

# PALESTINIANS in SYRIA

Nakba Memories of  
Shattered Communities



Anaheed Al-Hardan

# INTRODUCTION

## THE CATASTROPHE OF 1948, THE CATASTROPHES OF TODAY

*[The Nakba anniversary] last year was different. It was a day in which the refugees' fear was broken and a day in which they reclaimed their voice and image. What took place that day was legendary, it returned hope to millions of refugees and it returned joy to the camps.*

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"HILM 'AWDA" BY KHALID BAKRAWI (1988–2013), DIED UNDER TORTURE IN JAIL<sup>1</sup>

*I love it [Yarmouk Camp] a lot. I love its details. I love living in it, I don't know why. I hope to never leave it, I hope to remaining living in it, I hope that my circumstances become better and I remain living in it. If I could produce only one play per year, and to stage it in the camp only, I'd have no problem. I would be content and happy, and no one will get to know me, I don't want to become famous or become anything. I only want to remain living in this place, and to be able to work in theater and to remain an ordinary person, not more than ordinary. I don't want to live in anything other than an ordinary situation, in this situation I would be very happy. These are my hopes.*

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INTERVIEW WITH HASSAN HASSAN (1984–2013), DIED UNDER TORTURE IN JAIL<sup>2</sup>

**A**t the end of December 2012, with the full-fledged arrival of the war, a booby-trapped car exploded in Yarmouk Camp's Rejeh Square. A picture was posted in the aftermath of the explosion on Yarmouk Camp News, a Facebook page that provides on-the-ground coverage of events in Yarmouk. Although there were no human injuries or deaths, the picture showed the extensive damage in the square and the area that surrounds it, including the al-Samadi family's badly damaged home, part of which directly faces the square.

A few days later, a second picture of the bombed-out square was circulated on the same page. This time the picture was of al-Hajj Abu Samih, the eldest member of the al-Samadi family, standing with a cane outside his half-blown-out family home, looking straight into the camera, surrounded by the ruins of Rejeh Square. The caption attached to Abu Samih's photo on Facebook read:

In Yarmouk Camp, an old man who remains put in his home, in his street, in his camp. The explosion destroyed parts of his home, his neighborhood and his square, but he refused to leave his home. Al-Hajj Abu Samih al-Samadi, who lived through Palestine's Nakba [catastrophe], and now refuses another Nakba that would come about through his departure from the camp.<sup>3</sup>

During my interview with Abu Samih some five years earlier, Abu Samih spoke to me about Palestine's Nakba. The Nakba, or catastrophe, is the Arabic word that Palestinians and Arabs more generally use to refer to the establishment of the state of Israel on Palestine in May 1948 and the resulting destruction and uprooting of the major part of Palestinian society (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007). Born in Lubyā, Tiberias subdistrict, Abu Samih was a young volunteer with Jaysh al-Jihad al-Muqadas (Holy War Army). This was a group of local irregular volunteers loyal to Muhammad Amin al-Husayni and operating in Palestine before the entry of the regular Arab armies in May 1948 (Pappe 1992, 65; 1997; 2006b, 85–108).<sup>4</sup> He was shot near Ma'lul and taken to a hospital in Nazareth, from there to a hospital in Beirut, and eventually to a third hospital in Damascus because of the overcrowding. Once he reached the border with Syria, he spent the last two piasters in his pocket on a newspaper. He was eventually reunited with some members of his family, now scattered throughout Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, and remained in one of the mosques in Damascus that put up the refugees until he moved to Yarmouk in the 1950s. In Yarmouk, he would begin to rebuild his life from nothing, and it took him twenty years, he told me, to finally

emerge from the total poverty that he and his family were thrust into as refugees. Abu Samih also had an extraordinary library (AM 2012), and given his age and role in 1948, he appeared on Al Jazeera Arabic's special series on the Nakba, "A Right That Refuses Forgetfulness," which the channel began to air in the run-up to the sixtieth anniversary of 1948.

Thus, in the course of five years and against the backdrop of the devastation caused by the war in Syria, the Nakba was transformed. From a catastrophe that engulfed the Palestinians in 1948, which Abu Samih witnessed and bore witness to on its sixtieth anniversary, the Nakba became another catastrophe that would be realized by Abu Samih leaving Yarmouk at the end of 2012. At the core of this understanding of the 1948 catastrophe is that the unresolved Nakba has resulted in yet more catastrophes, given the now sixty-seven-year statelessness of the majority of Palestinians, the refugees. Within the context of Syria, this meaning of the Nakba reflects the drastic transformations that Palestinian communities in the country are undergoing after an uninterrupted four-generation socially and economically integrated presence.

Before the war in Syria, the establishment of the state of Israel, when understood through its Palestinian patriotic and Arab nationalist significations,<sup>5</sup> could be articulated as a catastrophic event whose impact on the new generations of Palestinian refugees was underscored by several factors. Most important of these are an ongoing statelessness, a political claim to historic Palestine, and diverse feelings of belonging. Today, these meanings of the Nakba have been transformed. The Nakba is no longer only about a distant event in the past that continues to manifest itself through an ongoing statelessness. It is also a catastrophe taking place in the present through the destruction of Palestinian communities yet again and the severance of their temporal, spatial, material, and personal ties in Syria. Thus, Abu Samih's Facebook caption—"another Nakba"—underscores the Palestinians' attachments to their homes, camps, and communities in Syria. The al-Samadi family, like most of the people of the camp, have since left Yarmouk, and their neighborhood, Harit al-Fida'iyye, has been extensively damaged by the fighting. The war has therefore not only drastically transformed the country, and with it the Palestinian refugee community, but also changed and continues to change the significations of the Nakba.

