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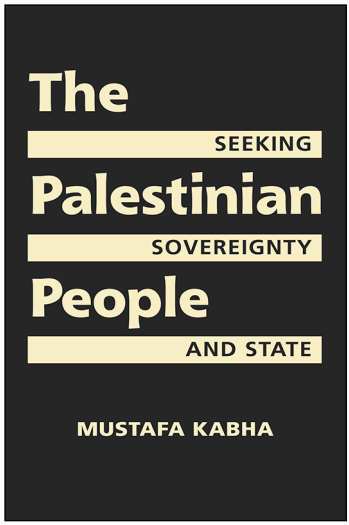
The Palestinian People: Seeking Sovereignty and State

Mustafa Kabha



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Introduction

Most historians investigating the history of the Palestinian people begin their analyses with one of two major events in the annals of the Zionist-Arab conflict: the commencement of Jewish-Zionist immigration from Europe in 1882, or the Balfour Declaration and the promise given by the British to the Zionists in 1917 that they would assist efforts to construct a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. Recognition of these events as a focal point has at its root the assumption that the unique Palestinian national consciousness developed in response to the budding Zionist enterprise. Other historians choose starting points indicative of more authentic origins. One such option is the local revolt initiated in 1834, aimed against the tyrannical regime established in Palestine by Ibrahim Pasha, son of Egyptian ruler Muhammad 'Ali.[1] In a more far-reaching attempt, others identify Dahir al-'Umar, the eighteenth-century ruler of the Galilee, as the founder of the first "Palestinian national state."[2]

These scholars thus tie development of the modern Palestinian identity to that of the wider regional and modern Arab identity, a disputable viewpoint. We have no evidence that a nationalist Palestinian doctrine existed at these earlier times, whether declared or implied, nor evidence of intrinsic manifestations of local-nationalist identity, as distinguished from the affiliation with other parts of Greater Syria, Bilad al-Sham. On the contrary, contemporary sources show that feelings of alliance with the regional Ottoman system remained intact until the demise of the empire following World War I. This tradi-

tional Islamic sense of identification was retained during the prewar years, increasingly manifested by conspicuous displays of Arab consciousness, which evolved despite the policy of "Turkification" introduced by the Young Turks. Many contemporary pioneers of Arabism and Palestinian consciousness were in fact Arabic-speaking Christians, whose ties to the Muslim Ottoman Empire had been shaky to begin with.

It is indeed possible to recognize the initial development of both an Arab and a Palestinian modern identity as occurring in the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Arab dimension of this identity evolved as an inseparable part of shifts occurring in the entire region, and the local Palestinian dimension as a result of unique problems involving Palestine and the growing conflict with the Zionist movement. The first signs of this local dimension included, among other things, the emergence of exceptional modern newspapers, *Al-Karmil*, established in Haifa in 1908 by Najib Nassar, and *Filastin*, established by cousins 'Issa Daoud al-'Issa and Yusuf Hanna al-'Issa in Jaffa in 1911. The newspapers' names reflect familiarity with the scenery of the homeland. Articles published in these and similar newspapers reveal the gradual formation of a Palestinian consciousness, in acknowledgment of the threat posed by Jewish immigration to Palestine and its Arab residents.[3] Jewish immigrants, arriving in the second immigration that began in 1904, declared goals of "conquering the land" and "conquering labor." These declarations undoubtedly contributed to the consolidation of an Arab movement based on nationalist, local-patriotic, *watani* foundations.[4] At this point, an Arab-Palestinian national consciousness began to develop, and it has continued to motivate its adherents to this very day. From the beginning, these sentiments were anchored in pan-regional Arab identity, and so they remain. The Arab dimension of the Palestinian entity derived both from its purely historical-cultural affiliation and from its need for support from the Arab world in its battle for Palestine. The history of the Palestinians in the twentieth century manifests a gradually changing emphasis from pan-Arab to uniquely Palestinian, a shift facilitated by the permutations of the fight for Palestine and deeply affected by intrinsic transformations, both social and political in nature.

