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“The Nakba Continues”.. Interview with Dr. Khaldoun Bishara

Today, Palestinian school curricula stand at the heart of political shifts and ongoing pressures that affect how the Nakba and Palestinian history and geography are presented to new generations, amid a reality in which the Israeli occupation continues to assert its presence not only on the ground, but also within the educational and cognitive sphere.

As political discourse changes and the presence of certain concepts and details related to Palestinian villages and historical memory declines, the new generation’s consciousness is being shaped within a complex reality where narrative, education, and politics intersect, while the Nakba remains present as an ongoing issue rather than an event of the past.

In this special interview with NoonPost, we spoke with Dr. Khaldoun Bishara, assistant professor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Birzeit University, about the impact of political shifts and ongoing pressures on Palestinian curricula, and how the erasure of Palestinian history and depopulated villages from the educational process is reflected in new generations’ awareness and their understanding of the Nakba as an ongoing reality rather than a distant memory.

Can we say that today we are living through a conflict of narratives over the Nakba, between what is taught in schools and what is preserved in popular memory?

Yes, it can be said that the Palestinian cause is, to a large extent, a conflict of narratives, and this is clearly reflected in the way the Nakba is presented in official curricula compared with what Palestinian popular memory preserves.

I belong to the older generation, and we studied from history and geography books titled “Civil Administration – Judea and Samaria.” At that time, during the 1970s and 1980s, it was not officially possible for us to learn about the Nakba or its literature as it is today. Even so, we knew more about the Nakba than some members of the current generation may know, despite its presence now in Palestinian curricula and courses.

But through popular memory and the stories passed down by fathers, mothers, and teachers, we were able to reach a different narrative from the one presented in official curricula. Teachers, for example, would not pass over words like “Palestine,” “the Arab world,” or “Israel” without drawing our attention to the fact that what we were reading was the official narrative, while the real narrative, as they would say, existed in the street, in people’s memory, and in the stories of Palestinian families.

That is why this struggle over the narrative is still ongoing. In fact, it is even more evident today in light of the strength of the Zionist project and the global support it enjoys, which makes it possible to exert pressure on the Palestinian Authority and on Palestinians more broadly in order to remove or obscure many important historical and geographical texts from educational curricula. Here, the greatest burden falls on social awareness and popular education to preserve the Palestinian narrative and safeguard its presence in consciousness and memory.

There is also a fundamental point that must be noted: even when official curricula address the Nakba clearly, that alone is not enough. The Nakba is too great to be reduced to courses or phrases in history and geography books, because it is not an event that ended in the past, but an ongoing reality that Palestinians live every day.

We are still living under occupation, settler colonialism is still devouring Palestinian land and people, and basic Palestinian rights are still denied. The right to self-determination remains absent, the right of return has not yet been realized, and Palestinians are still living the effects of displacement and uprooting to this day. Therefore, it remains necessary to keep emphasizing that the Nakba has not ended, that it is still ongoing in different forms, and that there is a constant responsibility to confront this reality and work to correct the

historical injustice inflicted on the Palestinian people.

How does the difference between the school curriculum, popular memory, and public discourse affect the new generation’s understanding of the Nakba?

It can be said that the new generation is living a dual condition: on the one hand, it is fortunate, and on the other, burdened with major challenges. It is fortunate because the narrative is no longer confined to a single source as it once was, but is now available through multiple spaces: family memory, the media, social media, and various digital platforms. This plurality has made access to information much easier, and it has become difficult to conceal what happened in the Nakba of 1948, what followed in 1967, or even what is happening today. The information revolution, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms have made knowledge widely accessible, and that in itself is a source of strength for this generation.

But on the other hand, there is another, more complex side that can be described as a cognitive burden or a psychological and political weight. It can also be said that this generation is “unlucky,” because it was born into conditions in which it knows a great deal, but does not always possess the ability to act or bring about change commensurate with that awareness. In other words, it is a generation with broad knowledge, but this knowledge turns into a heavy responsibility more than it becomes a capacity to influence.

If it understands that the Nakba is still ongoing, that the land was taken by force, and that more than 500 Palestinian villages were destroyed in 1948, and if it knows that many Palestinians inside historic Palestine live just steps away from their original lands but are denied access to them, then this is a burdened awareness. For example, some of the people of Lifta live in Sheikh Jarrah, and the distance to their original village is only a few kilometers, yet they cannot enter it or live there. The same is true in other villages in the north and elsewhere, where the same picture is repeated.

