

A sociological reading of the impact of the Nakba on Palestinian families: displacement, massacres, and the fragmentation of Palestinian society

قراءة سوسيولوجية لتأثير النكبة على الأسر الفلسطينية: تهجير، ومجازر وتفتيت المجتمع الفلسطيني

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Abstract:

This article examines the sociological impact of the Nakba on Palestinian families, including displacement, massacres, and the fragmentation of Palestinian society. It also examines its profound impact on Palestinian identity, the self, family structure, and the role of women in preserving Palestinian heritage in its broadest sense. It highlights the Nakba as a settler-colonial catastrophe that resulted in ethnic cleansing and systematic attempts to erase Palestinian national existence. It also examines the ongoing struggle for the right of return, historically comparing it to Algeria's resistance to colonialism. It also explores the role of political movements, such as Fatah, in shaping Palestinian identity and countering Zionist narratives that deny Palestinian historical continuity. The article delves into the geopolitical background of the Balfour Declaration, analyzing its political and colonial objectives. By integrating historical, political, and social analysis, this research offers a critical perspective on the Palestinian-Zionist conflict, affirming the legal and historical right of return as a fundamental principle for peace and justice.

Keywords: Nakba, Family, Women, Palestinian identity, settler colonialism, right of return, Balfour Declaration.

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An introduction:

When defining the essence of the Palestinian cause from a rigorous historical perspective, it becomes clear that the root of the ongoing conflict lies in the struggle between Palestinian rights and Zionist settler-colonial ambitions (Saleh El Shakbawi (2020) **the Ideology of the Palestinian-Zionist Conflict over Land**, p65). The Zionist movement has engaged in a systematic effort to seize historical Palestine, transforming the conflict from a territorial dispute into an existential struggle over identity, history, and sovereignty. This struggle is not merely about the division of land, as framed by international resolutions such as the 1947 UN Partition Plan (Resolution 181), but rather about the Zionist desire to establish an exclusively Jewish state (Saleh El Shakbawi (2018) **the Philosophy of the Palestinian State at the expense of the Palestinian people**, pp38–39).

However, a wealth of historical, social, and cultural evidence refutes the Zionist narrative that seeks to erase Palestinian identity. For instance, the 1919 study *Rebuilding Palestine*, published by the Palestinian Anti-Zionism League in New York, affirms the deep-rooted presence of Palestinian national consciousness in the early 20th century. The Nakba of 1948 marked a devastating rupture in Palestinian history, displacing millions and fragmenting their identity. Contrary to Zionist claims that Palestinian nationalism emerged only as a reaction to Zionist colonization, historical records prove the long-standing national identity of Palestinians (Saleh El Shakbawi (2020).**The Zionist Philosophy of Herzl**, pp. 103–104).

To explore this issue in depth, this study will first examine the historical formation of Palestinian identity before the Nakba, followed by an analysis of Zionist settler-colonial policies and their long-term impact. Finally, the study will discuss how these historical developments continue to shape Palestinian resistance and national consciousness. This raises key questions: How has Zionist settler colonialism shaped Palestinian identity? **What historical evidence contradicts Zionist narratives about Palestinian nationalism? How has the Nakba influenced Palestinian selfhood, and National Consciousness?**

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Figure N° 1: Palestinian Exodus: The Journey of Displacement

What is the Nakba ?

The Nakba is the systematic and comprehensive destruction of Palestinian society, identity, and national existence in all its dimensions—geographical, demographic, cultural, political, and psychological. It involved the forced expulsion of more than 800,000 Palestinians into exile and diaspora, both near and far, including Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq. Additionally, more than 530 villages and towns were destroyed, over 16,000 Palestinians were killed, and more than 52 massacres were committed by Zionist militias such as the “Stern Gang, Irgun, and Haganah”. These groups carried out one of the largest ethnic cleansing operations in modern human history against the Palestinian people, using it as a tool to eliminate the rightful landowners who had remained on their land for thousands of years.

