For Palestine

Essays from the Tom Hurndall Memorial Lecture Group

Edited by Ian Parker

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Front cover image by Tom Hurndall, Figure in front of tank at Rafah, Gaza (April 2003).

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6. Being Palestinian[1]

Karma Nabulsi

Palestinians possess more than enough culture, language, history, and ethnicity to fall within the traditional claims of a nation, and therefore to base identity upon a combination of these categories. But a people is more than a nation, as both our existential predicament and unceasing struggle over generations demonstrate. How does one define the nature of this extra feature that identifies us as a people?

In this chapter I will illustrate and explain how my own identity is not based on a combination of the national particularisms that gave rise to the Palestinian people, but rather, upon the glue which keeps us together. My identity is based exclusively on the general will. What exactly is the general will of a people? The general will of a people is what makes it cohere, gives it sense and purpose and expression. It is the basis for the creation of the social contract, it is the foundation for the theory of democracy itself. Yet it is commonly said that it is more or less undiscussable since it is totally unmeasurable. That it is purely metaphysical, and that it is therefore — and also — undefinable. Because the general will is not empirical, and because there is no clear way of analysing it, surveying it, or of classifying it. Nor is there any single or combined methodology that can capture either its performance or its essence. It is emphatically not ethnic, nor is it based on language, custom, religion, race, nor on the nation. And more than that it is never ever static: it moves, it grows, and it changes: it is both relational and unquantifiable. In his wonderful introduction to his translation of Rousseau's Social Contract, GDH Cole explains the operation of the

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general will in two parts: 'The General Will is realized not whenever that is done which is best for the community, but when, in addition, the community as a whole has willed the doing of it'.[2]

In order to set out how and why it has happened that I rely upon the general will rather than traditional nationalist claims for identity, it is necessary to first present the particularism and history of the Palestinian people who are largely a refugee population. Next it will explain how the general will functions within Palestinian society, which crosses borders and host countries to express itself. It will conclude with examples of why Palestinian identity is so caught up in an essential struggle to create just institutions, especially for the protection of the rights of refugees, and why this latter issue is cast within the dual quest for liberty and democracy which — in our case as in most people's — are intertwined.

The Palestinian People

There is a fashionable, and somewhat sympathetic way of seeing the modern Palestinian predicament: as a Diaspora, as an international business community: highly educated, rootless, existential, cosmopolitan. A mirror image of the Jewish Diaspora on the European continent. Such exiles will find their way easily after the final settlement in a globalised world, connecting to their community by internet, perhaps adding a Palestinian passport to that of the US, of Britain, or of Jordan. But this is largely a false image, merely that of an elite, those who managed to get passports or savings out, or went to the Gulf or to America in the 1950s and '60s. Although it is true Palestinians possess an enormous flourishing of talent and skill — doctors, engineers, scientists, artists, architects, teachers — and are from the coastal towns and cities as well as from the countryside; still the overwhelming character of the Palestinian people remains that of a landed people with a close bond to their homeland. Farmers and peasants, intimately connected to the land, although for three generations now born in camps, often only a few kilometres from their destroyed villages, empty fields. Hundreds of thousands of whom are officially excluded from certain professions in

2 J. J. Rousseau, Introduction, *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, London, Everyman Dent, 1913, p. xxxvi.

some of the countries that host them, who have no hope of any future. Refugees, with no travel documents of any kind, who dream only of return.

The Palestinian refugee camps were created during and just after the establishment of Israel. These camps remain the most enigmatic facet of Palestinian life and society to those outside it: how many Palestinians are refugees? Where are they scattered? A survey recently undertaken at a Scottish university discovered that only 9% of the British public were aware that the West Bank and Gaza is currently under a military occupation. Yet the refugees are more central to Palestinian identity than the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza by Israel since 1967, where the locus of the Palestinian state is to be. Indeed, the original dispossession and continued displacement from their homes in 1948, the unhappy fate of the majority of Palestinians is (as it has always been) the core of the conflict, and still remains almost entirely unknown.