These realities place young Palestinian men and women before a clear contradiction: broad knowledge versus inability to act, deep awareness versus a closed reality. This creates a feeling of heaviness or “bad luck” in the figurative sense, because they grasp the truth in all its details, yet at the same time cannot turn that understanding into tangible change on the ground.

There is also a second point: the feeling experienced by the new generation today is tied to a growing question about the value of knowledge itself—what is the point of possessing all this knowledge if reality is besieged in this way?

When we say, “So what?” we are facing a complex and oppressive reality: a world moving in the opposite direction, Israel expanding aggressively on the ground

and politically, and settlement activity continuously growing. At the same time, even within official Palestinian structures there is clear weakness, at times reaching the point of submission to external political and administrative pressures exercised by European, American, and Israeli parties, affecting the educational curricula themselves and leading to their amendment or the reformulation of some of their content. By its nature, this is reflected in the shaping of Palestinian consciousness, whether directly or indirectly.

Even so, although information today has become widely available and cannot be hidden, the essential difference lies between the “availability of knowledge” and its organization. We are talking about an educational system that includes millions of students—nearly two million Palestinian students daily in schools and universities. If there is a clear and systematic knowledge structure within this educational framework, it is capable of producing a cohesive and influential collective awareness around the Nakba.

But by contrast, in the absence or decline of some courses, or with the weakening of the presence of central concepts such as the Nakba and genocide within the educational process, it becomes difficult to fully compensate for this role through popular, individual, or digital platforms. These alternatives, despite their importance, remain scattered and are not capable on their own of producing a comprehensive and organized knowledge framework.

From here emerges this heavy feeling, or what can be described as “bad luck,” among the new generation, because it lives in an overwhelming political and educational context that does not provide a stable environment for forming an integrated intellectual awareness, nor does it allow the Palestinian educational system to operate with full freedom in producing clear courses on the Nakba. Even the teacher may face direct or indirect restrictions, sometimes to the point of being accused of “antisemitism” or “incitement” simply for raising these issues in their historical context.

Consequently, from this overlap between the expansion of knowledge, the weakness of the educational structure, political pressures, and restrictions imposed on discourse, the new generation’s consciousness is formed in a complex state: broad and open knowledge on the one hand, versus the weight of reality and the complexity of action on the other. This explains the dual feeling between the “fortune of knowledge” and its “burden” at the same time.

Is the Nakba still presented today as an ongoing issue, or has it gradually begun to turn into a historical event that is remembered more than it is understood and lived?

In my view, the Nakba is still ongoing, and I think it will remain so, because it is

not merely a historical event that ended, but an extended condition. Through my specialization in refugees and refugee camps and my constant meetings with refugees, the same phrase is always repeated: “The Nakba is ongoing.” This is not an empty slogan, but a description of an actual reality. If the Nakba is not addressed fundamentally by restoring rights to their owners—foremost among them the right of return and actual return to the original villages and homes—then it will remain in place, not as an event of the past, but as an ongoing condition in the present.

On the other hand, the problem is that the Nakba is not a single event that ended in 1948, but a series of ongoing Nakbas. 1948 was the major Nakba, but it was not the only one. The year 1967 constituted another Nakba, and its magnitude cannot be minimized. Then came the Oslo period and what followed, accompanied by accelerated settlement expansion, which in my view is another form of the ongoing Nakba.

After that came the events of October 7 and what followed, and what we witnessed in terms of scenes of genocide and widespread destruction in Gaza, including the targeting of cities, urban infrastructure, and the Palestinian people. This too is an extension of the Nakba, not a separate event from it.

From this perspective, it can be said that the Nakba did not begin only in 1948, but was preceded by the Zionist dream of establishing a state on the land of Palestine, which began clearly with the Basel Congress in 1897. From that time until today, there has not been a historical moment that can be described as one of stability or real prosperity in which Palestinians lived in a state of security and reassurance. On the contrary, the general historical trajectory is one of successive and cumulative Nakbas.

Therefore, the Nakba cannot be viewed as a concluded event; rather, it is part of an ongoing historical structure. It can even be said that what came after 1948 is a series of additional Nakbas extending to the present day.

In this context, there is what may be called the “founding myth of Palestinian identity,” namely the Nakba, as a massive and pivotal event in shaping Palestinian national consciousness and in entrenching the idea of the right to Palestine, the importance of Palestine, and the necessity of defending and reclaiming it.

But at the same time, in my view, we should not overlook all the Nakbas that followed the Nakba of Palestine in 1948, whose effects have extended to this day, including issues such as the modification of educational curricula. To view the issue of changing the curriculum as outside this context, or as not part of the chain of Nakbas, is a reading that runs contrary to the truth, because it carries

deep and significant implications.

