The Jewish Other and the Palestinian Identity: The *Naksa* Redefining the Meaning of the *Nakba*

*Ward Awad*

### 1 Introduction

Interviews were carried out with Palestinian men and women in the Westbank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and other regions during the summer and fall of 2018. For the present essay, I was tasked with working with the transcriptions or, in some cases, reports of interviews from the West Bank, namely Bethlehem, Jenin, Jerusalem, Nablus, Salfit, Tubas and Tulkarm. Reading through and sorting these testimonials, the most pronounced and interrelated issues were the presence of the *Nakba* as a powerful trauma within recollections of June 1967, the loss of land and the impact of both on the individual and Palestinian identity.

The reappearance of the *Nakba* within the context of June 1967 as a trauma that still determines the contours of the Palestinian identity is typically addressed in the academic scholarship. However, while scholars acknowledge the impact of the Nakba on Palestinian identity, they leave aside the detailed differences of this impact on those who experienced it directly, the Palestinian refugees, and those who heard about it, the Palestinian non-refugees. As a result, the implicitly engendering appearance of the other, which is a motif also apparent in these studies, as a constitutive element of the self-affirmation and -determination of the Palestinian identity goes unnoticed. In order to understand how this essay engages with and adds to the previous works, I will represent various approaches to the influence of the *Nakba* on the Palestinian identity; its relation to June 1967 and, finally, its implications on the other – the Jews.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2022-1965](https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2022-1965)
Ahlam Mustafa AbuKhoti dwells on definitions of trauma in “Calling the Phoenix: Integrating the Trauma of the Nakba into Palestinian Identity,” to offer new perspectives on its integration into the self as a member of the cultural collective (2018: 49). She argues that

[…] al-Nakba in collective memory became part of cultural identity through processes of recreation and integration. These processes took part in reformulating the perception of identity from individual self-unity and completeness, to a collaboration within members of the collective to preserve a traumatic past attempting to stand in the face of injustice and alienation. (AbuKhoti 2018: 60)

In this context, the Right to Return is mentioned as a reminder of the injustice done to the refugees, not to speak of its integral part of their collective identity. Lars Erslev Andersen examines in “The Crisis and Palestinian Identity,” for example, how the assertion on the Right to Return played an important role in the Palestinian postmodern identity of the Nakba generation. He points to the intricacy of this postmodern identity narrative as one that the Nakba generation is struggling to comprehend (Andersen 2016: 29).

The complex of this identity is further examined not only as pertinent for the first, but also for the second exilic generation. Victoria Mason explores in “Children of the ‘Idea of Palestine’: Negotiating Identity, Belonging and Home in the Palestinian Diaspora,” “[…] how the maintenance of Palestinian identity and attachment to the homeland has remained central to the generation that experienced al nakba […], the first generation born into exile […] and the second generation born into exile […].” She also aspires to “[…] demonstrate that the means of maintaining relationships with the homeland have shifted for each generation and that this has resulted in contrapuntal notions of identity, home and belonging” (Mason 2007: 272).

Other scholars tried to understand what living in exile – namely in a refugee camp – means socially and culturally. Adam Ramadan explores in “In the Ruins of Nahr al-Barid: Understanding the Meaning of the Camp,” for example, “[…] how Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon act as social, cultural and political refugees from marginalization in exile” (2010:50). Emphasizing the complexity of the idea of the camp, he shows “[…] how the camps draw meaning from a particular Palestinian time-space, which emphasizes displacement and transience, while at the same time becoming meaningful places in themselves” (Ramadan 2010: 50).

Finally, studies conducted in the name of understanding the essence of the influence of the Nakba on the Palestinian identity and, thus, the latter’s relationship to the Jewish other reveal further interesting insights. Adel Manna’ writes in “The Palestinian Nakba and Its Continuous Repercussions” that

the […] intellectual attempt to grasp the full-fledged meaning of the Nakba took place in the aftermath of the June 1967 Arab Naksa (setback). But even this attempt was again short-lived and overpowered by the obsession with
military and political events in the region. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that very little was written in this period about the meaning of the Palestinian catastrophe and its long run implications. (Manna’ 2013: 86)

Manna’ tries to offer meanings of the Nakba and its implications; nonetheless, Manna’ study does not, as he puts it, “[...] allow a detailed discussion of all the Nakba’s meanings and implications on the Palestinian people. What it attempts to do is to outline some of the different aspects of the Nakba, focusing on the collective dimensions” (Manna’ 2013: 86). While he left the personal dimensions aside, other scholars tried to address them.

Elias Sanbar goes beyond these collective dimensions drawn by the trauma of the Nakba in “Out of Place, Out of Time,” additionally discussing the resulting relationship to the other – the Jewish side. He examines what it means to be dislocated from one’s familiar space. Palestinians who restore historical time imply that Jews are excluded from that historical time and vice versa. He argues that from 1948 onwards, each of the two protagonists viewed its history as excluding that of the other. Beyond this, precedence in terms of presence in the land amounted to an exclusive and unshared right to be present in that land. In other words, it legitimized not only one party’s current existence but also the absence of the other. (Sanbar 2001: 91–92)

Ahmad Samih Khalidi reasserts Sanbar’s conclusion in “Why Can’t the Palestinians Recognize the Jewish State?” by maintaining that the Palestinians’ past is connected to their present and future, which means that “a ‘homeland’ cannot merely be a construct of today, with no implications for tomorrow” (2011: 80).

As far as I know, studies especially interested in the direct implications of this trauma on Palestinians’ (implicit) relationship to the other and its role in distinguishing rifts within the collective Palestinian identity have not been conducted. While we see scholars trying to define this relationship, it lacks significant aspects due to the undiscerned, nuanced division within the Palestinian identity. Markedly, they all – those who worked on the relationship to the other and those who concentrated on the Palestinian identity after the Nakba – treat the Palestinian society as a coherent one, sharing almost one fixed identity, and overlooking the fact that the Nakba caused, first and foremost, a split within the Palestinian identity.

I aim to bring to light what other scholars missed in this topic: what June 1967 adds to the prevailing perception of the Palestinian identity as a collective one, and the other as an indispensable determiner, so to speak, of this identity. The Naksa does not only reveal an essential difference between the refugees’ and non-refugees’ perception of being Palestinian, but it also opens up new and different approaches to the Jewish other. Since the Nakba is not experienced identically within Palestinian society, namely by those who experienced it directly and those who did not, it does not only affect their self-definition as Palestinians but also determines the role of the Jewish other vis-à-vis this definition. For the non-refugee Palestinian, the Jew is
unrelated to any existential self-affirmation determining self-agency, not to say that the latter enriches such an agency by enlarging the Palestinian definition. Nonetheless, for the Palestinian refugee, the other is an indispensable part of the self-definition that concomitantly and paradoxically supplies and detracts it, that is, deprives it of its independent ontological being by its constant presence in the self-affirmative process. I will elaborate on the differences apparent between witnesses who experienced 1948, briefly the ¹⁴⁸ers, and those for whom 1967 was the first major personal upheaval in their existence, by offering close readings of selected interview excerpts. We will understand what the various voices voluntarily try to tell us about the presence of the other physically and psychologically by contrasting these differences.

2 Six-Day War Recalling the Nakba

Why have the experience of statelessness and the injustice befallen the Palestinian refugees only intensified throughout time,¹ even after the Oslo Accords tried to establish an independent Palestinian country, which was supposed to undo the ramifications of the Nakba? Is the answer so obvious? Perhaps it is outwardly so, but our interviewees take us to new untrodden roads leading to this seemingly obvious answer.

“Palestine was removed, and the name ‘refugee’ remained,” says Ibrahim, a refugee in the West Bank since the 1948 War. He constantly reassured himself before the Six-Day War that he would return to Palestine, to his local land, and the loss of this dream influenced his awareness – now full of pain and remorse – of the value of his land: “When we grew older, we started thinking about why we escaped and how. We did not know the value of the land.”

Let us hear how this Palestinian refugee begins his testimony:

When we left [our village] [at the beginning of the 1948 war], people were reading news of when the war would end. People had left all the Palestinian cities. We were reassuring ourselves that we would return to the country, if not this month, it would be the next month. That seemed as futile as extracting water from a dry well regarding the return of the refugees. Then, what was called West Bank, was merged to King Hussein’s control at the Jericho conference in 1953, then it was divided into West Bank and East Bank and the name of Palestine was removed with the name of the refugees.