This book examines Nakba memories and histories of Palestinians in Syria. It explores how 1948-as-catastrophe was first conceptualized in Arab nationalist thought and transformed as a result of the rise and fall of the Palestinian liberation movement. It considers the ways in which Palestinian refugee right of return activists have rejected the 1993 Palestinian-Israeli Oslo Accords' institutionalization of the separation of Palestinian liberation from

the return (Chomsky 1999, 533–565; R. Khalidi 1992).<sup>6</sup> It explores the politically expedient memory discourses and practices around the Nakba that they have as a result created in their communities. While these efforts have led to specific and pervasive significations of 1948, including the contemporary and singularly patriotic view that 1948 is important as “the Nakba,” this book turns instead to the realm of memories to examine other possible meanings of 1948. It considers significations of the Nakba beyond its purportedly static and universally shared guise popularly furthered by activists and more broadly evident in Palestinian patriotic discourses.

Drawing on multigenerational interviews with Palestinian refugees in Syria, I demonstrate how the Nakba, despite its patriotic importance, is not the primary object of the narration and transmission of memories of loss in Palestinian refugee families. Rather, the Nakba’s importance lies in the ways in which its resultant temporal and spatial referents gave way to shared memories and histories around which communities in Syria would eventually crystallize despite the devastation of Palestine. These communities coalesced through the Palestine generation’s own shared memories and through the shared narratives on the Nakba of the “postgeneration[s]” (Hirsch 1997; 2012, 5)—what I refer to as the “post-Palestine generations”—their children and grandchildren. And herein lies the meaning of the Nakba in Syria today: the war’s destruction of these communities, the scattering of Palestinians from Syria to all corners of the world, has resulted in a catastrophe that, unlike 1948, means that the devastation may now be final.

Rather than taking the contemporary meanings and significations of the Nakba at face value, I therefore provide a counterintuitive reading of the Nakba. I do this by approaching its pervasive significations in Palestinian refugee communities as the result of shifting historical, political, and material circumstances in the Arab world. The contention that the meanings associated with patriotic or nationalist signifiers of the past are subject to change, contestation, divergent meanings, and different articulations is, however, hardly a radical or novel proposition. This contention therefore needs to be understood in the context of the new and growing literature on the Nakba in English, which tends to take the Palestinian patriotic meanings of the 1948 Nakba at face value. This is the Nakba as the establishment of the state of Israel on Palestine in 1948 and the ongoing statelessness, expulsions, and destruction of communities or settler-colonization of the remnants of Palestinian society. Important as they are, these are nevertheless only some of the meanings of the 1948 Nakba. They are also relatively new.

I also take the argument beyond pervasive yet historically contingent and shifting meanings of signifiers of patriotic or nationalist events of the past.

I do this by examining the ways in which shared histories and memories in the shadow of the afterlives of such events, particularly traumatic, speak to the possibilities of communities arising from and despite the devastation of collective shattering and uprooting. I therefore consider both Palestine and the Nakba through memory studies. This is an area of research that has been heavily dominated by German and European history, with a marked insistence on European Jewish Holocaust exceptionalism that has only recently been reconsidered through the so-called “colonial turn” in Holocaust studies (see, e.g., Langbehn and Salama 2011; Zimmerer 2004). Memory studies has also largely ignored memories and histories of violence and atrocities inflicted in the course of European colonialism (R. Sayigh 2013). This raises important questions about this body of work’s ideological blind spots and Eurocentrism that have led to these exclusions, including the exclusion of the ongoing ravages of Zionist settler-colonialism in Palestine and the Nakba (Abu-Lughod and Sa’di 2007).

Syria as a case study is central to the book’s arguments on memories and histories of the Nakba. Syria was home to approximately 560,000 UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)–registered Palestinian refugees on the eve of the war (UNRWA 2012d, 2013b).<sup>7</sup> Palestinians who arrived in Syria in 1948, and their descendants, have been the only Palestinians who maintained their refugee status while enjoying full civic rights (bar the right to nationality and the vote) and obliged to perform duties (military service) in an Arab state to which they fled in 1948.<sup>8</sup> Before the war in Syria, memories and histories of the 1948 Nakba were not produced under the immediate threat of war, settler-colonization, occupation, and multiple dispossessions. This has not been the case in other Palestinian communities, particularly those in Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (West Bank and the Gaza Strip, OPT), and Lebanon. In Syria, Nakba memories and histories were, four generations later, produced and diffracted through the ability of Palestinians to therefore belong in different ways and to different communities. Although these communities shared the experience of the 1948 expulsion from Palestine, they also shared the reality of having been formed and rooted in Syria for several generations.

In an in memoriam for the young actor and director Hassan Hassan, whose words in the opening epigraph are now a haunting reminder of Palestinian refugee life in Syria that no longer is, an exiled activist from Yarmouk movingly articulated the reality of his now-shattered community in this way:

Palestine, the land we all dream of, consisted of our passion [for] life, our shouts during the demonstrations on Land Day, our tendency to break the

usual in our poor context (the refugee camp), with the death of Hassan under torture in Assad prisons, with the death of Ahmad Kosa before him, with the death of Ghassan Shihabi before that, with all those lives lost, Palestine now is more irrelevant to me! Countries are made of people, lands are our illusions, I dream of the right of return with my beloved ones!