It is possible to contend that in the years prior to World War I only a fairly limited number of intellectuals possessed this complex, modern national identity. The working classes were the first to come

into contact with Zionist immigrants, but they probably interpreted the threat inherent in the presence of the newcomers in traditional terms of protecting the pan-Islamic and pan-Arab region. After the war an Arab government was established in Damascus, headed by Faisal Ibn al-Husayn and leaders of the Arab revolt, resulting in the enhancement of modern Arab aspects among the intelligentsia and the elite. Faisal's supporters, who were made up, among others, of Palestinians, recognized Palestine as the southern part of Greater Syria, and many local Palestinians deferred to the government in Damascus. This is evident from the newspaper *Surya al-Janubiyya*, published at the time in Jerusalem, not the least from its name (Southern Syria). Newspaper names regularly reflected the spirit of the times and the different emphases of the new modern identity. Aside from *Surya al-Janubiyya*, edited by 'Arif al-'Arif and Hasan al-Budayri, another newspaper published in Jerusalem during these years was *Mir'at al-Sharq* (Mirror of the East) edited by Boulos Shihada. The newspaper reflected a general Eastern sense of identity, seeking to blur ethnic-national and religious differences between all residents of the East. The Palestinian local-patriotic dimension was consistently manifested by the newspaper *Filastin*, which renewed its publication after World War I, edited by 'Issa al-'Issa. The names of new organizations, for example, the Muslim-Christian Associations and the Arab Palestinian General Congress, were another mark of the newly forming modern Arab-Palestinian identity. In addition to its association with pan-Arabism, and its contemporary Damascus focus, the Palestinian entity derived some of its motivation from objection to the Balfour Declaration, the assurances it gave, and its threat to the future of Palestine. As early as 1918, members of the Muslim-Christian Association in Jaffa voiced a "protest against the aspirations of the Jews" and a submission of the Arabs' demands. The "protest" included statements specifically emphasizing the uniqueness of the Arab population of Palestine and the fundamental connection of this population to the land as a disparate territory: "Palestine, the homeland of our fathers."[5]

The emphasis on any one dimension of the Arab-Palestinian (or Palestinian-Arab) identity has always been related to social, political, and strategic processes within Palestinian society. With the beginning of the British Mandate in 1920 and the internationally distinct political definition of Palestine, the Arabs of Palestine abandoned the idea of Greater Syria and a pan-Eastern identity. From this point on they

gradually became focused on the Arab-Palestinian identity, increasingly stressing the national dimension. A glance at books published in this period, primarily educational textbooks, shows that most of the writers used the name "Palestine" and defined its Arab residents as "Palestinians." For example, 1923 saw the publication of Husayn Rawhi's book *Concise Geography of Palestine*.[6] Educator Khalil al-Sakakini published a *History of Palestine following the Great War* in 1925.[7] Two other educators, 'Umar al-Salih al-Barghuti and Khalil Tawtah, composed a *History of Palestine*.[8] They wrote in the introduction, "In attempting to document the history of Palestine we fulfill the duty of each and every person to learn the history of his country and his nation before studying that of others."[9]

In the political sphere as well, institutions and organizations emphasizing national identity and its Arab and Palestinian dimensions were established in the 1920s. While the British attempted to address the Arab population of Palestine as a conglomerate of variegated religious groups, this approach was countered by the nonspecific Muslim-Christian Associations, precursors of the Arab Palestinian General Congress (al-Mu'tamar al-'Arabi al-Filastini al-'Am).[10] Members of the Executive Arab Committee, an organization demanding recognition of the nationalist ideology and its rights, headed by Mousa Kathim al-Husayni, were chosen from among this congress. Although the British never acknowledged the Executive Arab Committee (as they did its rival, the Jewish Agency), they did occasionally hold dialogues with its president and members, and some say that it was indeed recognized de facto.

