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Struggling for justice and freedom

By Imraan Buccus

Today, even while we celebrate the reconciliatory efforts between Hamas and the PLO in Palestine, the levels of oppression and brutalisation of Palestinians continues. Who can forget the attack on Gaza a few years ago? The area remains devastated and is often in darkness because Israel shuts them off.

On May 15th, Palestinians will be observing over 6 decades of occupation, dispossession and oppression – referred to as the Nakba or catastrophe – the day of forced removals in Palestine. Many in the world still remember the Nakba. Ali Hamoudi was eight years old in 1948 and he painfully recalls the day. “I remember I had to hide with my family in a cave near my house for nine days. There were seven of us in the cave, and there was not much room to move around. We could hear the Israelis passing by, but they could not see us because the cave is well hidden.”

There was large-scale intimidation and siege, setting fires to Palestinian homes, planting mines, destroying more than 500 villages, and exercising other terrorist activities. In the end, nearly 800,000 Palestinians were forced out of their homes and into refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere. These refugees haven't returned home.

Most Palestinians have a personal narrative of loss - a relative killed, or a branch of the family that fled north while the others fled east, never to be reunited, or homes, offices, orchards and other property seized. That cogent and eloquent defender of the Palestinians, the late intellectual, Edward Said also recalled how in 1948 his entire family was turned into a scattering of refugees. ‘None of the older members of my family ever recovered from the trauma,’ he wrote in one of his famous works, *The Politics of Dispossession*

And ten years ago Said commented on the “Israel at 50” celebrations: “I still find myself astonished at the lengths to which official Israel and its supporters will go to

suppress the fact that a half century has gone by without Israeli restitution, recognition or acknowledgment of Palestinian human rights . . . the Palestinian Nakba is characterized as a semi-fictional event . . . caused by no one in particular.”

Here in South Africa we know and can understand, perhaps more than others, the plight of the Palestinians. While Israel will be celebrating 63 years this year, Palestinians have nothing to celebrate. Just as pass laws restricted the movement of black South Africans, the movement of Palestinians, especially in the West Bank, continues to be restricted by check points, road blocks and a concrete wall. The apartheid wall means that a journey of 20 minutes takes 7 hours. It cuts farmers from their land, children from their schools, mothers from medical services for their babies, and grand parents from their grand children – even apartheid South Africa’s Bantustans were not surrounded by gates. In a United Nations report some years ago, Professor John Dugard said Israel was unwilling to learn from South Africa and observed that the human rights situation in the occupied territories continues to deteriorate. Significantly, Dugard made shocking parallels between the situation in the Palestine and South Africa saying that the ‘large-scale destruction of Palestinian homes, leveling of agricultural lands, military incursions and targeted assassinations of Palestinians far exceed any similar practices in apartheid South Africa.’

And a South African parliamentarian recently related these similarities between Israel today and apartheid South Africa. Addressing parliament she said, “Madam Speaker every time I relate to my own children how it felt to live in apartheid conditions, detention without trial, State of Emergency. How we would be woken up at night as kids when police searched our homes. How, as students, we used to throw stones at the police who were shooting at us - like in Palestine today. The response I get from my children is "Mom, why did you allow them"? This they say without understanding how mighty the army was. I am sure children in Palestine wish to be in a situation where the present conditions they live under could be history.”

Just as the world remembered us in our dark days, so too will we remember the oppressed peoples of the world. Especially on a day like the Nakba or Catastrophe, when 800 000 Palestinians were forcefully removed from their homes. Their tears are surely our tears.

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