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La Nausee and Al-Nakba: rewriting 1948

By Chibli Mallat

I

I have rarely encountered so much internal resistance to finish a landmark work such as the one discussed in this review. This is not a function of the length of the book. True, "The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited," almost three times the size of the original work published in 1988, is a work of unique archival research. But one often regrets that good books are not longer, so captivating do they become as the argument unfolds. Nor did the difficulty in finishing it lie in the fact that it does not carry the full story. True, the author suggests that the narrative will remain incomplete so long as the archives of the Arab capitals are not open, but it is unlikely that they will yield much to undermine the central argument, though archives elsewhere would offer an additional dimension to the history of 1948 Palestinian refugees. In the case of Jordan, it was carried out in Avi Shlaim's seminal work, "Collusion Across the Jordan" (Oxford 1998), and for other Arab countries in a collection of good essays edited by Eugene Rogan - "The War for Palestine," Cambridge 2001, including a chapter by Benny Morris and a formidable concluding essay by the late Edward Said. But "The Birth" is self-sufficient, and the wealth of material, together with the scrupulous attachment to their literal yield, makes it a particularly sober book. So it is not a matter of comprehensiveness. Finally, my difficulty in finishing the book is not because of the author's style. True, the turn-of-phrase is turgid, so interrupted it is by the documentation and its harsh, war-zone military prose. But the material is so rich that style weighs little against the thoroughness and wealth of information.

For me, the laborious effort in reading "The Birth" had a deeper reason, and a simple one at that: nausea. As I picked it up time and again to plod through a few pages, or a chapter, I was taken repeatedly by nausea, that special mental type of nausea where there is nothing physical to give up; a historic-like nausea in reading about the Saint Barthelemy massacre, or Nazi episodes in World War II; a nausea, though, which is not Sartre's or Camus' mal de vivre; a nausea which often comes with a report by Amnesty International of a massive human rights violation, or when television stations expose a horror without being gory about it; a nausea that continues to take you over Darfur, Iraq or Central Africa; the nausea of continuous, massive crime. "The Birth" is an occasion for nausea over 600 pages of systematic, relentless, unpunished brutality. This, I think, is why it took me so long to complete it.

The central agent in this brutality is the Jewish community of Palestine. The central victims are the Palestinians. The story recounted by Morris is simply harrowing. He describes five waves of organized violence which afflicted, over a few months, a hapless population with a view to cleansing Palestine of non-Jews - cleaning, cleansing, purifying are recurring words in the archives cited. The first wave started soon after the UN Partition resolution on Nov. 29, 1947, which divided the country in two and gave half of the land to a population which constituted hardly a third of the people living on the Mandate Territory (600,000 Jews, 1,400,000 Arabs), numerically, and owned a mere 6 percent of the land - who could accept that, and more importantly, what constituency could claim to express such acceptance? The efforts at cleansing the land were redoubled in March, with the infamous Plan D where the survival of the Jewish community was premised on expelling all Arabs in the way or left behind, and continued through the declaration of Israeli independence on May 14, 1948.

Many cleansing "plans" and "operations" followed. The third wave took place over a period of 10 days in July, with an exacerbation of the frenzy of killings, rapes and expulsions - a typical statement from one of the soldiers under Moshe Dayan's command: "I kill everyone who belongs to the enemy camp; man, woman, old person, child," p.426; from Allon to Ben Gurion: "What shall we do with the Arabs?" Ben Gurion, with a dismissive, energetic gesture: "Expel them," p. 429.) Result of the 10 days in the third wave: 100,000 Arabs in exile. The fourth wave was carried out after another lull following a pointless intervention at the UN. It took place between October and

November 1948, shortly after the Sept. 17, 1948, assassination of Count Bernadotte, who had premised the organisation's role on the return of Palestinian refugees. The result: "Together, operations Hiram and Yoav and their appendages precipitated the flight of roughly 200,000-230,000 Arabs," p.492.

