



PALESTINIAN VOICES

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE NAKBA THROUGH A TEENAGER'S EYES

MUHAMMAD HALLAJ

Muhammad Hallaj, a political scientist specializing in Palestinian affairs and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was born in Qalqilya, Palestine, in 1932. After earning his doctorate from the University of Florida in 1966, he taught at Florida's Jacksonville University and then at the University of Jordan in Amman. Hallaj returned to the West Bank in 1975, where he served as dean of social sciences and later as academic vice president of Birzeit University before becoming the first director of the Council for Higher Education in the West Bank and Gaza. While taking a leave to go to Harvard University as a visiting scholar in 1983, Hallaj was denied a visa to return to the West Bank. Among the positions he has held since then have been editor of Palestine Perspectives (1983–1991), member (and subsequent head) of the Palestinian delegation on Refugees to the multilateral peace talks following the Madrid conference (1991–1993), and executive director of the Palestine Center and the Jerusalem Fund. At the request of JPS, Dr. Hallaj shared his memories of the 1948 war and its aftermath, which he experienced as a high school student in Jaffa, and then in Qalqilya and Tulkarm.

PERHAPS BECAUSE I was sixteen at the time, and perhaps because I was in school in Jaffa, the epicenter of the political and military earthquake that ended in the destruction of Palestine and the dismantling of Palestinian society, the events of the catastrophe of 1948 retain a searing clarity in my memory sixty years later.

JAFFA: ORANGES AND EXPLOSIVES

From my youthful vantage point, it began on a morning in late fall 1947. I arrived at my school, al-Amiriyya, in Jaffa. On the wall facing the entrance of the school was a small blackboard where every morning something clever or interesting (referred to as *bikmat al-yawm*, or “wisdom of the day”) would be written in chalk. That particular day, 30 November to be exact, I glanced at the board, and what I saw there I will never forget: “Yesterday, on 29 November 1947, the United Nations decided to partition Palestine and establish a Jewish state in it.” I was stunned. What did it mean to “partition” a country? How could you establish a country inside a country? Why would the United Nations do this? Why didn't they come and see for themselves that Palestine is our country? The whole idea was absurd and incredible.

I could not guess at the time that this was the day we, the Arab people of Palestine, set out on what the Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra later called a “journey through the cosmic absurd.” This reality was to unfold bit by bit until its cumulative effect doomed not only Palestine but the entire Middle East to a new era of injustice and turmoil that is hard to fathom to this day.

I am not sure anyone can say with certainty exactly where and how it began, but within days of the UN partition decision, fighting broke out between the Arab majority and the Jewish minority. Arabs ambushed and killed Jews, and Jews ambushed and killed Arabs. Mixed Arab-Jewish urban areas such as Haifa and Jaffa became scenes of the worst atrocities. For example, the Zionists introduced the car bomb as a weapon in 1948 when they left a truck loaded with explosives concealed under a layer of oranges parked in a business district in Jaffa and blew it up. One of their favorite techniques was to drive a pickup truck through Arab towns at high speed, with gunmen in the back spraying bullets as they went. I witnessed this once myself in Jaffa. I had been studying with a friend, in the way we often did, reading from books as we walked back and forth along the road fronting the school residence hall. Suddenly, we heard rapid gunfire. We threw ourselves on the ground as a vehicle sped by carrying gunmen firing at pedestrians. We were not hurt, but other people were.

One day, as we sat in our classroom, a powerful explosion shook the building. Soon we heard the sirens of ambulances on the way to the Dajani Hospital near our school. Then we learned that a bomb had exploded in front of a coffeehouse on our street. We were told to go directly home, not to go anywhere near the scene of the explosion, and to walk in small groups. Of course, the minute we were let out, we rushed straight to the scene of the explosion. A Jewish pickup truck, we learned, had driven by and someone in the back had rolled out a barrel full of explosives that blew up right in front of the café. A lot of people were killed. The same thing was done in al-Abbasiyya, a small town not far from Jaffa, this time in front of a grammar school. The children had been playing in the schoolyard during recess when the barrel of explosives was rolled out, killing and wounding many.