Is it a coincidence that Ibrahim chooses to open his testimony on June 1967 by relating his present situation to the Nakba by associating the removal of the name Palestine as a coherent one covering incessant geography with the split in names

¹ Adel Manna’ maintains in “The Palestinian Nakba and Its Continuous Repercussions” that “The passing of more than sixty years has done very little to erase the Nakba’s deep direct and indirect repercussions on subsequent Palestinian generations. The experience of statelessness and the injustice which befell the refugees has only intensified” (2013: 86–87).
resulting from the war? Evidently, that experience of the physical dislocation — accompanied with the semantic change — constitutes a major component in this testifier’s life, a division in his life, for although it seemed as “futile as extracting water from a dry well regarding the return of the refugees,” they “were reassuring [themselves] that [they] would return to the country.” He is narrating to us, I would assume, a story about the division not only on the spatial level – “[Palestine] was divided into West Bank and East Bank” – but also about a division within his existential identity. What remains from the word “Palestine”? Nothing is left but the word “refugee” – that is, a Palestinian without Palestine.

A new (split) identity can be detected in the ‘new title’ (i.e. refugee) that Ibrahim forcefully and unpleasantly acquired in the new place of residence in the West Bank and his admiration for his left-behind land. Its conflictive psychological force draws on a dichotomy that starts to introduce itself as a fact that cannot be overlooked: Palestinianism, that is, being a Palestinian, goes hand in hand with physical possession over one’s local land. The newly imposed state as a refugee, ironically, in the so-called ‘Land of Palestine,’ is the opposite of such rootedness in ancestral, familiar land.

The inner conflict of being a Palestinian whose “Palestine was removed” and a “refugee” who was dreaming of repossessing his home during the War of 1967 is at once generative of the testimonial force and destructive of the self-absorbing subject who is trying to define their identity throughout the testimony. The boundaries between physical and psychic exile are blurred. This is starkly apparent in Ibrahim’s mention of the word “Palestine”: he mentions this word only twice (“people left all the Palestinian cities” and “the name of Palestine was removed with the names of the refugees”), and each time he mentions this name, he uses the past tense, as if, in the present time, this ‘thing’ that was named Palestine no longer exists. Now, living in psychological exile figured in the word “refugees” rather than “Palestinian refugees,” equals not living in the territory of Palestine, even though he still lives in the territory termed the Palestinian Authority.

This invites us to reconsider the notion of identity based not only on the questions of definitive self-perception, but also in light of the irreversible (as long as in exile) psychological damage that occurred to the Palestinian who has been eternally displaced from his house during the Nakba. Scholars make it clear that this trauma is still living in the Palestinians’ minds, regardless of their location. AbuKhoti argues that “[…] while the Nakba tends to refer to a specific time frame, it is by no means a singular event. The aftermath of the Nakba which continues to affect the Palestinian lives makes it an ongoing trauma that has not yet ended.” Correspondingly, Manna’ maintains that

contrary to what many think, particularly in Israel, the Nakba was not a one-time event connected to the war in Palestine and its immediate catastrophic

\[2\] Even the place where this refugee currently lives is considered a part of Palestine according to the Oslo Accords.
repercussions on the Palestinians. Rather, and more correctly, it refers to the accumulated Palestinian experience since the 1948 war up to the present. (2013: 87)

Yehuda Shenhav formulates this idea most clearly:

Today many historians, Jews and Palestinians, provide a revisionist formulation in which the Nakba is not just the expulsion and displacement of 1948, but especially the ban on return to homes and families immediately after the war and in fact to this date. According to this interpretation, the sovereign decision of the Israeli government to prevent the return of hundreds of thousands of people to their homes after the war is a formal act of ethnic cleansing. Thus, the Nakba is not an event that ended in 1948, but a trauma that continues in the present [...] (Shenhav 2019: 61; emphasis mine).

This trauma is essentially and straightforwardly linked to the question of identity. Casting aside for a moment the fact that scholars do not make a remarkable distinction – and if they do, it is not developed in our context – between the identity of the refugees and non-refugees, their assumptions intersect, albeit perhaps implicitly, on one point: as long as the trauma of the Nakba is still going on, the Palestinian identity will always be struggling with affirming itself. AbuKhoti maintains that “[…] a Palestinian identity contains within it the memory of the Nakba on a personal level and a collective one” (2018: 50–51); Manna’ refers to this relationship by maintaining that “the repercussions of the war in 1948 on the Palestinians are analogous to an earthquake which changed the geography, the demography, and the identity of Palestine and its inhabitants” (2013: 91); and Andersen maintains that

Palestinian identity is intimately linked to the idea of Palestine as the homeland of Palestinians, and thus the Palestinian problem cannot be solved before a Palestinian state is established in the area of the former Palestine. The refugee problem is, of course, embedded in this demand for a state to which all Palestinians have the right to return. (2016: 27).

In a word, the Nakba is not just the expulsion and displacement of 1948, but is also the ban on returning to one’s self, one’s identity, one’s existence, until this very day. More precisely, the Nakba can be reviewed as a trauma of and in identity.

Indeed, this refugee who lives far from his native space is starting to realize, after losing the hope of return, that losing the original physical sphere means losing identity, a loss of being a Palestinian as such, and being rendered different from other Palestinians who have not lost their land throughout the years, different from Palestinians whose physical Palestine is at their disposal. His inability to understand the semantic changes of Palestine becomes audible: for Ibrahim, “[…] the Zionists, or the so-called country of Israel […]” is “[…] neither a country nor a government, but a group of gangs and thieves […].” In this context, Khalidi explains that calling the land the “Jewish homeland” means that the Palestinian/Arab presence there
becomes “historically aberrant and contingent” – that is, they become “[…] historic interlopers and trespassers – a transient presence on someone else’s national soil” (2011: 79). This Palestinian refugee reasserts Khalidi’s assumption by showing that he cannot accept that his existence is marginal, for he exclaims: “[…] after all, the Jews have occupied our land and lived in it.” At the same time, he takes Khalidi’s idea to a new level: his unwillingness to accept the other’s existence relates to the very fact that the existence of this ‘other’ constitutes the nonexistence of his ‘I’ on the existential level – not only on the national one – for the national ‘I’ encompasses the existential ‘I.’ The way he chooses to relate to the end of the physical belonging to the national soil enforces this assumption.

Regarding this Palestinian, the occupation of the land and, thus, living in it means the extinction of the ‘Palestinian I’ that is totally unified with the Palestine in social terms. AbuKhoti correctly maintains that losing the land goes hand in hand with losing Palestinian society (2018: 50). Intriguingly, the national/social disintegration surmounts to the existential self-annihilation of the individual. The land after which this refugee is named has undergone a change and transformed into the ‘Jewish I’: his whole narration – starting from the core of the Nakba, the moment of losing the land, and then moving in time to the present point, trying to re-express the genealogy of his uprootedness, goes hand in hand with the domination of the Jews over ‘his Palestine.’ Mark the following two paragraphs that Ibrahim narrates right after the first paragraph with which he opened his testimony:

When we left [our] village, we were weak children then. We came to [live] at a neighbor’s house in [a village near Bethlehem] for almost one year. After that, we moved to another house that we rented. We went to [another village], and my mother gave birth to my brother in 1951. In 1952, my father and his friends decided to go to Jericho. We stayed there until 1956, which is the time when I got married to my first wife. I was working in some simple jobs, from one village to another, and I was bringing my wife [along] wherever I went here and in Jordan. We suffered a lot. Then, I returned to [a part of] Jericho. In 1966, I returned to [to the village we had first fled to] and lived in a rented house for two years. Then I built and lived in this house, as of 27 August 1968 and I stayed here.

Is not this a detailed description of the disappearance of the ‘Palestinian I’? – that is, of the inability to belong to the previous place and any other, future place? The importance of belonging – the feeling that you are secure and that there is a sense of possibility for the future – is tied to the idea of home, and here ‘home’ is the

---

3 Ahmad Samih Khalidi safely assumes that “[…] we cannot sever the thread that connects the past to the present and, necessarily, to the future. A ‘homeland’ cannot merely be a construct of today, with no implications for tomorrow” (2011: 80). Psychologically speaking, “the importance of belonging – of feeling ‘part of something,’ that you are secure and there is a sense of possibility for the future – is intimately tied to ideas of ‘home’” (Mason 2007: 274).
complete world, which puts the Palestinian refugee’s existence in an unescapable dialogue with the Jewish side.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is based on and generated from the binary division between Zionism and Palestinianism, that is, the dominance of the ‘I’ over the ‘other’ on more than the physical land. Looking at it from the perspective of the Palestinian speaker, the conflict would concern the ‘Palestinian I’ and the Zionist ‘other.’ Historically, this conflict reached its zenith in the Nakba and the Independence of Israel, respectively. It looms large in the Palestinian national discourse which imposes an existential situation on the Palestinians that reworks this oppositional relationship between the two sides in this conflict repeatedly, as will be shown in the analysis of further testimonials examined in this chapter.