(Salameh 2013)

Thus, while Palestine is a dream, a passion, a cause, the aspiration of return to this Palestine is one rooted in Salameh's community in Syria, the now-dead friends and comrades with whom these ideals were shared. It is against the context of a Palestinian past shared with others whose families were expelled in 1948, a present that was unique to those whose families happened to cross into Syria in 1948, and the different belongings and realities of communities that this made possible in Syria that this book unfolds. In it I examine the Nakba's shifting nationalist and patriotic significations, its rearticulation and mobilization by right of return activists in Syria, and the different possibilities its memories and histories have engendered among the Palestine and post-Palestine generations.

In the remainder of this introduction, I briefly sketch the history of the Nakba's contemporary nationalist and patriotic meanings and significations, the changing realities of the Palestinians in Syria in light of the war, and some of the main concepts that I deploy from an engagement with memory studies.

## **THE NAKBA**

May 15, 2011, marked the sixty-third anniversary of the Nakba and coincided with the uprisings that had engulfed the Arab world following the revolutions first in Tunisia and later Egypt in January and February 2011 respectively. By May of that year, demonstrations and popular unrest had spread, to varying degrees and with different consequences, to Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. This is more than half of the twenty-two League of Arab States members at the time.

Inspired by these unprecedented regional developments, Palestinian refugee youths planned marches of return to coincide with the sixty-third anniversary of the Nakba. The organizers envisioned these as a series of peaceful and coordinated "one-million-man" marches to historic Palestine. Through these marches, Palestinian refugees in Israel, the OPT, Syria, Lebanon, and

Jordan would exercise their right to return to their families' homes and lands in what is today the state of Israel (Fayyad 2011).

The idea of return as inherent to liberation has historically been a central, though now all but abandoned, component of the Palestinian national liberation movement. It was not historically discussed in terms of rights, but was seen as inherent to Palestinian liberation (R. Khalidi 1992). Today, the (right of) return continues to be important in Palestinian refugee communities and in direct contestation of the moribund statist project of the Oslo Accords. These Accords relegated return, and thus the refugees' hopes and aspirations, to "final status" negotiations. Given the implications of the Oslo Accords for the return, community activists invoke it as a right by using the language of human rights and international humanitarian law, especially UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 194. This resolution enshrined the Palestinians' right to return to their homes and lands in the wake of the establishment of the state of Israel (UNGA 1948). They therefore invoke human rights in order to contest the way in which the return has been consistently blocked by Israel in contravention of international humanitarian law and as part of its denial of responsibility for the expulsion and destruction of Palestinian society during the Nakba (Masalha 1992, 1997, 2003).

In the end, the marches were not the marches of millions the organizers had envisioned. Nevertheless, Palestinian and Syrian youths, their access to the border area facilitated by the authorities (Bitari 2013), made a dramatic crossing into the Israeli-occupied Syrian town of Majdal Shams on the Israeli-occupied side of the Syrian Golan Heights. The march was captured on film from the Majdal Shams side, with the sound of live Israeli fire in the background (Abunimah 2011b). The footage begins with frantic warnings by the people of Majdal Shams, who plead with the advancing line of Palestinian and Syrian flag-waving youths to stop because of the danger of land mines. Undeterred, the youths continue to advance as they chant, "The people want to liberate Palestine," a play on the Arab uprisings' chant "The people want to bring down the regime." A few minutes later, we see the first youth cross into Majdal Shams, with the sounds of bullets ringing in the background. He runs up to one of the men awaiting him and is embraced and congratulated. When asked what he would like to tell his people in the Golan, the young man ecstatically exclaims: "God protect them! And we want to return to Palestine! We want to return to Palestine!" He is followed by other youths, who are also given a hero's welcome. "Yes, this is how liberation looks like," says one man from behind the camera.

This historic March of Return, which the late community activist Khalid Bakrawi eloquently wrote about, as quoted in the opening epigraph,

encapsulates the three main concerns of this book. These are the Nakba, Palestinians in Syria, and memories and histories. In regard to the Nakba, the march highlights its memories and histories ongoing significance in Palestinian refugee communities, as well as their entanglement with political claims and visions of Palestinian liberation and return that refuse the separation of the two. The youths' enactment of a symbolic march of return to a concrete physical space is intelligible only within the context of the records and recollections of a forced expulsion from that space in 1948. This is because this space is for Palestinian refugees historic Palestine, or what is today the state of Israel, the object of their political claims. The march was therefore also a clear demand for acknowledgment and restitution by Israel and its powerful backers, especially the United States and the European Union, for the Nakba. It also underscored the nature of the political claims attached to the Nakba and its memories and histories. These revolve around the consequences of the forced expulsion of 1948 as ongoing, given that Palestine remains under Israeli occupation and that the right of return of refugees expelled in 1948 and their descendants remains to be implemented.

Given the meanings associated with 1948 demonstrated through the March of Return, the question arises, how and why have these significations of the Nakba come about? Some have retrospectively argued that denoting 1948 as a catastrophe has reduced the event to a natural disaster or calamity, obscuring questions of political will, agency, and responsibility (H. Khader 1998; Khoury 2012).<sup>9</sup> A more comprehensive understanding of 1948 as a *nakba*, however, comes from placing the concept in its “universe of discourse” (Foucault 1991, 2005; Said 2003, 273). This universe of discourse can be traced to the first two decades after 1948, when various authors theorized the Nakba within the context of the ascendant Arab nationalist liberation project and its related modernization discourses.