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Figure N°2: *Palestinian Exodus: The Journey of Displacement*

Is the Return Possible?

For 77 years of continuous struggle and an ongoing Nakba against our heroic people, Palestinians have never forgotten their homeland, nor has their right to it diminished over time. The right of return is a spiritual belief and a sacred right, passed down from generation to generation—men and women, children and youth alike—who have rejected the Zionist claim that says return is impossible. Israel has sealed its doors with iron and reinforced concrete, dismantled the foundations of Palestinian existence, and shattered its social and political fabric, asserting that Palestinians are strangers who must leave this so-called “Hebrew land.” However, (Costantine Zurayk (1948), pp186–187) reality defies this racist Zionist perception and reaffirms that Palestinians have an undeniable historical right to their land—one that does not expire or disappear.

Algeria serves as a powerful example: the French occupier tried to erase the idea of an Algerian Algeria, working with all its material, ideological, military, and cultural forces to “Frenchify” Algeria and sever it from its true identity and Arab heritage. Yet, after 132 years of occupation, France failed to alienate Algerians from their geographical and historical essence. The power of Algerian justice triumphed

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over French military might, and Algeria won its independence at the high cost of 1.5 million martyrs between 1954 and 1962.

Following in the footsteps of Algeria's victorious revolution, Palestinians, too, have never lost hope in overcoming the occupation and defeating Israel. Yasser Arafat, during his visits to Algeria, would always request to walk through Didouche Mourad Street, contemplating the towering buildings constructed by the French, who once believed that their rule in Algeria was eternal and that it had become an inseparable part of France. But when he asked, where are the builders of these structures now? the answer was clear: they were defeated, humiliated, and forced to flee across the sea, dragging their failure behind the

(*) Faced with this tragic yet inspiring reality, Yasser Arafat would smile, reassured in his deep conviction of Palestine's inevitable victory and the eventual collapse of the Zionist occupation, just as the French occupation fell in Algeria. Despite the 77-year-old wound in Palestinian identity, we have succeeded in reconstructing and redefining it both nationally and humanly. The Fatah movement played a pivotal role in transforming the oral narrative of the Nakba into a foundational historical even that concerns the entire Palestinian people.

Thus, we affirm before the stage of contemporary Palestinian history and our collective national existence that Palestinian identity is a national product—one forged by the Palestinian National Liberation Movement, Fatah. It remains the singular, unified national identity of a diverse people, because we, as Palestinians, know our homeland well. We know Palestine, for something is defined by what it is—and what it is not.

* This is an experience the first author (of this article) lived closely and personally heard from the eternal Palestinian leader "Yasser Arafat"

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Figure N°3: *A Journey of Survival: The Forced Displacement of Palestinian Families*

➤ **The Zionist Conspiracy and the Balfour Declaration:**

Sultan Abdul Hamid II did not agree to Theodor Herzl's demands to buy Palestine after Herzl visited him in Istanbul. As a result, Herzl shifted his political strategy and redirected his efforts toward London after realizing the impossibility of obtaining any Ottoman decree granting Palestine—or even a part of it—to the Jews.

In 1902, Herzl met with British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain and proposed the idea of settling Jews in the Sinai Peninsula as a gateway to Palestine. Herzl firmly believed that the defeat of the Ottoman Empire was only a matter of time. Chamberlain accepted the idea on the condition that Lord Cromer, the British High Commissioner in Egypt, approved it before seeking government approval. However, the British government later rejected this plan and instead issued the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which served two strategic objectives:

1. A Political Objective:

Gaining the support of influential Zionist figures in Germany, Austria, and Hungary, particularly since those figures were negotiating with these countries to convince the Ottoman Empire to issue a similar declaration to the Balfour

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Declaration, so that it would come from an Islamic state recognizing Zionist ambitions in Palestine.