While the fixed limits that are supposed to separate the Palestinian’s ‘I’ from the ‘other’ have already been subjected to a process of blurring, rewriting and redefining, the decisive moment that reflects such trespassing is the Six-Day War. Here, the traumatic experience of the Palestinian finds itself unable to remain hidden. The Nakba superimposes itself on the testifier even when they try to speak about the Six-Day War. We will see how the trauma of losing one’s identity – along with losing the land – does not only make Palestinians express their uncertainties about their national, coherent sense of existence, but also makes them express how it superimposes and articulates a new kind of relationship concerning the reciprocal acceptance and understanding between both sides from the Palestinian perspective.

For this study of Palestinian refugees’ stories, I make a distinction between the ‘48 Palestinian’ – that is, the ‘refugee-Palestinians’ who have experienced physical dislocation and displacement since 1948 as they cannot return to their houses due to demolition, repossession or any other cause, and the ‘67 Palestinians,’ who also live in the West Bank but have not experienced the trauma of the Nakba. The ‘48 Palestinian refugees accentuate their suffering refugee-Palestinian ‘I.’ They shout implicitly that they unconsciously incarcerate the other – the Israeli Jew. The ‘48 Palestinians try to claim self-sovereignty on an underlying negation of the Zionist other’s existence. More importantly, in their insistence to defend their identity on the basis of nationality, the ‘48 Palestinians constantly rewrite and redetermine the Palestinian and the Zionist, the interlacement of identities, by deconstructing the binary opposition of Palestinian and Jew dominant in both discourses. The relationship between the ‘48 Palestinian and the Israeli Jew is characterized by the irreversibility generated within the “traumatic Palestinian ‘I’” as a result of the other’s existence not only on the geographical or territorial level but also in the self-perception of the ‘I.’ To return to the place that is not charged with and defined by the other’s appearance, whether in historical or psychological terms, is itself an illusion, for returning to the pre-traumatized period is a return to the place in which the Jew is found as the other who defined the national ‘I’ as such.

Studying the ways in which the 1967 War has impacted biographies and everyday arrangements without admitting the underlying force that constantly pulls it back to the starting point of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is made impossible for several
reasons. The mere appearance of the '48 Palestinians within the West Bank \(^4\) reminds us of this supposed to be (at least to the Israeli side) buried past event – the expulsion and displacement of people who were dwelling in more than four hundred villages. \(^5\) The excessive mention of the *Nakba* during the interviewees’ reflections on the Six-Day War further points out this preeminence. I do not recollect any interview in which a Palestinian refugee did not mention the origins of their displacement while narrating their own story about the Six-Day War, which is indeed an intriguing fact academically acknowledged. \(^6\)

The trauma of the *Nakba* is alive in the Palestinian’s minds so much so that it dictates the decisions even of the Palestinians who have not experienced it. Palestinians who witnessed the Six-Day War could not but mention the ‘ghost of the *Nakba,*’ referring to the horrors it engendered within their souls by merely remembering what had happened to those Palestinians, each time they tried to explain or justify their abandonment of their houses during the war. This is why we see that the trauma of the 1967 War is embedded in the trauma of the *Nakba.* The Palestinian people have never thought that “something like this [the war] would happen,” which made them unprepared for it, says Ziad. All the Palestinians he saw on his way home were not aware of what was happening, and there was “a type of loss” among people.

Ziad remembers the experience of hearing the bombs falling in al-Ezaryah as very frightening: “it was a horrible night, you know, while you are hearing the bombs, not one or two, falling near you.” However horrifying the experience of the bombs was, Ziad only dedicates one line in his interview to describe this “horrible night”; what seems to be horrible for Ziad is not the bombs from which, logically, any human wanting to survive would flee. Instead, what appears to be the horrible experience for him is leaving the villages and the houses unattended and unpopulated when, as his recurrent words show, the Jews enter.

Rather than saying, for instance, “I had to flee my village because life is the worthiest of all,” which was mostly done by the Palestinians in 1948, Ziad stands for the Palestinians who found themselves in a chaotic situation as they heard of the outbreak of the war, convincing them not to flee. For him, death occurs once, and, from his perspective, one is either to die or live in one’s village and house. Ziad himself answers the prompting question that poses itself automatically – what makes a person under such intensive, chaotic and even traumatic circumstances shout to his people to either die or live here? His answer is that people do not want to be in the situation of the ’48 refugees: answering the question “I am trying to understand

\(^4\) Of course, the Palestinians who were made refugees as a result of the 1948 war currently populate different and many places, including Israel and the West Bank. Nonetheless, this paper will focus on those who are currently living in the latter.

\(^5\) Research on these villages has been thorough, with documentation initiated by Sharif Kanaana at Birzeit University (e.g. Kanaana and Zitawi 1987) and continued in various oral history projects up to the present.

\(^6\) “The Arab defeat in June 1967 reawakened memories of the Nakba among Palestinians” (Manaa’ 2013: 94).
what made you take this decision [not to leave],” Ziad answers: “‘48 is what made
me do so. I know how many Palestinian refugees, who were good, respectful, and
even wealthy, were insulted in their migration.” What affected Ziad’s decision was
the crucial choice between to be or not to be, to have a total nonexistence as a result
of no longer belonging to the original physical sphere or to have a total existence.
For him and his father, emigration was not even a choice.

The trauma of the Nakba is alive in the Palestinians’ minds and hearts so much
so that it determines the decisions even of the Palestinians who had not experienced
it. Ziad, for instance, was very aware of the repercussions of his decision and his
incitation to uphold their places. Although he knew what had happened in the ‘48
war, namely the massacres such as the one that had happened in Deir Yassin, he
preferred death over being a refugee.7

A group of interviews share the same motif: Um Lutfi who witnessed the “diffi-
cult” situation of the ‘48 Palestinians who took refuge in the West Bank decided
not to leave her house, even when she was totally afraid as she saw the Israeli army
and the tanks entering her village. Seemingly, what prompted her to remain in her
house and close her door in front of the Israeli army was not her patriotism as much
as her unwillingness to be like the ‘48 Palestinians who, as she had witnessed, were
separated socially when they came to live in the West Bank. As much as closing the
door is not patriotic, for one is hiding from the danger one fears, it is an unconscious
indication of possessing one’s property: this ’67 Palestinian, not fleeing from the
army outside the house (and the village), but closing the door of her house on her-
sself, manifests her unwillingness to become like a ’48 Palestinian. This can be de-
tected from her ‘voluntary description’ (e.g. her decision to relate to this story) of
the Nakba in her interview, which itself attests to her willingness to separate herself
from those who left their homes in ’48:

The 1948 War broke out in the villages […], and it did not affect us in the
West Bank. Life continued as usual, and all were going to work and to school,
and they continued working on the land. The 1948 War was very hard, the
people left their houses and came to dwell here, and then a dividing barrier
that separated between us, and the West villages was constructed.

The same anxiety can be detected in the following interview: Amneh says that “peo-
ple were afraid of the war and believed it, and they feared that their fate would be
like the fate of the people in the 1948 war.” Among other witnesses, Isaaf says that
people were afraid of the Jews after the war, but they were also afraid of migration,
since they thought that what happened in 1948 would happen once again. The same
fear reappears in the following testimony: Azzam, who was ten years old at the time
of the Six-Day War, was forced to leave his village with his mother, but his father and

---

7 Numerous ’67 Palestinians decided during the war not to leave their houses because of their fear of re-experiencing the losses of the Nakba. Ziad is used here as the representative of these Palestinians.
grandmother refused to do so, claiming that they “[…] would avoid what happened in 1948.”

Contrary to these Palestinians who were haunted by the trauma of the Nakba, or by the fear of turning into the kinds of torn individuals the Nakba had left behind, we can detect a very different mentality in the a’48 Palestinians’ interviews. Among all the ’48 Palestinians who lived through the Six-Day War, almost all repeated the idea of preferring to die rather than leaving their current place of residence. This idea barely surfaces in the ’67 Palestinians’ interviews. The aforementioned Ibrahim, for example, who decided to remain in his village rather than re-experiencing the physical dislocation and dispossession, asserts that the ’48 Palestinians were ready to fight with the Jordanian army. The refugees made it clear in the interviews conducted by Ramadan that “[…] the importance of living in a camp is precisely so that they remember Palestine and keep alive the demand to return” (2010: 55). The same idea reappears in our interviews, but more sharpened.

Umm Ali says that although she had seen “[…] wounded and martyrs during the war, [she] was not afraid” of the Jews – regardless of the fact that the latter were destroying and corrupting Palestinians. She literally said that “it does not matter to us.” If death does not matter to this refugee or to the ‘us’ that represents the ’48 Palestinian refugees, then what matters? What matters for her, is to throw stones (which she claims she did) at the soldiers, to wait in the night, bearing an axe, for the Israeli soldiers to appear, to die like the martyrs she saw during the war, to return to the Mosque in Acre to pray there.