In August 1948, while the war on Palestinians was still ongoing, the Damascus-born educator, historian, and nationalist theorist Constantine Zurayk (al-'Azma 2003) was the first to describe the outcome of the war as a catastrophe in his 1948 *Ma'na al-Nakba* (The meaning of the catastrophe). For Zurayk, what transpired in Palestine was catastrophic because of the defeat of the combined might of the Arab armies that had entered Palestine in May 1948. It was also catastrophic because of the mass dispossession of the inhabitants of Palestine at the hands of the Haganah, the prestate Zionist fighting force and nucleus of what would become the Israeli army (Rogan and Shlaim 2007). This early conceptualization of the 1948 war on the Palestinians as a *nakba* was made in relation to the catastrophe that it posed to the project of pan-Arab unity, liberation, and decolonization, given

that Palestine was part of the envisioned Arab nation (‘Abd al-Da’im 1998). Although Zurayk’s conception of 1948-as-catastrophe does indeed encompass the dispossession of the inhabitants of Palestine, this was not Zurayk’s primary concern, for it was only part of what made the establishment of the state of Israel on Palestine a catastrophe.

These were the discursive dimensions within which the 1948 war-as-catastrophe was first conceptualized and articulated, not only in 1948 but also in the first two decades of its aftermath, when the pan-Arab nationalist project of liberation was at its peak. In these decades, the Arab, rather than Palestinian, Nakba came to be associated with a definite rupture with the old Arab order left behind by French and British colonial rule that had made the catastrophe possible in the first place (al-Tal 1959). The Arab Nakba was also associated with the promise of a new dawn to be brought about by the military coups and emergent ideological currents and movements of the time (Talhmi 1998).

What this meant in practice was that ideas about the 1948 catastrophe became entangled in the militarism institutionalized in the 1950s and 1960s (Gerges 2007; al-Jabiri 1982). This was primarily the case as a result of the Egyptian July Revolution of 1952 and the emergence of Gamal Abdel Nasser as a powerful contender for regional leadership (Kerr 1971). Within this context, Nasser, who had been a major (*sagħ*) in the Egyptian army in Palestine during the 1948 war (al-Tal 1959, 434–435), argued in his 1954 *Falsafat al-Thawra* (The revolution’s philosophy) that the Nakba was not the cause of the July Revolution. Rather, the Nakba was catastrophic to the political realization of the Arab nation, and thus it was within the political sphere of the revolution.

Even during early Palestinian organizing in the wake of 1948—especially under the banner of pan-Arab groups such as the Arab Nationalists Movement (ANM) and the Ba’th Party—the question of the Nakba remained an Arab question and was articulated as such (Y. Sayigh 1991b; al-Sharif 1995, 48–56).<sup>10</sup> Only with the emergence of Fatah would Palestinians finally come to organize under a specifically Palestinian banner and articulate visions of liberation and the resolution of the Nakba within an exclusively Palestinian framework.<sup>11</sup> In an impressive study of Palestinian political thought, the historian Mahir al-Sharif (1995, 88–89) argues that what in fact distinguished Fatah was its “assertion that the making of the Nakba and its ongoing nature, were, to a great extent, the result of the distancing of the Palestinians from their cause, and its call to the Palestinians to take over their cause once again.”

Thus, for the first two decades following the Nakba, the intellectual and political trajectory of 1948-as-catastrophe would take center stage in terms

of its pan-Arab dimensions. The 1967 June War, however, transformed this meaning of the Nakba.<sup>12</sup> Initially, in the immediate years following 1967, a new wave of critical works addressed the new defeat primarily as being yet another catastrophe or disaster, one in a direct continuity with the first, and as having the same root causes (al-Azm 1968; al-Bitar 1968; Zurayk [1967] 2001). Indeed, Nasser himself would deem the new defeat a *naksa*, or “set-back,” to the project of pan-Arab unity, liberation, and decolonization (Abu-Lughud 1972). Eventually, thinking about the new defeat would come to subsume and eclipse the Nakba of 1948.

This preoccupation with the 1948 Nakba, even if only as part of the new defeat, would eventually conspicuously disappear from the post-1967 literature altogether. All eyes were now on the so-called “Palestinian Revolution” (see, e.g., ‘Abd al-Da’im 1970; al-Khatib 1971; Sayf al-Dawla 1970; Tu’ma 1969). This revolution, or increased Palestinian political and paramilitary organization, took off after the Palestinian takeover of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) during a process that culminated in the election of Yasser Arafat as PLO chairman in 1969 (Y. Sayigh 1992, 264). The revolution was now the site where the emergent Palestinian guerrillas were actively operating and determining how the liberation of Palestine and the return were to unfold. Later still, the resolution of the Nakba through liberation and return would itself take secondary place, with the guerrillas shifting their focus to effect reversal of Israeli gains made in 1967 (Y. Sayigh 2004).

The eventual “reemergence” of the Nakba in the 1980s as a Palestinian rather than an Arab catastrophe allowed it to take on a radically altered meaning, form, and content, one that we are more familiar with today. That the Nakba “disappeared” and “remerged” refers to the disappearance of its Arab universe of discourse and the latter’s eclipse by another one that resulted from the failure of the Palestinian national movement to deliver on both liberation and return. The Nakba, of course, did not disappear nor reemerge for those who lived through and survived 1948, nor has it done so for those who have grown up in the shadow of its memories and the material realities of its aftermath.

The emergence of this Palestinian Nakba was made possible primarily through a renewed interest in the Palestinian past by Palestinians. It took place when the PLO’s decade in Lebanon was ending and the organization was subsequently evacuated to Tunis (R. Sayigh 2008b). It also came about as a result of Palestinians’ own attempt to revive memories of their villages, towns, and ways of life in the Palestine that the Nakba had destroyed (Abdel Jawad 2007; Abu-Lughod and Sa’di 2007; Farah 2006). This turn to memories

of historic Palestine was accelerated further by the Oslo Accords, which posed a threat to the refugees' right of return to their homes and lands. In view of this context, this turn led to a particular emphasis on Nakba memories, especially in refugee communities and the generation of Palestine, the sole remaining witnesses to the 1948 catastrophe. This generation's memories were now seen to be able to lead to the eventual reclamation of Palestine (Hammami 2010; Hill 2005).

