

Queues

By Sarah Daoud

February 8, 2023, at my house in al-Jalil camp.

Snow at the doorsteps, frost eating away at the bones, a storm has paralyzed the city, and with the sound of the wind outside, you might think that the house will uproot itself and fly away. I'm wrapped in a blanket and curled next to the heater. I really need to go to the bathroom, and in this kind of weather, that kind of movement is no less than a struggle. I enter the bathroom, frozen water pipes, water droplets drip from the faucet, their sound similar to jail torture, and I am freezing cold, counting the seconds until I can go back into the warmth.

Wait a second, I think this scene matches another scene in my mind, yes it does, I remember. I had heard a little story about a similar scene told by Hajjeh Zakieh, in a recent encounter with her, it was about the Nakba and what she went through before it, during it, and after it.¹

Hajjeh Zakieh was in the refugee camp bathroom, one single bathroom for hundreds of refugees fleeing death towards the tents. In Bint Jbeil and other regions where Palestinian sought refuge after the Nakba, there was only one shared bathroom. It was a meter long and two meters wide, and initially a tent, then it turned into zinco that traps the echo and reverberates it like the inside of a rusty container. It was an outdoor bathroom, I don't know how it held against the wind and the storms.

I'm in a similar situation, except that back then, they used jugs and bowls for the water, and the bathroom walls were not made of cement, but right now, I am like the Hajjeh at the time, both of us freezing to death, the only difference between us is that I have time, whereas she didn't. Back then, the bathroom was an opportunity, a time-limited luxury a refugee would have to seize, since there was a queue of refugees waiting outside.

These bathroom queues, and this scene, and other similar scenes, like the bathroom queues in our camp back then—I remembered many queues in that moment, and I decided to write about them. I immediately went out, grabbed a pen and paper and started writing about those queues.

These many queues have become a part of the Palestinian's memory, a part of his past and his present, a part of his existence. Ration queues, fuel queues, food and drink queues, stationery queues, blanket queues, clothes queues, the queues of the first Nakba, the queues of displacement from homes, the queues of bodies, the queues of the wounded, and many other queues.

Queues queues queues chasing after us. So many sights of queues fill my mind, queues I have seen, queues I have experienced, and others I have witnessed on television, queues I have

¹ Zakieh Abdul Halim, born in 1940, Luby - Palestine, interview dated 18/11/2022, al-Wafa House of the Elders - al-Jalil camp, Nakba Archive interviews

heard about, queues my grandmother lived to tell me about. Sights and sounds of queues blending together all jumbled in my mind, until I got lost among them, which ones did I see with my own eyes, and which ones were a figment of my imagination that I experienced because our grandmothers told us about them, so much that they became real stories in my mind.

I remember one of these queues, it was a part of my childhood in al-Jalil camp, it was the queue for the rations distributed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to the Palestinian refugees in our camp.

You enter through the camp gate, then you turn left, you walk a few meters until you reach exactly where you see the color blue, yes there, a corner to your left, here is where they distributed the food rations.

In these moments, I remember the distribution days and I feel a fleeting smile, etching itself on the edges of my lips, I know it all too well, this mocking smile... I smile wondering, this cause for pain today, how could it have been the reason for joy back then?! Usually, it's the contrary, what hurt us in the past fades over time and becomes the opposite. But in this case, what pains me today is what used to bring me joy in my childhood.

I can see myself, carrying a backpack that could break the back of a camel, how did it not break my own back! Inside it are books and notebooks that weigh half of my weight, and I'm ten years old, coming back home to the camp from the UNRWA school. If I take the "upper" road, I can get to my house in just two minutes. But a curious and adventurous girl like me would not miss the chance to go watch the distributions and the ration queue, even if it meant carrying her bag longer and further, so I take the "lower" road.

I get to the camp square and I see people scrambling to receive the supplies. I stand there watching the scene and this observation makes me happy, but my vision feels blurry at times. A white fog blurs the vision and the faces, it's the flour that scatters in the air each time the distribution employees throw the compressed burlap bags of flour, stacked on top of each other like bodies. I watch, and I notice a man with a black beard receiving his share and leaving after his beard turned white from the flour, and I secretly laugh at him, the way mischievous kids make fun, and the man keeps going, and so do I.

Many other queues remain engraved in my mind, including water queues that I heard many stories about, some in Palestinian refugee camps, and others in Lebanese refugee camps. Although these countries abound in water, how could they withhold it from their own people, how could their springs run low for them?

Long queues where people (mostly children) line up at a well or a spring or a lake, carrying a jug in each hand, waiting for their turn to take their share of water, carrying it back to their families and tending to their needs. The drinking water is also the cooking water is also the bathing water is also the washing, the rinsing, and the cleaning water, and some of it is also used to water the herbs and the houseplants that the people of the camp have planted.

Speaking of water queues, I remember hearing a surprising story about one of them, it was different from other water queues, this water was mixed with the blood of Palestinians, it was the water of Tal al-Zaatar. Hajjeh Aisha Muhammad Farhat tells one of these stories in an interview I recently watched in the Nakba Archive, in which she narrates memories of the early years after the Nakba, beginning with their displacement until their arrival in Lebanon, where they initially settled in Tal al-Zaatar camp.²

Then she goes on to talk about her life in Tal al-Zaatar camp, she says: "We suffered more in Lebanon than we did in Palestine. With everything that happened in Palestine, we didn't suffer as much there as we did here, besieged for two months, drinking mud, drinking blood, when young men went to fetch water from the well, they would shoot them and they'd fall into the well, their blood would spill into it, and they would bring us this water in gallons... We would fill up a gallon and it would turn red, blood red, and we would drink it out of thirst, we drank sewage filth, water that ran in the sewers, we filled it, boiled it, and drank it... Oh, how we suffered." They say, blood returns to its holders, but not like this! Not by drinking it!