Born in 1946 near Haifa, Rahma A., mother to nine boys and five girls, is married and lives in the West Bank. She also remarks that “we were ready to die and lose our lives to return to our lands and country.” Plenty of examples can be detected in the interviews: Imad says that they fought the Jews and lost a lot of people. Similarly, Nimer, who was just two years old during the Nakba and did not understand the meaning of belonging and of possessing a physical house, refused to leave Qalqilya during the Six-Day War. He was 22 years old at the time and went to help the Jordanian soldiers in battle. It is not surprising that as a refugee who understood the meaning of belonging to a physical space, quite similarly to Ibrahim introduced earlier, Nimer delivered the following message to Palestinians anywhere: “Stay home and die there. This is better than leaving it or getting insulted […] such as hearing from people there that we gave up our country.” These interviewees crystalize the idea Ramadan discussed: here, we witness refugees preferring death to the feeling of re-experiencing the dislocation, which means sacrificing existence over moving to a new place.

The Palestinians’ testimonies of the War of 1967 indicate that both the ’48 and ’67 Palestinians are preoccupied with the Nakba. It manifests itself in the interviews as a traumatic force that compels them to draw on this past experience. The fear of

---

8 It is crucial to keep in mind that the traumatic force detected in the testimonies is expressed differently and on various levels. For simplicities sake, they can be grouped into two directions: firstly, we can see
ending up like the ’48 Palestinians living in camps in the West Bank demonstrates that the Nakba became a symbol of facing a serious threat to self-perception, a threat to a firm, unchallenged identity. Many of the ’67 Palestinians refused to turn from a “Palestinian” to a “refugee,” as did the “’48 refugees,” if we are to borrow Ibrahim’s terms. If the ’67 Palestinians’ reaction to the ‘other’s’ appearance within their geographical and home sphere is limited to defending their identity (that is, not to turn into a refugee) even by facing potential death, the ’48 Palestinians’ reaction to this other’s appearance is different: they assert to prefer death not in order to maintain their identity but to defend their lost identity, as they find themselves past the phase in which they can defend what they have; they currently have nothing to lose, but they have something to retrieve, as the next section will discuss.

3 In Search of the Lost Identity: The Palestinian Voice

In this section I will explore the main difference between the ’67 and the ’48 Palestinians’ perception of the Nakba. I claim that while the former’s trauma from the Nakba is a fear of the future, the latter’s trauma relates to the inevitable link of their present and future ontological situation and the unreachable, nonexistent past, that is, the past that apparently rewritess itself for them as a point in their lives to which they cannot return. The recurrent mention of the ’48 war tells a lot regarding the traumatic experience of the Palestinian, whose experience of belonging we can examine by observing the ’48 Palestinians’ willingness, as they put it in their own words in the interviews, to die for the sake of returning home in spirit. Putting their return to their villages above their need or will to live testifies to their unique existential situation: the Palestinian is the one who belongs to the absence, to what is eternally beyond reach. 

This idea is known in the studies of postwar trauma. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub set out to examine the testimonies of people traumatized by the Second World War, especially by the Holocaust, in their book Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History. They make a considerable effort in analyzing the strong relationship among haunting memories, breaking silence and writing. For Felman, a traumatic accident is known when it starts pursuing the traumatized person, and it is when the witness starts, in turn, pursuing it (Felman 1992: 15). M.D. Laub claims that

[testimony] is a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds – the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is – that are different and will always be so. The testimony is inherently a process of facing...
loss – of going through the pain of the act of witnessing, and of the ending of the act of witnessing – which entails yet another repetition of the experience of separation and loss. (Laub 1992: 91; emphasis mine)

The process of exploration and reconciliation of the two worlds is not an easy task; apart from facing loss, it is a mission with uncertain outcome over which the traumatized person has no control, let alone the hope of succeeding in it. An individual turns into the object of this process, facing fleeting memories that resist giving themselves up to the testifier’s will. As Felman claims:

[psychoanalysis and literature] will be considered as primarily events of speech, and their testimony, in both cases, will be understood as a mode of truth’s realization beyond what is available as statement, beyond what is available, that is, as a truth transparent to itself and entirely known, given, in advance, prior to the very process of its utterance. The testimony will thereby be understood, in other words, not as a mode of statement of, but rather as a mode of access to, that truth. In literature as well as in psychoanalysis […] the witness might be […] the one who (in fact) witnesses, but also, the one who begets, the truth, through the speech process of testimony (Felman 1992: 15–16; emphasis mine).

Intriguingly, the traumatized person has to fight against annihilation and loss; they both do so in the hope of surviving the overwhelming sense of rupture and the erosion of identity. As Felman teaches us, this task of retrieving, accessing and claiming control over a truth that constantly escapes⁹ the traumatized testifier is a task of also claiming back identity, for if one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well. Therefore, the loss of the capacity of repossessing the traumatized person’s past is the very annihilation of the person’s past – their identity (Laub 1992: 82).

As a matter of fact, the ’48 Palestinians remembered intensively the fleeting remnants of memories relating to their destroyed villages and the social interactions among its villagers. Before I turn to the examples from the corpus of West Bank interviews, one needs to clarify that the narratives documented invoke an incident that matches the observations of the trauma just reviewed: “In addition to the destruction of an entire society, Al-Nakbah represents an unbridgeable break in the time, place, and consciousness of the Palestinians[,]” for “Al-Nakbah is the violent moment which also created an unbridgeable break between the past and the present. It represents an end to normality; i.e., this split disturbed the ‘normal’ evolution of history” (Sa’di 2002: 186). Sanbar seems to explain this idea further, adding more details to it that elucidate the time dimensions:

⁹ Psychoanalysis shows that “[…] the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speaker” (Felman 1992: 15).
by departing from space, the Palestinians, about whom the whole world agreed to say ‘they do not exist,’ also departed from time. Their history and their past were denied. Their aspirations of their future were forbidden. Hence they found themselves trapped in an ephemeral dimension, and for half a century they would live in limbo, achieving a very special relationship with the concept of duration. Since the present was forbidden to them, they would occupy a temporal space made up of both a past preserved by a memory afflicted by madness and a dreamt-of future which aspired to restore time. And their obsession with places would be accompanied by a fervent desire to reestablish the normality of everyday lives. (2001: 90)

This marks, I conclude, an existential situation, and perhaps the most authentic reflection of it is best mentioned in an interview that, as all the other interviews reviewed for this study, accentuates the interlacing of the territorial with the nostalgic. Although the Palestinian refugees testified to the better life they currently have economically speaking after the Six-Day War, all of them re-emphasized the loss of identity as a result of the lasting seal on the possibility of a physical return to their past. They all offered detailed descriptions of their destroyed towns, the agricultural work and the social interactions among the people with whom they used to live before the Nakba.

Sa’di detects this same motif among the Palestinian refugees. Let us read his introduction, which constitutes a tight relationship with my basic thoughts:

The 1948 War resulted in Al-Nakbah – the immense catastrophe – for the Palestinian people and changed their life beyond recognition. First and foremost, Al-Nakbah engendered the dispersion [Shatat]. Between 77 and 83 percent of the Palestinians who lived in the part of Palestine that later became Israel – i.e., 78 percent of Mandatory Palestine – were turned into refugees. Thus, for Palestinians, Al-Nakbah represents, among many other things, the loss of the homeland, and the disintegration of society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of a hasty process of destruction of their culture. […]. (Sa’di 2002: 175)

The interviewees apparently fought against the destruction of their culture and the loss of their homeland by reconstituting their disintegrated society; they attempted repeatedly to interlace the physical land with the spiritual social interactions. Abdul Qader starts narrating first about the social interactions, namely the weddings, sinking into small, extensive details, which is an element present in almost all of the interviews. While this reflects his compassion for the lost times, it testifies to a much deeper point – the attachment between the lost land and the lost self; he shows the communality of belonging to the land, first and foremost, by recalling modes of socializing and generalizing upon that. Mark this for an example:

Life was happy even for those who had nothing to dine, for there were love and respect among people. People had compassion for each other; those who
had money and animal and agricultural products were feeding those who had not. These products were not for sale among the people, for the land is cultivated with vegetables and wheat, on which people have no exclusive right. Everyone had the right to eat from these products and to take what one needs from them, and the owners of these products never got upset.

Not only does Abdul Qader emphasize the relationship between people based on the land, but he also emphasizes the relationship between the self and the land, as if both existed depending on each other:

We were living; we were owners of lands, which we planted with wheat, barley, and all the vegetables and fruits. I used to plant fenugreek and make out of it a drink, which could cure forty diseases. However, these days no one cares about this plant.

Abdul Qader associates living with ownership of land. Even more, curing the self – making it continue to exist, physically speaking – depends on the land. He addresses the lost lands – the general idea of owning land and the personal story of losing these lands – as if he were describing losing himself. The change that the ‘I’ undergoes after the war is manifested in losing the daily relationship with the land: “we used to drink water out of the spring, we didn’t use cups but ceramic bottles. These days we drink water that is full of chlorine.”

