

Narratives Under Siege (10): Remembering the Nakhba:



Handuma Rashid Najja Wishah spends as much time as she can in her garden in Gaza, maintaining her “intimate love of the land.”

“I am not sure what year I was born. But it was around 78 years ago, in Palestine.” Handuma Rashid Najja Wishah sits on the patio overlooking her large garden, recalling the turbulent story of her long life. “I am a Palestinian from the village of Beit Affa” she says, tucking her long white scarf under her chin. “It was a beautiful village and we had a good life there. There was a small Jewish settlement nearby, called Negba, and we had a good relationship with the Jews. Whenever we had weddings, we would invite them to come and celebrate, and we women all used to dance *dabka* (Palestinian (traditional dance) together. The *muktar* (or chief) of the settlement, was called Michael. He used to arrive at the weddings with a gift, like a goat, and we would cook it and share the meat between us.”

Beit Affa was a village of around 500 people, in southern Palestine, 29 kilometers north east of the Gaza Strip. Most of the villagers were farmers, but even those who did not solely earn their living from farming had, says Handuma, “an intimate relationship with the land.” Like many of the local women, Handuma married young and stayed in her village. But in 1948, after the end of the British Mandate in Palestine and the declaration

of the new State of Israel on Palestinian land, mass violence erupted. “The Zionists refused the division of the land into two states, and the massacres started” she says.

“The first massacre was in Deir Yasin, where they slaughtered more than a hundred people.” The Deir Yasin villagers were killed by the notorious Zionist *Lehi and Etsel* gangs, which had originally been part of the 50,000 strong *Haganah* militia (which later became the core of the Israeli Defence Force, or IDF). These heavily armed gangs of Zionists were intent on driving Palestinians from their homes en masse. After the Deir Yasin massacre, they targeted villages across Palestine, threatening the Palestinians that if they did not leave their homes immediately they would be killed like the people of Deir Yasin.

“It was a terrible time. The Zionists killed women and children, young and old. The Haganah would slit women’s throats. We were all terrified.” Handuma and her family, which included her eighteen month old son, Ibrahim, stayed at home, waiting. She recalls the Jordanian and Egyptian armies arriving at the border of nearby Ashdod city, and asking local Palestinians to volunteer to leave their homes, reassuring them they would be able to return within the week. “My family refused to leave our village. It was the wheat harvest and we had just stored our wheat. With the Egyptian and Jordanian troops nearby we hoped we would be safe.”

The Haganah militia entered Beit Affa in the summer of 1948. “They arrived at 1am” Handuma recalls, “and started to kill our people. I saw my husband’s cousin axed to death, and an elderly woman being murdered. We hid in our homes, and the killing continued until 7am. Then the Haganah broke down the front doors of our houses and told us all to get out. They separated us, women from men, and then they took the men and blindfolded them, tied their hands together, and forced outside into the hot sun.”

The surviving villagers’ lives were saved when Egyptian troops arrived and drove the Haganah out of Beit Affa. “But we had to leave our village,” says Handuma. “We were still afraid for our lives – and for the honour of our girls. The land would have to wait for us. I took nothing from my home, and left the front door open.” She says all of the Beit Affa villagers left together en masse.

Handuma, her husband Motlaq and young Ibrahim, traveled with many of the villagers for approximately the next six months. She easily recalls the names of villages where they stayed for a month at a time before moving on. “We were in Karateya, then in Al-Falluja (now known as the Israeli town of Kiriat Gat). Then we moved onto Herbya. We kept moving. People from the villages all traveled in large groups. We heard some small news from Beit Affa – we knew it was under Egyptian control for six months, and then the Israelis occupied it.” According to the Palestinian historian Walid Khalidi, “There are [now] no traces of villages houses; only sycamore and carob trees and cactuses mark the site [of Beit Affa].” Like thousands of other Palestinians, Handuma Wishah still carries the key to the front door of her home in Beit Affa.

When Handuma, Motlaq and Ibrahim arrived in Gaza in December 1948, they were just three of the approximately 914,000 Palestinians who had been forced out of Palestine as refugees during the Nakhba, or Catastrophe. Around two hundred thousand of the refugees arrived in the Gaza Strip, overwhelming the local Palestinian population of eighty thousand. “We spent our first week in Gaza city” says Handuma. “Then we moved on to Nuseirat (in the middle area of the Gaza Strip) and stayed there. We had nothing. We slept on the land, uncovered, until UNRWA arrived and gave us tents.” The United Nations Relief and Works Agency was established in 1949 to assist the Palestinian refugees, and it remains by far the largest UN operation in the Middle East. In Gaza, UNRWA started to count the refugees, who were allocated tents according to the size of each family. Handuma and her small family were issued with a tent and UNRWA blankets, but had no beds. “The thing we needed the most was medicine” she says. “There was no medicine. My son, Ibrahim was dying in front of me, and there was nothing I could do.” Ibrahim died in Nuseirat, aged two years and two months.

Slowly the refugees divided themselves into camps; there are now eight refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, and they are some of the densely populated places on earth. Handuma and Motlaq eventually moved from their tent into a small house in the Bureij refugee camp, where she has lived since 1953. “The first years were very difficult” she says. “After the death of my first son I gave birth to another boy, and called him Ibrahim too. But he died 45 days later. If I had known how much suffering it was going to cause my children, I would never have left my village.” She starts to cry silently, and excuses herself for a few minutes. This elderly woman has just recalled the hardest and most bitter battles of her life: the pain of losing her land, and the struggle to save her children.

Handuma’s third son, Jaber survived, and she went on to have another three sons and four daughters. Um Jaber (Mother of Jaber) as she has been known for years in the Gaza Strip and beyond, has also been a staunch political activist more than five decades. She remains grateful to UNRWA for their assistance, but is fiercely critical of both the United Nations, and especially Britain, for their roles in the Nakhba. “We Palestinians are not terrorists” she says. “We are living under occupation and siege from the Israelis, and we will continue to resist until we can return to our homes. We are patient people.”

In 1995, when she was 65 years old, Um Jaber started a major political campaign to support Palestinian prisoners incarcerated in Israeli jails. “All of my four sons were jailed” she says, “and through them I met other Palestinians who also needed support. I used to visit the jails in Israel daily.” The mothers of Palestinians incarcerated in Israeli jails have been denied all visitation rights by the Israeli authorities since June 2007, and Um Jaber still joins the weekly Gaza vigil that demands the right for Palestinian mothers to visit their sons, husband and daughters who are imprisoned in Israel. These days, however, Um Jaber spends as much time as possible in her large garden tending her flowers and herbs and her flocks of hens and pigeons. “I have never lost my intimate love for the land” she says. “I have fed this love to my children and grandchildren, and I practice my traditional village life here as much as I can.”

As she remembers her own Nakhba, Um Jaber says she has never lost the hope of returning to the site of her village. “The Nakhba day will be a difficult and sad day” she says. “I will remember my village, and our lives there. I will also remember the respect between us and the Jews. But we are not the problem, we are the occupied people. The problem is the Israeli occupation of our Palestinian land.”