

## **Smoke, bread, and barbed wire**

By Ahmad Sukari

I'm walking... Still walking... And the distance to the shelter is not short at all, especially when you're running and time is not on your side, and loss in this specific situation is a matter of life or death, or at least an injury that could result in paralysis, or permanent disability. Not to mention the unknown fate that a person might fall into.

Unknown fate? No, absolutely not!

Perhaps at the time, I wasn't thinking that I could lose the house I grew up in, where I spent my childhood. I never expected it to come to this, just as my grandfather who, when he was leaving, had never expected not to return or see his village ever again.

But I remember the scene of Taym Hasan, Professor Ali... The scene of the flight from the village, in the Palestinian series "Al-Taghreba Al-Filistiniya"... The scene of the great displacement between villages.

One word, one word only, can describe my feeling and the character's feeling at the time: "Fear." This word encompasses everything, or rather, all the degrees of fear, because children's fear as they reach the shelter can certainly be called panic, but the fear of an elderly man is called sorrow, and disappointment, and a shattered soul... Just like the expression on Khaled's face spoke of expulsion, in this same displacement scene.

My grandfather was fleeing his village in Palestine, surely afraid for the same reasons I was scared of when I was running away from Syria. I always hear the elders say that we were afraid for the women and the children. Truly, we were not only escaping death, we were afraid of the chaos... The chaos that unleashes all the monsters within us, those that don't come out in normal circumstances.

Chaos caused by Zionists coming in from overseas, that caused my grandfather to fear for himself and for his dignity. This same chaos was haunting me because of my neighbor who lived in the same neighborhood.

I will reiterate that the situation can only be described in one word: fear.

Suddenly, after many television scenes that depicted what was, and still is, happening in Syria, the loudspeakers in the mosques were enough to acquaint us with the literal term "house destruction", which meant us leaving our homes. An hour later precisely, the shelling began, its source and direction unknown, chaos only, with no predicting where safety lay. Four hours later, the journey that is called the journey of house destruction began. We began moving from one relative's house to another, to find a safe place, but unfortunately, I felt like I was in a car going from one house to another, taking people along this journey, because we all set off in the same

direction and started running to protect ourselves in the shelter, which we thought was a safe place. But unfortunately, nowhere was safe. Before I tell you why we left the shelter, I must talk about the road to the shelter. It was like a doomsday scene, terror and fear in people's faces and eyes, no words or expression could ever describe this scene, you're running, but the distance is far, you're running, but you feel yourself getting heaavvvy, heavy with your worry, your sadness, your fear, and your panic, heavy with your thoughts about what will happen next, heavy when you see a woman leaving without her hijab, forgetting herself out of her own fear. What is bigger than death? Nothing!

And on the other side, a mother is screaming "I forgot my son at home!"

The mother who is willing to give her son her life, her days, and everything emotionally or materially, becomes unconscious in an instant and runs to save herself, until she regains awareness and realizes that her baby is not with her, so she screams: "I want my son, bring me my son." At this point, I don't need to search my memory for a similar scene. The first thing that came to my mind when I saw this woman was a scene with Um Salem, again in the television series "Al-Taghreba Al-Filistiniya". I recalled Khaldun, the symbol of a childhood lost to the Nakba. Khaldun, whom Ghassan Kanafani, in his novel "Returning to Haifa", decides to leave in his house in Haifa, for him to become lost, and to later become known as "Dov". I remember when my grandmother saw Um Salem's character, she started crying. Apparently, this story actually happened during the Nakba, and with more than one mother, who fled and took a pillow instead of her child.

Here I was, thinking that Dr. Walid Sayf (the author of "Al-Taghreba Al-Filistiniya") and Ghassan Kanafani—by virtue of them being intellectuals who wanted to expose the ugliness of the struggle caused by displacement—had created a story revolving around a horrific event that could only be imaginary, but it turns out that reality, my dear, is not much different than imagination.

The mother in 1948, who is Safiya on paper, is the same as Um Salem on the television screen, and the same as the woman I saw in Syria, when I was fleeing and living in the shelter.