The curriculum is not a secondary detail; it is a matter of sovereignty and awareness, and a fundamental tool in building national identity. Any flaw in it or encroachment on its content is directly reflected in collective consciousness, and thus leads to a diminishment of that awareness, including a diminishment of the right of return, the right to establish a Palestinian state, and the very idea of self-determination.

How does the absence of the names of depopulated villages and cities from the school curriculum affect the new generation’s relationship with Palestine and its history?

Of course, this absence has a clear impact, in the sense that it changes the shape of the relationship between the new generation and Palestine and its history. After Oslo, there was greater focus in the curricula on Palestinian geography in general, and on Palestinian ports and mountains, but with a clear change in some basic details. For example, it began to be said that the highest mountain in Palestine is Mount al-Asur, at an elevation of around one thousand meters above sea level, while Mount Meron, despite being the highest mountain in Palestine, was omitted or mentioned less.

The same applies to the issue of ports. Instead of maintaining a clear presence for Haifa and Acre as historic Palestinian ports, the focus shifted more toward saying that Palestine’s port is the Port of Gaza, and Palestine’s airport is Rafah Airport rather than Lydd Airport as modern gateways. This dramatic change in presenting geography is directly reflected in the new generation’s awareness, because it reshapes the image of Palestine in their minds through what they learn in the curriculum.

At the same time, even if the curriculum contains correct information or allows students to learn names such as Meron, Haifa, Acre, and others, the question remains about the way they are presented: are they presented within a framework of awareness and nation-building, or merely as geographical information detached from its historical and national context?

Accordingly, we cannot rely only on the official curriculum in shaping this awareness, because there are parallel institutions of socialization that play a fundamental role. Even if there is a good official curriculum, a large part of knowledge about Palestine still comes from other sources—from the father and mother, the grandfather and grandmother, and popular memory not only from the school or the teacher.

For this reason, there must always be awareness of the importance of this parallel system, so that understanding does not remain confined to official or

political change or external pressures, but preserves the popular narrative as an essential part of building the relationship between the new generation and Palestine and its history.

Have the details of the Nakba begun to lose their real presence in the consciousness of new generations, turning from a living narrative into merely brief historical information?

In my view, as long as Palestinians live under occupation, as long as the Palestinian issue remains unresolved, and as long as the right to self-determination has not been achieved, the Nakba will remain powerfully present not only as a fixed event, but as a constant reference point that returns at every pivotal historical stage. Every major event reshapes awareness around it: after October 7, the dominant event becomes October 7; after the 1967 war, the “Naksa,” or major defeat, becomes the headline; likewise the 1982 war and the massacres of the camps in Lebanon. Yet despite all that, the most important and deeply rooted reference in Palestinian history remains the Nakba.

This is not an ordinary event, but a major turning point that left deep effects on geography, history, society, culture, cinema, the economy, and every detail of Palestinian life, such that no aspect of these can be separated from its repercussions. Therefore, I am not convinced that the term “Nakba” or the memory of the Nakba can lose its presence or power, even with the multiplicity of events and changing methods of education.

On the contrary, it has become a fixed part of the structure of Palestinian history, because what entrenches it further is the continuation of the settler-colonial project itself, which pursues Palestinians in every detail of their lives, even in matters that are supposed to be far removed from the conflict.

Colonialism itself, as an existing system, reminds Palestinians of the Nakba every day, making it extremely difficult to separate memory from reality or erase it, even if attempts are made to do so. In the end, as long as this reality persists, the Nakba is not erased; it remains continuously present, because the very structure of colonialism reproduces it on a daily basis.

As for the depopulated Palestinian villages and cities, is the Palestinian place today shifting from being a “witness to the Nakba” to merely a name or a historical fact for some generations?

This varies according to generation and individual experience, and no single general judgment can be made about it. As a professor at Birzeit University, I notice that some students have broad knowledge, while others know less, and some know almost nothing about the original villages or the Nakba. This is not linked only to curricula, the teacher, or the student.

For example, Palestinian workers who work inside the Green Line do not use the Israeli names for places, but continue to use the original Palestinian names. They do not say “Kfar Saba” but “Mlabbis,” nor “Ramat Gan,” but instead connect the place to its historical or Palestinian name. They speak of “Sheikh Muwannis,” “Jaffa,” and “Bab al-Khalil,” reproducing this memory in their daily lives as though it were a natural part of their language and daily practice. This in itself is a form of preserving memory.