2. A Colonial Objective:

Advancing Britain's imperial interests, as Palestine held significant strategic value. Arthur Balfour viewed the Jews through the lens of millenarian restorationism, which regarded them as God's chosen people. Moreover, Britain, by issuing this declaration, sought to win Jewish support for the Allies during World War I and benefit from Jewish financial contributions, which played a crucial role in funding the war. This was why, during his 1917 visit to the United States, Balfour suggested to Justice Louis Brandeis the idea of establishing a Zionist republic in Palestine.

For this reason, the thinker Yassin al-Hafiz stated that Palestine did not fall in a single day but rather fell piece by piece, stone by stone, from the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 until the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948. Thus, the British Mandate over Palestine constituted a prelude to the major Palestinian catastrophe of 1948, as Britain, in cooperation with European powers, worked toward their shared goal of gathering and settling Jews in Palestine. Zionists assert that the efforts of Chaim Weizmann, the new leader of the Zionist movement after Herzl's death in 1904, were the key factor behind the issuance of the Balfour Declaration, considering it his greatest political achievement.



Figure N° 4: The Balfour Declaration and the Displacement of a Nation

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➤ Sociological Differences Between the Palestinian Family Before the Nakba and the Exiled Family

1. The Status of the Palestinian Family Before the Nakba:

One of the most defining characteristics of the Palestinian family before the Nakba was its rural and agrarian nature. Approximately 80% of the population were peasants living in a thousand Palestinian villages spread across the homeland (Middle East Studies Center (2002), p36). The village served as the center of collective organization, with the family as its cornerstone, and kinship as the essence of social organization. (Sharif Kanaana (2002), p132) This structure encompassed multiple families within a single village, fostering an economy based on kinship and lineage. Notably, over 50% of Palestinian villages were collectively owned.

However, the rural community was not entirely egalitarian, as disparities in wealth and influence were prevalent among families. The family provided protection, social security, and economic stability to its members, which reinforced the Palestinian peasant's attachment to their family, land, and village.

The extended family was the dominant social unit in pre-Nakba Palestinian society, consisting of three generations and multiple households bound by blood,



Figure N° 5: A Palestinian Historical Family Gathering

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ties and lineage. We also note that Palestinian families (despite all the disasters they have gone through) are still distinguished by the cohesion of their members, the bonds of kinship, and the stability of their families, like all Arab countries.

Speaking about the concept of family stability, which was precisely defined by the sociologist “Sabah Ayachi”: Family stability is the state of stable relationships between family members, comprising a legally constituted couple and their children (or their guardians), with or without the presence of some relatives. This stability is generally achieved through the availability of a set of factors: material factors, such as housing space and basic needs (food, clothing, medical care, and entertainment), as well as emotional, social, and religious factors. This stability is achieved through the equivalence and complementarity of selection criteria: morals, upbringing, educational level, religion (moderate religiosity), and lineage. This stability is also achieved through the complementarity or equivalence of temperamental and moral traits (such as sobriety, tolerance, loyalty, and mercy), complementarity in intimate relationships (sexual), and equivalence in shared life goals, such as raising and guiding children. Stability is also determined by the integration of the family system and family requirements (which are renewed with the changes of the times), and with other systems, such as economic, political, security, legislative, and religious. Stability is relative among families, as they differ in the extent to which these factors are fully or partially achieved. Communities, their institutions, official bodies (and international organizations) also differ in their responsible humanitarian role, as far as their cooperation and keenness to achieve security, reject violence, and meet the essential needs of the various categories of the family and their development (women and men, children and adolescents, youth, the elderly, and people with special needs) is a success for the stability and development of society as a whole in all areas”. (Sabah, Ayachi (2020), p 667)