Under the new circumstances formed by the British Mandate, in light of the conflict with Zionism and with no autonomous, official governmental Arab systems (which existed in other Arab countries), the Palestinian-Arab national movement found it difficult to become stabilized. The family-based factions of the traditional elite became further entrenched, hampering attempts at founding a modern system. These conflicting factions had existed for many years but were dormant during the late Ottoman period and reemerged in force during the first decade of the British Mandate. The British encouraged traditional factionalism and rivalries between the families of the elite. In 1921, the British authorities initiated the Muslim Higher Council, an organization created to provide religious leadership, which they then proceeded to recognize as representing the Arabs of Palestine, as opposed to the Executive Arab Committee, which was a nationalist or-

ganization. The Muslim Higher Council succeeded in aggravating the factionalism. British authorities directed the Nashashibi-led group to municipal positions and awarded the rival Husayni-led group precedence on the religious council. In 1912 Haj Amin al-Husayni was appointed mufti of Jerusalem, and a year later he became head of the Muslim Higher Council. This set in motion the development of strong rivalries and factionalism at the expense of modern national forms of organization.

The elements of national politics introduced by families of the Palestinian elite, together with the relative stability enjoyed in the region and in the world in general in the 1920s, helped calm matters during this decade. However, with the transition to the 1930s a new era began. Facing the crises emerging both globally and regionally, the existential need to form modern organs of a national movement—political parties, popular committees, journals, and armed units—arose once again. This coincided with a process of social change that strengthened Arab sentiments at the expense of local Palestinian identity. Establishment of the al-Istiqlal (Independence) Party (officially in 1932, but unofficially as early as 1930) marked the advent of a new generation of intellectuals becoming active in national politics, most originating from the middle class. This generation began developing a modern political system as an alternative to the old elite with its family-based rivalries. In contrast to the hegemony of the 1920s elite, the 1930s generation espoused a new national agenda in which a more patent attempt was made to use concepts incorporating pan-Arab modern unity. Efforts to achieve liberation from British rule replaced the apportioning of positions under British patronage.

In addition, the Zionist-Palestinian conflict in the 1930s deteriorated and became more violent. Fortification of the Jewish settlement by waves of immigrants escaping declining circumstances in Europe, in addition to impoverished conditions in Arab villages due to the economic crisis, led the extensive lower classes of Palestinian society to begin taking part in political activities from the onset of this decade. The new members were mostly organized in armed bands that operated clandestinely and attacked British and Jewish targets. The one leader most identified with the attempts of villagers and members of the urban proletariat to take to arms and terrorize their opponents was Shaikh ʻIzz al-Din al-Qassam. Born in Syria in 1881, al-Qassam was a teacher at the Islamic School in Haifa and a preacher and imam at a local mosque. He was killed on November

19, 1935, in a battle with British forces near Jenin. He has remained a symbol, not only of armed participation of popular groups in Palestinian politics but also of the development of political Islam as an additional dimension and component of the Palestinian movement.

The history of the Palestinian people in the twentieth century was shaped by three triangles. One was external, and consisted of Britain (and the other superpowers), prestate Zionism and the State of Israel, and the Arab world, encompassing Arab countries and their vested interests. The second triangle relates to aspects of national identity: the pan-regional Arab dimension, the national Palestinian dimension, and the political Islamic dimension. The third triangle is social and intrinsic: the veteran, traditional family-based elite, the intellectual middle class that entered politics mainly from the 1930s, and working-class groups whose young armed representatives burst into the political sphere at crucial junctions, taking advantage of both traditional and modern leadership. These triangles remained in force throughout the modern history of the Palestinian people, albeit in different contexts and with different players, in light of the changing political and historical circumstances.

The 1936–1939 revolt, which is summarized in the next chapter of this book, was the first episode to demonstrate the relationship between these elements and their disastrous outcome for the Palestinian people. In the rest of the book I discuss processes that occurred subsequently, from the defeat of 1948 and the creation of a Palestinian diaspora, to attempts—led mainly by the Fatah movement—to reconstruct an independent modern Palestinian and secular Arab national movement. My analysis focuses on the efforts of the Palestinian people to become united and free, while becoming entangled in internal rivalries; the conflict with Israel; and the paternalistic and interest-based involvement of the Arab countries.

