



## PERSPECTIVES

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### The False “Nakba” Narrative

by Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael G. Bouchnik-Chen

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The term “Nakba,” originally coined to describe the magnitude of the self-inflicted Palestinian and Arab defeat in the 1948 war, has become in recent decades a synonym for Palestinian victimhood, with failed aggressors transformed into hapless victims and vice versa. Israel should do its utmost to uproot this false image by exposing its patently false historical basis.

Nowadays, the failed Palestinian Arab attempt to destroy the state of Israel at birth, and the attendant flight of some 600,000 Palestinian Arabs, has come to be known internationally as the “Nakba,” the catastrophe, with its accompanying false implication of hapless victimhood.

This, ironically, was the opposite of the original meaning of the term, when it was first applied to the Arab-Israeli conflict by the Syrian historian Constantin Zureiq. In his 1948 pamphlet *The Meaning of the Disaster (Ma’na al-Nakba)*, Zureiq attributed the Palestinian/Arab flight to the stillborn pan-Arab assault on the nascent Jewish state rather than to a premeditated Zionist design to disinherit the Palestinian Arabs:

When the battle broke out, our public diplomacy began to speak of our imaginary victories, to put the Arab public to sleep and talk of the ability to overcome and win easily – until the Nakba happened...We must admit our mistakes...and recognize the extent of our responsibility for the disaster that is our lot.

Zureiq subscribed to this critical view for decades. In a later book, *The Meaning of the Catastrophe Anew (Ma’na al-Nakbah Mujaddadan)* published after the June 1967 war, he defined that latest defeat as a “Nakba” rather than a “Naksa” (or setback), as it came to be known in Arab discourse, since – just as in 1948 – it was a self-inflicted disaster emanating from the Arab world’s failure to confront Zionism.

At that time, the term “Nakba” was glaringly absent from Arab and/or Palestinian discourse. Its first mention – in George Antonius’s influential 1938 book *The Arab Awakening* – had nothing to do with the (as yet nonexistent) Arab-Israeli conflict but rather with the post-WWI creation of the modern Middle East (“The year 1920 has an evil name in Arab annals: it is referred to as the Year of the Catastrophe or, in Arabic, *Aam al-Nakba*”).

Similarly, in his 1956 book *Facts on the Question of Palestine (Haqa’iq an Qadiyat Falastin)*, Hajj Amin Husseini, the leader of the Palestinian Arabs from the early 1920s to 1948, used the term “al-Karitha” to describe the Palestinian Arab collapse and dispersal. According to Palestinian academic Anaheed Al-Hardan of the American University of Beirut, this reflected Husseini’s desire to avoid the term “Nakba,” which was widely associated at the time with a self-inflicted Palestinian Arab disaster – either through land sales to Zionists, failure to put up a fight, or the issuing of instructions to the people to leave.

Nor did the term resurface for decades following the 1948 war – not even in the PLO’s hallowed founding document, the Palestinian Covenant (1964, revised in 1968). It was only in the late 1980s that it began to be widely perceived as an Israeli-inflicted injustice. Ironically, it was a group of politically engaged, self-styled Israeli “new historians” who provided the Palestinian national movement with perhaps its best propaganda tool by turning the saga of Israel’s birth upside down, with aggressors turned into hapless victims and vice versa, on the basis of massive misrepresentation of archival evidence.

While earlier generations of Palestinian academics and intellectuals had refrained from exploring the origins of the 1948 defeat, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, who was brought to Gaza and the West Bank as part of the 1993 Oslo Accords and allowed to establish his Palestinian Authority (PA) in parts of those territories, grasped the immense potential of reincarnating the Nakba as a symbol of Palestinian victimhood rather than a self-inflicted disaster. In 1998, he proclaimed May 15 a national day of remembrance of the Nakba. In subsequent years, “Nakba Day” has become an integral component of the Palestinian national narrative and the foremost event commemorating their 1948 “catastrophe.”

Israeli sensitivity vis-à-vis the term “Nakba” grew after it was reported that on May 15, 2007, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon telephoned PA President Mahmoud Abbas to express empathy with the Palestinian people in honor of “Nakba Day.” The deputy head of Israel’s UN mission complained that the word “Nakba” is a tool of Arab propaganda used to undermine the legitimacy of the establishment of the State of Israel and should not be part of the UN’s lexicon.

While Israeli diplomats were busy dissuading their counterparts from falling for the PA’s false narrative, in July 2007 the Knesset debated a decision by Education

Minister Yuly Tamir to include the Nakba as a topic on the annual syllabus for the Arab minority in Israel.

Fortunately, on March 30, 2011, the Budget Principles Law (known as Amendment #40) –“Reduction of financial allocations or support due to activity against the principles of the state” – was published in the Israeli official registry. Amendment #40 added a section to the Budget Principles Law of 1985 authorizing the Minister of Finance to reduce financial allocations or support to any organization or entity that receives state funding if it engages in any of five activities:

1. Rejecting the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state;
2. Inciting racism, violence, or terrorism;
3. Supporting armed struggle or an act of terror by an enemy state or a terrorist organization against the State of Israel;
4. Commemorating Independence Day or the day of the establishment of the state as a day of mourning;
5. Vandalizing or physically desecrating the state’s flag or symbol.

Amendment #40, unofficially nicknamed the Nakba Law, is now entrenched in the Israeli juridical and parliamentary daily discourse, though it faced strong criticism from Arab parties who argued that it fails the test of freedom of expression. In their view, the law undermines freedom of artistic expression at events such as theater productions or poetry readings that deal explicitly with the Nakba, Palestinian refugees, or the yearning to return to the homeland.

The legitimization of the now common use of the term “Nakba” in the Israeli official and public discourse, whether positively or negatively oriented, provides a service to the Palestinian cause. If considered to reflect an integral segment of Israeli history, the term contradicts Israel’s longstanding, rightful position rejecting responsibility for the creation of the refugee problem. In the process, it legitimizes the false Palestinian victimhood narrative that defines the Nakba as the “greatest sin of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

The “Nakba” is not a fact. It is a manipulative and catchy term designed to service the Palestinian propaganda campaign against Israel. Israel should refrain from legitimizing the term, as it imposes a false sense of guilt or culpability for the creation of the refugee problem onto the state. Nor should the word be used to refer to the mass deportation of Jews from the Arab states, as doing so creates an impression of equivalent injustice. The flight of the Palestinian Arabs was the direct result of a failed “war of extermination and momentous massacre” (in the words of the Arab League’s secretary-general).

The Arab states' expulsion of their Jewish populations was an unequivocal act of ethnic cleansing.

Israel would be well advised to hearken again to the momentous speech of Abba Eban, then Israeli Ambassador to the UN, on November 17, 1958. He addressed the refugee issue without using the term Nakba:

The Arab refugee problem was caused by a war of aggression, launched by the Arab States against Israel in 1947 and 1948. Let there be no mistake. If there had been no war against Israel, with its consequent harvest of bloodshed, misery, panic and flight, there would be no problem of Arab refugees today. Once you determine the responsibility for that war, you have determined the responsibility for the refugee problem. Nothing in the history of our generation is clearer or less controversial than the initiative of Arab governments for the conflict out of which the refugee tragedy emerged. The historic origins of that conflict are clearly defined by the confessions of Arab governments themselves: "This will be a war of extermination," declared the Secretary-General of the Arab League speaking for the governments of six Arab States. "It will be a momentous massacre to be spoken of like the Mongolian massacre and the Crusades."

*Dr. Raphael G. Bouchnik-Chen is a retired colonel who served as a senior analyst in IDF Military Intelligence.*