Palestinian refugees make up over one third of the world's refugee population, and they are also one of the oldest of refugee groups. Currently there are around five million refugees, and they consist of the majority of the Palestinian people, just over two thirds, and include refugees from the 1948 war as well as the Six-Day War of 1967, which created another half million Palestinian refugees. So there are several different generations and different types of refugees, some living scattered in the fifty-nine UN-registered refugee camps throughout the West Bank and Gaza, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon. However, most of the refugees whose families registered with the UN after 1948 (now 3.8 million) don't even live in the camps, and what is more, many refugees never registered with the UN at all. Others live in the rest of the Arab world, from Baghdad to Cairo; some, more recently, in Europe and in America, many are even Israeli citizens, and are living in unrecognised villages close to their razed homes inside Israel.

The creation of the refugee crisis can largely be attributed to the dramatic events which live on in the Palestinian memory as the Nakbah (Catastrophe); the fragmentation, devastation, and total rupture of Palestinian society in 1948. The Palestinian villages in Galilee and elsewhere were demolished by the authorities of the new state of Israel once the original inhabitants were driven out or fled during the fighting. This largely peasant society found themselves confined to refugee

camps not far from their original homes, some only a few kilometres away, where they are to this day.

The international community at that time believed that the United Nations had a special responsibility to Palestinian refugees, given that their terrible predicament was created as a direct result of the UN decision to partition Palestine. Indeed, the UN resolution that dealt with the urgent refugee crisis, General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1948, is yet to be implemented, because Israel refuses to do so. Every Palestinian refugee today knows the meaning of this UN resolution which deals with their fate and their rights, calling for the return of those refugees who wish it to their homes, as well as compensation.

The United Nations was more successful in establishing an institution to care for the ongoing humanitarian crisis of the refugees, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which began its operations in 1950, which it still carries out to this day. But its mandate is limited — it does not provide anything other than minimal relief, it cannot provide representation for the refugees, and it cannot offer the vital legal protections that the UN's High Commission for Refugees offers to all other refugee populations. The political organisation of the camps by the popular resistance movements in the mid-1960s — Fatah, the Popular Front, the Democratic Front etc. — emerged as a result of the despair engendered by these failings, although Palestinians every year heard the international community and the Arab states insisting on the right of return of refugees, nothing was done. Through the 1960s, '70s and '80s, the Palestinian movement actually operated through a variety of means in the camps: organising unions, hospitals, creating factories and employment in them, and co-ordinating and collaborating with the other national liberation movements, such as SWAPO and the ANC, and international institutions and agencies.

The refugee camps in Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon were where the guerrilla groups were established and from where they drew their membership. By 1970 these various groups had merged into the Palestine Liberation Organisation, forming a government in exile, and establishing embassies and diplomatic relations across the world. It was comprised of a National Council made up of representation from the parties, the unions, and the differing exile constituencies. Much of the regional conflict that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s was a result not

just of Israel's attempt to crush the political infrastructure, such as the 1982 invasion, but of the Arab state's continual attempt to control the Palestinians' political independence, and the destabilisation it created throughout the Arab world. This erupted into battles such as that in Jordan in 1970, and in Lebanon in 1985 and 1986 during the so-called War of the Camps.

How does the will of a people, scattered over several countries, regions and continents, express itself with any assurance under these extreme conditions? Fourteen years ago, the Palestinian leadership sought to capture in words enough of what we were as a people that it might hold us all together: the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, proclaimed on 15 November 1988 in Algiers by the Palestine National Council, our parliament in exile. Somehow it succeeded: it articulated and managed to reflect enough of the things that we were, as well as an inclusive enough notion that we could all adhere to, whoever we were or wherever we were. Communist anti-nationalists or the faithful; marxists or conservative nationalists; refugees living in the camps of Lebanon and Jordan or as exiles living in Knightsbridge and Rotterdam and Dubai; under occupation or in prison; in a foreign country with false papers and no work permit or second generation holding the passport of a foreign land but forever Palestinian. The millions under occupation or the millions more living in refugee camps or outside of them since 1948, since 1967; since, for many of us, we were born. This declaration manages this not by claiming to be the expression of the birth of a nation, but as something much more profound; it does so as an expression of the general will of the Palestinian people. The proclamation also managed to evoke many notions of the homeland that Palestinians themselves could adhere to. By 1988 the notions of Palestine that we had acquired in the years of following the violent expulsions, the dispossession, and exile of 1948 created such a multiplicity of meanings and attachments, of sentiments and descriptions, that we had become 'a country of words'.[3]

3 Mahmoud Darwish, 'We Travel Like Other People', in *Victims of a Map*, trans. Adballah Udhari, London, El Saqi, 1984, p. 31.

