

# Epilogue

## “THE SECOND ROUND” AS A TURNING POINT

Both the United States and the Soviet Union supported the establishment of a Jewish state at the expense of the Palestinian people. The two superpowers competed with each other in 1948 over who would provide greater political and military support for the Zionist movement, so that it might succeed in establishing a state, and even in expanding its borders. Not surprisingly, neither the Western nor the Eastern bloc was shaken by the Nakba, which afflicted the Palestinian people in particular, but also the whole of the Arab nation. Neither of the two camps tried to apply pressure on Israel to participate in finding a solution to the refugee problem and permitting the exiles' return to their lands in accordance with UN Resolution 194. These states had a strong sense of guilt concerning a prior catastrophe that had befallen millions of Jews on the European continent. Thus, for several years Israel did what it pleased with the Palestinians without being held accountable or punished. All of its actions against the Arabs and the Palestinians in particular were considered self-defense, at least until 1956.

Near the end of 1956, Israel found itself in an unfamiliar position, in fact the opposite of its position since its establishment in 1948. Both superpowers opposed Israel launching a colonial war on Egypt with Britain and France. In the postcolonial era after the Second World War, this event was seen as a political adventure. Despite the fact that the Israeli army had no difficulty in occupying the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, the political outcome was at variance with the military one. For a few months Israel was absorbed by the exuberance of military victory, but this time it faced a decisively negative judgment from the United States and the USSR, which compelled it to withdraw its forces from all of the territories it had occupied during the confrontation. On the other side, Egypt's political victory in its defensive war boosted Abdel Nasser's standing and his popularity in the Arab world, making him a nationalist hero. He lifted Arab morale and

boosted Arab self-confidence less than a decade after the Nakba. His popularity extended among the Palestinians as well, including those who remained in Israel.

Arab communists in Israel aligned their position with their people in 1956 and afterwards. Whereas they had broken ranks in 1948—and some had been imprisoned for their opposition to the entry of Arab armies in the war—in the Sinai War they were thrown into Israeli jails for their opposition to the collusion by Israel, Britain, and France against Egypt. The administrative detention of dozens of Maki activists deepened the split between the communists and their previous partner Mapam. *Al-Ittihad* newspaper waged a campaign against the government and its policy, and demanded “a halt to the aggression and occupation and massacres and arrests.”<sup>1</sup> The same issue carried a news item about a visit by MK Meir Vilner and MK Tawfiq Tubi to Kafr Qasim, and reported that popular gatherings were held in solidarity with its inhabitants in ‘Ilabun and Jerusalem. The demonstrators denounced the massacre and demanded that those responsible be put on trial.<sup>2</sup>

The perpetrators of the massacre in Kafr Qasim were in fact eventually brought before the courts. This was the first time that Israeli security personnel were put on trial and punished for killing Palestinians since 1948. Despite the criticism of the short sentences imposed on the criminals, and the subsequent pardons which aroused strong revulsion, the trials and sentences in themselves were a new and important event in the history of the Arabs who remained in Israel. The army and the government had tried to conceal the crime, evade responsibility, and avoid putting the killers on trial. But the pressure of both Arab and Jewish public opinion forced the government for the first time to change its usual *modus operandi*. Between the war of 1948 and the massacre of Kafr Qasim, Israeli security forces had killed an estimated three to five thousand Palestinians along the border and in Arab villages, with no one being held to account. But in the Kafr Qasim case, it was considered that the decision to kill innocent civilians during the Sinai war, under orders of army officers, was a crime for which the perpetrators had to be held accountable. Although this precedent concerned the values and conduct of soldiers, not senior officers or politicians, it remains a landmark event.<sup>3</sup>

The Kafr Qasim massacre evoked the memory of the Nakba, and the killings and massacres in Dayr Yasin and in many Galilee villages, in the minds of the Arabs who remained. The inhabitants of Kafr Qasim and the villages of the Triangle had no connection to the war that broke out between Israel and Egypt in Sinai. The slaughter of forty-nine innocent villagers in cold blood, only because they were returning home after their workday spent tending their fields and were unaware of a sudden curfew, was a traumatic shock. MK Tawfiq Tubi and MK Latif Dory, a Mapam activist, snuck into the village to interview some villagers and published the news of the massacre, which the government had been trying to keep under wraps.<sup>4</sup> When the details of the event and its atrocious nature became

known, the communists intensified their attacks on the government and its bloody policy. Before all the details of the massacre were known, *al-Ittihad* took the position on its front page that it was necessary “to stop the national persecution and aggression on peaceful Arab inhabitants.”<sup>5</sup>