2. The Palestinian Family After the Nakba:

Undoubtedly, the Palestinian family after the Nakba was no longer the same as it had been before, (Palestine Liberation Organization (1998), p83) as it underwent a series of social, psychological, and cultural transformations. One of the most significant changes was in its social structure. The distinctions that had previously characterized the Palestinian families; Whether peasant, Bedouin, or artisan—disappeared, giving rise to a unified family structure: the refugee camp family. (Sharif Kanaana (2000), p132)

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This family experienced shared social, economic, and psychological conditions within the displacement environment and tended toward forming nuclear families. According to demographic indicators, nuclear families constituted two-thirds of all families in the refugee camps, sharing key common factors, including (Hamad Maw'ed (Ed. Palestinian Refugees):

1. **Geographical Space:** Each family was allocated a 70-square-meter tent by UNRWA.
2. **Economic Factors:** Financial support provided by UNRWA, including monthly food rations distributed to each individual.
3. **A Shared Fate:** All refugee camp residents endured a common experience of displacement, suffering, grief, and loss.
4. **A Role in the Palestinian Struggle:** Families in refugee camps played a crucial role in fueling the contemporary Palestinian revolution, which relied heavily on camp residents for its mobilization and



Figure N°6: A Palestinian Refugee Camp Scene

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➤ **Analytical Study of Palestinian Families:**

We can say that there is a significant similarity among Palestinian families in terms of their origins, as well as their living, economic, cultural, and educational conditions, based on this, the following phenomena can be observed:

1. The Disappearance of Traditional Family Distinctions in the Diaspora:

In exile, the distinction between rural (fellahin), Bedouin, and urban families has largely disappeared. The Palestinian family in exile has transformed into a “camp family” sharing a common environmental identity. As a result, the value systems rooted in rural or Bedouin backgrounds have faded, particularly among the second and third generations of the Nakba, most of whom were born in refugee camps outside of Palestine.

2. Decline in Polygamy and Rise of Divorce:

There has been a shift away from polygamy, with a relative increase in divorce. The golden age of the first generation, which lived in Palestine and practiced polygamy as a norm—where a man was criticized for having only one wife—has ended.

3. Weakening of Family Duty and Blood Ties:

Among the second and third generations, the sense of family duty and commitment has diminished. Blood relations are no longer the main pillar holding the family together. Each family now tends to focus on its own concerns, responsibilities, and needs, particularly as exile has weakened the strength of social and familial bonds. Families increasingly seek to secure their own biological and material needs independently.

4. The complete abandonment of the idea of marrying relatives (Endogamy),

The most significant observation we have made since the Nakba, it's the Complete abandonment of the concept of marriage with relatives (Endogamy), that means the disappearance of the traditional concept of a male cousin's right to "get his female cousin off his horse and marry her." These traditional social values have vanished among Palestinians in the diaspora and have virtually no presence in exile.

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5. A New Structure of Palestinian diaspora families:

Has stabilized in the refugee camps, where the family unit—its form, substance, and kinship relations—has evolved.

As researchers in the Sociology of the family, we believe that the form and essence of Palestinian familial relations and their value system continue to reflect the structure of family life prior to the Nakba, with only certain slight changes in the pattern of construction and cohesion of the family. Notably, there has been an increased presence of women within the Palestinian family, which has maintained its cohesion, strength, resilience, and its national identity with a deeply human dimension. Therefore, we cannot say that we are witnessing the birth of a completely new Palestinian family in the diaspora and refugee camps.

Despite all the hardships and suffering endured by Palestinians in exile, we believe that the emerging Palestinian family consists of members who are more educated, capable, competent, and aware—particularly the nuclear family that transitioned from the homeland to exile. This nuclear family is far stronger than the traditional extended family that once prevailed in Palestinian society before the Nakba.

It is more adaptive, more resilient in facing challenges, and more conscious in responding to the painful reality that surrounds it like darkness from every direction. The Palestinian family still lives in an incomplete state that can only be fulfilled in the embrace of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital—where the self can achieve self-actualization and feel a sense of complete existence. The human self thus unites with its second lineage—the geographical self—and in doing so, the existence of the Palestinian family is completed. It transforms into a natural family, a family that no longer suffers from social or ontological deficiency.