The ongoing relationship between land and identity\(^{10}\) that the ‘48 Palestinian acquired after the Nakba is also manifested clearly in Abu Jameel’s testimony, as he decides to narrate a story about his father’s response to a Jew who wanted to buy his lost land in his destroyed village. The interviewer asked: “There are sayings that everyone went out for a certain period like a week or ten days when the Jews informed them that everyone would return home and raise the white flag. Did you get scared or hungry at that time when Jews arrived?” To this, Abu Jameel responded:

No. I am going to tell you a story of my father. Once, when I was young, we had seats of straw. I was sitting on one of these seats. One of the known rich\(^{11}\) people came and asked me: “Is this the al-Dar’awy place?” I said: “No, this is [the place of] al-Sar’awy.” He asked me again about the place, so I told him that his name is Jameel al-Sar’awy. He said: “I want [to speak to] him.” I gave [the rich man] a seat to sit down while my father was [still away], working in barley trade. When he arrived, this person asked my dad: “Are you Jameel?” He said, “Yes, I am Jameel.” He told him that he wanted to talk about something. So my father said, “Yes, how can I help you?” Then my father told me

\(^{10}\) It is important to illustrate that the identity of the Palestinian refugee has two components: “I think that the local context in both its social and spatial makeup should be considered as a constitutive dimension of identity” (Sa’di 2002: 192).

\(^{11}\) The exact word used in Arabic is خواجة (Khawaja), which can be translated into a person with luxurious properties and possessions. This term is used by the Palestinians (today very infrequently) to describe the Jews.
to bring coffee. The rich man told my father that he [the father] had a piece of land in Sar’a and he offered to buy it from my father. My father asked how could I sell it and you have it already? He said to him: “Do, as you want.” He offered my father [to pay] the price that he needed in a blank cheque, but my father refused, and he said: “I accept this offer on one condition: that you replace the land with your wife.” The rich man was shocked by my father’s condition. Then my father asked him [to leave]. There was a friend of ours from the village of Sataf named Taha al-Satafi, who was working in the vegetable trade. The rich man presented Taha al-Satafi with the same request that he had asked of my father, but Taha al-Satafi raised a gun to his face.

One cannot fail to notice that Abu Jameel’s response is incompatible with the interviewer’s question, for Abu Jameel responds with a mere “no,” shifting to narrating a story that instead shows how they did not fear nor even were in need of the Jew’s money. Abu Jameel’s clinging to his identity is also articulated by the time he corrects the Jew’s accent when the latter mentions his family name incorrectly – ‘al-Sar’awy’, which is the title they acquired after the name of their destroyed village, “al-Sar’a” – or in the Jewish accent, replacing the “S” with the “D.” It is no coincidence that Abu Jameel, who clearly appears to understand the Jewish accent and intention by this “innocent question” of his “innocent accent,” pronounces his family name, which is named after his lost land, again emphasizing the absolute attachment between the post-refugee state and the lost land. Indeed, when the Jew asks again about the place of Abu Jameel’s father, the Palestinian refugee skips this question and decides rather to re-emphasize his father’s last name – Jameel al-Sar’awy. The testimony illustrates starkly how strongly refugees are situated – one might even stay stuck – within their past.

What is more pronounced here than Abu Jameel’s attitude, is his father’s, who is still hanging on to the lost land as if it were a part of his identity or existence. The land, even though its owner (the Palestinian refugee) knows that it is not belonging to him physically, still equates it as part of the identity. His father equates the value of the land with the wife, which are two things that complete the speaking subject, and I think he does so to make the Jew (Khawaja, a symbol of refusal of the other) feel what it truly means for him. Moreover, Abu Jameel’s father wants to show how invaluable the land is by asking the Jew to replace his wife with it. Jameel’s friend was much more infuriated by the question than his father, reaching for a weapon and, thus, threatening the Jew who asked him the same question.

Perhaps Hamda’s memories of her husband’s mother can explain concisely why the people of Sara’a were so furious about the idea of selling their lands. She narrates about her husband and his mother, both from Sara’a village:

One day a man from Kafar Okob offered him [her husband] to take his land [in Kafar Okob] to plant it, but his mother refused the whole idea because she was thinking that she would get back to the village she was displaced from. When my sons were visiting it, they were bringing sage. The same thing for
the ladies who were bringing olives and figs. His facial expression was full of happiness when he was talking about his village of Sara’a.

The mother’s refusal to plant a new land outside of the village from which she had been displaced manifests the idea of sticking in the lost past. I interpret this as the inability of continuing through the future without repossessing the past. Apparently, the decision to plant the new land implies for her an absolute conscious absorption of abandoning the land after which they are currently named. If the Palestinians perceive or define the connection to the lands by the act of planting, then accepting to plant new land means a conscious decision (or acceptance) to abandon the past connection. This explains why “firmly believing that they would return to Palestine, in the early years of their exile the majority of Palestinians steadfastly refused to create, or even enable, permanent links or roots in their host countries” (Mason 2007: 273). Interestingly, even the second exilic generations, who have not witnessed the physical uprootedness, felt that the basis of their identity is “[…] not only lost, but never existed, and the dream of ‘returning’ represents a search for identity as much as for a place […]” (Mason 2007: 274). The second generations cannot but belong to their native land, too, although they develop roots in the countries in which they live (Mason 2007: 281).

This motif appears in all of the ’48 Palestinians’ testimonies, as they all chose to express their relationship to their lost land. Azmi and his wife are both refugees, and the former expresses the tight relationship to the land and its role in constituting one’s identity:

My wife is a refugee, and she wishes to return to Bir Ma’in [her native village] as she said that the soil of the land is very valuable to us, for it is our hometown. As for the camp, we are only refugees here, and we do not have memories here as we have in the village; we belong to our land. We have not visited our village since 1948, but I can describe it as it is still in my mind, its homes, neighbors, sheep and trees. In the case we returned home, I would be happy. It is my homeland.

The relationship to the past and the idea of the relationship between identity and past is manifested here through the contrast between a refugee and memories. Where there are no memories, one cannot feel at home. Indeed, we can see how, regardless of the physical distance and space, the memories of this refugee’s homeland are still vivid in his mind. Memories of the past constitute his homeland, as he puts it, which is interesting since he encompasses the idea of homeland with his native village and land, not the whole of Palestine, where he is currently living.

Similarly, Azmi expresses the relationship between his lost self and the agricultural life, just like Abdul Qader who exposed how losing his self is the equivalent of losing his land. Note Azmi’s remark on the land and its products:

Since 1967, I do not remember that something special has happened, but there is a pain in my heart from leaving my village. We live in the village where
my sons and relatives got married and if there is a chance to go home, I will take it. I still remember schools and streets in the village as I was a child at that time. If I return home, I will depend on planting.

Apparently, working the land, depending on its products, is an act of regenerating, of repossessing, one’s lost self. Perhaps the example that in its stark detail would best illustrate this point is the following nostalgic description by Umm Ali:

Life in Sindyana was good. I remember my mom was baking with a tabun [oven] and we sat around her by the door, there were oil, ghee and everything available. Vineyards and quince and we went to the mountains to pick Kharub [carob beans] and at night we picked oak branches and grilled with them on the tabun.

We had a house that had four arches and each one had a storage area to store lentils and wheat. The people were one hand. Every Friday, we went to the valley to bathe our children and wash our laundry. There were no diseases, and there was a blessing in everything.

I got out of my homeland when I was 7 years old and now I am 85. I carried the jar and we went to fill water from the spring. We went twice a day.

The young men gathered in al-Bayader [the place where the hay was gathered waiting to be ground] and when a wedding occurred, we went to collect firewood to set the fire; there was no electricity. Our house was made of mud-brick. I was young when I got out of the house so I don’t know how many durums of land it had.

I still have the documents and the papers and the key of the house, our work was in agriculture, we grew cucumbers, tomatoes, and we sliced and salted them to let them dry for the winter.

From the outset of her process of remembrance, Umm Ali associated her village with the image of her mother baking on the tabun while the family surrounded her. The personal, social and material are all intertwined in her recollection. The mother is generally the first image a child connects to, and, of course, this image has to be as nostalgic as it could be from her posttraumatic consciousness. One can see this as she conjures up this image which includes herself and her siblings. Undoubtedly, this image suggests to her that “everything was available.” But Umm Ali carries on in her reflection of the nostalgic consciousness: she completes the first image with walking in the mountains, illustrating how the remembered terrain constitutes an indispensable part of her past which is currently under reconstruction.

Reconstructing the physical level is not a coincidence; it would be careless to claim that this woman has nothing to remember other than this physical description. She surely has many other memories, but it is this testimony she gave when asked to remember 1967. The text then reveals a traumatized person’s attempt to remember

---

A tabun oven is a clay oven, traditionally dug in the earth. It is still used today in many regions in the Middle East.
the past; the descriptions she offers appear to be of importance to her self-perception. The “we” of society enters abruptly and tellingly in the memory of the mother and the children. While the role of the particular village in its geographical settings remains unknown, its role in Umm Ali’s remembrance is that of the lost self: if the personal memory ends with the word “tabun,” the collective memory also ends with the same word. Her mere remembrance of the tabun scene led her, unintentionally, to the collective experience. The association is made evident in the sequence of the narration. She, thus, completed what she left incomplete in the image.

