

Between Past and Future: Looking with Hannah Arendt at the Nakba Map

What does Hannah Arendt have to say about the Nakba map? When I look at the map, it throws me back into the past on the one hand and forward into the future on the other. It shows us the real and painful past of the destruction of the country as well as the future possibility of return.

Past and future are central concepts in the thought of Hannah Arendt. According to Arendt, we are conditioned by the past, it always shapes us somehow, but it never fully determines us. It is always possible to go beyond the conditioning of the past and to create a new beginning. The present is where this possibility exists. As Arendt writes: “Seen from the viewpoint of man, who always lives in the interval between past and future, time is not a continuum, a flow of uninterrupted succession; it is broken in the middle, at the point where ‘he’ stands ... a gap in time which ‘his’ constant fighting, ‘his’ making a stand against past and future, keeps in existence.”¹

In her monumental book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt shows us concretely what it means to stand in the gap between past and future. On the one hand, she maps out the destruction wrought by the totalitarian regimes in the near past and probes its historical sources. On the other hand, this very exposure and understanding of the destruction of the past are meant to enable us mentally to distance ourselves from this past and to lay the foundations for a new beginning, for a different future, one that will not replicate and perpetuate the origins of totalitarianism. In this way, from her position in the present she works to disrupt the seemingly automatic flow of time from past to future. She turns her gaze backward into the past, not in order to give us a frozen picture of it that we can put in some historical museum, but in order to create a new beginning.

This is exactly what the Nakba map does as well. It drives a wedge between past and future. It challenges and disrupts the State of Israel’s hegemonic flow of time, which seeks to position the Nakba of 1948 as no more than a blurry, unimportant event that happened in the past. This is what Tom Pessah talked about here earlier. Zionist soldiers told him that they expelled some people from the villages, and that’s it. A state was founded, new settlements were established, and the memory of the mass expulsions of 1948 is supposed to become increasingly faded as time goes by. The Nakba map, on the other hand, does exactly the opposite: what is washed out in it is not the past but the present. Present localities appear in it as a washed-out background, whereas in the foreground we find precisely that which is supposed to fade out—the localities destroyed in 1948. In this way, the map highlights the Nakba as one of the major roots of the Israeli project.

In addition, just as Arendt urges us to mark out a new, different future, I propose to look at the Nakba map as a roadmap for a future that includes the return of Palestinian refugees and the re-establishment of destroyed localities. But we need to remember that Arendt encourages us to imagine a future that is not on a linear continuum with the past. So when we think of the return of refugees as a new beginning, this does not necessarily mean that each and every one of the localities destroyed by Israel will be rebuilt, because we need to take into consideration the new reality that has been created on the ground since that time.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 13.

If the post-Return future will not be a simple replication of the pre-Nakba past, then how can the Nakba map help us in shaping this kind of future? First, it gives acknowledgement and visibility to all the destroyed localities, including those that eventually will not be rebuilt. Second, it can serve as a source of knowledge and inspiration to Jews and Palestinians who may want to join hands in planning and realizing a new future for this land.

Today I happened to come across the city plan prepared for Jaffa by the Tel Aviv municipality. And I thought, Here I am looking at the future. Who knows? Perhaps this plan is showing us where Jaffa's returning refugees will find their homes?