



BRILL

Gaza and the Chronology of Perpetual Return

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Abstract

It doesn't take much effort for a Palestinian to fall back on a narrative of recurring catastrophe, *nakba*, with Gaza the latest and most horrific in a long series of catastrophes. With Israel forbidding international media to enter Gaza, this newest catastrophe is mediated to us by the Gazans themselves. They try to communicate to us their suffering, but also other ways in which they want us to see them. How do we make sense of songs, smiles and small moments of hope in the middle of so much death and destruction? In their explicit defiance to being reduced to numbers, victims and refugees, Palestinians in Gaza challenge us who remain at a distance to think differently about the chronology of being Palestinian and re-inscribe it with a series of returns rather than catastrophes.

Keywords

collective memory – history writing – *nakba* – resistance – right of return

For a Palestinian watching from afar as one horror after the other unfolds in Gaza, there is an ironic duality of feeling. Gaza is probably the furthest place on earth—besieged, inaccessible and forbidden. Simultaneously, it has never felt closer. There is a level of death and destruction never before experienced by Palestinians. This should shake any human being to the core. Yet even when this suffering remains unfathomable from a distance, there is also something deeply personal about Gaza for every Palestinian because Israel's war taps into individual and collective memories spanning several generations—memories of bombardments, massacres, maiming, lootings and dispossession.

There is no dearth of catastrophes in a Palestinian timeline, both individual and collective. For us watching from afar, this current catastrophe comes to us in a mediated form. However, it is significant that it is mediated to us by Gazans themselves. They try to communicate to us not only what they are suffering but also how they want us to see them. Amid catastrophe, the insistence on place and the imperative of return is most striking. In their explicit defiance of being reduced to numbers, victims and refugees, they challenge us who remain at a distance to think differently about the chronology of being Palestinian. It is both an individual and collective challenge—what if one were to pull the timeline of catastrophe apart and put it together again with a chronology of return?

Initially, I must admit it was an image of catastrophe that hit home more than all others. It was the sight of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians—men and women, children and elderly—fleeing south on foot, carts and bicycles, carrying few of their possessions, sometimes with their hands up in the air or waving white flags. Hundreds of thousands in northern Gaza refused to leave their homes at the start of Israel's war before being finally forced to flee in fear for their lives and the lives of their children. We have seen this happen repeatedly since then as the inhabitants of Gaza are being forced to move around like dispensable obstacles standing in the way of something seemingly greater and more meaningful than life itself. We had all seen similar images of Palestinians in these circumstances before, but only in black and white from 1948.

It is no wonder that dispossession felt most personal. Growing up during the Lebanese Civil War spared me what Palestinians in Gaza are experiencing today. Nonetheless, one aspect, dispossession, has shaped my life as it has the lives of millions of Palestinians through successive generations, including the majority of those living in Gaza. It twice set my father's family on an unknown path, first in 1948 and then in 1967. I had heard of experiences of exile and flight as they were told by my father, grandparents, uncles and aunts. We retell those stories as our own, those who did not experience them—the cow that crossed the river Jordan with the family in 1967; the bicycle my father left behind because he was sure he would return; sleeping in fields under the open sky; and little 'Hajar' born shortly after the *nakba* and named so because of the name's connection to *hujra*, exodus. She would have been my aunt had she survived the trials of refugeehood. I often imagined what it was like, how they felt as they left their homes, not knowing what the future held. Observing the expressions on the faces of those fleeing at the start of Israel's genocidal war, their despondent gait, the few things they carried from their previously abundant lives, the slow pace as they walked towards the unknown ... it felt hauntingly familiar.

Two months after those scenes emerged from Gaza, I was sitting with my aunt, Umm Imad, in their home just outside al-Baq'a, the largest refugee camp in Jordan. She doesn't remember the *nakba*, but she is the family's only surviving member who was born in mandate Palestine, among the Bedouins of Bassat al-Faliq. She does remember the second dispossession in 1967. I hadn't seen her in over a year, and Gaza was there in all its presence, even when our conversations went to other places. Suddenly, she turned to me with an expression I hadn't seen before on her face and asked me: 'did you see?' about the masses fleeing and sleeping in the open air and in makeshift tents. 'It's just like 1967'.