A father carrying his child on one shoulder, and his worries and sorrows on the other, remembered what his grandfather used to tell him about their expulsion from Palestine. Perhaps it is because the father is always the one who protects the house, that he feels more danger than any other member of the family, seeing what they don't see. At the same time, I'm remembering the words of the elders about their displacement in '48, all these situations that I never imagined would happen to me personally, the embodiment of fear in its various degrees and forms.

We reached the shelter, a place saturated with fear, filled with panic, and reeking of the smell of death that encircled people from all sides. We stayed there for two days, and to summarize what happened, there was little food, no heating, and at one point I decided to go out with a few young men to get bread, when we heard that the bakery had been bombed. But in the story of

Hajjeh Sheikha Zayd, which I watched in the Nakba Archive, the situation was slightly different because it wasn't the bakery that was bombed. The young men who went to get bread were the ones who got bombed. There was a young man named Taha, who went to get bread for his family who had fled to Ayn al-Hawsh, in the outskirts of the city, as soon as they saw him, they shot him.

In the world of warfare, this is known as "sweeping." It means destroying any human strongholds that remain within the defeated enemy. The strongholds, or what people in rural communities perceived as strongholds, were solely attributed to the physical strength of their men. But what can a man with nothing but a single British rifle do against organized gangs equipped with the latest weapons and armored vehicles?

What is the story of Ain al-Hawsh, really? Its story is that people spread the news among themselves, just as Hajjeh Sheikha<sup>1</sup> says: "the Jews attacked, they displaced the women and the children." Subhan Allah! It's the same script wherever it happens: the women and the children. She says there's a man named Saeed al-Hadeeri who defended his wife in the village of al-Jish and came back to us. It doesn't matter whether he faces danger; what matters is that the woman remains unharmed.

This is exactly what happened to me when I went to get bread for my family in the shelter. Had I gone a little earlier, I would have died when the bakery was bombed. Truly, the mercy of our Lord was evident everywhere, despite everything that was happening.

Perhaps it's because we consider the preservation of life as being a victory, regardless of the kind of life it is—a life as a refugee, a life of displacement, or a life in the camps. What matters is that we save our souls. That's how we'll be fine, or at least that's what we imagine.

Anyway, we took advantage of a lull in gunfire and managed to leave the area. Suddenly, we found ourselves on the Jordanian border without any prior planning, and we tried to enter Jordan because we were in a state of war. We didn't expect or imagine that they would prevent us from crossing. We stayed at the border for about five days, five days and nights enduring the cold and hunger. Every time we tried to cross the border, they would put us on a bus, lock us up, and send us back outside the border, claiming that we are Palestinian-Syrians and that we don't have the right to seek refuge in another country. We struggled greatly waiting at the border. At one point, I saw a cat crossing the border over to the other side, I thought to myself: "How is it possible that an animal today has more rights than a human being?" After we lost hope of entering Jordan, we decided to go back, but at that time we were unable to think of returning home because there was no longer a home to return to, so we decided to go back to Lebanon, repeating the same process and the same struggle, except this time we did manage to cross the Lebanese border.

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<sup>1</sup> Sheikha Ismail Zayd, born in 1926, al-Dhahiriyyah - Safad - Palestine, Nakba Archive

When we entered Lebanon, a new journey of agony and struggle began, contrary to our hope that we would find relief away from destruction, shelling, blood, war, and explosions. We still talk about what we lost, how we escaped, and many other things, and most importantly, about the unknown fate. Because reality was more painful and complicated for the Palestinians who sought refuge in Lebanon, than for those who had always lived here. Hahaha, these terms are funny: Palestinian-Syrian... Palestinian-Lebanese. Basically, there are no plain Palestinians. The Palestinian-Lebanese has a tiny advantage over a Palestinian-Syrian like us. It's as if, in being a refugee, there could be three stars, four stars and even five stars, my dear. But what I know and am certain of, is that for any Palestinian, these stars forever mark each one of the stages of his ongoing Nakba, bruising his body and his memory.