Symbols of Nakba, Visions of Return

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For peoples engaged in struggle, the potency of symbolism is undeniable. In the Palestinian case, the symbols of struggle cover the world throughout which we have been dispersed, and exhibit the depth of a century-old quest for freedom. Among the most potent of these symbols is the kufiyyeh, a headdress associated with 1936-1939 worker and peasant uprising against British occupation and Zionist colonization. Many images are also symbols, like the iconic photographs of the expulsions of 1948 and the first tents of the refugee camps, and those of martyrs and freedom fighters. There are also the keys. Refugees carried these keys to the homes lodged in their memories to which they were sure they would return; logos of the leading militant factions; a caricature character with the spiky hair of a hedgehog witnessing the bitter ironies of loss and victory; the map of a homeland resembling a sharp shard of glass carved out by European powers and gifted to the world’s most famous Diaspora, only to create today’s largest and longest standing refugee population; and a flag designed as part of a British colonial campaign against its rival Ottoman empire, later to become a banned symbol of resistance raised in acts of defiance by protesting youth throughout the 1980s.

Today a certain disconnect, a rupture, has emerged constituting a discomforting space between the symbol and what it symbolizes. The locks into which refugees’ keys fit are now buried—together with the doors and the houses they guarded—under bustling cities and Jewish National Fund parks and picnic areas. The weapons adorning some of the leading factions’ logos are today used to police the mothers and cousins of their bearers. The Palestinian flag now adorns the mahogany desks and buildings of an Authority seeking to talk its way to whatever scraps of land and sovereignty the colonial power will allow to fall from the negotiating table. The map of Palestine bears the name of the colonizer’s regime on most maps produced today, and a more accurate map of the “State of Palestine,” if such a scrap is to somehow fall from the table, looks more like ghettoes in the form of a splatter of blood than a bandage to a century of wounds. How long will it be before settlers produce Handhala T-shirts in the Jews-only settler-colonies to sell to Palestinian refugees in neighboring countries and Westerners seeking to replace their tattered Che Guevara paraphernalia with something fresh?

For Palestinians, as for others who have fought and continue to resist to assert their humanity, some of the most important symbols are dates. For Palestine, the dates associated with massacres, battles, prisoner swaps, the passing of U.N. resolutions, the outbreak of uprisings and wars and military assaults combine to form what is nothing short of a “Palestinian calendar.”

The defining date on this calendar is May 15, and as with other symbols it is characterized by a rupture. The date is meant to mark the establishment of the colonizer’s state, an establishment which actually took place on May 14, 1948. When the clock struck twelve that night, the British occupation of Palestine officially ended, the first day of Zionism’s victory had begun. The systematic population transfer of Palestinians from Palestine by political and military means, symbolized by May 15 -the Nakba- actually began in December of 1947. Half of the Palestinians displaced in 1948 had already left their homes. This process has not stopped in the sixty-four years that have since passed.

May 15 now marks the end and the beginning of the year on the Palestinian calendar. When the sun rose and set on that date, we stopped speaking of sixty-three years of the denial of our return, the theft of our country, our separation into camps, Banks, Strips, ID card colors and the Palestinian rainbow of travel documents; we started to speak of sixty-four.

In this double feature issue of al-Majdal, we look at both the ongoing nature of the Nakba, and share some preliminary visions for the dawn of a new day in Palestine. In their commentaries, Rich Wiles and Nidal Azza discuss the creative ways in which Palestinians have resisted the ongoing Nakba. Noura Erakat and Rania Madi relate the achievement of an unprecedentedly coordinated effort by Palestinian human rights organizations in provoking the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination’s recognition, and condemnation, of Israeli apartheid on both sides of the green line.

In the first feature of this issue the focus is on the crime of population transfer; a central aspect of the ongoing nature of the Nakba. Joseph Schechla offers an overview of population transfer, focusing on the development of international law criminalizing this practice since the 1930s, and Israel’s place as one of the leading state perpetrators of this crime. The following articles offer case studies of Israel’s policies and practices of population transfer. Salman Abu Sitta examines Israeli authorities’ use of Ottoman law, specifically of the mewat classification of land, as cover for stripping Palestinian Bedouin of their property in the Naqab; while Mercedes Melon describes the ways in which Israeli policies and practices in the occupied Jordan Valley have continued the forced transfer of Palestinians from, or within, that area. Amjad Alqasis ends the section with an analysis of the ways in which Zionism and, specifically, the legal use of the concept of Jewish nationality have constituted root causes of the population transfer of Palestinians.

In the second section we publish the discussion documents from the February 2012 joint BADIL-Zochrot study visit to Cape Town. One of the goals of the visit was for participants to see, hear and learn about population transfer under the South African Apartheid regime, how the struggle for return was waged, and how displaced South Africans experienced return as part of liberation after the fall of political Apartheid in 1994. In the last days of the visit, the participants from Badil and Zochrot discussed the ways in which their experiences could be incorporated into a vision of Palestinian refugee and IDP return. Out of these discussions emerged three documents: one on working towards return, another on reparations and a third on visions for a new state. The purpose of these documents is to stimulate broader discussion on visions and practicalities of return in the Palestinian case.

This issue of al-Majdal marks the sixty-fourth year of the Nakba: “Year 64” on the Palestinian calendar. As with the passage of the day, time ticks forward; the number on demonstration placards and Nakba commemoration posters gets bigger. But as with the night, the longer it has been since the descent of darkness, the closer we are to the break of dawn.

Dear Palestine, Happy New Year.