While the Israelis adopted "by consensus" a refusal to accept any return, including a policy to open fire on any villager who tried to return to his house or to harvest land, a fifth wave took place through two subsequent nonwar years, from 1948 to 1950. The fifth wave was designed to clear the borders of Arabs with a depth of 5 kilometers to 10 kilometers. Another 40,000 refugees. My own work on the Syrian-Israeli borders, and that of Morris in two other books, shows how the cleansing pattern was consolidated through the 1950s: Any attempt to return is met with death; small villages near the borders, or in demilitarized zones, are emptied from their inhabitants. At the same time, all efforts to reduce the misery of the Palestinian population was reduced diplomatically to naught. Result: some 700,000 (Morris) to 780,000 (Said) Palestinians uprooted. Another 150,000 remained, and 20 percent of these were internal refugees who were also prevented from going back to their homes.

Morris does not always express this narrative in so many words, and one would be surprised, if the book were to be put to an easy word-processing test, to see how many "buts" and "however"s it includes. Hardly a section, when a particular atrocity is broached, does not include all kinds of qualifiers. While nuances are important, persistent qualifiers against massive ethnic cleansing adds to the feeling of nausea.

Another word-processing exercise would yield more harrowing results: In addition to the killings, what emerges in months of ethnic cleansing is a persistent pattern of looting, and more disturbingly of rape. I could not keep track of the number of rapes documented in this book, but the sense of nausea is also overwhelming for their recurrence. Documentation of rape as a pattern appears as a particular addendum in the new edition of the book.

II

"The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem" has a complex history, and the debate it elicited has not abated. Up until the late 1980s, it was taken not so much as given, but as inviolable and sacred truth, that the soon-to-be-Israeli Yishuv settled on land that its Arab occupants had deserted, and had deserted because their superiors had told them to do so. The Zionist foundation myth went so far as to assert that the land in question had been signed away by King Faisal (then peripatetically looking for a crown, which he later found in Iraq) when he entered into an agreement with the Zionist leadership in 1919. With the publication of Morris' "Birth" in 1988, all that changed. He, and others who joined him, such as Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé and Tom Segev, blew a hole through Zionist historiographical defenses and gave birth to what was called the "Revisionist School" of Israeli history. They made a lot of enemies.

Why did the research by Morris constitute such a watershed? First, because it is serious: The archival work is simply staggering. Second, because it undermined a number of received notions, notions that had in fact become taboo to discuss: He pulled the rug from under the received notion that the emptying of Palestine was a simple exchange of populations - Arab Jews from other Arab countries against non-Jews from Palestine, the dating is clearly circumscribed to a phenomenon of cleansing that goes in one single direction: Palestinians. And he attacked the other central notion that Arab governments had called upon the Palestinians to leave. Morris shows that the alleged call by Arab governments for Palestinians to leave their homes was simply untrue, reinforcing the common sense of any decent person: Exile is a tragedy - no-one enters into it willingly. But mostly, Morris' book uncovered patterns of massacre, rape and looting.

Much had, of course, already be written about this, attempting to challenge the official early history of the Israeli state. But it was work produced by outsiders: Erskine Childers and Walid Khalidi, in the early 1960s, then Edward Said and Noam Chomsky in the 1970s. It wasn't kosher. Baruch Kimmerling's masterful "Zionism and Territory," published with some difficulty at the international relations' center in Berkeley in 1983, came closest to internal dissent, and is acknowledged by Morris in his preface, but the real explosion had to wait until the late 1980s.

III

The reason that Morris' "The Birth" is so important is because the entire subsequent history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict must be traced back to 1948. The moment the political problem in

Palestine is set at that date, the solution cannot avoid the refugee problem. The debate may get complicated over time, and in 1967 becomes one dominated by "occupation" and more refugees, UN Security Council Resolution 242 and other resolutions, while lately it has been dominated by Security Council Resolutions 1397 (March 12, 2002) and 1515 (Nov. 19, 2003), which establish a Palestinian state by 2005, and the International Court of Justice resolution on the separation wall on July 9. This is all important but does not efface 1948. The point is: The history of Israel, built on the death of Palestine, starts in 1948, not in 1967 or 2000. And Morris gets this right. And he deserves immense praise for having had the courage to confront the truths of 1948 head-on. But if Morris received the acknowledgment of countless historians for having had the guts to not shy away from the details of 1948, he has also heaped on himself the opprobrium of countless others for the conclusions he draws from those details.