Although I have heard many painful Palestinian stories, most of which were even more painful than this one, I don't know why the words escaped me when I came to respond to this specific story. This is why I will stop at this discussion about water queues, and move on to another queue.

These words are painful, I know, and I apologize for this. They're not bleak, they're not excessively negative, they're not dramatic nor doom and gloom, but Palestinians cannot possibly write without addressing some of their wounds, they cannot invent a life other than their own, they cannot erase their history or even change its details.

Though these details are comprehensive, they contain both sorrow and hope. After the Nakba's details became clear and manifest in our souls and in our witnessed reality, there undoubtedly was a glimmer of hope that briefly dispelled the humiliation queues; these were the queues of thousands of worshippers in al-Aqsa Mosque, among them my grandmother, Um Ammar. She always recounts a visit she made 30 years ago, remembering it in all its finest details, imagining it anew, with the same intensity as if she were reliving it now, with the same exact emotions inhabiting this moment of retelling.

It's the story we always wait for, us grandchildren, gathered around her, hearing her bestow upon us what she witnessed, what feelings and images this experience left in her, we never tire of this story, and how she repeats it each time as if it were the first, for us and for her. When my grandmother describes the queues to enter the blessed al-Aqsa Mosque, every second goes by like a year, time passes slowly, dies, and we die of eagerness. She retells the moment of the first encounter, it was the dream of a lifetime, and it's a reality now, we're separated from it by a

² Aisha Muhammad Farhat, born in 1922, al-Tantura - Haifa - Palestine, Nakba Archive <https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/Record/4501>

few meters and a few enduring minutes, and long inspection queues by the occupying enemy afraid of a single praying individual who holds nothing but supplication and faith in his heart. The occupiers do not know that this faith is more dangerous to them than weapons.

During these queues, you hear a lot and see a lot, in faces, in voices, in noises and events. There is an event my grandmother always retells, only to end her story with one sentence: "Those cowards, with all their weapons, they still feared us..."

I will tell the story in my grandmother's words, she said: "First, we went to Jerusalem to pray at al-Aqsa Mosque. We wanted to go inside, but the Jews were standing at the gate. A student carrying his bag placed it aside to enter and pray, but the Jews were so cowardly and fearful that even a student's bag provoked them. They brought wireless recording equipment, pulled the bag far away, and called in special forces trained in explosives. We stayed there, but the Jews called us over to another location saying "come, come" and they moved us far away. They opened the bag and found books and clothes belonging to the student. We started laughing at them, because they were so fearful and cowardly, while we just stayed there, like it was normal."

I won't comment on this story with more than what my grandmother said, her words summarize the conversation well enough for us and for everyone to know who the true owners of the land are. This scene alone is enough to tell the world who the occupier, the aggressor, the thief is.

Speaking of these queues of hope, there is another queue that I remember, and that I will mention, so that the reader doesn't think: "What a grumpy person." It was the reception queue, or rather, reception queues, since there were more than one. The plural is used for weddings and the singular is used for funerals, if this isn't proof enough that we love life whenever we can.

My grandmother speaks about these reception queues when she and my grandfather entered their village in Haifa. She describes this magnificent reception scene as follows: tens, if not hundreds of people welcoming us as if our arrival carried a breeze of return, like a miniature scene. Relatives, neighbors, children, adults, their families, and relatives of relatives and their acquaintances, who we knew so little about, but with whom our souls connected, and this joy brought us together as sorrows always did, as well. It was the unity of sentiment, in all its aspects, that gathered us and brought us closer. Cheers, call and response songs, and car horns, everyone in the streets celebrating our arrival as if it were a wedding, not just a reception.

My grandmother says, "We felt like newlyweds"; in fact, their joy then was greater than their joy at their first wedding celebration, for here they were pronounced husband and wife once again and were celebrated like newlyweds on their land. I don't think any other joy in life can match this joy: love and land, the complete and perfect meaning of belonging, belonging to a person, a place, and a feeling.

After all these queues, I imagine them taking on a different form, a different ending, an ending that is ours. An ending with queues of liberation, queues of return, queues of victory, queues of

independence; Palestine's independence from the word "occupied", that followed it in news bulletins, newspaper headlines, schoolbooks, and even stories and tales. Humiliating queues to evict the occupier—until the last cowardly soldier—from our homeland, from our beloved land, Palestine.

These queues differ, in their appearance and feeling and pace, in their speed and intensity and anticipation, even the footsteps contained in them are different, light footsteps unburdened by the weight we've carried all these years. The heaviness of the footsteps in the queues of the Nakba, the bending of backs, and the brokenness of spirits, all of this will be a past we will tell our grandchildren while we form other queues on the land. Queues that sing the beauty of the walls of Akka, and others that line up to get a taste of Yafa oranges, and others that crowd the markets to buy Jenin olives, and queues that enjoy the waves of the Gaza sea, and others gathered on weekends at lake Tabariyya, and queues that amass every Friday to pray in the footsteps of the Prophet, in our liberated al-Aqsa al-Sharif.