After the school bombing, I remember very clearly thinking to myself: I am going to the hospital in Jaffa to see the bodies so that I will remember. At the hospital I saw corpses of at least half a dozen children laid out on stone slabs. I don't think any of them was more than ten years old.

TO “SAFETY” IN QALQILYA

Jaffa was becoming increasingly isolated from other Arab areas as the Jews captured one village after another. My family was living near Jaffa, in Wadi Hunayn, which the Jews called Nitziona. One day my father decided that it was too dangerous for me to have to commute back and forth to school every day, so he had me stay at home. I was a junior in high school at the time. Later he decided that it was unsafe for the whole family to remain in Wadi Hunayn, and that it was safer to move us back to Qalqilya, where he was from. So we were

loaded together with our belongings onto a truck and shipped to Qalqilya. We went to live with my grandmother in her house. We were now refugees. My father, of course, lost his job and became an unemployed police officer.

Qalqilya did not have a high school at the time, so I commuted to Tulkarm, just north of Qalqilya, to finish high school. I completed the unfinished part of my junior year at al-Fadiliyya high school. During the summer of 1948, the al-Fadiliyya building filled up with refugees escaping the war. When it was time for the school to reopen in the fall, the refugees refused to leave, saying “either send us back to our homes or let us stay here!” As a result, we high school students were taken to the Khadduri School, a private agricultural school also in Tulkarm, and that’s where we finished our senior year. From our school we could hear gunfire every day, because it was located very close to the front line.

Not long after we had arrived from Jaffa, the Jews blew up a passenger train near Tulkarm. I remember that a few friends and I went to a building in the city, which was known as *bayt al-amwat*—the house of the dead. I don’t know why it was called that, or what it was normally used for. The bodies of the bombing victims were kept in that building for the relatives to come and claim them. When we got there, we saw dozens of corpses in the most terrible condition. In fact, some were just piles of body parts; others were burned beyond recognition. That’s how “terrorism” came to the Middle East. Yet today, the original victims of terrorism—the people of Palestine—are almost universally seen as the inventors of terror. It makes you wonder about how much of history is written that way.

Britain had created this terrible mess in Palestine by facilitating the immigration of an alien people who came not to share a life with us but to displace us, but when things got bad the British decided it was time to jump ship. They pensioned off people who had served in the mandate government, like my father. In fact, they even gave him a rifle and some ammunition, presumably for personal protection. Even before they left, the government had virtually stopped functioning. People had to fend for themselves as best as they could. My father and other policemen found it unacceptable to leave people without law and order, so they decided to resume their work as policemen without pay, since there was no authority to pay them. He continued to volunteer his police services until two years later, when the part of Palestine that had escaped seizure by the Jews—later called the “West Bank”—was annexed to Transjordan in 1950.

PREPARING FOR DEFENSE

Qalqilya was a small town, or even a large village, with about ten thousand inhabitants. Surrounded by a number of smaller villages, it soon found itself on the front lines of the Arab-Jewish war. What does a rural community do to protect itself, without any help from a government or outside force, when there’s a war going on? The Palestinians were particularly unprepared. The fighters were volunteers, and very few had weapons. Only a decade earlier

(1936–1939), they had been through an exhausting rebellion against the British. Many people were killed during that struggle. The top leadership had been imprisoned or deported and sent into exile; many others were hanged. The people had been totally disarmed. So when the fighting between Arabs and Jews broke out in 1948, the Palestinians were not at all equipped to defend themselves and their lands. In Qalqilya, women sold their jewelry to raise money for purchasing arms from abroad. The town chose a committee of several persons to go to North Africa to look for rifles left over from World War II collected and stored by Bedouin in Egypt and Libya. The townspeople were afraid to send young men, who might have known something about guns, because they thought that young men might spend the money on fun in Egypt, so they chose “pious” older men who could be trusted to do the right thing. These men returned with a handful of old rusted Italian rifles that had been buried in the North African desert since the allied forces pushed the Axis powers out of North Africa.