'A Country of Words'

Before exploring the complexity of the 1998 declaration, it is interesting to look at the first proclamation of independence which was issued during the war for Palestine while the catastrophe was just unfolding, since it is its very opposite. Laconic and fairytale-like in its plainness, it was published on 10 January 1948 by members of the Palestinian National Council, meeting in the city of Gaza. Its telegraphic simplicity renders it almost heart-breaking in its brief, rushed, inarticulacy. There was no need to describe who we were, how we were, or how we got there. What the homeland was, much less what it meant to us, or even us to it. On that day, in the minds of the leaders of the Arab Higher Council, there was no prescience, no revelation, nor any hint of the destiny that Palestine and her people would endure over the next fifty-two years. The text is hasty, the predicament conceived as a mere temporary affair. This battle would be resolved and we would go on working the land and living in our cities. We would prevail. So Palestine is simply described as bounded by four other Arab states with the Mediterranean to her west, and her people described as 'citizens' who 'will enjoy their liberties and their rights', that they be inspired by Palestine's 'glorious history' and that they 'serve human civilisation'.[4] The difference in just forty years is extraordinary, our perpetual temporary crisis meant that language had become all-powerful in the construction of homeland. This condition was portrayed by the poet Mahmoud Darwish in *We Travel Like Other People*, which he wrote shortly after the siege of Beirut in 1982. The poem begins with: 'We travel like other people, but we return to nowhere', and it ends: 'We have a country of words. Speak, speak so that I can put my road on the stone of a stone./ We have a country of words. Speak speak so we may know the end of this travel.'

The words that needed to be used in 1988 to capture the essence of the state for all Palestinians had to evoke a place that was grown not from a nation, but rather from the sense of many; not from one people, but from many peoples, not drawn from one religion, but consciously aware of its existence as the source of many. The Declaration of the State of Palestine describes us thus: 'Nourished by an unfolding series of civilizations

4 *The Declaration of Independence 1988 issued by the Palestine National Council*, Jerusalem, PASSIA (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs), 1990.

and cultures, finding inspiration in its spiritual and historical heritage rich in variety and kind, the Palestinian Arab people has, throughout history, continued to develop its identity in an integral unity of land and people'. This connection to the land is fused to the notion of a homeland of peoples, and is an expression of their attachment to it. But the sentimental attachment is not the source of Palestine's sovereignty. Nor does the source of the sovereignty reside in the struggle for it. Indeed it is not through fighting for it or sacrificing oneself to it that one 'earns' the homeland. Nor are the people created from the wound of the Nakbah. The homeland is there, already their antebellum, and the relationship is one of connection of the people that live on it with it. In a simple, tangible, non-abstract way. Not in an imagined, nostalgic way. It is in this manner that it is not a struggle to be a people. The state thus becomes a place of quiet and calm, of peace and compassion, which negates the need for a war to have an identity, or in order to create one: 'The call went out from Temple, Church, and Mosque that to praise the Creator, to celebrate compassion and peace, was indeed the message of Palestine'. The document expresses, time after time, a witnessing of the people's will constantly regenerated through the passage of time, protean: 'From generation unto generation, the Palestinian people gave of itself unsparingly in the valiant battle for liberation and homeland.' It then portrays the unmistakeable workings of the general will in its most visible manifestation: 'For what has been the unbroken chain of our peoples' rebellions except the heroic embodiment of our will for independence? And so the people was sustained in the struggle to stay, and to prevail'.[5] It is within this very will that the both the state and the people have their source and their identity.