The “we” that enters the image of the self here is an alternative of the “we” of the narrator’s present, which encompasses both the refugees and the new society in which she now lives—a setting in which ’48 refugees were often insulted. Mohamed testifies to this by saying that “[…] the refugee was not welcomed—but hated.” Hence, the “we” of the post-refugee situation can be seen as an attempt to reverse the condition of the current “we” that seems to be unfamiliar with and irreconcilable with Umm Ali’s lost, original ‘I.’ The duality of the “we” in this narration can be understood, therefore, as follows: it is a “we” of the Palestinians who remember living a harmonious life before they were uprooted, and it is the “we” of the society in which this woman was living before being humiliated in the new society in which she is considered a refugee. Sa’di summarizes this idea:

[Pierre] Nora’s concept of “site of memory” is, I believe, an indispensable tool for understanding the way in which Al-Nakbah has becomes a constitutive element of Palestinian identity. Al-Nakbah is a Palestinian event and a site of Palestinian collective memory; it connects all Palestinians to a specific point in time that has becomes for them an ‘eternal present.’ (2002: 176–177).

A lot of attention is paid to Nora’s concept by scholars. AbuKhoti, for example, returns to this idea to strengthen her main claim that “the persistence of the catastrophic event in the cases of collective cultural traumas fuels a will to remember instead of a will to forget” (2018: 49). She develops this idea further by maintaining that

The Nakba has become what Pierre Nora terms a “site of memory,” and a constitutive element of Palestinian identity. In this context individual representations of collective memory contribute to the continuity of an established collective identity. The Nakba as a site of memory is not a singular narrative of a specific event, but the sum of all experiences and stories told by those who experienced the initial event, and those who came after. (AbuKhoti 2018: 50).

This “eternal present” would appear to be the same past that constantly haunts the Palestinian refugees, the same past that rewrites itself as an eternal present, depriving these refugees of any possibility of living but in their past. This utterly explains why
even though [Palestinian refugees] do not expect the Right of Return to be realized, they will never give it up but retain it as an integral part of a kind of postmodern identity narrative that can sometimes be difficult for the Nakba generation to comprehend. (Andersen 2016: 29).

Umm Ali suddenly shifts her narrative from the “blessing” to information about her abandonment of the village. Apparently, it is the unblessed situation of living the life of a refugee that intruded into her mind when she remembered the very antithesis of her present. This is where the physical level is expressed: to concertize this meaning as well as the existence (albeit in her mind now) of the lost ‘we,’ there is the need to accompany this with physical descriptions of the terrain of the home space; it serves as witness to the authenticity of her memories as well as her lost identity. This is the ‘we’ of the pre-refugee Palestinian.

The village is the opposite of the word refugee. Umm Ali has to repossess – physically – her lost village in order to return to being a Palestinian. However, the nature of the access left to this village belongs only to the abstract sphere: she only has the documents, papers and the key, the concrete evidence of her belonging to this unrestorable life. Memories help Palestinians only as a means of preserving identity as an act of holding on to the right of return (AbuKhoti 2018: 57). Sa’di has commented on the motif of the key in the Palestinian topic as follows:

The absence of home became a constant source of misery. In light of this, the house key has become the last symbol of home, a reminder that, before Al-Nakbah, Palestinians had a different life – a life where the home stood at its center as a haven to which one could return. The house key is also a symbol for the return – the return not only to the house that was left behind but also a return to normality, to a life filled with dignity and warmth. Thus the key has become a material symbol for the refugees’ state of mind. (Sa’di 2002: 181)

It is not a coincidence then that Umm Ali’s description of the physical events and scenes follows after her mention of papers and documents, the access of those vivid memories. The chaotic aspect just discerned in Umm Ali’s process of remembrance testifies to her trauma. She insists on remembering this scene from the past as an act of returning to what is demolished and has moved into the realm of the absence, thus, articulating the inability of belonging but to the unreachable past. Her

13 Holding on to this identity is what Palestinian refugees take as their priority; Ramadan argues that the refugee camps have become imbued with meanings and significance over the decades (2010: 49), attempting to undermine Edward W. Said’s argument that the nature of the Palestinian existence is discontinuous. While Ramadan makes some insightful points in the service of his argument, his interviewees seem to take him to the conclusion that “recognizing the camp as a meaningful place need not diminish the importance of the right of return to Palestine as the central aspiration of Palestinian lives. As so many people made clear to me, the importance of living in a camp is precisely so that they remember Palestine and keep alive the demand to return” (2010: 55).
remembrance is incomplete, and this is where we have seen her unable to separate her new state as a refugee who suffers from a trauma and her pre-traumatic identity.

As a result of the traumatic identity, the Nakba draws a separating line between the '48 and the '67 Palestinians not only regarding their existential experience but also their self-perception as Palestinians. Whether this is irreversible or not is unclear. Mohammed summarizes this by saying, on the verge of tears, “We will not come back.” Apparently, Mohammed knew that the process of returning is not a mere physical return. His short sentence testifies to his awareness of the irreversibility of the historical facts. Taking into consideration that Mohammed is a Palestinian refugee, Sa’di’s remark, generalizing all Palestinian refugees’ experience, is plausible: “Al-Nakbah is the moment when a part of the Palestinian people became homeless; after which they could never feel at home. These Palestinians have been deprived of everything home signifies and provides” (2002: 181).

It is no coincidence that Abdul Majed, as a refugee who lost his house in the Nakba, associates the existence of the Jews with his nonexistence, as he relates what he remembers of the Six-Day War: “The Jews entered the village and destroyed everything so that they would ensure that its people would not return to [their village].” Abdul Majed’s interview is three pages long, and the first two pages are only concerned with narrating the genesis of his current situation – that is, the years after the '67 war. He covers a wide range of events, both collective and personal. He opens his testimony with a kind of excuse why the Palestinian people lost the 1948 War, not the 1967 War: “During the reign of the British, there were Jews who were educated; they were also employees at the tax department.” He is interested, most probably unconsciously, in showing that the Jewish community was more capable of winning since they were more educated and, thus, more powerful than the Palestinian side. But why does this testifier open his testimony of the Six-Day War with a remark that is not even concerned with the beginning of the 1948 War, but with the prewar social and economic conditions? He is not concerned even with his current condition nor the changes that happened to him on various levels after the War of 1967.

I interpret this remark as a kind of self-consolation that bears within it an effort to convince himself why the Palestinians lost the war. This testimony opens immediately with the shrinking of the Palestinian’s ‘I,’ and what follows in the next two sentences of the testimony illustrates this point: “We lived together but we did not ask them for help. We were depending on the products of our lands.” Not only does Abdul Majed draw a very clear separative line between the ‘I’ and ‘the other,’ but he also highlights why the Palestinians could independently be estranged, economically and socially, from the Jews. It is no coincidence that he mentions the products of the land – the physical sphere is the basic and the potential of the existence of the

---

14 It would be of much benefit to keep in mind Walid Khalidi’s Before Their Diaspora (1984). “Before Their Diaspora is about a vanishing past – something that no longer exists – about people and places that have undergone dramatic changes in such a way that the people (those who appear in the photographs and their descendants) would never inhabit the same places or even live in the same area” (Sa’di 2002: 179).
‘Palestinian I.’ Hence, losing the land, for this witness implies in effect losing one’s independence, or, more precisely, losing the capability of existing without the other, as the interviewer reports in his transcription of the interview:

When the war began, he narrates, the Jewish side started, and this is what he highlights, to assail Palestinian lands to enforce their inhabitants to leave: They practiced injustice against farmers to leave their lands. [...] The Balfour Declaration, which was a public statement, issued by the British government during World War I announcing support for the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine if the allied powers beat Germany. When the declaration ended, Jewish girls were putting bombs at Jaffa Gate. The British had asked some Arab leaders, such as al-Nashashibi and Al Husayni, about giving Palestine to Jews and for another period of reign, but the Arab leaders refused that. Jews began a sedition; they were giving guns to the shepherds. After the withdrawal of Britain, we took the guns. Jews began coming from other countries, such as Egypt and Iraq, and they never stopped killing people, such as in the Deir Yassin massacre where they killed the children and raped the girls.

Finally, he arrives at the following memory:

We ran away and stayed near Deir Elias for two months. We went back to the country in the daytime and took the products of the land to the place where we lived. Nevertheless, the Jews entered the village and destroyed everything, so that they would ensure that its people would not return.

