



A New Direction for Palestinian Nationalism?

Every decade or so since the 1948 War it seems that the Palestinian national movement goes through periods of historical re-thinking. Almost all of those episodes are focused on inherent tensions and dynamics between the remnants of Palestinian society still on the land (in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza) and those forces that led the movement in the dispersed communities in Arab host countries (primarily in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon). But today the challenge also comes from an ideological source: an Islamic vision of salvation that is not tied to the territorial principle.

We can point out three critical junctions in the growth of secular Palestinian nationalism in the period preceding the Oslo accords: the merger of the Palestinian movement into mainstream Arab nationalism during the late fifties and sixties (the Ba'th party, the Greater Syria Movement, and Nasserism); the rise of the armed struggle movement after 1967 as

inspired by Maoism and Guevarism; and the decline of the doctrine of liberation through notions of guerrilla struggle and people's war after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982) and the dispersal of the Palestine Liberation Organization and its militias. Throughout this period the Islamic movement (mainly the Muslim Brothers) was busy with moral rearmament, and distancing itself from effective politics.

The main lessons of these achievements (and defeats) were epitomized in the Palestine National Congress meeting in Algiers (November 1988), when Yasser Arafat announced the Declaration of Independence and the Peace Initiative. The gist of that declaration was that Palestinian nationalism was now reconciled to two states in historic Palestine (Israel and Palestine) on the basis of the 1947 partition plan. The border of the two states would be the June 1967 borders in line with international consensus and legitimacy, underwritten by Security Council Resolution 242.

Obviously, this new development was protracted and had been in the works for 18 years of debate, polemics, and occasionally, armed conflict within the various factions of the PLO. It started hesitantly with the early 1970 launching by the Democratic Front of the notion of independent Palestinian territory "that can be liberated from the enemy" (again a Guevarist formulation). The subsequent adoption by a majority vote in the tenth PNC in Amman (1974) of the same idea amounted to the first step towards independent statehood (as opposed to the total liberation of Palestine). The result was that the PLO was now split into two currents: the pro-state trends (Fateh's majority, the DFLP, and the communists), and the "rejectionists" led by the Popular Front, and the opposition tendency in Fateh led by Abu Musa and the pro-Syrian Palestinian Ba'thists.

The great turning point in this reformulation of nationalist ideology was the return of the PLO to Palestine after 1994. The main consequence of this return was that the historic opposition between a localized political culture that paid symbolic allegiance to "its" leadership in Tunis (and before that in Beirut and Amman), and that of the PLO, came to a historic end. The returning leaders of diasporal nationalism now forged a new institutional edifice (the Palestinian Authority) with local urban elites and the internal wings of Fateh that effectively marginalized the PLO in all but name, and with it sidelined the role of Palestinian diaspora communities in affecting the course of Palestinian politics.

It was the State-in-the-Making, and its various components, that became the instrument of this new transformation: the enhanced presidency, the parliament, the security apparatus and the bureaucracy. While the elections of 1996 legitimised the new regime in the eyes of the world and the local constituencies, it was the public sector bureaucracy that allowed Arafat and the returning leadership to underwrite an effective (but not so efficient) system of clientalism and patronage. This was also the institutional lynchpin that created a new political apparatus uniting the returnees (external leadership) with local elites and movements. But the main weakness of this process was an endemic ability of the new/old leadership to create effective and accountable institutions of governance.

This whole symbiotic process between the two wings of Palestinian nationalism, and the inevitable decline of the diaspora came to a sudden reversal with the collapse of the Camp David talks. The inability of the state in the making to bring about territorial consolidation of its population base (i.e. sovereignty), and the rise of the Israeli right, which was keen at preventing any Palestinian

state (barring a quisling segmented regime) from having contiguity, dealt an effective blow to the whole idea of a two-state solution.

Palestinian nationalism is being re-defined today as a result of these twin developments: the failure of the project for independence (two-state solution) mainly due to intransigent and superior Israeli settlement policies under conditions of overwhelmingly uneven power relationship; and secondly, the rise of Islamist movements positing themselves as an alternative paradigm of national deliverance.

Of the former it must be said that Palestinian civil society has failed to present an effective challenge to the system of patronage and segmental power that was inherited from the years of the PLO in exile. But the main blow was dealt by an Israeli system that seems to be unable and unwilling to tolerate another state between the river and the sea. (Israel today adopts the mirror image of those stands of territorial maximalism adopted by the Palestinians and Arabs during the fifties and sixties vis-à-vis Israel.) The rise of Islamic movements was predicated on this weakness. Hamas and their allies have presented themselves, paradoxically, as both an alternative worldly and millenarian system of adherence--worldly, through a seemingly accountable network of social services for the poor (something that the patronage-based institutions of the PA were unable to deliver. The Islamists have also promised a paradigm of otherworldly salvation, through the cult of martyrdom. But this combination has built-in limitations on its ability to set itself as the alternative to the PLO, since it feeds on the inability of secular Palestinian nationalism to create a state, rather than its own (Islamist) ability to create a workable system of governance. These limitations are most obvious in the country where they reached their highest success: Iran.

We are witnessing an impasse today: the major blow to the project of self-determination in Palestine has not led to a revitalization of extra-territorial Palestinian nationalism, as in the sixties and seventies, nor has the set-back of the two-state solution given rise to a movement to adopt binationalism. The most likely short-term possibility is the Israeli current version of apartheid rule and cantonization. The current building of the "separation wall" and the sustained attempt by the Israeli leadership to remove Arafat and the Palestinian leadership are indicative of the blind alleys into which they are leading the entire region. It should be obvious that the consequences of such acts are neither security for Israel, nor peace for the Palestinians, but the ushering in of the death knoll for the possibility of co-existence between the two nations. Dorit Namaan's essay in this issue of JQF on Israel's celebration of Zionism as manifested by the *Tekumah* series shows that the rethinking in the Palestinian national movement that is taking place today requires a parallel questioning of the most basic assumptions of the Zionist project.

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