At the end of 1956, the Arabs who remained after the Nakba, and who were steadfast in facing the policy of uprooting and repression, escaped the plans for a “second round” of war. As of the early 1950s, those Israelis who believed in ideas of “transfer” despaired of expelling the Palestinians who remained in the Jewish state unless it would be under “the fog of war.” When the Sinai War came along, this group thought it was a suitable opportunity to evict the Arabs, at least from the villages of the southern Triangle. There, along the Jordanian front, several bloody clashes occurred on the eve of the Sinai War. Despite the terrible nature of the Kafr Qasim massacre, the inhabitants of that village and neighboring villages (Kufr Bara, Jaljuliyya, al-Tira, and others) did not contemplate leaving their homes. The Palestinians in general, and especially those who remained in the country, had learned the lessons of the Nakba and its consequences: that to die in their homes and on their lands was preferable to leaving and leading the humiliating life of refugees.

The stoic reaction of villages in the southern Triangle and Arab villages in Israel in general served as a bulwark against the policy of scaremongering and terrorizing the population. The Palestinians who remained kept their composure so as not to provide those in charge of security with any excuse to expel them or move them away from the border region. Despite the many statements by Mapai leaders, it became evident that the remaining Arabs were not behaving like a fifth column. Thus, the days of the Sinai War passed without offering the opportunity to get rid of the Arabs that many of the security-obsessed in Israel had been hoping for. At least in this respect, the 1956 war was a turning point for the remaining Arabs, who firmly established themselves in their homes and villages, particularly in the villages of the Triangle, where Israel had not been successful in expelling the population during 1948–49.

Contrary to the days after the Nakba, the period which followed the Sinai War began with positive developments and optimism throughout the Arab world. Abdel Nasser, whom the three aggressors had hoped to humble, emerged from the war as a national hero who had challenged Israel and the colonial powers and defeated them, politically at least. France and Britain were forced to withdraw their forces from the Suez Canal without scoring any gains worth mentioning, and Israel, under the leadership of Ben-Gurion, had to yield to American and Soviet pressures and threats and to withdraw Israeli forces from the Sinai and Gaza Strip in March 1957. The Soviet Union’s clear stand on the side of Egypt was in marked contrast to that superpower’s position in the 1948 war. This reversal in Soviet policy made an impression on the Arab population, particularly the communists and activist nationalists among them, who found themselves on the same front against Israel and the colonial powers.

As a result of the swift Israeli withdrawal and the increase in popularity of Abdel Nasser, the remaining Arabs felt proud and their morale improved after years of disappointment and despair in the wake of the Nakba and its consequences. They also grew more confident that the period of threats, uprooting, and expulsions had ended and would not return. The solidarity with the inhabitants of Kafr Qasim and the role played by Tawfiq Tubi and other Maki leaders led to an increase in the influence of the party and had a positive impact on the villages of the Triangle. One could say that the 1956 war contributed to launching a new political era in which the remaining Arabs transitioned from the struggle for survival to the phase of rebuilding a collective identity. One initiative in this direction was the increased activism of Arab students at Hebrew University, which represented a new challenge to Israeli repression and persecution by the second generation. A decade after the Nakba, one began to hear voices challenging the reality created by the 1948 war which had become the established order from the Naqab to the Galilee.

Most of the published studies and research on Arabs in Israel center on the policies of the government and its institutions towards the Arab minority. Considering that the Yohanan Ratner committee, appointed by Ben-Gurion to study the military government system, recommended not eliminating the system, researchers did not see a significant impact from the 1956 war on the remaining Arabs. However, if we focus on the conduct rather than the policies of the government towards the remaining Arabs, the picture is different. The 1956 war, on the one hand, and the Kafr Qasim massacre on the other, significantly influenced the organization and behavior of the Arabs who remained, which had not happened before. The anger stirred up by the massacre, and the hopes awakened by Abdel Nasser's success, created a political spirit which overcame the fear of repression, even if just for a short while. Consequently, political actions and organizational initiatives emerged which defied the governmental repression and control which had been operative since the Nakba. In 1957 political winds blew which hastened rapid rapprochement between the communists and independent nationalist activists. This rapprochement, followed by organized cooperation, laid down the basis for a confrontation which played itself out in the famous events of Nazareth on 1 May 1958.