One of the most vivid invocations of the image of the destroyed village comes from Khalil’s description of Qalqilya which was destroyed in the War of 1967. When he returned to Qalqilya, he says, there was nothing left undestroyed except the main road. About his own house, he continues to say: “There was nothing at home. Everything was stolen. Nothing was there – no sewing machine, no washing machine, no refrigerator, no chair, nothing. Only the walls were left, and parts of them were destroyed by the bulldozer.” Omar, also from Qalqilya, confirms this image:

When we arrived in Qalqilya, I saw an unfamiliar view. I no longer recognized the area, as everything was destroyed. For example, if you wanted to go to the northern area of Ziad’s house, you would get mixed up and go to another area. The landmarks in the streets were different.

What the testimonies of the ‘48 Palestinians shows clearly is that the more the ‘other’ prevails and dominates territorially, the more the ‘I’ shrinks. The materialization of the other’s existence within space and time goes hand in hand with the dematerialization of the ‘I’s’ existence within space and time. The writing of the other’s narrative discourse eliminates the ‘I’s’ discourse as it always redefines the ‘I’ on the basis of the geographical space. The absence of identity of the Palestinian – this very traumatic loop that rewrites the Palestinian self as an absence of identity (when one has
no home to belong to), as belonging to the non-belongingness – is not only limited to the Palestinian’s self-perception as a Palestinian, but also stretches out to reach the question of any type of belongingness, namely, to the collective Arab identity. Therefore, to be a Palestinian, the Six-Day War teaches us, is an experience which draws a very metaphysically and ontologically distinctive line within the collective Palestinian identity.

4 In Search of Belonging: The Palestinian’s Entanglement with the Other

The ’48 Palestinians fervently cohered and identified with Arabism. As Elias Sanbar puts it, “[the Palestinians’] Arabness constitutes an underlying identity, a core which is common to the peoples of these regions” (2001: 88). This is very evident in the interviewees’ belief in Abdel Nasser, the so-called father of Arabism, and his dream of Pan-Arabism. Unwittingly, Arabism became a medium or a tool through which the Palestinian tries to reconstruct or repossess the absence within their identity. This is a natural response for people whose identity has undergone a de-Arabization: “Al-Nakbah is associated with a rapid de-Arabization of the country. This process has included the destruction of Palestinian villages” (Sa’di 2002: 184). Sanbar’s remark can explain this more precisely:

Driven out of time and space, the Palestinians would ultimately see themselves as deprived of the right to their own name. Driven by an astonishing intuition – they knew that if the name were to be permanently obliterated, their disappearance would be confirmed – they would fight tooth and nail to preserve the existence of the words “Palestine” and “Palestinians.” (2001: 91)

Hence, one can conclude that belonging to Palestine is a precondition to the total belongingness to Arabism.

Such a motif is easily detected in the interviews examined. Karim, for instance, a refugee since the ’48 war when he was 12, sings for Palestine as he is being interviewed: “[...] if we do not return you free, shame on us to be Arabs, Oh Haifa and Jaffa, if we do not return you, shame on us to be Arabs.” The same idea returns also with Ibrahim, as he is dreaming of repossessing his lost land: “There will be a day to come when they [the Arab governments] will fight and exclude them [the Jews] from here, since this is an Arab land.”

What makes Karim sing of Arabism after so many years, especially after the discourse of Arabism failed to prove itself capable of freeing “Haifa and Jaffa” in 1967? For a Palestinian refugee, Arabism needs Palestinianism as much as Palestinianism

---

15 Sanbar means by this that a full identification is found between both parties: “binding factors include the use of the same language, the existence of a collective imagination, the claim of a shared history, and the reality of identical social structures” (2001: 88).
needs Arabism. Speaking on behalf of the Palestinian refugees, Lutfi explicitly, but necessarily intentionally, claims that to be an Arab, he needs to return to Palestine, to the place he was traumatically forced to abandon. His cohesion with Arabism – to be an Arab per se – is conditional upon reclaiming his Palestinianism, and this testifies, I assume, to the chasm within the ’48 Palestinian identity not only with the ’67 Palestinians but also with the Arab world in general.

Arabism for the uprooted Palestinian, therefore, does not appear to be a total emancipation from the traumatic identity they acquired after the Six-Day War: the need to belong, coupled with the understanding of the inability of belongingness to everything but to the geographical space, is a driving force in the experience of being a Palestinian refugee.

The Arabic language is the cultural and linguistic reference to all people that belong to the ‘Arab world.’ Yet, among the other references that constitute Arabism or Arab nationalism, Palestinian people share a special relationship with Arabic since it remains a tool of unification between them and the external Arab world. For the former, the Arabic language, after the sociopolitical and geohistorical changes they went through, plays the most important part in helping them cope with their new existential mode: it is by calling themselves ‘Arabs’ that they can affirm their belonging to a geographical space that has undergone transformations on the semantic level (change of names) and the physical level (villages that were apparent and turned through their destruction into absences).

It is hard not to notice that the hollowness the Palestinian experience leaves within the speakers collides with their celebration of Arabism. The interviewees’ constant references to Abdel Nasser points to the attempt of asserting a total cohesion with the Arab world, an assertion that does not only fail to overcome the Palestinian’s sense of loss, but also highlights the moments where the Arabic culture is split by the Palestinian use of the Arabic language to represent a unique existential situation.

The frequent references to the physical roots to the land, particularly when they occur after the reference to Nasserism, show that the speakers’ Palestinianism is intertwined with Arabism. Examples from the interviews illustrate this poignantly. Ahmad, born in 1942 in one of the destroyed villages in the Jenin district, testifies to his belief in Abdel Nasser to return Palestine. Ahmad’s belief in Abdel Nasser surpasses his disappointment during and after the war: while, he says, all the people were expecting the war, they were all disappointed when the “Naksa happened, […] especially that Sawt al-Arab radio station was exaggerating the strength of the Egyptian army”; he admits, “we were all optimistic, but later on, they turned out to be false statements.” But the most noticeable aspect in Ahmad’s testimony is the ongoing loyalty to Abdel Nasser’s dream or endeavor: he accuses “all Arab regimes [to be] responsible for the war as they were in cooperation with America against Abdel Nasser.” Again, it is not a belief in Arabism as such, instead, his belief is associated with the liberation of Palestine. Rahma also expresses this idea, as she says that “[she...
hopes] that the kings and presidents of the Arabs will unite so they can return to [their] country.”

This experience can also be generalized to many other people. Ahmad recalls that most people’s talk was political, especially when they “used to sit together in the courtyard and talk about Gamal Abdel Nasser and his speeches.” The belief in Arabism, which is, to a large degree, symbolized by Nasserism (or people’s great love for Abdel Nasser), thus, circulated among all the villagers at the time. Indeed, in all transcripts examined, I cannot recollect any interviewee who mentioned Abdel Nasser and did not also mention that all the villagers were enthusiastic about hearing his speeches. Ahmad expresses people’s love of Abdel Nasser, describing that “when there was a speech by Abdel Nasser, there was like a curfew in the city, everyone gathered to hear the speech.” Similarly, Rahma re-emphasizes the relationship to Nasser: “We used to gather around the radio to hear the news, and we were happy to hear al-Shuqri’s news on the radio, and we were excited, and we heard the speeches of Gamal Abdel Nasser.”

This takes us to a new point: the ’48 Palestinian ‘I’ cannot define itself without, and, coincidentally, cannot possess itself without, ‘the other.’ Whereas AbuKhoti maintains that the willful remembering of the Palestinians helps to construct a collective identity “[…] separate from the opponent identity who caused the trauma, and escape the appropriation of one’s culture, history, and existence by the colonizer” (2018: 57), the interviews collected for this study undermine this conclusion mainly because of the nuanced differences among the voices that constitute the collective one, which scholars often decide not to address thoroughly.16 The discernable differences between the ’48 and the ’67 Palestinians’ testimonies regarding the Six-Day War not only highlight a very startling difference between each unconscious definition of ‘the other,’ but also tells us so much about the interlacement between the ’48 Palestinian ‘I’ with ‘its other’ (the Jew) that is generated by the historical imperative.

In order to understand the unique relationship between the ’48 Palestinian ‘I’ and the Jewish ‘other,’ I will turn to a testimony of such a relationship between a ’67 Palestinian and the ‘other.’ Interestingly, the ‘other’ is not one concrete entity perceived as one being among the witnesses of the Six-Day War. For the ’67 Palestinian, the ‘other’ does not necessarily mean the exact opposite of the ‘I’; it apparently is ‘any other,’ not the other, on the basis of which the ‘I’ is shaped as the ‘I’ of the postwar era.