In Syria, this focus took place largely as a result of what came to be known as the Right of Return Movement (RoRM) (Al-Hardan 2012a; Suleiman 2004). The RoRM emerged as a response to the Oslo Accords and as an attempt to undermine the agenda of the PLO and the Oslo-created Palestinian Authority (PA) in the OPT. Its focus was especially on the question of the legitimate representation of the refugees, and with that, the PLO's and PA's ability to forfeit the right of return in negotiations. Oslo, among many other things, completely excluded the refugees from the Palestinian decision-making process by giving birth to the PA in the OPT (Suleiman 2001). Insofar as the refugees are concerned, the PLO all but signed away their right of return through its abandonment of a coherent national liberation project encompassing all Palestinians. It did this by engaging in two decades of futile negotiations with Israel over "final status" issues (i.e., borders, the status of Jerusalem, and the right of return) (Swisher 2011). These negotiations merely provided a cover for increased Israeli settler-colonization of the OPT and never resulted in a Palestinian state (see, e.g., R. Khalidi 2006, 2013).

On the local level, activists began to mobilize memories associated with historic Palestine and the Nakba as resources for collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; McCarthy and Zald 1977). This particular mobilization led to the emergence of contemporary as well as popular memory discourses on the Nakba in Palestinian communities in general (Masalha 2008; R. Sayigh 2008b). Central to these discourses are notions that memory itself is a guarantor of a future return to Palestine and that the Nakba is ongoing, given the lack of its resolution. At the heart of these discourses is, therefore, a memory/return matrix as well as particular patriotic understanding of the Nakba as central to Palestinian political claims and identity. It is in and through community activists' mobilization of memories as resources and their commemorative efforts that the articulation and rearticulation of the Nakba is taking place today.

Thus, the different significations associated with the Nakba since its occurrence have resulted from shifting historical and political conditions and the response of Palestinians to these circumstances. The most important

of these changes have arguably been the twentieth-century defeats of the pan-Arab nationalist liberation project and the Palestinian liberation movement. First, as noted, the Nakba was articulated as a catastrophe for Arab liberation; and later, as a catastrophe within the context of Palestinian liberation. In addition, whereas the Palestinian liberation movement once saw return as inherent to liberation, today Palestinian refugee activists have responded to the movement's abandonment of both liberation and return by tying the imperative to remember with the right of return and thus the eventual liberation. As a result, the idea of memory has come to have high political currency in Palestinian refugee communities.

Returning to the March of Return, which began this brief sketch of the Nakba, I next examine what it can tell us about the Nakba in relation to these Palestinian communities in Syria.

## **THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE COMMUNITY IN SYRIA**

The day after the historic march of May 2011, yet another dramatic act of return was captured on film. Hasan Hijazi, a young Palestinian refugee from Syria, traveled from Majdal Shams to Jaffa, his family's hometown. While in Jaffa, he gave an interview on Israeli television and defiantly made his symbolic act of return public before he was deported (Abunimah 2011c). In the interview, Hijazi tells the interviewer that it was his dream to come to Jaffa because "it is my town." He asserts that he was not scared of the elite Israeli Golani Brigade soldiers sitting next to him on the bus that brought him to Jaffa and that he does not recognize the state of Israel even though he is aware that he is making his declarations from the heart of the state. When the interviewer asked him whether he considers the march a victory against the state or merely a symbolic act, Hijazi tells the interviewer that it is merely symbolic because real victories come through armies.

Hijazi's interview demonstrates the power of memories and histories of the Nakba for individual Palestinian refugees (Sanbar 2001). Despite his birth in Syria, Hijazi made a claim to the town of his family's memories. Although he had never seen Jaffa in his lifetime as a refugee, his was nonetheless a return to a town that he had in many ways already seen and known, if only as a family memory, as the town of his grandparents. He had in fact known it enough to dream about returning to it, as he told the interviewer, and to declare Jaffa his town. His return to his grandparents' Jaffa was as much anchored in the narration and transmission of family memories as it was in his and his community's uprooted histories; it was

ultimately a return to a town from where his family had been expelled three generations earlier. Through his declarations, Hijazi drew a clear connection between his memories, history, and political claims and aspirations, as encapsulated in a single town, Jaffa, the site of his imaginative and political attachments.

Although Hijazi's symbolic return and television interview may have been extraordinary acts during a regionally extraordinary zeitgeist, his memory claims are not uncommon among the post-Palestine generations. This is because his memory claims are ultimately articulated against the Nakba's shifting meanings and pervasive significations. Beyond this, what can Hijazi's imaginative and political attachments tell us about histories and memories in the shadow of the afterlife of the Nakba and the possibilities of communities arising from and despite its collective devastation? To begin with, though Hijazi took part in a march on the sixty-third anniversary of the Nakba, the object of his memory claims is clearly Jaffa, not the Nakba. The occasion of the Nakba anniversary is indeed the reason for the march and Hijazi does make all the necessary nods to its patriotic significations in his interview. For example, he refuses to cede legitimacy to Israeli settler-colonization of Jaffa and his family's expulsion from historic Palestine. The Nakba is, however, subsumed within the object of Hijazi's imaginative and political attachments, his family's hometown. He does not conjure up memories of 1948 and his memory claims do not simply reproduce the central place of the Nakba in the post-1993 memory discourses. Rather, his memory claims speak to the ways in which refugee families narrate and transmit their memories of the loss that resulted from the Nakba. In this narration and transmission, it is the object of loss, or families' lives, worlds, and very social existence, that is the object of memories, the Jaffa of Hijazi's family, and not the Nakba per se.