#### AWARENESS AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Israel had not only plundered the majority of Palestinian lands, including the lands of the remaining Arabs; it had also waged war on their national consciousness and identity. The authorities and their agents promoted a distorted identity for the "Arabs of Israel," which became an inseparable part of the process of making Palestinians disappear from geography and history. As we saw earlier, the authorities reinforced sectarian, tribal, and ethnic identities as part of their policy of divide and conquer. This policy was successful in the Druze community, most of

whose members enlisted in military service and gradually split off from the rest of the Palestinian citizens. After conscripting the Druze into military service, Israel consolidated their sectarian identity and tried to turn it into a separate national identity. The previous chapter, which dealt with elections and political behavior, did not delve into the distribution of Arab votes along sectarian lines. However, a look at the voting pattern in Druze villages reveals clearly that there is an essential difference between them and the rest of the Arab citizens.<sup>6</sup>

One mechanism that the authorities used to try to reengineer the national consciousness of Arabs in Israel was to make them participate in the Independence Day festivities. Since the spring of 1949, it had attempted to induce them (including the inhabitants of the Triangle) to participate in the first celebrations. Many inhabitants of Triangle villages who had trepidations about being subjected to Israeli rule and sovereignty participated in that bit of theater, like their brethren in the Galilee.<sup>7</sup> The Israeli media played up news about the residents' participation in festivities which had been organized by the military government.<sup>8</sup> Many political adversaries, Arab and Jewish, communists and agents of the regime, also agreed to participate. As for the daring nationalist activists, they were afraid to give voice to their opposition to "Independence Day," so they decided on the "wisdom of silence," without rushing to either participate or calling for a boycott of the celebrations.

The military government employed the carrot and stick policy on this occasion in particular in order to encourage Arabs to take part in the celebrations. The policy of repression and intimidation, for example, was used on the eve of Independence Day to ensure widespread participation by government schools. But the authorities, concerned with ensuring the participation of the general public, permitted Palestinians to move freely on that day and through any means of transport without the need for a permit, while the police—to imbue the occasion with unaccustomed joy—permitted travelers to use tractors, trucks, and other vehicles. Indeed, many villagers who were denied freedom of movement and travel throughout the year seized on this opportunity for family trips, recreational visits, and other social activities. They also facilitated the travel of young Arab men to the "mixed cities" and other Jewish cities and towns where celebrations were held until very late at night.<sup>9</sup>

The Communist Party did its part in encouraging people to celebrate Independence Day, as we mentioned earlier, as an expression of its Israeli nationalist posture. Communist discourse did not change until the mid-1950s, despite the contradiction between granting legitimacy to the Jewish state (within the armistice lines), and the fate of the Palestinian people in general and the repression and persecution of the remaining Palestinians. Despite that, Emile Habibi, who became a member of the Knesset in the summer of 1951, gave expression in his own way to the gap between what ought to be and what exists. In 1952 in an article on the front page of *al-Ittihad*, Habibi wrote: "On Independence Day the people affirm their determination to achieve the independence which they sold and to

end their subordination to American imperialism.”<sup>10</sup> However, Maki’s discourse and the position of its activists changed very significantly after the Sinai War, and a discourse of challenge and rebellion developed which led in the end to the confrontation in Nazareth in 1958.

Worth remembering is that in 1956 the government began implementing a policy of Judaizing the Galilee by establishing the city of Upper Nazareth. After plundering the land of the refugees and the forced migrants inside the city, it began to confiscate what was left of Arab lands within the Galilee in order to sever the geographic connections among Arab villages by planting Jewish settlements between them. In addition to beginning to build a Jewish city near Nazareth, the government decreed 200,000 dunums of Arab lands between al-Shaghur and al-Battuf a closed area, in the first step towards expropriating the land to build the city of Karmiel. Thus, the Jewish state and its governmental institutions became an essential partner in Zionist settlement after the Nakba. This settlement drive poured fuel on the flames of anger ignited by the Kafr Qasim massacre in 1956. The communists found themselves quickly drawn to the positions of activist nationalists during 1957–58.

