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**Why They Call It "The Catastrophe"  
The African World  
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I first heard the name "Deir Yassin" when I was almost 15 years old. I was in 9th grade preparing for a debate in my social studies class about what was then called the "Arab/Israeli conflict." I had grown up hearing about the glorious founding of Israel and, as a young person who followed the news, had been fascinated by the June 1967 "Six Day War" in which Israel spectacularly defeated Arab armies from Egypt, Jordan and Syria.

I was not really prepared for what I came across when I started researching for the debate. I had heard these legends, repeated regularly in the US media, concerning how the Palestinians had, allegedly, left their lands voluntarily at the beginning of the 1948 war. It did not make a lot of sense to me at the time, but I assumed it to be true.

But growing up I never heard about Deir Yassin and all that it represented. So, at the ripe old age of 15 I stumbled across information about a phenomenon that we would now call *ethnic cleansing*; and it was ethnic cleansing carried out at a monumental scale by Zionists against the Palestinian population immediately prior to the founding of Israel.

You, the reader, can Google "Deir Yassin" at your convenience and get the details. The gist of it goes like this: A Zionist underground army, what would today be described as terrorists but in 1948 was described in the Western media as freedom fighters, attacked a Palestinian village called Deir Yassin. They destroyed the village

and murdered over 100 men, women and children.

Had Deir Yassin been an isolated incident it would have been criminal enough. Unfortunately, the ethnic cleansing that took place in that village in April 1948 was symptomatic of an orchestrated effort to drive the Palestinians off of their land. In all, more than 400 villages are reported to have been destroyed and some 750,000 people - Palestinians - driven into exile by the Zionist military units.

The Palestinians, and their Arab allies, describe this period in 1948 as the ***Nakba*** (Catastrophe) and it is a time for mourning rather than celebration. The Palestinians who went into exile in 1948 believed, in many cases, that they would be returning home with the cessation of the fighting. After all, international law, recognized by the then newly formed United Nations, guaranteed a *right of return* for refugees displaced by military action.

The Palestinians have never been able to exercise the right of return. Instead, weeks became months; months became years; and years became decades. Interestingly, following the 1948 war, the United Nations reminded the world that the Palestinian refugees had the right of return. This 'reminder', however, has never been enforced. United Nations resolutions have been subsequently ignored, whether it concerned the right of return or the demand that the Israelis withdraw from the territories that they occupied in June 1967.

The point of view of the US establishment, as enunciated by former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, was that the Arabs lost and that they should get over it. There are several problems with this simplistic analysis, not the least of which is that it violates international law. Such a view is contrary to the views that the US has expressed when it has come to other situations involving refugees.

Yet, in an ironic way, it also comes very close to home. Think about it this way: what if the victims of Hurricane Katrina - the evacuees - were told that they could not return to their homes on the Gulf Coast. Well, as a matter of fact, the Bush administration is acting as if they CANNOT return. That instead, the Katrina evacuees should *get over it* and move on with their lives. In other words, the evacuees should forget about their homes, their livelihoods, and their heritage; turn over that which they worked to build over years, if not generations; and just begin again. Most reasonable people rightly reject such a position with regard to the victims of Katrina. So, why would we view the Palestinians as any different, particularly when their situation is magnified hundreds of times?

It is impossible for Palestinians to celebrate the founding of Israel, and those who abhor oppression and injustice, should understand this. While those committed to social justice should always stand with those who resisted the Holocaust and stringently oppose anti-Jewish racism, we should also stand with those who lost their homes, their livelihoods and a portion of their heritage in 1948, and later, in 1967.

It was a catastrophe and will remain one until and unless international law and the countless United Nations resolutions are enforced. As I understand the idea of civilization it goes something like this: no one should be exempt from the law.

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