---

16 AbuKhoti indeed comments on this point, but she does so curiously and, thus, does not go further in her discussion: “These conflicts within the process of forming a common Palestinian identity make it crucial to adopt the previously mentioned methods of multiple narratives and versions of recollection, to accommodate for the multiplicity of experiences whenever the Palestinian identity is discussed” (2018: 59). She instead decides to overlook such differences: “therefore, highlighting the common suffering and commemorating the Nakba as the source of all suffering is essential to overcome such divisions and unify the collective under this trauma-based constructed cultural identity” (2018: 60).
This first encounter between Ziad and the Jew occurred when Ziad saw the latter in his military uniform. He states that this is when he started to understand what is meant by “the military occupation.” What is interesting here is that he got to know this soldier through the Hebrew words “lekh, lekh” (לך, לך)\(^{17}\) that the soldier told Ziad:

Now, I told you [addressing the interviewer] that, personally, I went to the monastery, and we remained for three nights there. Then, we decided to return home. When we had just exited the monastery, I saw some soldiers, and it was the first time I saw a Jewish soldier. One of them was standing, his face was full of evil, and yelling at us in Hebrew, saying “lekh lekh.” We did not respond; he appeared horrified and was ready to shoot us. This was the first time I saw a soldier, and in this moment, I started to realize what military occupation means.

Ziad accentuates that this meeting was the first in which he encounters an Israeli soldier (he repeats this twice), and this is inseparable from the following remark: apparently, Ziad associated the word “lekh” with the occupation, and this is very understandable since ‘to go’ is to leave the place, and, for him, as we have already noticed earlier in the paper, occupation is where people are forced to leave, to replace their presence in the place to their absence from the place, to cease to belong.

Ziad has encountered a friend named Shimon he knew before the Six-Day War, and this friend was a soldier, too. However, this friend, who offered Ziad a tour in West Jerusalem, was nothing like the other soldier he had met. Ziad’s tendency towards narrating his first exposure to West Jerusalem is optimistic. Rather than hatred or trauma, this meeting is filled with surprise: “It is a world!” he says, referring to it as a new world which he is experiencing with surprise (“we were surprised”).

The attitude of this Jewish friend is not built on the binary oppositions of ‘to be or not to be’ that we saw in the previous soldier’s logic. While Shimon is also a soldier, he does not represent, at least to Ziad, the “military occupation.” Instead, he embodies the opposite – the entrance of the ‘I’ to the ‘other’s world,’ both physically and metaphorically speaking.

Ziad can see beyond the military uniform of Shimon; he can see him not as a soldier, but as an opportunity of reworking his ‘I.’ Ziad’s interest apparently lies in expanding his attachment to the geographical space by entering a new world, which stands in great contrast to the ‘48 Palestinian. Ziad says when he walked in Jerusalem’s Jaffa Street for the first time that he “[…] imagined himself walking in Damascus or Beirut.” Ziad is familiarizing himself with East Jerusalem; he is personifying the ‘other’ and, at the same time, expanding his ‘I’ on account of ‘the other,’ that is, transforming it into a domestic entity that cannot be reduced to a mere ‘friendly other.’ He subjects it to the imaginative process of familiarization, embracing and understanding. As a matter of fact, the ’67 Palestinians had, as Ziad testifies, no

---

\(^{17}\) The Hebrew word "לך" means “go.”
problem with dealing with the Jews after the Six-Day War: “The people of Jerusalem welcomed the Jews as tourists; there was no kind of hatred against them.”

To sharpen this idea, it is useful to hear how a ‘48 Palestinian expresses his attitude toward the Jews after the war, once one encountered them weekly, and I would like to return to the ‘48 refugee Ahmad. He felt it to be unfortunate that social relationships between both sides were normalized: “Unfortunately, we treated them kindly. They used to come every Saturday to shop, and some statements became common just as ‘lira ya Khawaja’” (emphasis mine). More precisely, the fact that “Israeli men and women used to come to shop and social relationships happened between them and the people” was “frustrating.” Ahmad cannot even name the Jews, for he reuses the plural pronouns such as “them” and “they” rather than using the word “Jews” as if the dichotomous limit between “them” and “us” had not yet been blurred. This is then the opposite of Ziad’s reflection. Abdul Majed, the Palestinian refugee, cannot accept the growing normalizing relationship between the two sides either: after the war, “rather than protesting against them so as to show to the world that we refuse their staying among us, when the Jews entered the country, we did not deal with them as enemies” (emphasis mine). The social relationships got better, for “[Arabs] started selling [Jews] goods like vegetables, clothes, and pottery,” and “some people started learning Hebrew.” Abdul Majed says that “in addition, they were selling lands to Jews and entering cities without restrictions.” Considering the either ‘I’ or ‘other’ formula, no explanation is needed why Abdul Majed’s stance toward the Jewish other is anything but acceptance. Ibrahim even goes further with the rejection, as he says that he did not deal with Jews after he was exposed to them at all: “After 1967, I visited Jerusalem. There were great changes due to the Jews. I did not deal with the Jewish after the war.” Let us not forget how Abu Jameel insists on not only dismissing the Jew as a representative of all rich people, but also to emphasize this richness. Abu Jameel’s attitude toward generalizing the Jewish person, along with his description of him as a rich man, is an indicator of his unwillingness to mention him in further detail. He refuses to accept his existence. The detachment and lack of connection between both sides is deeply pronounced.

What was frustrating for Ziad is the experience of the inability of communicating with this ‘friendly other.’ When he called Shimon’s office to converse with him, his secretary could not communicate with Ziad, either in Arabic or in English. Thus, Ziad wanted – he was not forced – to learn Hebrew in order to enter the other’s world from its ‘wide door.’ Let us hear Ziad’s own narration:

Now, after some days, I called Shimo’on. His secretary answered the phone, and she did not know any English words, and I did not know any Hebrew words. She spoke Hebrew and I, English and Arabic. Everything I remember from her speech was “lo ba” [not coming]. When I saw Shimo’on later, I narrated this story to him, and he said that I was supposed to learn Hebrew. I

18 Khawaja is used to describe an honored man with high socioeconomic status, and ‘lira’ was the local name for the currencies then. Hence, “Lira ya Khawaja” means “One lira, Khawaja.”
said to him that I wanted to learn Hebrew, and he took me to Bet Ha’am. I was the first Arabic student who went to this place to learn Hebrew.

Ziad’s inability to communicate with the ‘Hebrew other’ presented an obstacle. Ziad is not satisfied with the response “lo ba” (לא בא) and he wants more – he wants a discussion, a conversation, a path to total understanding. Even his decision to learn Hebrew was motivated by this accident: it was Shimon who, after hearing the story from Ziad, who told him to learn Hebrew, and Ziad accepted this offer. After all, the entrance of the ’67 Palestinians into the ‘Jewish realm’ faced neither significant obstacles nor clear limits: “[…] we were happy as well, as we went to many places in Israel and no one could stop us. In addition, we were loved more than the Arabs of 1948.”

For a ’67 Palestinian, the ‘other’ – not figured as the “Israeli soldier” who represents for Ziad the “military occupation” – can be the medium through which the ‘I’ extends itself. This is not the case for Ibrahim, for example, who is still thinking that the physical place is exclusive either to him or to the Israeli soldier:

There will be a generation that will fight and take them out of here as this is an Arab land. […] If I walked in Jerusalem next to an Israeli soldier, he would be afraid and ready to shoot me. Why is he afraid? Because it is not his land or his father’s land. Until now, I walk with high spirit, but in Tel-Aviv the soldier walks with fear.

Ahmad goes even further; he did not only resist the Israeli soldiers – and for this he was arrested and imprisoned for nine months – but he also could not accept the appearance of Jewish Israeli civilians in the Palestinian lands: he highlights the fact that even after the appearance of the resistance movements (Fedayeen), who carried out operations against the Israeli army, “Jews kept coming on Saturdays and after that, the borders with Israel were opened so [they] were able to go […] whenever they wanted.”

In contrast to the ’48 Palestinian ‘I,’ the ‘other’ for ’67 Palestinians does not substitute the ‘I’ in place and time; rather, it is the road to new places and times. For Ziad, the image of the Jew as an imaginary construct associated with the trauma of the Nakba immediately changes after the first meeting. This is understandable, since the other, contrary to the ’48 Palestinian’s ‘other,’ does not appear as a danger to the ontological existence. The ’67 Palestinian’s ‘I’ has the freedom to create new dialogues with the ‘other’ since the former can claim total existence without depending on the presence of the ‘other’ within time and space. The ’67 Palestinian can extract self-agency without being crippled in the process of getting rid of its ‘other’; they can celebrate selfhood without struggling with a dialectical part that constitutes part of the self.
Primary Sources

This chapter worked with interviews recorded from men and women born between 1936 and 1958. At the time of the interviews, they lived in Beit Annan, Bethlehem, Marda, Jerusalem, Qalqilya, Ras al-Arquob, Sara’a, Sindyana, Tabur and the Kalandia refugee camp. Their names were abbreviated to first names for this publication to protect their identity. The full names are known to the author and the editors; the interviews have been archived.

References