The Israeli government’s reaction to this transformation was to consider the possibility of declaring Maki an illegal organization. Discussions regarding this matter were conducted with the other parties at the end of January 1958 to solicit their support.<sup>11</sup> In order to legitimize such a radical step, the intelligence services were asked to monitor the Arab leaders of the party and to try to incriminate them. Yair Bäuml has concluded that the charge against Emile Habibi and some of his comrades in Nazareth of planning a rebellion was without foundation and had been fabricated for political reasons.<sup>12</sup> What really caused concern for the Israeli authorities was the rapprochement between Arab Maki leaders and the Arab nationalist movement after the Sinai War. As we said earlier, the positions of the party at its thirteenth conference clearly reflected this major transformation in the policy of the communists, who had taken Israel’s side since 1948. These new political positions rattled the government, so it tried to put a stop to them.

After 1957 the positions of the party became more radical and less in the service of Israeli domestic and foreign policy. In March 1958, the first objections were being heard to participation in celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Maki escalated its opposition to Israeli policies, and *al-Ittihad* wrote that all “the artificial celebration programs on Independence Day will not end our attachment to our national and daily rights.”<sup>14</sup> The nationalist discourse worked its way into the slogans of the Arab communists in Israel, and this transformation reached its height on the eve of the celebrations when the communists declared frankly: “We will celebrate when we regain our nationalist rights.”<sup>15</sup> The focus moved to Nazareth on 1 May where the authorities tried to ban the traditional communist march on the occasion of International Labor Day, which in fact turned into a historic day as the city became the scene

of unprecedented confrontations between demonstrators and police. Dozens on both sides were wounded, and the police arrested hundreds of demonstrators that day and in the days that followed. The date, 1 May 1958, became symbolic of open confrontation and challenge by the remaining Arabs to the policy of repression and persecution.

After Labor Day, *al-Ittihad* published news reports of the arrests following the demonstrations and confrontations in Nazareth and Umm Fahm. Those detained, who were tried by military courts, were described as victims of terrorism in the name of the state. As a reaction to the authorities' tactics of repression, discussions began in July for the formation of an Arab front which would include the leaders of Maki and nationalist activists headed by Yani Yani, the head of the Kufr Yasif local council.<sup>16</sup> The military government and other government agencies acted quickly to prevent the establishment of the front which was considered tantamount to an act of rebellion and an unprecedented challenge in the political conduct of the Arabs who remained in the country. The government placed dozens of activists under administrative detention and others under house arrest. Despite all these measures, meetings were held in 'Akka and Nazareth on 6 July 1958 and the establishment of the Arab Front was announced.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the leading figures in the Arab Front were independent activists who had tried in the past to set up a political organization as an alternative to the Communist Party and the Arab slates affiliated with Mapai. The attorney Elias Kusa was among those who joined the front along with the communists and, in a published interview, he was one of the first to predict that it would not last long, days after the declaration of its creation.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Kusa withdrew from the front, claiming that "it had become a pliable instrument in the hands of the communists," and predicted, "All Arabs who are not members of the party who fell into Maki's trap will withdraw their names from the declaration of the establishment of the front and will resign from its membership soon."<sup>19</sup> His expectations came true. In January 1959, less than six months after it was founded, and shortly after it had opened branches in many Arab cities and villages, its non-communist leaders resigned, including Tahir al-Fahum, Yani Yani, Jabbur Jabbur, Mansur Kardush, and others. This trial followed by the resignations was the first step towards the creation of the al-'Ard (The Land) movement by those nationalist activists.

#### FROM STRUGGLING TO SURVIVE TO FIGHTING TO BUILD A FUTURE

One can view the establishment of the Arab Front in 1958 in the wake of the confrontations in Nazareth as a symbolic political event in the history of the Palestinians who remained after the Nakba. In Karl Mannheim's political terminology, such important events represent a transformation that is the harbinger of the rise of a new political generation. From the war of 1956 and its ramifications arose an



opportunity for the remaining Arabs to crystalize common political experiences and meaning as a minority suffering from repression and persecution. The Kafr Qasim massacre entailed a unique experience compared to all the killings and repression carried out by the Israeli authorities previously. This massacre aroused a spontaneous feeling of solidarity in the Galilee and the Triangle with the inhabitants of the village and laid out new bases for collective social action. Thus, the political developments in the Arab world and their consequences combined with local events to unify the ranks of the remaining Arabs, even if only temporarily.