Where precisely is the physical locus of this homeland for Palestinians? The proclamation's answer was to give a remarkably simple definition of the State of Palestine, which nonetheless adhered to an absolute logic then, and a concept that still holds equally true today: 'The State of Palestine is the state of Palestinians wherever they may be.' It is thus the expression of the general will of all Palestinians at that very moment of time. And the majority of us were not on the land our parents came from, or where we ourselves were born. Where

5 *The Declaration of Independence 1988*.

were we and what were we in 1988, that we could make our will known, to ourselves and to others? So scattered throughout time and space; some of us frozen inside these temporal and spatial spheres, but many more of us far too fluid, slipping through borders and out of our bodies like no other people I knew in recent history: dying in strange places violently, or alienated from ourselves, far away from our origins. In 1988 we said that we would recognise the State of Israel (which continued to deny us), and to give up the claim of a state in 78% of historic Palestine. So if we wanted to return to a Palestinian state, we would only go to one small part of it. If we wanted to return to our own actual homes — the towns, farms, and villages that we had been dispossessed of — it would be under Israel's sovereignty, which we then recognised, then accepted. The effect of a generation of Israelis who had built a new society on our lands, inside our houses. And by then we understood we could not impose our tolerant vision of inclusiveness: their exclusivity and their exclusion of us was all they wanted from us, after all. Yet how could we have decided such crucial things? And how did we make this will manifest so that we all recognised this vision of the homeland had been arrived at by all of us, wherever we were?

Representing the General Will of the Palestinian People

It was through representing all the things we were that I came to learn of these highly political notions of homeland, their complexity, and that they became my own. So my own rather odd notions of Palestine, which had developed whilst growing up in Beirut, Washington, and Rabat, were utterly altered and superseded by the years I lived and worked as a PLO official and representative in the 1970s and throughout the 1980s in Beirut, New York, Tunis, Cyprus, London and other places, and whilst travelling to the four corners of the world as a representative of a people in search of the homeland, in search of state, in search of return. I am not sure where academics are meant to draw their notions of identity from, but I know the ones I hold today did not emerge through an exploration of the huge wave of literature on nationalism, identity, multiculturalism, ethnic and minority rights, political philosophy, nor even of a modern

cosmopolitanism.[6] Instead, it developed through a political education which I learnt from a practice: from a way of being, of thinking, of speaking, of doing. Not an inarticulate essentialism of innate culture but rather a conscious, inclusive, ceaseless political action.

One of the main ways was to seek to accurately reflect us as a people. Through this means one ended up, in effect, learning how many things a people could actually be, of the nature of the home inside all Palestinians that connects us, as well as the home we create when we are with each other. In order to represent a people who are persistently and violently denied sovereign identity, the craft, the political art, and the obligation is to portray the general will as fully as possible. To show the rich, strange and unique nature of a people, and in so doing to demonstrate equally, and without fail, the universal within this: that they are a people like any other, inasmuch as they are particular, from a certain time and place. Drawn from a myriad of traditions, ethnicities, religions, political ideologies and classes. And are complete and inalienable, not dissolved through their dispossession and denial. The other universal is that they come together to make decisions and to deliberate as one general will, as peoples seek to do. Some of whom have the fortune to possess the democratic institutions, the place, the structures, the space, and the laws to protect them in this deliberation.

Just one of my tasks those years was explaining the nature of our cause to those who either knew very little of us or what they did know was so wide of the mark as to be fantastical. I met with anyone: representatives of states and heads of them, with diplomats, trade unionists, NGOs, international institutions, artists, schoolchildren, constituencies, national parliaments, university unions, clubs, officials of political parties, workers, humanitarian organisations, civil servants,

6 See, for example, Isaiah Berlin's powerful but predisposed view of nationalism (i.e., created from a national psychic wound) in 'The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism', in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London, John Murray, 1990); and also his association of the general will with the most unpleasant sort of positive freedom in 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 34. Hannah Arendt is another example of this. In *On Revolution*, she pairs Rousseau's name constantly with that of Robespierre, in an understanding of the general will that is bound intimately with the work of the Committee of Public Safety of France in 1793; she uses the concepts of the nation, the national interest and the general will interchangeably throughout as if they were the same thing. See *On Revolution* (London, Penguin, 1990), esp. pp. 76–79.

journalists, writers. With some of them, my task was to persuade them to help, to be virtuous, to act. With all of them, it was to see us, really see us. In this endeavour my practice was always twofold: illustrating this plurality of notions of homelands that exist amongst Palestinians with how they also come together as one. How there is the collective and the individual dream, and also that there is the present reality which we face united. Rather than simply present my own definition, my own notion. Indeed, my definition of Palestinian identity is the general will. Whenever I am amongst it, I am home.

The people to whom I spoke about our cause came from all walks of life, and I saw them in the different capacities my work demanded: officially, secretly, publicly, informally, accidentally, but the people of whom I spoke were all the same. They were the same because they were in exactly the same predicament by virtue of being Palestinian. Palestinians, no matter where they were, no matter what they were doing, found themselves (and find themselves still) living in the same mysterious and acute situation, and they also saw themselves in this manner quite clearly. And more: they all saw the same answer to their predicament, without question, when the homeland's absence would make itself apparent. So I could see the corporeal contours and the tangible character of the general will, the will that is said to be so invisible. It manifested itself to me through various manners and means, constant in its presence; the familiar; home. As Nicias told his fellow Athenians on Syracuse during the Peloponnesian war, the city is inside the people: 'it is men who make the city, and not walls nor ships, empty of men'.[7]

In the years of 1987 and 1988 there was the Intifada, as palpable an expression of the general will of a people as one could find in modern times.[8] The daily uprising against military occupation which lasted for over two years, where hundreds of thousands of civilians were beaten, imprisoned, and thousands shot for throwing stones at the occupying army, for working under siege and curfews and through the popular

7 Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Blanco and Roberts (London, W. W. Norton, 1998), Book 7, ch. 77, s. 7.

8 There was a series of popular general strikes and insurrections and rebellions by Palestinians throughout the twentieth century, especially in the 1920s and 1930s when under British rule.

committees, the unions, the underground leadership and political parties to express the will to be independent, self-governing, sovereign. But as Rousseau noted in *The Social Contract*, this will cannot be partial. In a chapter entitled "That Sovereignty is Indivisible", he writes: 'Sovereignty, for the same reason that makes its inalienable, is indivisible; for the will is either general[9] or it is not; it is the will either of the body of the people, or only of a part of it.'[10] Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, whilst having refugee camps from 1948 within that part of the land, were not the majority of the people, they were only a part of it. The majority of the people had been dispossessed and were living outside of Palestine in refugee camps and exile. So how did they make their will manifest? Throughout the 1970s and 1980s I saw manifestations of the general will through a variety of roles and means, constant, manifold, present. The normal democratic structures that pertain to a landed people were not there, but we knew, if we were faithful in our jobs, what the will of the people was to the most precise and detailed degree, and on every issue of substance that had to do with our way forward, a future settlement, a minimal justice. There were hundreds of popular committees, unions, the political parties, associations, newspaper editors, journals, charities, schools, camp leaders, university teachers, trade union members and associations. There was our parliament in exile, there was other exiled associations and communities. Each weighed in to take their part of the whole, part of the living creature that was the general will. The close links between Palestinians inside and those outside the homeland in fact created a homeland itself, this bond which held us together as a people was lucent, so easy for someone like me to see, witness as I was to the crescendo of constant traffic: the phone calls and faxes, the underground networks, the private and public meetings, the political platforms that united all the parties, of children's letters, the appeals, the multiple travel documents, the petitions, the armed resistance in the camps and throughout invasions and sieges, the thousand inventive and creative ways that a people asserts itself, expresses itself, and binds

9 Rousseau adds in a note here 'To be general, a will need not always be unanimous; but every vote must be counted: any formal exclusion destroys generality'. J. J. Rousseau, *Le Contrat Social, Oeuvres Complètes*, Gagnebin and Raymond (eds) (Paris, Pléiade, 1959–1995), vol. iii, p. 369.

10 Ibid.

itself to each other, even whilst floating above the ground full of the intolerable weight of landlessness.

So in order to represent this sovereign will with fairness, and as we were obligated to do, from 1991 to 1993 at the talks in Washington our delegation tried to negotiate for a democratic structure that would represent us — elections for Palestinians outside as well as inside at the same time, offering the Israelis and Americans several models of precedence: Western Sahara, or Namibia, countless examples of how the will of a people that was spread across borders could be united in an even momentary infrastructure, in order that Palestinians could participate in the creation of their own governance, and build basic laws that would be fair. As is known, the implementation of these principles were denied to us. One could even say that the obvious aim was to sever this link between the people, between those inside and those outside, the link which holds us all together. In 1995, elections were held in the West Bank and Gaza only, the European Union pouring millions into democratisation processes, election campaigning, transparency, and all the other means traditionally used in order to try to capture and reflect the general will of a people. Yet all the while leaving out the majority. The majority were silent in the suspension of their sovereignty, although it was understood, witnessed. Also, 'this is not to say that the commands of leaders may not be taken for general wills as long as the sovereign is free to oppose them and does not do so. In such a case the people's consent has to be presumed from universal silence'.[11] They had been informed it was merely a temporary affair, it would become a final status issue, it would be addressed soon.

What happens when a people place their sovereignty in the hands of their leadership, and their leaders' own hands are then tied, and they are lost in a terrible prison, as if trapped in a dark enchantment? When their leaders are to all intents and purposes removed from the body of the majority of their people, and no longer can find themselves virtuously embedded deep within the body politic? The people eventually take their force back, for it is sovereign. Whilst honouring the predicament of their leaders, respecting them and understanding their plight, and their good intentions, their sincere attempts, the relentless forces facing them. For authority is only lent, and only for as long as the leadership can find a

11 Ibid., p. 369.

way to represent it: 'sovereignty, since it is nothing less than the exercise of the general will, can never be alienated, and that the Sovereign, who is nothing but a collective being, can only be represented by himself: the power indeed may be transmitted, but not the will'.[12]

Rediscovering the General Will

In the first half of 2000, some few months before the Second Intifada began, a British Commission of Enquiry was established by a group of cross-party members of Parliament, representing the parliamentary Middle East Councils. The aim was to enquire into the situation of the Palestinian refugees. To those initiating the enquiry, the portrayal of the nature of the refugee's predicament had been warped through the long evolution of the Oslo peace process. They had become a 'final status issue', a mere variable amongst the many other intractable issues such as water, or conflated into a line on a map, such as the topic of 'borders'. It appeared their political agency was being removed from them, robbed of them, and they had been reduced in perception to the category of a desperate and unfortunate humanitarian plight, turned into numbers, into statistics. They were no longer a people, with the rights of belonging that accrues to all peoples. They had become, quite simply, a massive problem for the negotiators then attempting to resolve the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel.

The aim of the Commission was to ask them how they saw their legal right to return being implemented, and their views of the homeland. The Commission travelled to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, wherever Palestinian refugees were, and talked to hundreds and hundreds of individuals, representatives of popular committees of the refugee camps and from as wide a spectrum as they could manage. The beauty of the report was in that the bulk of it was oral evidence, verbatim testimony, by those who have been excluded from the majority of narratives of exile of the Palestinians,[13] and these have now been faithfully

12 Ibid., p. 368.

13 As Salim Tamari points out in 'Bourgeois Nostalgia and Exilic Narratives', in Robin and Strath (eds), *Homelands: Poetic Power and the Politics of Space* (Brussels: P. I. E., 2003), p. 76: '[n]evertheless the absence of the voice of average people from these private histories and biographies is indeed an astonishing void. It is the task of new

transcribed into both English and Arabic versions of the report.[14] The Commission promised to translate and keep their evidence intact, and not truncate these narratives or take them out of context.[15] These pieces of evidence are not the histories of the dispossession itself (which are often referred to by those who participated in the Commission's work), but more simply the political will of ordinary refugees today who have been excluded from the decision-making process of recent years.

Inside of these oral accounts, these testimonies surrounding their understanding of the right of return, all of the Palestinian identity is there, as well as Palestine itself, encapsulated in the will to simply remain a people. So when I hear or read these aspirations of belonging, I too am at home. When they speak of how they see our will lasting forever, like Muhammad Nusayrat:

> We believe in a comprehensive and just solution which will enable the Palestinian people to regain their stolen rights, so we can contribute to human civilisation as we used to do. I disagree with my colleagues that old Palestinians love and remember Palestine the most. The truth is that the new generation of Palestinians are not weaker but rather stronger than the older generation in their love and desire for Palestine.[16]

When Adnan Shahada speaks today of the manner in which Palestinian fellaheen who are now refugees feel a direct tangible attachment to the land, it is the very same that I heard every day in the camps of Tal al Za'ater, Sabra, Shatila, Rachidiyeh in the Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s.

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researchers to provide this voice with the forum and appropriate tools (such as oral histories) so that it can be restored and articulate its own experience'.

14 The Commission's Report contains a preface by Professor Richard Falk, who was part of the three-person United Nations Commission on Human Rights sent to the region during the Intifada in the spring of 2001 (see the UN's human rights report at https://www.un.org/unispal), and was also part of the international legal team in the summer of 1982 (Sean MacBride International Commission of Inquiry into the Israeli Invasion of 1982). Although the report has sections which provide analysis, historical and legal contexts, general themes, experts' evidence, and several key recommendations by the British Commission of Parliamentarians, the bulk of the report (some 250 of its 315 pages) is the submitted oral and written evidence by refugees themselves. *Right to Return: Joint Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Palestinian Refugees*, 2nd edn, London, Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Middle East Councils, March 2001.

15 During the Commission's trip to the region, many refugees and members of NGOs representing refugees' welfare mentioned, in particular, the recent Atkinson Report, which they all felt misrepresented their views.

16 Muhammad Nusayrat, from Nusayrat, Jericho, *Right to Return*, p. 112.

> For some of you, or for European logic in general, it is difficult to understand why some people have this strong attachment to a certain place. In Western culture, people move from one country to another, where they settle down and live their life. However, the homeland has a great significance for us. It means belonging, self-esteem and history for the generations who live in that part of the earth... I would like to remind you that the right of return is an essential human value and not only a Palestinian political issue. It is also the issue of belonging. Thank you.[17]

When I hear Amal Jado say that the refugee camp will never be tolerable, that it is unbearable, this is also my feeling. I do not live in a camp, but whilst other Palestinians still live in them, it is exactly as if I do as well. She said:

> I am a refugee from Aida refugee camp, a member of the local committee there. I just want to reinforce the right of return for women.... I was raised in the refugee camp. The camp has never been my home and it never will be. I will never accept it as my home. It is a fact that I want to reinforce here. My home is the homeland that I have never seen...[18]

Ziyad Sarafandi sees the will of the Palestinian struggle for a state as what sustains him in his life, as do I:

> There was an international plan to transform the Palestinian people into a nation of refugees... we resisted the powers that sought to destroy our identity. This was done with a great deal of sacrifice, whether through the fierce fighting in Jordan and Lebanon, or in Palestine through the Intifada. It was all done to confirm that we are a people who have rights that we adhere to. We resist.[19]

I see the general will as a living body, and as such, Palestine means something to us, just as we mean something to it. Palestine itself has created something inside of me, exactly as Amni Jibril could see its creation inside her students in the refugee camps of Lebanon: 'I am also a teacher. I hear from my children how Palestine is in their hearts and they ask many questions about their villages. It is something Palestine has created in them.'[20]

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17 Adnan Shahada, from Yasur, *Right to Return*, p. 34.
18 Amal Jado, originally from Al-Maliha (Jerusalem), *Right to Return*, p. 84.
19 Ziyad Sarafandi, originally from Yibna, *Right to Return*, p. 112.
20 Amnah Jibril, originally from Haifa, *Right to Return*, p. 276.

My idea of return to Palestine is not one of violence and destruction, or exclusion of the other in order to be myself. My vision is just exactly like the one Haifa Jamal spoke of when she said: 'We will not repeat the mistake of the Israelis and make our existence in our land dependent upon the non-existence of the people who are already living here. Israelis thought that their existence on the soil of Palestine meant the non-existence of the other. We do not consider this so. We do not wish to tell them to leave'.[21] I see the possibilities just exactly as someone who has been living every day of his life in a shelter in a camp for years, as Ibrahim Abu Hashash does, 'we do not mind to live with our Jewish neighbours, side by side. We were asked: if there was a settlement which was built on a Palestinian village, what would you like to do with it? The answer is simple, we will live side by side with the Israelis'.[22] Like Ahmad Salah in Lebanon, it gives me such a strange feeling not to be able to get close to it still, after all this time, and yet it is now so near. He explained:

> An older person came from Palestine to the border and said to me, 'I am your uncle'. We signalled to each other across the border. But I had a very strange feeling because I couldn't get close to him, to embrace him. We couldn't get close, there was wire and soldiers between us. It is also the same when you see your homeland and you can't reach it, because they put barbed wire in front of you.[23]

My identity is drawn from all these notions, and through the Commission's report one can see they exist as unambiguously today as they did in 1988. But more importantly, the right of return represents a collective will, the force and power of a people, even more the heart of my identity and home, its constant presence since the filaments that attach it through time and space are larger and more intimate still than the sense of a particular place. As Rousseau declared in his opening of the *Discourse on Origins of Inequality*, the homeland he prefers is the one where 'love of one's country meant a love of its fellow-citizens rather than a love for the land'.[24]

21 Haifa Jamal, originally from Shafa Amr (Haifa) *Right to Return*, p. 21.
22 Ismail Abu Hashash, originally from Iraq el-Manshiya, *Right to Return*, p. 44.
23 Ahmad Salah, originally from Nahaf (Acre), *Right to Return*, p. 267.
24 J. J. Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 112.

Conclusion

In one of the recommendations of the Commission of Enquiry's report, it notes that the European Union has spent a good deal of time, energy, and money on mechanisms of the general will (elections and so forth) in the West Bank and Gaza in the mid-1990s as part of the Oslo peace process. It therefore recommends that they should now go on to help recreate various mechanisms of the general will for all the Palestinians who are outside, in exile, in refugee camps, from Latin America to Amman, so they can restore the associational life that has been destroyed by generations of war.[25] These structures would not be in order to show who represents them — everyone knows their representative is the PLO, all refugees and exiles say it without question or hesitation. The mechanisms are, rather, to help the PLO to represent them properly, to give them the same ability that all other governments have, which is to feel the people's will around them, so that they can understand it, and so that they can serve it. Nor do the refugees want surveys or opinion polls concerning these rights.[26] The only way democracy works is through embodying the living relationship between a people and their government, and making sure that the organic and associational structures that let people participate, make their will known. When these links are severed, as has happened through war, it becomes much more difficult and dangerous for the political will of a people to be seen. But the will itself has not disappeared, as this recent British Parliamentary Report, for example, has shown. And Palestinians have always found a way to make their will known, generation after generation, constant, manifold, ever present. I have used Rousseau's Social Contract throughout this essay in order to illustrate a reading of the general will that seems to me illustrated in the endeavours of the Palestinian people for a state and for the right to return, and because it captures the understanding I have of my own identity, my own sense

25 *Right to Return*, pp. 49–57.

26 As Amna Ghanayam, of the Shu'fat Women's Centre said 'Holding a referendum about this right [of return] is an insult to the Palestinian people because it questions their loyalty to their homeland. Every Palestinian dreams of return. I have been asked "Return or Jerusalem?" This question, as far as I am concerned is the same as "which one of your eyes do you want to knock out, the left or the right?"' Amnah Ghanayem, originally from Tal al Rish (Jaffa), *Right to Return*, p. 83.

of homeland. Indeed I use it because of Rousseau's sensitive and (it seems to me) perfect understanding of the general will, as well as for his elegant portrayal of its workings and mechanisms. I conclude this essay on my understanding of identity, however, with another author's definition, that of the philosopher Denis Diderot, who was Rousseau's contemporary. It captures the way of the homeland that I have had the good fortune to grow up in.

> The general will is, in each individual, a pure act of the understanding, which reasons in the silence of the passions about what a man can demand of his fellow-man and about what his fellow-man has the right to demand of him.[27]

27 Denis Diderot, 'Le Droit Naturel', in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Metiers* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1950), vol. i, p. 58. See also, in English, John Mason and Robert Wokler (eds), Denis Diderot, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 20–21. This same formulation was actually used by Rousseau to describe the General Will in the first draft of the *Social Contract*, known as the Geneva Manuscript.

Fig. 9 Tom Hurndall, Palestinian children in shelled house in Rafah, April 2003.