Another thing the people of Qalqilya did to protect their town was to take a couple of trucks to a metal shop in Jaffa and have them converted to armored vehicles by covering their sides with steel plates. So Qalqilya had its own “tank corps.” They also bought a primitive cannon. When it was brought to Qalqilya, I went with other kids to see that marvel of military technology. It was a big pipe, perhaps ten inches in diameter, on two big wheels. It had a little hole in the lower part of the barrel. You were supposed to fire it like an old musket, by stuffing gunpowder and pieces of metal down the pipe and then lighting the fuse to let it rip. Some young Qalqilya men decided to try it. When they lit the fuse and fired it, it made an awesome sound, but it spun around, and no one ever knew if it hit anything or where it landed. I think that was the first and last time it was fired.

Soon after the partition resolution, the people of Qalqilya had decided to build some “fortifications” around the town. They measured the town’s circumference and divided the number of meters by the number of able-bodied men, each of whom was then assigned to dig a set portion of the trench that was to enclose the town. Soon Qalqilya was completely surrounded by a defensive trench. The men also built a number of round concrete structures with little openings to serve as watchtowers. Every able-bodied man between the ages of 18 and 45, if I remember correctly, was to stand guard one night a week. I was too young to be required to stand guard, but one day I insisted that my father allow me to do so. I must have made a lot of fuss, because my father finally handed me his rifle and told me to go ahead. I stood there all night, staring into the darkness, too afraid even to blink in order to be ready at any moment to repel an attack. Fortunately we were not attacked that night (although the town had been attacked repeatedly before). I say “fortunately” because we had no military training or experience or backup support of any kind. In fact, each one of us was responsible for providing his own ammunition, which was a challenge, as ammunition was scarce and expensive, and nobody had a job or income then. But everyone did what he could.

As the end of the mandate approached, fighting became more intense. One day we saw Jewish gunmen attack and occupy Qaqun, a small Palestinian village not far from Tulkarm. We watched the battle from our schoolyard. The Jewish attackers wore red and white *battab* (kaffiyehs) as they surrounded the village. The purpose of the *battab* was to deceive the Arab defenders into mistaking the attackers for Transjordanian army reinforcements.

MAKU AWAMIR—“WE HAVE NO ORDERS”

It was around that time—sometime in the spring or early summer of 1948—that the Jews overran and occupied a small Arab village to the west, called Kafr Kassim, whose people became refugees in our town. A contingent of the “Arab Legion” (as the Transjordanian army was called) showed up dragging guns behind jeeps, parked themselves on a street at the western edge of Qalqilya, and began firing at Kafr Kassim. A large crowd of boys, including myself, stood near them watching the performance. Their guns, maybe two-inch mortars, looked like toy artillery. When they fired we saw a puff of smoke rise between the orange trees surrounding the village. We spectators thought they were firing blanks just for show because the Jews did not bother to respond. After a few minutes the Jordanians got in their jeeps and drove away. It was not exactly a counteroffensive.

It wasn't long afterward that the British forces completed their evacuation from Palestine, and on 14 May 1948 the Jews proclaimed their state. The next day, regular army units from the neighboring Arab states (Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Transjordan*) arrived, noisily declaring their intention to save Palestine. In the end, they did very little fighting. They took positions behind the front line, which was manned entirely by Palestinian civilian volunteers, and made no effort to recover any lost territory. The Egyptians made their stand in the Gaza district and a few towns in the Negev; the Syrians, in a small enclave along the Syrian-Palestinian border; the Jordanians, in Jerusalem; and the Iraqis, in central Palestine—including Qalqilya.