❖ A study of the transformations of reality in the face of Gaza's continuous sacrifice confirms that you are not alone in confronting the silence and betrayal of the official Arab regime—neither from those near nor those far. The West is closer, while the Arabs seem more distant, so we call for the re-formation of a new historical consciousness in response to these shifts in reality, one that enables Palestine to break free from the cycle of alienation and restore its Arab and Islamic identity. This would place Arabs and Muslims before their responsibilities—to build foundations based on dialogue, rather than submission.

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❖ Arabs and Muslims have been placed in critical existential positions, exposing the truth of the Arab and Islamic systems—why do they remain silent in the face of killing and destruction? Leadership has a crucial role in guiding people to feel the pain of oppression and to begin developing a new awareness. An awareness that exposes what we truly want from Israel, which uses its army as a tool of oppression.

We believe that Zionism has created all the conditions that lead to the oppression of the Palestinian families and denied it full humanity. But in overcoming the Nakba and those who inflicted it, the Palestinian family—though oppressed—has taken on the responsibility of resistance to reclaim its lost humanity and lift the weight of oppression from itself. Palestinians have adapted to the conditions of oppression and triumphed over them. They continue to struggle for freedom and return, feeling that they will ultimately prevail, achieving their full human integration and ending their alienation.

❖ There is a vast difference between those who merely observe and those who participate—in education, economy, awareness, martyrdom, and the ongoing struggle to reclaim their humanity and Palestinian identity. This is a struggle for freedom. Palestinians have succeeded in realizing their presence and have contributed to developing an educational approach that aids in their liberation. We have begun the labor of birthing our freedom. From this struggle, a new being will emerge—one that will end the contradiction between the oppressor and the oppressed.

❖ As Palestinians, they live a dialectical relationship that defines their existence, in opposition to the Zionist presence. they have transcended its contradictions, and this awareness has led them to begin the fight for their freedom and liberation. The oppressor's awareness of their own existence causes them unease. But this discomfort pushes them to engage with the oppressed in a shared movement—toward victory, liberation, and the creation of a new Palestinian entity.

❖ One that contributes to the reconstruction of a liberated and modern Palestinian family. A family no longer defined by uprootedness and instability in camps and exile, but one that belongs to a homeland, a state, and a meaningful existence. The gap between a family in exile and a family in the homeland disappears and unites in a single moment of time—a moment in which the sociology of return is fulfilled.

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➤ **The Heritage of the Palestinian Women**

The Palestinian woman possesses a rich cultural heritage and legacy. She carries with her original Canaanite concepts and artistic expressions that have endowed her with distinctive features. These traits have played a vital role in preserving the Palestinian national identity and cultural character. Her heritage has significantly contributed to safeguarding many aspects of contemporary Palestinian heritage, which has prevailed against all forms of Judaization and assimilation. The cultural inheritance of the Palestinian woman reflects joy in welcoming a newborn, nurturing and raising the child while instilling core life values and principles. When the child marries, the mother plays an active role in the wedding rituals, and even after marriage, she remains a part of her son's life until he becomes a parent himself—thus continuing a cycle of generational connection, experience-sharing, and the protection of community traditions.

This cycle is further maintained through the oral transmission of songs, proverbs, and popular sayings, as well as the beliefs and customs that aim to safeguard her children. Palestinian women also have distinct rituals for occasions of both joy and sorrow, which reflect the deep-rooted features of Levantine (specifically Palestinian) femininity.

The Palestinian woman asserts her unique identity through the food she prepares and the intricate handicrafts she creates especially through traditional embroidery and decorative arts applied to her clothing and jewelry. Palestinian traditional dress is closely tied to ornamental embroidery, where the designs often carry inherited motifs from ancient ancestors, particularly the Canaanites. These embroidery patterns are known as 'al-'urooq' (the veins or threads). The type, color, and design of a woman's dress can often indicate the region or village to which she belongs.

