

Witness in Palestine Deir Yassin Continues

Monday, April 9, 2007

Fifty-nine years ago today, the militant Zionist Irgun and Stern Gang systematically murdered more than 100 men, women, and children in Deir Yassin. The Palestinian village lay outside the area that the UN had recommended be included in a future Jewish state, and the massacre occurred several weeks before the end of the British Mandate, but it was part of a carefully planned and orchestrated process that would provoke the flight of 70% of the Palestinian population to make way for a majority Jewish state.



Deir Yassin was just one of more than 450 Palestinian villages depopulated and destroyed by Jewish forces in 1948 (or shortly before and after). I recently visited the ruins of a Palestinian village called Kafrayn in present-day Israel on a tour with *Zochrot*, a group of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel that works to educate people about the Nakba.⁶⁷

Our group met in the home of Adnan, a refugee from another village called Lajjun, who now lives in the town of Um Al-Fahim in Israel. A well-dressed man in his late sixties, Adnan welcomed us into his living room when we asked to hear his story. His grown son brought around fresh strawberries and fancy chocolates before sitting down to translate as his father began to speak:

Adnan holds a map of his village Lajjun, from which he and his family were violently expelled in 1948. Although they are citizens of Israel, Adnan and his family have never been allowed to return.

⁶⁷ Zochrot: www.zochrot.org/en

I remember Lajjun as if in a dream. I was only seven years old when the men with guns came, but I still remember certain things so clearly. I remember my school, and the name of my teacher. I remember we had a community center for visitors, and the village was very excited because an English ambassador was planning a visit. We worked for weeks renovating the big gardens in anticipation. I remember our village had a strong spring and a sophisticated water system. Israel has succeeded in convincing the world that Palestinians were primitive and uneducated until the Zionists arrived, but that is propaganda. We even had developed agricultural tools like trucks to turn corn. We were well-educated and we had good relations with our Jewish neighbors living in a kibbutz a few miles away.

Then the soldiers came. I remember them shooting from atop a mountain, bullets flying over my head as we ran. We fled to a town called Taybi, taking nothing with us—we had no time, and we assumed we would be back when the war was over. In Taybi we had to borrow woolen tents to live in. Eventually we found our way to Um Al-Fahim with thousands of other refugees, and we've been here ever since. Our village had 44,000 dunums [more than 10,000 acres] of agricultural land and they took every last one of them. We are citizens of Israel, but never allowed to return to our land and our homes nearby. We are refugees in our own state.

Between 1948 and 1966, Palestinians in Israel lived the way Palestinians now live in the West Bank and Gaza. We were prisoners in our homes in Um Al-Fahim, under frequent curfew and controlled by checkpoints. Although certain restrictions have been lifted, as non-Jews we are still generally restricted from more than 93% of the land in Israel, owned by the state or the Jewish National Fund. That includes my land, my village. They've surrounded it with a fence and won't even let us go pray in the mosque, one of the only structures still standing. The mosque belongs to the nearest kibbutz now, so Jewish kibbutzniks can visit it when they please.

How can Israel call itself a democracy when I cannot go to my land simply because I am a different ethnicity from my Jewish neighbors? What kind of a democracy is this where political parties are not allowed to challenge the Zionist exclusivist framework,⁶⁸ but they *can* challenge the rights of the indigenous population to stay here? Israel's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Strategic Threats Avigdor Lieberman, who immigrated from Moldova in the seventies, is talking about kicking out the Palestinian citizens of Israel, we who've been here for hundreds if not thousands of years! The Jewish people know catastrophe and suffering. They work for justice in their own lives... why not in all of our lives?

About one-third of all Palestinians with Israeli citizenship are **internal refugees** from 1948 like Adnan and his family.⁶⁹ They live as second-class citizens, receiving fewer services than their Jewish counterparts. Israel spends an average of 4,935 shekels (US\$1,372) for each Jewish student per year, compared to 862 (US\$240) per Arab one.⁷⁰ In the words

⁶⁸ For details on official exclusion of non-Zionist political parties in Israel, see Appendix IV.

⁶⁹ *Al-Awda* FAQs on Refugees. www.al-awda.org/faq-refugees.html

⁷⁰ According to the *Guardian Unlimited*, "In the 2002 budget, Israel's housing ministry spent about £14 [\$27] per person in Arab communities compared with up to £1,500 [\$2,950] per person in Jewish ones." During the same year, the Israeli health ministry used less than 1% of its budget towards developing healthcare facilities in Arab communities; "Worlds Apart," *Guardian Unlimited* (February 6, 2006).



Driving around with Nakba survivors trying to find villages that no longer exist

Left: Um Al-Fahim town in present-day Israel is home to 48,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel, most of whom are internal refugees denied equal services to Jews or the right to return to their homes.

of the Israeli parliamentarian Jamal Zahalka, “Israel is a democratic state for its Jewish citizens, and a Jewish state for its Arab citizens.”⁷¹

Several elderly Um Al-Fahim residents accompanied us on our tour to Kafrayn. It was a strange thing, driving around in a bus looking for a village that no longer exists. Before we’d reached Kafrayn, one elderly Palestinian named Muneeb jumped up and began motioning



outside the window: “That’s it! That’s my village!” I turned to see a large hill covered with trees. Like so many others, Muneeb’s village (near Kafrayn) had been emptied of Palestinians and then planted over with fast-growing Jerusalem pines by Zionists who would later brag about “making the desert bloom.”

Muneeb pointed excitedly towards one part of the hill: “That’s where I used to walk to school! And that’s where we’d go to fetch water! And that—that’s where my house was...”