Even with attempts to alter geography, change names, and impose new designations, Palestinians continue to call a place by its original name. Bab al-Khalil remains Bab al-Khalil, Beit Jala remains Beit Jala, even if the urban structure above it changes or other names are given to it. This spontaneous attachment to place reflects that memory is not tied only to curricula, but is a living daily practice.

Therefore, despite all the changes and attempts to reshape geography and history, Palestinian consciousness remains capable of reproducing the relationship with place. Accordingly, the Nakba is not only an event in the past, but a living element in memory and reality, and it will remain present as long as this conflict continues.

To what extent have political shifts in Palestinian discourse, especially after Oslo, affected the way the Nakba is presented in the school curriculum and Palestinian consciousness in general?

I have lived through the Oslo period up to today, and I fully realize that this agreement is a sword hanging over the Palestinian narrative, an attempt to politically and intellectually reshape it. It is true that recognition of Israel imposed a new political reality, but it cannot erase Palestinian history or wipe out Palestinian geography.

Even so, it cannot be said that the picture is entirely bleak. Despite attempts to produce an official narrative around the Nakba, Palestinian history, the PLO, and Oslo, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority also created space for the emergence of institutions, initiatives, and multiple narratives that refuse to be confined within a single rigid and sterile story. The Nakba is not one experience that can be reduced, nor are the depopulated villages identical, nor are human experiences the same. Rather, it is a broad collection of details that form the larger Palestinian narrative without being reduced to a single framework.

After Oslo, tangible shifts occurred in the structure of the Palestinian narrative, but what offers some hope is the expansion of the popular narrative that is not fully subject either to the Authority or to the occupation. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the margin for teaching Palestinian literature and history in schools

expanded, and it became possible to teach poets such as Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qasim.

By contrast, Palestinians inside Israel live a more complex and harsher reality, where education is imposed in Hebrew and forms of symbolic coercion are practiced against them, such as raising the Israeli flag and reciting its anthem, in one of the clearest manifestations of colonial overreach against identity.

Despite this, Palestinians inside Israel remain among the groups most attached to their national identity. They work constantly to restore Palestinian names in the public sphere and hold fast to the language and national symbols in the face of attempts at erasure and replacement. This is evident even in the Naqab, where residents insist on using Palestinian Arabic names in the face of attempts to replace them, in a daily struggle over memory and identity.

Regardless of the strength of the official narrative or Zionist overreach, rights have still not been restored. Therefore, an essential part of individual and collective responsibility lies in preserving the narrative as a form of self-defense, not as a struggle for cognitive superiority or a competition of narratives. At its core, the issue is one of rights: whoever has been deprived of their rights cannot be asked to forget them, because forgetting means losing both identity and dignity.

From this perspective, the issue is connected to what may be called the “Palestinian right” in its deeper sense: the loss of land and the effort to reclaim it generation after generation. Here, the Nakba becomes a fundamental element in reproducing individual and collective responsibility within Palestinian society, regardless of Oslo, political shifts, changing balances of power, or international support.

In this context, European pressure may continue, but it does not necessarily produce solutions; rather, it may lead to greater political and popular explosions. By contrast, no official system has value if it does not integrate with a living and effective popular system.

It is true that the presence of the Nakba and Palestinian geography and history within the official narrative is important, but it is not sufficient on its own. Therefore, every Palestinian must carry their own narrative and pass it on in their daily environment. In popular consciousness, the narrative becomes a daily practice: when “Ramat Gan” is said, the Palestinian name is recalled; when “Halamish” is said, the name “al-Nabi Saleh” is invoked. In this way, the narrative becomes a daily act not subject to control, because the word itself does not need an institution in order to remain alive.

From here, the Nakba must move from its official framework into a

comprehensive popular consciousness that is difficult to contain or control. International policies may change curricula or delete narratives, but the popular narrative remains more deeply rooted and enduring.

This narrative was not produced by official institutions; rather, it was formed through living memory carried by mothers, fathers, and grandmothers, and transmitted orally across generations. Therefore, it is not strange that a Palestinian child knows the meaning of the Nakba before delving into its details, because knowledge here is emotional before it is academic.

From this perspective, there is no fear for the Palestinian narrative as long as it remains alive in society. But the real danger lies in official narratives or international pressures turning into policies that affect fundamental rights, foremost among them the right of return, as an established right under international legitimacy and a right to resist occupation in order to reclaim the land.

Nor should international pressures be allowed to become tools for criminalizing memory or punishing those who hold on to it. If matters reach that point, then any official system will necessarily produce a counterreaction, because in the end the narrative is not decided within official frameworks, but in the popular sphere, which possesses the real capacity for continuity and rootedness.