Closely related to this is the communal claim encapsulated in Hijazi's return to Jaffa. His return speaks to the Palestinian communities that once existed in the Jaffa that he dreamed of seeing and to the possibilities of communities of Jaffans that inform his memory claims despite their destruction in Palestine in 1948. These are communities that Hijazi and other refugees born in Syria have encountered through their symbolic contours, their memories. The existence of these communities itself embodies meanings of the Nakba that may at times overlap, sometimes contradict, or even contest the meanings associated with 1948 as a patriotic signifier.

Thus, in addition to the concept of memory, the concept of community is also central to the arguments of this book. Community is a multifaceted concept having different connotations in different disciplines, though

it could be broadly characterized to be about notions of belonging. Generally, sociologists associate community with groups' social organizations and relations based on a locality, and anthropologists in recent years have argued for community as a form of cultural belonging, meaning-making, and identity. Political scientists emphasize community in relation to political participation in its different forms, whereas in philosophy, community is an idea and even an ideal, whether as utopia or ideology (Delanty 2010, xi). In a comprehensive interdisciplinary study of the concept of community, the sociologist Gerard Delanty (2010) synthesizes these different approaches and argues that community is an ideal as much as it is also real. This is because "community has a transcendent nature and cannot simply be equated with particular groups or a place. Nor can it be reduced to an idea, for ideas do not simply exist outside social relations, socially-structured discourses or a historical milieu" (Delanty 2010, xii).

In this book, the notion of community appears in two specific ways that I contend are also complementary and not necessarily mutually exclusive. First, community is used to explore the Palestinians' social, historical, and political experiences in Syria. Here, the emphasis is on community as specific modes of social organization and their resultant forms of belonging and imagination of social relations (Delanty 2010, 35). Thus, I approach the Palestinians in Syria as constituting a politically, nationally, and legally defined and constructed community. I demonstrate the ways in which this definition, demarcation, and construction historically took place through the bureaucratic practices of the Syrian state, UNRWA, and the reemergence of the Palestinian liberation movement after 1948. This community as case study is important because of its unique context and because to date no full-length academic Arabic- or English-language monograph examines its experiences.<sup>13</sup>

When discussing the Palestinians in Syria as a community, however, I imply neither that they are homogenous nor that there is one overarching community. They therefore also constitute heterogeneous communities shaped by myriad factors, including different origins in Palestine, places of abode in Syria, and economic class, among other factors. In addition, like other Palestinian refugee communities in the Arab world, Palestinians in Syria have been and continue to be shaped by the general post-1948 Palestinian experiences of statelessness and the trials of the Palestinian liberation movement. Their unique Syrian context, however, has historically set them apart as a community. This is because it has been relatively stable over the past six decades and Palestinians in Syria have enjoyed rights shared by no other disenfranchised Palestinian refugee community in the Arab world. To speak of Palestinians in Syria as constituting a community is also, therefore,

to speak of heterogeneous local communities with a unique overarching historical experience as well as a connection to transnational Palestinian refugee communities.

Before the war and the suspension of all normal life in Syria, the Syrian state's relationship to its Palestinian refugee community, it has been argued, paved the way for the gradual socioeconomic integration of Palestinians into Syrian society. This took place as Palestinians were allowed to maintain a separate national identity (Brand 1988c, 621). Others have argued that Palestinians in Syria lie somewhere between an established diaspora and a transit refugee community (Hanafi 2003). The former can be characterized by communities descending from late Ottoman immigrants in the Americas, while the latter can be characterized by communities of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, with their institutionalized temporariness and insecurity. More recently, the notion that Palestinians constitute a diaspora has itself been problematized (Peteet 2007). This is because of Palestinian refugees' closeness to historic Palestine and their former homes, the immediacy and ongoing nature of their displacement, the potential depoliticization of the term "diaspora" in relation to the right of return, and the question of identity (some Palestinian refugees rejecting diaspora as ideological invocation, resistance to displacement, etc.).

With these debates about the overall nature of the community in Syria in mind, I also use the notion of community in a second, complementary way. This allows me to explore the RoRM activists' political mobilization efforts as enabling the realization of community. In addition, it allows me to consider the generation of Palestine's shared memories and the post-Palestine generations' shared Nakba narratives as circulating in their communities. Here, the emphasis is therefore on community understood in its practice, symbolic, and communicative aspects (Delanty 2010, 102). The symbolic contours of these communities are found in their members' shared memories and histories of an expulsion from Palestine. Their realities are communicated through a shared history and refugee experience in Syria and are also constructed through activists' efforts to redress their communities' ongoing statelessness.

The different aspects of community used in this book move beyond an examination of the Nakba in Arab nationalist, Palestinian patriotic, and popular memory discourses. They allow for an understanding of the circulation of 1948's meanings in and through community members' memories and histories. These memories are constructed around the Nakba's shared yet uprooted and fractured temporal and spatial referents. As such, they embody the possibility of communities despite the devastation wrought by the establishment of Israel. This meaning of the Nakba today and the

different memories of 1948 realized through community at times coexist, sometimes compete, and at other times challenge Arab and Palestinian significations of 1948.