It doesn't take much effort for a Palestinian to fall back on that narrative of recurring catastrophe, *nakba*, with Gaza the latest and most horrific in a long series of catastrophes: 1917, 1948, 1967 and 2023. Then there are the countless more minor catastrophes that punctuate Palestinian history: 1950 (Majdal, Bir al-Saba'), 1953 (Umm al-Faraj) and 1956 (Kafr Qasim), and all the population expulsions referred euphemistically to as 'transfers' in Israeli terminology. Together, they paint a larger picture of the structural and systematic erosion of any potential Palestinian state and of increased Israeli control over the land between the river and the sea, preferably without Palestinians. Lucky is the Palestinian who has been dispossessed only once.

Perpetual catastrophe certainly rings true emotionally and meshes well with our current culture of commemoration and even with the historical periodization we use as scholars. Beshara Doumani and Alex Winder note the problematics of a 'structure of commemorative politics solely constructed around events of massive destruction, loss, and colonial machinations' and its role in imprinting colonial narratives onto Palestinian ones (2018: 8). The trouble with this chronology of recurring catastrophe, individual and collective, is that it privileges a settler narrative of success and failure, as Rana Barakat describes it, rather than foregrounding indigenous sovereignty through Palestinian resistance and endurance (2017: 361). Simply put, it is a history not defined by our acts as Palestinians but by what is done to us.

The Palestinians in Gaza keep courageously inviting us to defy this. For in the middle of all this death and destruction, there is a stubborn insistence on life. One of the lines incessantly heard on the lips of children, men and women is from a poem by the most beloved of Palestinian poets, Mahmoud Darwish: 'for we love life, if we find a way to it'. You see this insistence on loving life in what Palestinians in Gaza insist on sharing with us. You see it in men looking after children labeled as 'WCNSF' (Wounded Child No Surviving Family) as if they were their own. You see it in nurses going beyond the call of duty and entertaining displaced children taking refuge in hospitals. You see it in people under siege and bombardment continuing to look after stray animals. You see

it in songs about belonging sung in besieged hospitals and between refugee tents. You see it in the attempts to reconstruct a community in displacement, even when that community is decimated and fragmented. You see it daily, in so many places and in so many forms, and this insistence on loving life in the face of the coldly mechanized and AI-ed brutality of death never ceases to amaze.

Separately, these moments can be drowned by the sense of despair in Gaza. Together, they constitute a challenge to think about Palestinian life beyond catastrophe. For this love of life is also the perpetual return to a place and a rejection of dispossession. The graffiti 'we will not leave' decorates destroyed homes in Gaza. When a ceasefire was declared in November, people immediately moved north again despite the dangers, knowing that their homes had been bombed and most of their neighbors had either been killed or displaced. The month of Ramadan was marked with decorated tents, *iftar* in the rubble, and *tarawih* and prayer in front of destroyed mosques. More recently, a local project in northern Gaza called 'Thamra' is nurturing a Palestinian connection to the land through urban farming and literally making the rubble bloom. Among the ruins, 'place' is more than the sum total of erect stones. It becomes instead an insistence on belonging. For a Palestinian, life, indeed existence, and insisting on being from a place are inextricably bound together.

How can this defiance in Gaza become a challenge to think differently about the chronology of being Palestinian? What if, instead of a chronology of catastrophe, one was to re-inscribe personal and family history with a chronology of return? Perhaps talk of Israel's war on Gaza prodded my aunt's memory. Maybe it was I who started asking new questions. For in our conversations, new memories emerged, ones of perpetual, if also truncated, returns. Yes, my family fled in 1948 in panic, as many did, and many took the keys to their homes with them in anticipation of return. I have always silently wondered why we don't have such a key and somehow imagined a house without a door until my aunt told me. My family literally carried their home on their back. Under the insistence of my great-grandmother, they wrapped up their entire home and took it with them. They lived in a Bedouin tent, *bayt sha'r*, before their exile, and they were planning on returning to Bassat al-Faliq, to establish their home again where it belongs.