The book's final chapters discuss a new phase in the history of the Palestinian national movement in terms of active strategies and operative mechanisms. Land Day, which was initiated by the Palestinian citizens of Israel in late March 1976, was an early development heralding the reintroduction of popular civil disobedience over land issues to the operative mechanisms of the movement, as had occurred during the general strike of April–October 1936. This element received still greater emphasis following the outbreak of the First Palestinian Intifada in December 1987. As in the case of the general strike of 1936, the First Intifada emerged from below and forced the

senior political leadership to jump on the bandwagon when it felt that the rug of leadership was being pulled out from under it. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had been expelled from Beirut and relocated to Tunis, whence it regarded the return to Palestine as further away than ever. Now it found itself struggling tooth and nail to preserve its preeminent status in the leadership of the Palestinian national struggle. Its efforts to do so drew it into the whirlwind of the intifada, creating an oppositional dynamic of external leadership versus leadership on the ground.

The tension between the new generation of intifada leaders in the occupied territories and the old guard in Tunis on the one hand, and the meteoric rise of the Islamist stream on the other hand, generated pressure on the senior leadership. This pressure, in conjunction with Arafat's international isolation after his support of Saddam Hussein in Iraq's war against the United States in 1991, caused the PLO leadership, with Arafat at the helm, to begin to display greater flexibility and to enter into secret negotiations with Israel in the Norwegian capital city of Oslo, culminating in the signing of the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn in September 1993. This process resulted in the mutual recognition of the PLO and Israel and paved the way for Arafat's return to the occupied territories and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in May 1994. Although this maneuver liberated Arafat from isolation and provided a profound resolution to the tension existing between the leadership in Tunis and the leadership in the occupied territories, it failed to curb the Hamas-led Islamist stream's rise to a position of influence and to prevent it from challenging the PLO's three decades of nearly complete control of the Palestinian national movement. Arafat's death in November 2004 also contributed to the increasing power of Hamas, which reached its height in the group's victory in the parliamentary elections of January 2006. From that point on, all-out war was waged between the PLO, which controlled the West Bank, and Hamas, which set up a government of its own in the Gaza Strip. In the course of these events, through bloody street battles, Hamas forcefully ejected members of the PLO and its security forces from the Gaza Strip.

These developments brought the Palestinian national movement to an unprecedented low point. It now emerged as a deeply divided movement facing continued Israeli control of most of the West Bank; Israeli reinforcement of existing settlements and the establishment of new settlements that, over time, have made the idea of a Palestinian

state unfeasible; and a delicate international situation that does not serve Palestinian interests and that precludes the possibility of American pressure on Israel, which is currently ruled by a right-wing government. Even the events of the Arab Spring failed to improve the situation of the Palestinians and actually made it more difficult in some Arab countries with large concentrations of Palestinian refugees, such as Syria. In conclusion, the Palestinian yearning for a fully autonomous independent state appears to be an aspiration that will remain unfulfilled for the foreseeable future.

Notes

1. See, for example, Kimmerling and Migdal, *Palestinim, 'Am Behivazruto* [Palestinians: The Making of a People].

2. See, for example, "The Palestinian national movement developed in resistance to Ottoman rule, and was headed for eighty years by Dahir al-'Umar and his sons," Palestinian National Information Center, http://www.pnic.gov.ps.

3. On the role of the press in forming a national consciousness in this period, see Kabha, *Palestinian Press*, ix–xiii.

4. See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*.

5. Zu'aytir, *Watha'iq al-Haraka al-Wataniyya al-Filastiniyya, Min Awraq Akram Zu'aytir* [Documents of the Palestinian National Movement: From the Papers of Akram Zu'aytir], 1.

6. Rawhi, *Al-Mukhtasar fi Gughrafiyyat Filastin* [Concise Geography of Palestine].

7. Al-Sakakini, *Filastin Ba'd al-Harb al-'Uthma* [Palestine After the Great War].

8. Al-Barghouti and Tawtah, *Tarih Filastin* [History of Palestine].

9. Al-Barghouti and Tawtah, *Tarih Filastin* [History of Palestine], 5.

10. The congress was part of the General Syrian Congress, and it received its new name once the concept of "Greater Syria" gradually diminished and was replaced by that of "Palestine for the Palestinians."