Syria as a country is a defining factor for its Palestinian refugee community, regardless of how the latter is theorized. Palestinians make up less than 3 percent of the multireligious and multiethnic population in Syria. They have historically formed an important pillar of the regime's official Ba'athist Arab nationalist ideology that far exceeds the size of their community. Given this ideological connection, the regime's treatment of the Palestinian refugees in the country has provided important political capital, even though before the Ba'athists came to power the Palestinians had been granted the rights setting them apart from other Palestinian refugees (GAPAR n/a; Hinnebusch 2002). This historical and political reality arguably allowed for Palestinians' particular relationship to and sense of belonging in Syria. This is despite the fact of the Syrian Ba'athist regime's instrumentalization of the Palestine question while allowing for sieges of Palestinian camps and communities in neighboring Lebanon during that country's civil war. The treatment of the Palestinian refugees in the country notwithstanding, the Syrian regime has also had a historically turbulent relationship with the PLO (Brand 1990; R. Khalidi 1984; Talhami 2001).

This history alongside the current Syrian war also means that the Palestinians' relationship to the Syrian state and its current regime is today undergoing unprecedented transformations. The regime's current struggle for survival has not spared Palestinians from the death and destruction that have engulfed the country. It could be argued that the ways in which this refugee community was violently thrust into the war, alongside virtually all of Syria's diverse communities, came as no surprise precisely because of the Palestinians' full-fledged social and economic integration in the country (Aziza 2012; Munawwar 2012). The long-term impact of the current war, the deteriorating humanitarian and political situation, and the uprooting, bombardment, and starvation of Palestinians in Syria is difficult to assess as it is ongoing. What is certain is that the communities of which I write, and whose memories I explore, are part of a Syria that has now ceased to exist.

Thus, the Syrian war has had a dramatic impact on the entire country, not just the Palestinians. The March of Return, having taken place only three months after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, could only take place on the Syrian side of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights as a result of the regime's nod of approval (Bitari 2013). The youths' own political agency notwithstanding, the march may have been used by the regime to divert attention from the events beginning to engulf Syria. It may have also been

a warning to Israel, and its American and European backers, of what could come should the regime fall (Shadid 2011).<sup>14</sup>

The Palestinians, however, had become embroiled in the uprising as soon as it began. Newspaper reports circulated in which Palestinians were accused of instigating the “rioting” in Dar‘a, the town where the uprising started through demonstrations, as early as March 2011. A senior government official pointed the finger of blame at Palestinians yet again for the early “riots” in Latakia (Al-Hardan 2012b). Wisam al-Ghul, a Palestinian man from Dera‘a Camp, became the first Palestinian “martyr” of the uprising on March 23, 2011, after he was killed while trying to provide aid to the demonstrators (‘Aziza 2012; Bitari 2012; Hamoud 2012). Palestinians also became embroiled in the uprising from the very beginning because they lived in Syrian neighborhoods and Palestinian camps that would become battlegrounds for the Syrian army and different armed groups known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). They also provided relief and sheltered internally displaced Syrians from nearby war-stricken neighborhoods (‘Aziza 2012; Hamoud 2012).

Thus, the small Palestinian communities in Dar‘a, Homs, Hama, and Latakia in particular had long been affected by the uprising. It was only toward late 2011 and 2012 with its militarization in the Rural Damascus Governorate, where four-fifths of the Palestinians in Syria lived, did the uprising begin to have ramifications for the major part of the community (Bitari 2013). Within this context, the spillover of the fighting into Yarmouk in midsummer of 2012 was both relatively late compared to other parts of the country and particularly important, given the centrality of Yarmouk and its surrounding areas to Palestinian refugee life in Syria. This happened when mortar shells fell on the camp during the fighting that raged between the FSA and the regular army in the areas that surround Yarmouk (Nayel 2013; UNRWA 2012e; Zarzar 2012a), with deadly and devastating consequences (UNRWA 2012a; Williams 2012). Partisans have been keen to portray the Palestinians in Syria as supporting one side or the other. However, to make claims about more than half a million people on the basis of the actions of individuals who may have indeed supported the uprising, especially in its early days, is implausible. Similarly, to argue that the Palestinians’ proregime stance, especially after the uprising turned into an all-out war that devastated their communities, can be inferred based on the actions of some of their factions, which were hardly representative to begin with, is equally untenable.

Insofar as these factions are concerned, initially, with the exception of the Syrian regime-aligned Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), all maintained strict silence on the question of the Syrian uprising. Hamas broke off with the Syrian regime by leaving

Damascus, which became public at the end of 2011 (Napolitano 2013), and the PFLP-GC began arming committees to fight the FSA in Yarmouk (Bitari 2013; Hamoud 2012). The Palestinian factions did not, however, actively recruit Palestinians on a mass scale to join one side or the other prior to the air bombardment of Yarmouk at the end of 2012 and the exodus of its people (Aziza 2012; Bitari 2013).

The arming of so-called “Popular Committees” by the PFLP-GC to battle the FSA in Yarmouk accelerated the increasing militarization of that camp and it led to lawlessness, theft of private property, kidnappings, anarchy, and insecurity (AFP 2012; UN 2012; UNRWA 2012c). Battles raged in neighborhoods directly adjacent to Yarmouk, including al-Hajar al-Aswad, al-Tadamun, al-Taqadum and al-‘Uruba. On December 16, 2012, a Syrian fighter jet bombarded a mosque in the middle of Yarmouk, leaving dead a number of people who had been sheltering there (UNRWA 2012b, 2012h; Zarzar 2012b). This air bombardment marked the beginning of an exodus from the camp, the defeat of the Popular Committees, and the takeover of the camp by the FSA. The FSA ransacked private homes and vehicles and looted private properties and UNRWA facilities (UNRWA 2012f, 2012g, 2013c).