Suddenly Muneeb’s voice cracked and he looked down, embarrassed. “I shouldn’t have come here today,” he confessed after

A Palestinian Nakba survivor visits the land from which he was violently expelled.

⁷¹ Dina Awad, “An Inside Job: Arab Israeli parliamentarian calls Israel’s bluff,” *NOW* (March 15, 2007).



Signs read “Welcome to Military Base 105” and “Danger: Firing Area – Entrance Forbidden!” near the ruins of Kafrayn village. There are no soldiers in sight, but villagers are forbidden from returning.

he had regained his composure. “It’s too emotional. You were here thousands of years ago and you miss your land,” he spoke to the Jews in our group, “I was here 50 years ago and I miss my land.”

What most struck me about our drive was how bare everything was. Nobody was living in Muneeb or Adnan’s villages, or anywhere near them. Their villages had been turned into forests, military bases, and pastures, controlled by kibbutzim sometimes many miles away. One Israeli on the tour explained to me that Israel typically develops large land-intensive projects to maintain control over empty areas where it doesn’t want Palestinians to settle. When we arrived in Kafrayn, we found several empty fenced-off areas. One was labeled “Welcome to Military Base 105.” Another posting said “Danger: Firing Area—Entrance Forbidden!” A third sign read “Cattle-Grazing Land.”



The former site of Kafrayn village is fenced off and designated as military and grazing grounds. Most Palestinian refugees’ land remains empty but is controlled by kibbutzim or the Jewish National Fund for exclusively Jewish use.

“So they let cows live here but not Palestinians?” I asked my new friend.

“Cows don’t have nationalist aspirations,” he smiled. “Besides, do you even see any cows around here?” He was right—there were no cows in sight, or soldiers for that matter.



More than 100 Israelis and internationals accompany Palestinian refugees to Kafrayn village, razed and destroyed in 1948.

One common misconception about the Palestinian refugees' right of return is that its implementation would create a new refugee crisis by displacing most Israelis. In fact, according to Dr. Salman Abu Sitta, a former member of the Palestine National Council and researcher on refugee affairs, "78% of [Jewish Israelis] live in 14% of Israel. The remaining 22% ... live in 86% of Israel's area, [on] Palestinian land. Most of them live in a dozen or so Palestinian towns. A tiny minority lives in Kibbutz [*sic*]... Thus, only 200,000 Jews exploit 17,325 sq km (6,700 sq miles), which is the home and heritage of 5,248,180 refugees, crammed in camps and denied the right to return home." In other words, the vast majority of Palestinian refugees could return to their land without displacing more than about 3.5% of Jewish Israelis.⁷²



The issue is not about space; it's about demographics. Allowing Palestinian refugees to return would change the ethnic character of Israel. Rather than being the state of the Jews, it might have to become the state

A girl walks with her father through the ruins of the Palestinian village from which her grandparents were violently expelled. She, like all non-Jews in Israel, continues to live as a second-class citizen in the Jewish state.

⁷² Data collected from Dr. Abu Sitta's highly recommended Nakba Map, available at al-awdocal.org/shop.html

of the people who live in it, some of whom are Jews, some of whom aren't. But until that happens, the most people like Muneeb and Adnan can look forward to is an occasional tour with Jewish fringe activists every few decades. Some of the Kafrayn expulsion survivors who accompanied our tour had not been back since 1948—almost 60 years. They wandered around, as if in a dream, pointing out where the old cemetery and school used to be. One survivor, Abu Ghasi, recalled his story for the group:

We had all heard about the Deir Yassin massacre a few days before, so when the Zionist forces arrived and began shooting, we all ran. Those of us who survived took shelter in a nearby village, and soon we heard the blasts that we knew were our homes being exploded. After the Jewish forces had moved on, we returned to find our village completely obliterated. It was clear we had no alternative but to move elsewhere, and eventually we settled in Um Al-Fahim.



Abu Ghasi points out where the cemetery used to be.



The place where the schoolhouse used to stand

An old woman from the nearest kibbutz spoke with the survivors and all agreed that their communities had gotten along well before the expulsion. They reminisced about a school bus driver they had shared, and the woman confirmed their story about the Zionist forces razing and bombing Kafrayn. The tour ended with a communal lunch between survivors, kibbutzniks, and the rest of the group next to Kafrayn's old springhouse and main water source.

Somebody had painted "Death to Arabs" in Hebrew on the springhouse, but we didn't let that keep us from enjoying the spring's natural beauty as several people got up to speak. One Jewish woman who had immigrated from Canada to Israel 27 years ago said it took her 2 decades to really understand the truth about Israel's past and present. One man asked an old kibbutznik if he thought his Palestinian former neighbors should be allowed to return, but the kibbutznik was unwilling to give a straight answer, saying it was complicated. The questioner responded with frustration, saying, "We are here on 100,000 dunums [almost 25,000 acres] of empty land. We have in Israel many internal refugees from this land that lies empty. Why not give families just one of their thousands of dunums to let them come back to their homes?"



Hebrew graffiti on the Kafrayn springhouse reads "Death to Arabs."

A Kafrayn survivor addressed the kibbutznik as well: "Look, we all want peace. It's very easy to say, but peace requires making an effort. I've lost 60 years on my land. How can you expect me to live in peace with the Jews if they refuse to give me back my land and my rights?" Another refugee echoed his sentiments: "Peace does not look like one type of person enjoying land and others forbidden. If you want peace, let's share everything. Let's live together."



The grandchildren of refugees who fled Kafrayn in 1948 visit their village for the first time.