In 1967, my family fled again, this time from Khirbat Sir in the West Bank to the Jordan Valley. My grandfather was imprisoned in Jordan, accused of carrying out a cross-border attack on an Israeli patrol. The family feared Israeli retribution might be directed at his eldest son, my father, Khaled Ayed, who was seventeen at the time. As the women and children of the family gathered some belongings in preparation for another displacement, my father was nowhere to be found. He had taken advantage of the chaos and went roaming in Israel,

visiting the Palestine he had heard about but had never seen. He never went back to Israel or the occupied territories after 1967, and we often talked about someday visiting together. He never told me before he passed away that he had already returned in his own way.

My grandfather, Mahmoud, had already returned once to Palestine. During the anti-colonial Arab Revolt in Palestine (1936–1939), he carried arms against the British. The accommodation the British had reached with Hitler in the Munich Agreement of 1938 freed their troops from fighting Nazism in Europe, and the Empire bore down instead with all its might on the predominantly peasant rebellion in Palestine and on the seventeen-year-old who was to become my grandfather. He fled to Egypt, where he met and married my grandmother. Bedouins seemingly affirmed the Zionist settler narrative of the early 20th century of a Palestine inhabited by wandering nomads who might as well settle somewhere else. However, this Bedouin couldn't stay away from his 'beloved Palestine', as he later told me. Once it was safe to return, the young couple made their way to Bassat al-Faliq.

Return has always been the silent shadow of catastrophe. Thousands of Palestinians crossed daily into the new state of Israel in the years following 1948. Referred to by the newly minted Israeli state as 'infiltrators', many were attempting to return to their lands, families and homes (Benvenisti 2000: 217–220). Return also has its heroes, both mythical and real. In his semiautobiographical *Saraya, the Ogre's Daughter*, Emile Habibi talks about the mysterious woman known only as Butterfly, who smuggled Palestinians across the border from Lebanon through Wadi Karkara in northern Israel, reuniting them with loved ones. It was believed at the time, he says, that Butterfly 'was present at every one of this state's elastic borders: in the Galilee, the Triangle, and the Negev Desert' (2006: 205).

What do Palestinians want, asks Edward Said: 'all of us speak of *awdah*, "return", but do we mean that literally, or do we mean "we must restore ourselves to ourselves?"' (1999: 33). The latter is the real point, according to Said, even when the return is real for many Palestinians, to their homes and a way of life. Perhaps restoring ourselves to ourselves consists of stubbornly defining who we are rather than letting others do things to us: count us, aid us, deny us, recognize us, etc. This is not the first time Palestinians in Gaza have distilled in their extreme conditions of existence the imperative of return. Previously, during 2018–2019, civil society in Gaza organized the 'Great March of Return', weekly demonstrations that went on for over 20 months, demanding an end to the siege and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the homes they were expelled from in 1947–1948. Today, in their darkest hour, Palestinians in Gaza document life blossoming among the rubble and an insistence on place. These

documented moments, together, outline a chronology of restorative return, an insistent return to oneself despite the horror. A chronology of hope, even?

There is no small risk in talking about hope at a time like this, in the absence of a stable place to imagine the future. In Gaza, hope can only be fleeting, crushed under the weight of a bomb. It can only be momentary, overtaken by the search for the next meal. It is also fragile, surrendering the next moment to a fit of despondence. It most certainly does not take away from the immensity of the pain, death, destruction and dehumanization, but it is still unmistakably there. Despite all its power and the billions of dollars feeding it, the astonishing machinery of death and destruction fails to suppress what it aspires most to suppress: hope. Although the future remains uncertain, and the limits of what is acceptable are increasingly and dangerously flexible, there will be a day after, one way or the other. In its insistence on the transformative power of political action, hope can constitute forward-looking politics (Bloch 1986). It can help us make sense of the fragmented moments of defiance reaching us from Gaza. It can put us again in control of who we are and how we narrate our stories as Palestinians, not as victims. If we are, as Edward Said says, ‘the victims of the victims, the refugees of the refugees’ (1999), perhaps in its forward-looking form, this hope can save us from the cycle of victimhood and from one day doing onto others what has been done and is being done onto us.

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