A great many countries are born in sin, in utter, revolting violence. No case is more glaring than the whole settlement in the USA and the rest of the Americas, a genocidal process if any. But in the United States, and differently in most of Latin America, a policy of reverse discrimination prevails, including the creation of tax havens transformed into million-dollar- revenue-generating casinos for the descendants of Indian tribes. The American-Indian argument put forward by Morris was easily picked up by Kimmerling: "Morris has abandoned his historian's mantle and donned the armor of a Jewish chauvinist who wants the Land of Israel completely cleansed from Arabs. Never has any secular public Jewish figure expressed these feelings so clearly and blatantly as Professor Morris did. And in order to be completely lucid on this point he drew an analogy between Israel and North America: 'Even the great American democracy could not have been created without the annihilation of the Indians. There are cases in which the overall, final good justifies harsh and cruel acts that are committed in the course of history.' I do not know today any American historian or social scientist that agrees that the annihilation of the indigenous population of the continent was a necessary condition for the American nation or the constitution of American democracy." There are no American Indian - "native American" - refugees in 2004.

In Israel, the original sin continues.

IV

"History," said Benedetto Croce, "is always contemporary." There are degrees in the intensity inflicted by history on current affairs, and this intensity is man-made. The Holocaust is one example, the Palestinian 1948 Exodus another.

The vectors of memory take many shapes, some expressed in sheer violence - the self-immolation of scores of Palestinians mostly from the refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza is the crudest and most recent. But memory is the business of historians, and history, as the search of what happened - *wie eigentlich gewesen*, in the celebrated aphorism of the 19th century German historian Ranke - is search for truth. No truth, no history. Once the truth is laid out, as scientifically and accurately as possible, others take up the mantle as political leaders or lawyers in compensation mega-lawsuits. For events like the Holocaust and the 1948 Palestinian Exodus, the decisive word is the historians.'

This is why the works of Morris, as the leading archival historian of what happened in 1948, are central. The rest, that is the consequences, political, legal or otherwise, is not his business. This should help us focus on the book, rather than the author, who has mired himself in recent months in a bizarre comparison between current events and those of 1948, and appears to suggest that the only way out is to drive the rest of the Palestinians living in Palestine out of it. In an infamous Haaretz interview in January 2004, the expulsion of the massive majority of the indigenous inhabitants was vindicated crudely as the need "to break eggs in making an omelette." The sense of nausea must also obtain from the capability of a reasoning human being to go to such lengths as advocating a parallel between 1948 and the current civil war: as if by any standards today, or indeed then (as documented elsewhere in the confidence Ben Gurion had of his clear military superiority), the Jewish community was at risk of disappearance in its Palestine settlement. Ultimately, Morris' ratiocinations on the current situation are not important - this is familiar terrain: With all the war crimes uncovered, Morris insists that the struggle was one of survival. "No choice" is another harrowing sentence of Israel's persistent mythical history. No choice in 1948, in 1956, in 1967, in 1982? In each case, the Israeli leaders started a massive war. And in the latest instance, on Sept. 28, 2000, the official date for the start of the present war, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, backed by Ehud Barak, visited the Jerusalem esplanade. Protest followed, with over 200 people wounded and four killed in unarmed demonstrations over Sept. 28 and 29 . They were all

Palestinians.

With all this, and the ensuing nausea, I am prepared to give Morris-as-historian the benefit of the doubt. For once his conclusions, when scientifically sound, are offered, the judgment becomes one that belongs to all of us. His argument for expelling the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza today, in the same way they were expelled in 1948 are profoundly disappointing and degrading to him, but the book shows beyond doubt, not only the massiveness of the Yishuv-inflicted tragedy in Palestine, but the responsibility of the international community, including the Arab states, Europe and the US, in not preventing it, or, when it happened, not reversing it. By any standards, the absence of coercive outside intervention to protect a massively victimized population is the one we saw before World War II, during the uprising of the Warsaw ghetto, through to the tragedy unfolding in Darfur. With all its qualifiers, Morris' work leads to this inescapable conclusion: This belongs to a pattern of atrocities and mass crimes of a special, unique magnitude.