Does the use of simplified language or changing historical terminology in curricula amount to a form of reformulating or rewriting the historical narrative?

The idea is deeper than merely changing words or simplifying language. Language by its nature allows for metaphor, interpretation, and reformulation, and meaning can be conveyed through it in multiple ways. But in the end, it is not the linguistic form that determines the truth, but what settles in consciousness and conscience.

There is a difference between the text and the inner sense of truth. There is something linked to awareness, and something deeper linked to dignity and the moral perception that distinguishes between what is true and what is false, regardless of how it is presented. Therefore, the narrative can be formulated in more than one style, but the question remains: does the meaning change or not?

From here, one can distinguish between the true narrative and the false one not necessarily through books or curricula alone, nor even through the abundance of information now available on the internet or social media, because these are often accumulated data more than they are established truths. Truth, in its essence, is what is connected to the Palestinian right itself, as something constant that does not change with changing formulations.

In other words, a right does not need a document in order to be a right. As in the case of seizure or theft, when a house is taken from its owner, the matter does not require a "tabu deed" for us to realize that it has been taken. The presence or absence of a document does not change the nature of the act itself. A right is known by its essence, not by the papers surrounding it.

Here lies the core idea: documents, dates, and curricula are tools for producing knowledge, but they are not the only source of truth. History is often written from a position of power, while living memory is shaped from the position of ordinary people, from the weak who resist the official narrative and preserve their own story.

Therefore, Palestinians do not rely on a single means to transmit or preserve history, but on a broader system that includes popular memory, stories, symbols, and daily forms of expression. Even folk songs were a means of conveying the message in coded form, such as "Ya Tale'een al-Jabal," where the message reached those who understood it—(the revolutionaries)—while remaining obscure to those trying to control it—(the colonizer).

This shows that language is not merely a formal tool, but also a space of resistance. Through it, the narrative can be conveyed, meaning can be anchored, and it can be passed from one generation to another, regardless of the nature of official wording or changing terminology in curricula. In the end, the true narrative is not reduced to a book, but preserved in consciousness, memory, and daily practice.

To what extent does changing the curriculum affect the new generation's awareness of the Nakba, given the continued transmission of the narrative through popular memory and lived experience?

It can be said that any change in the curriculum, whether in language, terminology, or content, may have an impact on the new generation's awareness of the Nakba and on later generations' understanding of it. But at the same time, through observation and experience, the issue cannot be reduced to the curriculum alone.

If we look historically, we find that previous generations, even before Oslo and before 1967, did not possess official curricula or an organized narrative in the current form, yet the Palestinian narrative still arrived powerfully and endured. It can even be said that its presence today has become broader and stronger, especially with the development of social media and digital platforms, as the new generation has a greater connection to the original place and to historical details, and sometimes knows more than previous generations about its villages and towns.

From here, it can be said that the transmission of memory does not depend only on formal education, but goes beyond that to living memory and daily experience. Even traumatic experiences and historical injustice do not remain confined to one generation, but are transmitted in one way or another to subsequent generations, in something like an “inheritance of memory,” meaning that the effects of the Nakba and suffering extend through time and are reflected in new generations.

Therefore, it can be said that the curriculum does have an impact, but it is not the only decisive factor; rather, it intersects with broader social, cultural, and media factors.

In light of this reality, the most important question remains: how can a clear Palestinian narrative of the Nakba be preserved in public consciousness without distorting it or emptying it of its historical meaning?

The answer, in my view, lies in strengthening popular education and the unofficial narrative alongside formal education, because bureaucratic systems alone are not enough to transmit memory as it is. Indeed, relying on a single central narrative may sometimes lead to reducing the experience or distorting its plurality, whereas the Nakba in its essence is not one closed narrative, but a collection of multiple narratives and human experiences.

Therefore, it is important that the transmission of the Nakba be decentralized, with every individual participating from their own position: the worker, the owner of the depopulated home, the artist, the refugee, and everyone who lived the experience or was touched by its effects. This diversity enriches the narrative rather than weakening it.

Art and cinema also have an important role in reviving memory, such as films that addressed Palestine in 1936 or the film “Tantura,” which reopened the file of the massacres and the Nakba of 1948 before a wide audience. These works brought discussion of the Nakba back to the forefront and showed their ability to influence public consciousness more than some closed academic courses.

From here, it can be said that preserving the Palestinian narrative is achieved not only through curricula, but through a broader system of popular education, art, and collective memory, as essential tools for confronting attempts at erasure or domination over the historical narrative.

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