On 27 December 1956, Elias Kusa issued invitations for a meeting at his house, which was attended by dozens of political activists of different persuasions.<sup>20</sup> The attendees discussed the Kafr Qasim massacre, and the need to establish a suitable organization for Arabs in response. They signed a declaration addressed to Arab citizens to inform them of the details of what had happened, and to expose the responsibility of the government for that massacre which it had tried to conceal. The signatories affirmed their decision to send letters of protest to the prime minister and to the speaker of the Knesset. At the head of the list of those who signed the letters of protest were Judge Musa al-Tabari, three Christian clergymen from Haifa and the Galilee, the mayor of Shafa 'Amr Jabbur Jabbur, and the head of the Kafr Yasif local council Yani Yani.<sup>21</sup> The list of signatories also included teachers and merchants, some of whom later became activists in al-'Ard (Habib Qahwaji and Mansur Kardush), and also leaders of the Israeli Arab Party such as Tahir al-Fahum and Elias Kusa and known activists in the Communist Party.<sup>22</sup>

It appears that the political events in the Arab region reinforced the determination of Kusa and his activist nationalist friends. On 11 January 1957, the Haifa lawyer sent a letter to fifty-six leading Arab figures, urging them to establish a political organization which his own previous efforts had not succeeded in creating. The intelligence agencies that were monitoring these activities tried to foil the move by increasing pressure on the activists to divert them from cooperating with the initiative. In a handwritten note to the office of Uri Lubrani, signed "Carmel," the sender said that he had gone to Bishop Hakim to tell him to warn Kusa to keep quiet.<sup>23</sup> The letter adds that despite Hakim's promises Kusa had again contacted the leaders of Maki. Although pressures from the authorities increased, the rapprochement between the communists and activist nationalists continued until the establishment of the front in 1958.

Discussion of what happened in 1959 and later would take us beyond the scope of this study, but it is nevertheless worth adding some important although concealed information about Elias Kusa and his activities, despite the intense pressure on him from the authorities. Kusa was one of the prominent figures who helped to establish al-'Ard after the failure of the common front with the communists in 1958. This lawyer came to prominence once again due to his courage in publishing his own frank and penetrating observations. In 1960 he issued a booklet which included harsh criticism of the Ben-Gurion government and its collabora-



tors, Bishop Hakim being the most notable among them. The publication of the booklet, with its harshly critical content, made him the talk of the town, according to the testimonies of some of his contemporaries whom I interviewed. The author became the subject of hostile campaigns of incitement in sections of the Hebrew and Arabic language press which worked hand-in-hand with the authorities.

Kusa did not keep quiet as a result of the attacks and incitement against him. He sent replies to the papers that had attacked him, which they refused to publish. Nevertheless, that did not sap his determination. He published another 40-page booklet, printed by *al-Ittihad* press in Haifa, in which he attacked his adversaries in his own way.<sup>24</sup> Kusa dedicated his book "to every Arab who is proud of his Arabism and who cherishes his human dignity, who resists persecution and tyranny, who fights to gain his rights as a citizen . . . and to every lofty-minded Arab wherever they may be, who wishes to know the conditions of the Arab minority in Israel."<sup>25</sup> This nationalistic call showed the failure of the Israeli authorities to silence the Arabs who remained, regardless of all the years of repression and persecution.

Kusa was an example of the generation of fathers and Palestinian nationalist leaders who disappeared from the scene after Israel destroyed the Arab cities and expelled the Palestinian Arab elites from the country. Despite his advanced age and the fact that he did not have a party organization to support him, he remained a model to be emulated by the new generation of Arabs who remained and who did not submit to the policy of oppression. Kusa and his friends did not succeed in the 1950s in establishing the independent political organization which they had sought to create time and again. Nevertheless, the efforts of the select few like him laid the foundation for the establishment of al-'Ard, and for the engagement of a new generation of literary and political activists in the 1960s. One of these was the lawyer Sabri Jiryis, who became a nationalist activist in that movement and in various other organizations and institutions.

The Palestinians who remained in Haifa and the Galilee broke the barrier of fear and trauma which had constrained them since the Nakba. Although the authorities managed to suppress the demonstrations and confrontations of contentious politics in Nazareth, those events were the beginning of a new consciousness and hope in a promising future under the leadership of nationalist leaders like Abdel Nasser. It is true that the Israeli government retreated from the idea of declaring Maki an illegal organization, yet it laid down new red lines which caused the Communist Party to retreat to the positions it had occupied in the decade of the 1950s. Nevertheless, the readiness to challenge and engage in confrontation became an important aspect of the experience of the Arabs who remained. The next time that the communists decided to organize a broad Arab front and to challenge the policy of the authorities was on "Land Day" in 1976. The children of the 1970s had learned from the wisdom of their fathers' generation, and they developed the tools of struggle which have made them an important stream of the Palestinian national movement.