It is within the context of the full-scale arrival of the war to Yarmouk that the booby-trapped car exploded in Rejeh Square in January 2013. The situation in Yarmouk during the past three years has drastically deteriorated, with armed groups holed up inside and the army and its Palestinian allies enforcing a siege on the camp. In addition to the transformation of the camp into a devastated war zone and the two-year lack of electricity, water was also cut off toward the end of 2014 despite the then approximately 18,000 remaining residents in Yarmouk (AGPS 2015). Parts of the camp have been destroyed beyond recognition, a siege economy has flourished, starvation cases have been reported, and snipers have enforced a shoot-to-kill policy. The appearance of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters within the vicinity of the camp in April 2015 has meant that most remaining residents have now left to surrounding areas. According to relief workers with access to the environs of the camp, an estimated 2,000–4,000 people remain in Yarmouk today. The camp is now being subjected to inter-armed-group fighting and barrel bombing from government forces (AI 2015). As of this writing, UNRWA aid convoys are arranging the delivery of much-needed, though insufficient, food aid to the areas around Yarmouk rather than to the camp itself (UNRWA 2015b).

Before the air bombardment, Yarmouk and its inseparable Rural Damascus Governorate environs had an estimated population of one million people. Of this population, only 150,000 were UNRWA-registered Palestinian

refugees (UNRWA 2012a, n/a-b). As the Syrian uprising became increasingly militarized, the estimated population of Yarmouk increased with the arrival of internally displaced Syrian families seeking shelter from the surrounding war-stricken areas and beyond. According to UNRWA, approximately 45,000 Palestinians in Syria made their way to Lebanon before the Lebanese state barred their entry. Another 15,000 went to Jordan, where entry for Palestinians was barred even earlier than in Lebanon and where some today reside in two different camps in the north. An additional 4,000 are now in Egypt, where those attempting to board illegal boats to Europe have been shot, killed, or imprisoned (Ayid 2012; HRW 2012, 2013; al-Jammal 2012; UNRWA 2015a).

The Action Group for Palestinians of Syria (AGPS 2015) estimates that as of the end of March 2015, approximately 30,000 Palestinians had made their way to Europe.<sup>15</sup> This figure reflects the increasing number of Palestinians from Syria who are left with no exit options from the war except through the precarious journeys on the so-called “death boats” from Turkey, Egypt and Libya to Europe, sometimes with tragic consequences. The first most highly publicized death boat incident saw Italian coast guard officers turn a blind eye as a boat carrying up to 500 refugees, including children, was left to sink off the coast of Lampedusa in October 2013 (Gatti 2013). Numerous boats carrying Palestinian refugees from Syria, as well as other migrants—one boat carrying even higher numbers than the refugee boat that sank in October 2013—have since sunk in the Mediterranean.

Given the demographic distribution of the Palestinians in Syria, the entire community has been drastically affected by the war. In addition to some facing siege conditions in Yarmouk, others continue to live in neighborhoods that have become war zones and in camps that have become “theaters of war” (UNRWA 2013a, 2013c, 2013d). In view of these war realities, UNRWA estimates that as of the end of March 2015, 95 percent of Palestinians in Syria were in need of humanitarian assistance, at least half having been internally displaced at least once and more than a tenth having been externally displaced (UNRWA 2015a).

In terms of the UNRWA camps, AGPS (2015) estimates that at least 70 percent of Dera'a Camp is in ruins; it is also inaccessible to UNRWA (2015). Latakia Camp was in the eye of the storm as early as August 2011, though as of this writing it is calm (Hamoud 2012).<sup>16</sup> The war had long reached the camps in Homs and Hama, given the fierce battles that took place between the army and the armed groups, especially in the former town, though as of this writing both camps are relatively calm and accessible to UNRWA. The war also reached the two camps in Aleppo: armed groups expelled Ein

el-Tal's residents in April 2013, and the camp remains inaccessible, whereas Neirab remains accessible to UNRWA and is relatively calm. Several of the camps in the Rural Damascus Governorate, including Sbeineh, Qabr Essit, and Khan Eshieh, have been either totally or nearly totally depopulated. While both Qabr Essit and Sbeineh are under government control after fierce battles in their vicinities, Sbeineh's residents have not been allowed to return to the camp. Khan Eshieh is inaccessible to UNRWA and continues to be severely affected by intense clashes in its vicinity as well as the presence of armed groups within it. The war has also severely affected Khan Danoun and Jaramana, given their proximity to war zones and their hosting of internally displaced people, even though they remain relatively calm and accessible to UNRWA (UNRWA 2013b, 2015a).

Finally, according to the AGPS, as of the end of March 2015, there were approximately 3,000 verified Palestinian refugee deaths in the country. A third of these deaths took place in Yarmouk Camp alone, the biggest refugee camp. Approximately 200 resulted from the now almost two-year siege that has led to starvation, inadequate medical care, and spread of disease in Yarmouk. As of this writing, approximately 800 Palestinians are imprisoned and 300 are missing (AGPS 2015).<sup>17</sup>

This brief sketch of the impact of the war on the Palestinians in Syria demonstrates how their fate is today tied to the fate of the country as a whole. What continues to distinguish their experience from that of their Syrian counterparts, however, is their immobility. Palestinians carry refugee travel documents and face restrictions on entering all Arab states. This leaves them with nowhere to legally seek a second refuge. Their only exit options are therefore to either flee to appalling conditions in neighboring states or make precarious journeys to Europe. Syria's future and that of all its communities remains uncertain, given the country's full-fledged descent into the abyss of war.