t leave, they would do to us what was done to the inhabitants of Al-Husseinya village. We knew that the Jews had slaughtered dozens of inhabitants of that village like sheep. We were absolutely panic-stricken and did not argue with them. Our goal was to get out of there as fast as possible and reach a safe place. On the way to the unknown we all wept. Men, women, and children were all choking on silent tears. . . . We headed from the village in the direction of the northern Golan Heights, and after a walk of several hours we came to an area with several villages. We numbered from 800 to 1,000 souls. . . .”

Source: David McDowall, *The Palestinians*, Minority Rights Group, July 1998.

## “THEY SHOT MY MOTHER TOO”

Between 9 and 11 April 1948, over 100 Arab townspeople were massacred by Jewish paramilitaries in Deir Yassin near Jerusalem in the British Mandate of Palestine. The incident was pivotal in modern Middle East history, becoming in one Israeli historian’s words, “a landmark in the chronicles of the Israel-Arab conflict and a symbol of the horrors of war.” It greatly stimulated Palestinian Arab refugee flight. . . .

Fahimi Zeidan, then a 12-year-old girl, remembered hiding with her own and another family when the house door was blasted open. The guerrillas took them outside. An already wounded man was shot, she said, and:

“When one of his daughters screamed, they shot her too. They then called my brother Mahmoud and shot him in our presence, and when my mother screamed and bent over my brother (she was carrying my little sister Khadra who was still being breast fed) they shot my mother too.”

The children and others were put against the wall and fired upon. She and some other children were wounded, but survived. . . .

Trucks were loaded with villagers between 2:00 PM and 4:00 PM for their removal to Arab East Jerusalem, but not before additional humiliation. Fahimi Zeidan remembered that they “put us in trucks and drove us around the Jewish quarters, all the while cursing us.” The prisoners were paraded openly to raise city morale.

Source: Matthew Hogan, “The 1948 Massacre at Deir Yassin Revisited,” *Historian*, Winter 2001.

## “GO! THE JEWS ARE COMING”

“In April 1948, following the massacre at Deir Yassin, the feelings of fear and anxiety, which used to be vague and distant, began to appear more imminent and more real. At night, some of the men would go to the edge of the village [Ein Kerem, now part of Israeli West Jerusalem] and do guard duty. One night, everyone was awakened to the sound of one of these men who went through the village screaming: “Go! The Jews are coming.” I can still recall the voice and the ensuing chaos. Within a short period of time, the entire village was marching out, carrying bare essentials, some bedding on a mule, some clothing, and some food. We spent the night in the fields a few kilometers out.”

“Overhead we could see streaming lights and we could hear whizzing bullets and explosions. From a distance, we could see other villages pack up and leave in the same chaotic and hurried manner. The next day, we resumed our trek in the direction of a village called Ras Abu ‘Ammar. On the way, we could see some dead bodies and some scattered limbs where explosions had occurred and tore

up human bodies that were left lying there. We spent a month in this village and then, when the Jews came again, we resumed our walk in the direction of Bethlehem. . . . Our exile from our homes was supposed to be for a short duration. People thought that they would be going back to their homes and land in a matter of weeks. . . .”

Source: Dr. Fouad Moughrabi, “Reflections of a Native Son: A Jerusalem Memoir,” *Jusoor - The Arab-American Journal of Cultural Exchange*, 1999.

## “PEOPLE BEING HERDED LIKE CATTLE”

“I cannot forget three horror-filled days in July of 1948. The pain sears my memory, and I cannot rid myself of it no matter how hard I try. . . .”

“First, Israeli soldiers forced thousands of Palestinians from their homes near the Mediterranean coast, even though some families had lived in the same houses for centuries. (My family had been in the town of Lydda in Palestine at least 1,600 years.) Then, without water, we stumbled into the hills and continued for three deadly days. The Jewish soldiers followed, occasionally shooting over our heads to scare us and keep us moving. Terror filled my 11-year-old mind as I wondered what would happen. I remembered overhearing my father and his friends express alarm about recent massacres by Jewish terrorists. Would they kill us, too? . . .”

“The horror began when Zionist soldiers deceived us into leaving our homes, then would not let us go back, driving us through a small gate just outside Lydda. I remember the scene well: thousands of frightened people being herded like cattle through the narrow opening by armed soldiers firing overhead. . . .”

“Outside the gate the soldiers stopped us and ordered everyone to throw all valuables onto a blanket. One young man and his wife of six weeks, friends of our family, stood near me. He refused to give up his money. Almost casually, the soldier pulled up his rifle and shot the man. He fell, bleeding and dying while his bride screamed and cried. . . . That night I cried, too, as I tried to sleep alongside thousands on the ground. Would I ever see my home again? . . .”

“We trudged nearly twenty miles up rocky hills, then down into deep valleys, then up again, gradually higher and higher. Finally [we were taken] in trucks to Ramallah, ten miles north of Jerusalem. I lived in a refugee tent camp for the next 3½ years. We later learned that two Jewish families had taken over our family home in Lydda.”

Source: Father Audeh Rantisi, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: The Story of a Palestinian Christian* (1990).

## “MY BROTHER-IN-LAW HELPED DESTROY THE VILLAGE”

“I am writing through tears. I wept when I saw the photo of the ruined village of al-Sanbariyya because it was my former brother-in-law who helped destroy the village and the lives of those who lived there. . . . I will never forget how he laughed as he described the frightened villagers fleeing their homes as they left their shoes by the door and their pots on the stove. Later, in an internet search, I found out that the village . . . had been home to 130 families. His story bothered me, but I was young and caught up in the story of Israel.”

“As a Jew who was raised to believe in justice for all peoples, I believe that it is my obligation to speak out about Israel and to try in whatever way possible to bring about a better life in Palestine for the people who belong there – the people who were so cruelly evicted from their lands.”

Source: Anonymous letter submitted to the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah.