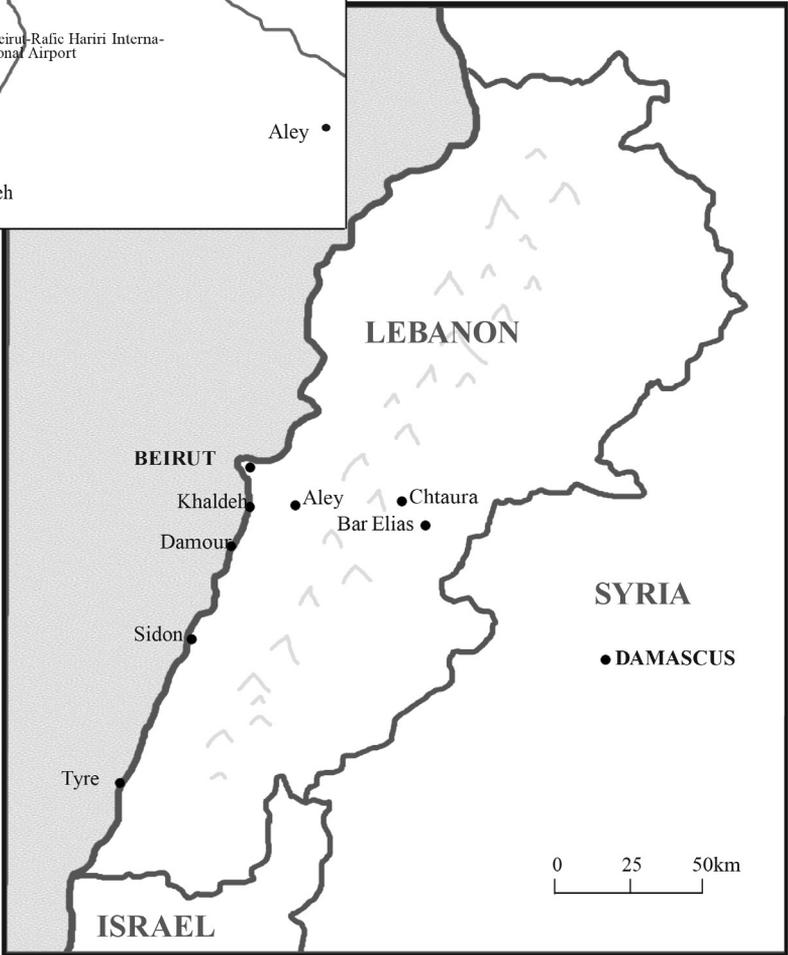
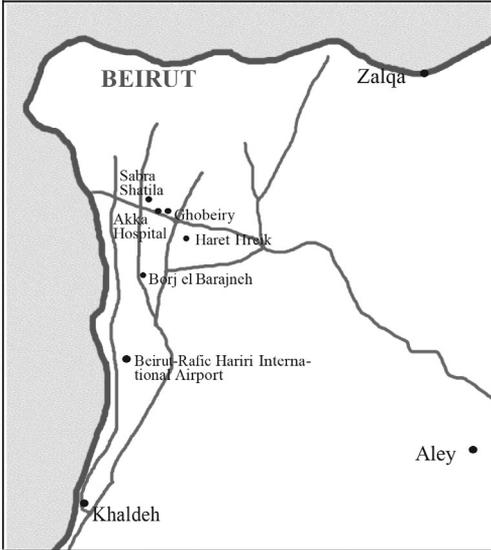


TEARS FOR TARSHIHA

OLFAT MAHMOUD

with Dani Cooper and Helen McCue





INTRODUCTION

Tears for Tarshiha is the story of my friend Dr Olfat Mahmoud who was born a refugee in Burj Barajneh, one of several Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut, Lebanon. I first met Olfat in 1982 having resigned my Middle Eastern consultancy with the World Health Organisation after the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila camps in Beirut. Olfat was a nurse in Gaza Hospital when I met her, and we soon became good friends.

Olfat's story is the story of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees living in camps in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East, so it echoes the lives of millions of refugees worldwide. Through Olfat's story of leadership, extraordinary courage, dedication and resilience in war-torn Lebanon, we see the life of a refugee woman, nurse, mother, academic and outspoken advocate for her people who longs to return to her ancestral home and live in peace.

My friendship with Olfat has been sustained over the past 34 years initially though my work with Union Aid Aboard-APHEDA, then later through ongoing advocacy for refugees. It has been with Australian trade union support and Australian government funds that considerable development assistance has been provided not only to refugees in Lebanon but also to Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories.

Along with many others, for many years I had been urging Olfat to write her story. In March 2001 I spent six weeks with her, recorder in hand, reflecting on her life. Later, when she was in Australia, we did more interviews. In 2013 Dani Cooper conducted further interviews. It was an extremely emotional journey with lots of tears and laughter as Olfat recalled the trauma and joys of her life. I interviewed her mother, father, grandmothers and aunts as well as other family members living in the Burj Barajneh camp. I spoke, too, with Olfat's friends and colleagues. Using all the material, Dani Cooper has woven one woman's story of struggle for Palestinian rights, prin-

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cial among them the right of return, into a personal narrative that captures Olfat's pain, exile, statelessness, and courage.

Seventy years on from the flight of Palestinians from their homeland, *Tears for Tarshiha* is a timely reminder of the present-day failure of the Middle East peace process and the failure of the international community through the United Nations to address the fate of some four million Palestinian refugees, to address the key issue of the Right of Return and to address the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territory.

Throughout her life Olfat has not ceased to fight for the principle, enshrined in international law and in numerous UN resolutions, of the Palestinian right of return. Her contribution to that principle has taken her all over the world, speaking about life in the camps and advocating for peace. In 2015 when she was invited to the UN in New York for a ceremony marking the formation of UNRWA. Speaking on behalf of Lebanese-based Palestinian refugees in the presence of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Olfat said:

As a Palestine refugee in Lebanon, I have very limited rights, I am stateless, and I exist but am not recognised. . . My father and mother and my grandmothers and grandfathers and my children will remain refugees even if they marry Lebanese. For us the phrases 'human rights' and the 'right to be free from statelessness', and 'the right to live in dignity and safety' have lost all their meaning.

I hope this book will help raise understanding of the plight of Palestinian refugees and their rightful quest to return to their homeland.

Dr. Helen McCue AM,
Southern Highlands, NSW, Australia 2018.

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THE CATASTROPHE (AL NAKBA)

I was not yet born, but on a winter's night on March 10, 1948, a group of 11 men I would never meet sealed my fate. On that Wednesday, these 11 men—Zionist leaders and young Jewish military officers—met near the seafront in northern Tel Aviv (*Tel al Rabi* in Arabic) at a rectangular, white building, ironically known as the 'Red House' in deference to its previous life as a workers' union headquarters. There they finalised the blueprint of a plan to systematically clear Palestinians from their homeland. Before the evening was over orders had been delivered to military units on the ground to prepare for the expulsion of Palestinians from large swathes of the region. It took six months to fulfil the mission and 'when it was over, more than half of Palestine's native population, close to 800,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed and 11 urban neighbourhoods emptied of their inhabitants'¹. My village of Tarshiha, in northern Palestine, was among the last to be cleared. It was October 1948 and the military operation—what my people call *al Nakba*, the catastrophe—was by then concentrated on the Upper Galilee where my family had lived for centuries. As the Palestinian

1 Pappé, I. 2006, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, One World Oxford, Preface.

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men of our region fought back, the Israeli ground offensive was reinforced with an aerial bombardment.



Today I can but imagine the terror my grandmother, *Alia*, felt as death rained from the sky, but the details of the day's events are etched in my memory—placed there through my grandparents' countless retellings to our family. In my mind I see my grandmother Alia racing back to the township from the fields, where she worked each day, with the roar of planes reverberating overhead. Milk from the jar she carries is splashing on to her clothing and face as she runs. Other women race beside her, stumbling at times as their feet catch in their long skirts, but propelled on by their terror and fears for their children. Smoke and dust rise from the village as the bombs fall. Alia hears the women's cries for their children as they run towards the devastation, her own voice echoing in the chorus.

As she arrives home, Alia races through the house calling for her children. There is no answer. Panic mounts. She runs next door and finds them huddled together, crying, with the neighbour and her family. Alia's oldest daughter, Hind, just 12, has her arms wrapped around her younger siblings. She falls into my grandmother's outstretched arms sobbing, 'Yamma, I've been praying for you to come back, I've been praying'.

Alia reluctantly pulls away from her children and runs towards the village centre where her sisters, cousins and other family members are sheltering in one of the few two-storey homes. 'Please Allah, keep them safe,' she pleads again and again out loud. 'Allah, let them be safe.' The village, which had survived since the days of the Phoenicians, is in ruins. Debris is everywhere: broken glass, rubble, and amidst the collapsed buildings, the wounded and dying. A young woman Alia recognises is lying on the ground, her legs blown off. A horse has been killed; human and animal flesh and blood mix together in death. Blood is splashed up the walls and soaking into the dusty road. And then she sees them—her niece and her beautiful

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four young boys. Dead. The shock barely registers before she races on. There is no time for grief, no time to mourn or bury the dead. There is time only for the living and to run.

Alia is now desperate to find her other relatives. Mahmoud, her husband, is on the eastern side of Tarshiha with his brothers and other men, trying to repel the Israeli ground troops. It is a vain hope—men with rifles and farm implements are no match for the well-armed Israeli troops. Every minute now counts as she seeks to stay one step ahead of the invaders. She is desperate to leave but won't go without her family. At last she finds them in one of the village's churches. Muslims and Christians—Palestinians all—crowded together, praying their place of sanctuary will not be hit. Alia's Christian neighbours beg her to stay, but she knows what can happen to those who linger when the Israelis march in. In Deir Yassin, just six months earlier, more than 100 men, women and children had been murdered by Israeli paramilitaries.² The massacre reverberated across Palestine and fuelled the flight of hundreds of Palestinians from their homes as the Israelis advanced. The same fear takes hold in Tarshiha.

Now reunited with her family, Alia gathers her children and collects a few items from home. She feeds the chickens, locks the house and puts the key, and a few pieces of jewellery and gold, inside the folds of her dress. With her children, sisters and other family, she heads to Tarshiha's western edge, to avoid the advancing Israeli army, and flees north towards Lebanon, 20 kilometres away.

She would never return. To this day I wonder if, as she walked away, my grandmother glanced back momentarily for one last glimpse of home. I hope so, but I doubt she realised she was walking into exile. Instead I expect Alia simply heaved her load more firmly on to her shoulders, shushed the children and head down, pushed forward to safety.

2 Israeli historian Benny Morris argued in *Birth of the Palestinian Problem Revisited* that news of the killings at Deir Yassin spread fear among Palestinians and encouraged many of them to flee their villages when attacked. It is a widely accepted view (<http://bit.ly/NYTimes19980409>).

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Of course, my family are not the only ones fleeing. There are hundreds of people on the move. Alia sees old people struggling to walk but cannot help as she carries her two youngest. As they flee, Israeli planes swoop low, harassing and terrifying them, pushing them to leave Palestine. Everyone is sure they will be bombed at any moment. When the planes approach, they run off the dusty road, pulling the children near to protect them. Often, they walk through olive groves and orchards, where branches scratch their bodies. Cousin Ahmed, who trades in Lebanon, arrives and guides villagers along the safest and quickest route. But still their constant companion remains the fear of being shot and killed.

On their first night of flight, my grandmother's family lies in the fields among olive trees, sheltering as best they can. Alia doles out the olives, cheese and bread she has grabbed from the house. There is momentary joy the next day when my grandfather Mahmoud rejoins the family, bringing with him some of the family's sheep and cows. But he also delivers the news that Tarshiha is lost.

The family continues its forced trek towards Lebanon, finally reaching its borders on the third day. Alia now realises the extent of the exodus with thousands of Palestinians crossing the border. For three days more they continue to walk, and by now the flight is taking its toll. While the days are warm, the nights in the open fields are cold. Alia's youngest son, Ahmad, not yet weaned, dies from pneumonia. Muhammad, just shy of two, soon follows. In the Islamic faith the dead are buried as soon as possible, so the two baby boys are laid to rest in an unmarked grave in the fields, time only for a short ceremony and prayers. Weighed down with grief, Alia continues on her forced march to the village of Aita Al Sha'b. There, she is reunited with other families who join the trek on to Qana and Burj el Shamalie, where they finally rest.

It has been six days and it is only now Alia and her family learn that the Israeli army has occupied Palestine. Still, Alia remains confident they will soon return home. She has her house key and their

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animals. Fields will soon need tending. What would the Israelis want with her home? But this certainty is shattered when Alia's grandfather, worrying over what has been left behind, decides to return to Tarshiha. The fighting is over, and he is an old, unarmed man. But that is of no consequence. The order in Israel is to shoot anyone who tries to return, and he is killed in his attempt to cross the border. Alia understands at last that the road home is closed.

Our exile has begun.