



Israeli Arabs taking part in a rally calling for the right of return for refugees who fled their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, near Atlit, Israel, on April 19. PHOTO: REUTERS

## What 1948 meant for Palestinians

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Next month marks the 70th anniversary of the Nakba, when Palestinians commiserate over their exodus following the creation of Israel in 1948, when thousands lost their homes.

This year, there is an additional cause for concern, as the United States has said it will celebrate the opening of its embassy in Jerusalem, the day before Nakba Day on May 15, even though the call to move the embassy provoked widespread condemnation after President Donald Trump announced it last December.

Bearing in mind the stalemate in peace talks, worries over the succession of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and that tens of thousands of Palestinians have been holding protests in the Gaza Strip since Land Day on March 30 in the "Great March of Return", there is concern that on this occasion, events may get out of hand.

One matter that has not been widely addressed in articles on the Gaza protests are the reasons Palestinians protest at all.

While we hear a lot about the protests in the Gaza Strip and how Israel responds to them, there has been comparatively less debate as to why Palestinians take to the streets year after year on Nakba Day. The Land Day protests began in 1976, and Palestinians have been marking May 15 – originally Palestine Day – throughout the Arab world since the 1950s.

There are at least three reasons Palestinians still commiserate over the Nakba despite the passage of time.

The first and most obvious reason is that their dispute with Israel remains unresolved.

While the current Israeli leadership appears to believe that it can live without a deal and manage the Palestinians for another 70 years, one of the results of not having a comprehensive peace settlement in place is that the grievances that arose in 1948 remain unaddressed. Just think of the millions of Palestinian refugees who remain in limbo, living cheek by jowl, day by day, with no closure.

The apparent disinterest in negotiating a peace agreement also undermines the idea that peace is possible and that compromise is necessary over Jerusalem, the settlements, borders, refugees and water. These issues were supposed to have been addressed in the final status negotiations with a view to

resolving the conflict. They are no longer being discussed, perhaps in the hope that Palestinian nationalism will wane. But this is mistaken – as the protests demonstrate. So long as Palestinian statehood remains an aspiration, if not a dream, and so long as Palestinians remain stateless, unable to exercise their rights of citizenship, there will be no closure, and the dispute will continue to fester.

Second, there is still denial about what happened in 1948. For Israelis, it was a year of pride, emancipation, independence and ultimate victory. For Palestinians, it was the reverse. It signalled the loss of home, livelihood and the memory of a past that can never be reclaimed.

Unlike other longstanding political disputes – including those in Ireland, South Africa, and Chile – there has been no serious attempt to address the past in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with both communities remaining trapped in their narratives. No Arab-Israeli "truth and reconciliation commission" has been set up, for example, which could address not just the Nakba but also Palestinian violence against Israelis. Nor has there been an attempt to establish a claims commission to compensate those Palestinians who lost their homes, farms and factories in 1948.

Little thought has been given in the Arab world to compensating Jews expelled from their countries after the creation of Israel.

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The conflict remains a zero-sum game. The winners take all and the losers suffer what they must.

The third reason, I think, is the failure to reach a comprehensive agreement between Israel, the Palestinians and the broader Arab world.

A comprehensive agreement, in my view, should not just be an elaborate ceasefire agreement like Israel's peace treaty with Egypt and Jordan.

Instead, it should be a deal that actually leads to a genuine people-to-people relationship between Israelis and their Arab neighbours. But for this to work, there must be a common understanding about the past and not just about the present or the future. Otherwise there will never be a meeting of minds, which is a prerequisite for peace.

A comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Arab world would have to address the refugee issue and, therefore, the Nakba, as many of these countries are hosts to millions of Palestinian refugees who were displaced by the fighting in 1948. Accordingly, it would be necessary to address the Nakba head on for such a people-to-people relationship to succeed.

In this connection, it should not be forgotten that thousands of Jews were also expelled from their homes in the Arab world, in some cases in retaliation for what happened to the Palestinians. They must also be offered compensation for their losses.

A quid pro quo would be impractical, however, given that a far greater number of Palestinians were displaced in 1948, and then again in 1967. But this should not be insurmountable. Where there is a will, there is a way.

While Israel might be able to strike a secret deal with some Arab leaders to deter a common enemy, a comprehensive peace deal will remain elusive so long as the stalemate between the Israeli government and the current Palestinian leadership endures.

The Nakba is a gaping wound that cannot heal unless it is addressed and dealt with. It cannot be swept under the carpet.

For many Palestinians, pre-1948 Palestine represents a lost world of relative Arab-Jewish co-existence when they participated in each other's festivals, weddings and ceremonies (even if these stories are prone to exaggeration). The memories are kept alive in the stories passed from father to son and from mother to daughter.

There can be no closure for Palestinians so long as their grievances remain unaddressed. Only then will they be able to reconcile themselves with the reality that Israel is here to stay.

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