Each Palestinian region—such as Ramallah, Tulkarem, Jenin, and Nablus has its own distinctive embroidery patterns that make the traditional dress recognizable. Additionally, Palestinian Bedouins have their own national attire, as seen in the example of the region of Be'er Al-Sabe' (Beersheba). Today, many workshops in Palestine are dedicated exclusively to the embroidery of women's clothing, especially after the tradition largely faded from men's attire.

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➤ Conclusion

The Palestinian-Zionist conflict over the land will not negate the sacred, legal, and inalienable right of Palestinians to return to the places they inhabited in Palestine before the 1948 Nakba. This right is collective, yet its exercise is individual, and it belongs to all Palestinians who were forcibly displaced from their land and now live in exile and diaspora. It is derived from international law and guaranteed by the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, issued on December 10, 1948, particularly Article 13. On the following day, the famous Resolution 194 was issued by the United Nations General Assembly, affirming the right of Palestinian refugees to return and receive compensation.

Thus, the world conditioned the establishment of the State of Israel on two requirements:

- a) **Acceptance of Resolution 181:** Which called for the establishment of two states.
- b) **Acceptance of Resolution 194:** Which granted Palestinian refugees the right to return to their homeland and homes, even under Israeli sovereignty.

We conclude our article by stating that a Palestinian state is not only a Palestinian necessity but also an Israeli and international necessity. There can be no peace or security without the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as the Capital.

October 17th changed the equations of the conflict, and produced a new Palestinian era, the most important thing in its context is the return of hope to the Palestinian self for victory, despite the heavy price every paying Palestinian , despite the martyrs who numbered more than 58 thousand and more than 70 thousand wounded, and the destruction of more than 26 thousand homes and buildings... that is, the destruction of more than 90% of the area of the Gaza Strip, but the Palestinian people are still clinging to their right and resistance and to defeating the Zionist occupier... they are still clinging to the resistance and the revolution that fired its first bullet on January 1, 1965, led by the Fatah movement, the first bullet and the first stone.

Today, the resistance movement in Gaza completes the march of yesterday's revolution... and declares that the end of the occupier is near, this revolution that was supported fairly on all political, diplomatic and material levels by Algeria, which led a conscious, constant and rational diplomacy, as it accompanied the

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Palestinian right in the United Nations, the International Court of Justice and the UN Security Council... Yes, Algeria has accompanied the Palestinian cause in all places and at all times, even at the level of forces and civil society associations... It supported and stood with Palestine, as Algeria is the only country in the world where you find the president, the army, the security forces and the people all united as one man with Palestine... Yes, Algeria was and still is the strategic depth of Palestine... and applies the saying of the martyred leader, the symbol, President Houari Boumediene: Algeria's independence will not be complete without the liberation of Palestine. May God protect Algeria and grant it victory, as it is the destination of the free... and revolutionaries and all the peoples and governments of the world that support Palestine.

We conclude this article by stating that a Palestinian state is not only a Palestinian necessity but also an Israeli and international necessity. There can be no peace or security without the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as the Capital.

Recommendations:

- 1) The necessity of paying attention to Palestinian women, the guardians of our existence and continuity, in preserving identity.
- 2) Conducting extensive academic studies on Palestinian heritage and identity, examining the relationship between heritage, identity, and globalization, and their implications.
- 3) The need for in-depth studies exposing the occupation's philosophy in implementing policies of Judaization and erasure that target Palestinian heritage.
- 4) Conducting research on both tangible and intangible Palestinian heritage and deepening studies on the impact of the Nakba and diaspora on Palestinian national identity across different generations.
- 5) The necessity of conducting comparative sociological studies on the connections between different Palestinian communities (the diaspora, Palestinians of 1948, Palestinians of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza) and exploring the nature of their relationships.

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