This requires a profoundly different view of the military intervention of the Arab states in May 1948. 1948 is not, as the dominant Israeli (and international, including Arab) view still has it, a matter of "life and death" for the Yishuv. Arab armies were simply impotent to prevent the mass flight of a people, or to reverse it. It was its moral duty to intervene, as it was any other power which could do it at the time. The fact is that the world forsook its legal and moral duty to save the Palestinians from ethnic cleansing in 1948.

Simple, serene work is needed that puts this center stage 50 years hence. Palestine is one land for two people, and it is no longer possible to write a history of Israel that does not include the one struggle that defines it over the past century, and which is bound to define it for the next. The history of the struggle defines the history of the two communities, this is a central change historiographic change in eternally imbricated populations, and it has now picked up pace in several other excellent books, by Baruch Kimmerling "The Invention and Decline of Israeliness," California 2001 and, with Joel Migdal, "The Palestinian People: A History," new edition Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003, by Ilan Pappé, "A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples," Cambridge 2004, and, on the other side - or the same one, actually and potentially, in the works of Nur Masalha, and to some extent Azmeh Beshara and Yezid Sayegh. One needs more sociology and history that insists on this common destiny, because the future of the two peoples will forever be defined in common.

V

Search for solutions to persistent problems is always complicated by all sorts of conditions. Such, in 1948, is relative to instances of resistance and killings of Jews by Palestinians, the lingering mystery of the small minority of the 100,000 Palestinians not displaced - here more work is to be done on the Christian and Druze factor, not examined closely enough by Morris - the passage of time and further displacement in 1967, and "occupation." Still, the norm is simple and universal: Refugees, irrespective of the reasons for their flight, are entitled to return to their homes. They should also be compensated, but this will depend on a number of factors, including criminal responsibility, and Morris has an interesting note about how most reports of large-scale killings remain closed in the archives. Right of return may be qualified, but it remains the point of departure of morality and law, and cannot be emptied. This is the moral and legal departing position, true for Kosovars as well as Darfur refugees, and is embodied in the case of Palestinians in "the right of return" UN General Assembly Resolution 194 in December 1948. This is still the official position of the EU, of the US (despite President George W. Bush's insinuations), and of organizations like Amnesty International.

Since "The Birth" is so contemporary, our concern is this: If such are the facts, that the displacement was systematic, took a logic toward the worse as the battles raged, and resulted in a conviction on the winning side that the return of the refugees is unacceptable, why is the Palestinian state on non-1948 territory being pursued, on the Palestinian side, as the solution? Realpolitik is easily argued: A two state solution is being pursued exactly because the winning side reckons the right of return is unacceptable. To this end, it has written away the 1948 ethnic cleansing. That is, until Morris, which makes silence - and distortion - no longer tenable.

But realpolitik can be argued in the opposite way, and a groundbreaking realpolitik argument for "one Palestine-Israel" was made in "Israel: The Alternative," an article by Tony Judt in the New York Review of Books in October 2003. Judt flows from Morris. If 1948 underlines the moment the problem became intractable, if the history of Palestine and Israel - which is the same thing - can only be seen as an integrated whole, partition is bound to leave that issue unsolved. There are solutions offered by extremists: massive expulsions, targeted assassinations, destruction of property

and walls on the one hand, and the killing of civilian Jews in the hope the rest will flee on the other. These are winning the day, but will not solve the issue either way. They will just add more monstrosities to the grim picture. One day, leaders will search for a different way forward, built more on the equality of people than on the division of land. Compromises were sought in the case of Oslo, and at Camp David. Compromise is now portrayed in America as the withdrawal from Gaza. But this is simply not sufficient, because it ignores the fact that history did not start in 1967. Jews and non-Jews living together are the only way forward, and this is something that both sides need to realize, and that Palestinian leaders must stand for, as they did up till 1974. It might take a generation, but after Kimmerling and his school of current Israeli-Palestinian sociology - of whom Morris for that crucial period of birth-through-ethnic-cleansing in 1948 is a vital source - that logic is implacable. It matters little what Morris says about his "understanding" of why massive expulsion could be repeated, for that part of the argument is just nauseating, and will remain as unfortunate idiosyncrasy of yet another historian "mugged by reality."

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