With school out for the summer, I was delighted to learn that the Iraqi forces planned to organize, train, and equip Palestinian volunteers to help in the defense of their country. They needed someone to man an office to register volunteers. I applied, was accepted, and was given a small office furnished with a table and a chair in the Qalqilya police station, which served as headquarters for the Iraqi army in the area. I sat in that little office and waited for volunteers to come to me. They did, and I prepared lists. Nothing came out of it, however. It might have been a problem of “*maku awamir*”—Iraqi dialect for “we have no orders,” which is what Iraqi commanders told people when they were asked why they were not fighting. Or maybe someone in authority had figured

* The Transjordanian Arab Legion, being under British command, had been stationed in Palestine before the British troop withdrawal.

out that it wouldn't be a good idea to arm Palestinians, who might take the war seriously. In any case, no volunteers were ever trained or armed, and "*maku awamir*" became the most infamous expression in the Arabic language throughout Palestine, even far from where the Iraqis were hunkered down. In the end, most Palestinians came to believe that the Arab states had sent troops into Palestine in 1948 to assist in the implementation of the partition of the country, rather than to oppose it.

So we were forced to rely on ourselves. The old rifles that had been purchased in North Africa turned out to be worse than nothing: When one was fired, it made a big burst of fire and at night gave away one's position from miles away. Sometimes the rifles were riddled with rust, and when you fired a bullet you couldn't pull back the bolt to put another bullet in the firing chamber. Such a rifle was not much better than a stick in your hands.

KEEPING THE ENEMY AT BAY

I remember that when a battle raged around Qalqilya, which happened frequently, volunteers went knocking on doors to collect food to feed the fighters. People gave of what they had: a loaf of bread here, a boiled egg there, a handful of olives, a piece of cheese—whatever people could spare. That was how Qalqilya defended itself in 1948.

The cleverest act of resistance undertaken by the people of Qalqilya was deceiving their enemies so as to dissuade them from attacking the town. One day, the Jews were seen mobilizing a large number of vehicles and troops in the orange groves just west of Qalqilya. Fearing that they were launching their biggest effort yet to overrun the town, people arranged for trucks (of which Qalqilya, a prosperous farming town, had dozens, previously used to transport produce every day) to drive out of town and return under the cover of darkness with their headlights blazing, then go out of town again without lights, only to return to town a second time, creating the impression that reinforcements were pouring into Qalqilya to help defend it. Qalqilya was not attacked, and we slept soundly that night.

As the autumn progressed, the situation grew more desperate. I was a senior by then at the Khadduri School in Tulkarm, which was right on the front line. One day, as we walked around the schoolyard during recess, we saw UN soldiers stretching a barbed wire across the fields just west of town. They were demarcating a "truce" or "cease-fire" line between the new state of Israel and us. Witnessing our country being dismembered and torn from our hands and hearts before our eyes, we felt that as high school seniors we were old enough to do something about what was being done to us and our country. Despite what we had already seen of the Arab performance, we decided to volunteer. We elected a committee that would go to offer our services to the commander of the nearest Arab military camp, which belonged to the Iraqi army. When the committee representatives returned, they reported that our offer to volunteer had been rejected because "they didn't have boots for us." It was terrible to

have to watch helplessly, as a mere spectator, while your people and your country were being torn apart. This was probably the hardest thing that young Palestinians who lived through the events of 1948 had to endure emotionally.

I don't know how many people died defending Qalqilya and keeping it from becoming a part of Israel in 1948, but I remember that so many people were dying that extra graves were dug in the town's cemetery and kept in reserve to be used as needed.

Qalqilya not only defended itself in 1948, but it also helped to defend a number of smaller neighboring villages, such as Taybeh, al-Tira, and Jaljulya. The town installed a siren on the top of the mosque's minaret, and when reinforcements were needed to help another village the siren was sounded to alert men to go to their aid. When they heard the siren, they assembled in the little square in front of the municipality, and trucks carried them to wherever the battle was taking place.

AFTERMATH

Although Taybeh, al-Tira, and Jaljulya were attacked repeatedly by Jewish forces, they were not conquered. But in the summer of 1949, when the UN-mandated armistice with Israel was negotiated, the Jordanians acceded to the demands of the Israelis, who demanded that the villages of Taybeh, al-Tira, and Jaljulya be ceded to Israel. Qalqilya, on the other hand, remained in the Arab-controlled territory of Palestine until the 1967 war, when Israel finally seized it like the rest of Palestine.

The town of Qalqilya had remained in Arab hands, but it lost almost all of its farmland. When the armistice lines were drawn, Qalqilya found itself on one side of the barbed wire and its farmland on the other side, in Israel. Like Palestinians everywhere, the people at first refused to believe what was happening to them. People who became refugees believed that within weeks the fighting would end and they would return to their homes and their land. War always creates refugees, and refugees always go home after the war. Why should it be any different for us? Palestinians tended to think of the ordeal as a nightmare from which they expected to wake up soon.

An incident that took place in Qalqilya is a good example of the sense of unreality about what was happening to Palestine. When people learned that United Nations "truce supervisors" were about to show up to demarcate "borders" between Israel and Palestine, and that their orange groves would all end up on the Jewish side of the line, some people dismantled the huge water pumps they used to irrigate their orchards and brought them home with the idea of reinstalling them later, when a settlement would be reached and they would be able return to their land. A few days later, one of the families changed its mind and took the pumps back to the orchards and reinstalled them. They said that if the Jews took the orchards without the pumps their trees would die, but by returning the pumps the trees could be irrigated and kept alive until the war ended and they could recover their orchards. What happened, of course,

was that the Jews got the land, the trees, and the pumps, and the Palestinians got nothing for their pains.

In the meantime, and up until 1950, when Jordan annexed the West Bank, the people in Qalqilya risked their lives—some died—stealing oranges from their own orchards, which were now on the Israeli side. It was a common sight in Qalqilya to see small groups of young men carrying burlap sacks, waiting for darkness to fall so they could sneak across the barbed wire that now constituted the border between Israel and Palestine. The young men entered groves that they had until recently owned and filled their sacks with oranges before sneaking back. The following morning, they would sell the oranges, and that was how they made a living.

The problem worsened when the Israelis began to run armed patrols along the line. Sometimes they caught the “infiltrators” (as they came to be called) and demanded monetary fines in exchange for their release. If these people had any money they would not have taken the risk in the first place. So, to avoid being caught by the Israelis, the infiltrators began to take weapons with them along with the sacks. When an Israeli patrol showed up they fired at it to cover their escape. So the Israelis started shooting infiltrators, and many young men died while trying to steal a sack of oranges from their own family groves.

When farmers lose their farmland, what do they do? If there is land available to reclaim, they create new farmland. Eventually, the people of Qalqilya cleared the hilly area to the east of the town. They used dynamite to blow rocks out of the side of the mountain until they had new land where they could grow crops. They planted citrus trees, grape vines, figs, and olive trees. They even dug wells, installed pumps, and irrigated vegetable farms. They recreated their lost economy.

In 1967, the Israelis completed their conquest of Palestine, seizing the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including Qalqilya. They bore down on Qalqilya with a particular vengeance. They tried to destroy the town completely, loading many of the inhabitants onto trucks and dumping them at the Jordan River, telling them to “go to King Hussein.” My father was among them. After dynamiting and bulldozing a substantial part of the town, foreign embassies in Tel Aviv found out what Israel was doing in Qalqilya and had their governments intervene. International pressure forced Israel to stop destroying the town.

Later, when Israel decided to separate itself from the Palestinians by building what the Palestinians call the Apartheid Wall, Qalqilya was given an extra dose of punishment. The wall not only passed by the town, it surrounded it, leaving only a gate guarded by Israeli soldiers for people to go in and out. Instead of a town, Qalqilya became a prison, and so it remains until today.