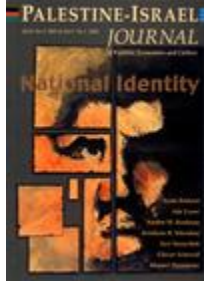

Historical Dynamics Shaping Palestinian National Identity

By Manuel Hassassian



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Two factors have influenced the development of Palestinian identity: Palestinian Diaspora after the 1948 war, coupled with Jordanian and Egyptian rule over the West Bank and Gaza. The dispersion of the larger part of the Palestinian population and the presence of almost three million Palestinians in occupied territories today have created different conditions for the evolution of identities.

These identities remain somewhat distinct despite the Oslo Agreement that brought the PLO leadership from exile to the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). It was believed that this step would lead to the reconciliation between "interior" and "exterior" political cultures. However, the post-Oslo period has witnessed competition between various strains of Palestinian political culture, such as that between the mainstream national movement and the Islamic fundamentalist movement.

This article attempts to unfold the historical and ideological forces molding Palestinian national identity, thus outlining its transformation into its current state during the Palestinian national uprising, Al-Aqsa Intifada. In light of the historical context that has shaped the current conception of Palestinian national identity, I argue against the allegations by Israel that the Palestinian nationalist movement and struggle is supportive of terrorism.

Concepts of Nationalism

The origins of nationalism as a phenomenon have produced a vast mass of literature, with diverse definitions, arguments and hypotheses on the inception of the concepts of nation and nationalism.

Those who argue that nationalism is an old primordial phenomenon make the claim that humanity needs social solidarity for its survival and that it is nationalism that provides communities with the social cohesion needed for survival. However, it is claimed by other schools of thought that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, which appeared as an ideology in response to or as a product of certain social and political developments in modern societies. Ernest Gellner's conceptualization of nationalism is premised on the argument that capitalism, science and technology, industrialization, mass communication and other features of modernization helped disintegrate traditional groups and introduce a challenging mobile lifestyle. The disintegration is thought to have induced chaos and conflict, and so nationalism was adopted as a unifying factor that restores order and legitimates the modern state. According to theorists like Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities*, 1983), print-capitalism, another modern production, is thought to have contributed to the invention of nationalism as a "cultural artefact" that would secure social cohesion.

The concept of having a national identity is, therefore, constructed, as opposed to being a given. In fact, the process of constructing national identity is shaped by real political and intellectual forces which, in turn, grapple with the formation of new social classes, the expansion of modern communications, the spread of education, and the introduction of mass politics.

The Arab Nation as an Intellectual and Political Force

To discuss Palestinian national identity, it is vital to trace the spread of nationalism to the Arab world, since "nationalism" is believed to be originally a Western concept. Western perception of nation and nationalism was introduced and accepted in the Levant by Arab Christian intellectuals like Ibrahim Al-Yazigi and Jurji Zeidan, whose sectarian axis helped foreign intervention under the pretext of protecting Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire. The contact of Arab societies with the West nourished a liberationist tradition, highlighted in wanting to build nationalism on shared destiny and civic culture and to

achieve social and economic justice, as well as to acquire the techniques of modern science and its application. This was to be done in a process that also revives Arab heritage.

Education was perceived as the best means to accomplish such an awakening, accompanied by Western values and ideas. Arab Christians were the first to receive Western education at the missionary schools, which were established in Syria and in most of the Fertile Crescent by the French, British, Americans and Russians. Thus, contact between East and West increased interest in academic education apart from religious education. Secular education grew in the second half of the 19th century in Egypt and India. This educational development was followed by Islamic reformists headed by Rifa'at Tahtawi, Jamal Al-Dein Afghani and Mohammad Abduh, who succumbed to sociopolitical realities and encouraged Muslims to join missionary schools like the Syrian Protestant College, later known as the American University of Beirut, and the Jesuit School in Lebanon.

Consequently, the Arab Muslim World gained from Western experience of social and intellectual change, and added it to traditional culture. Arabs became more aware of their national historical homogeneity, and began a process of separating between civil and religious authority. Thus hardly had the 20th century begun when the idea of the Arab nation began to translate itself from the pages of magazines and books to societies and conferences. It became a force in the intellectual world and on the political arena. The fact is that since the establishment of Al-Arabiyya al-Fatat Society, strong and clear objectives began to appear within the principles of Arab nationalism. The Arab struggle for liberation and national independence culminated in the Great Arab Revolt of 1916. This revolt liberated Arab countries from slavery to the Ottoman State but only into a state of quasi independence.

The Genesis of Palestinian Nationalism

To trace the genesis of Palestinian nationalism requires an in-depth look at Arab nationalism, which was shaped during the Ottoman period, especially during the latter part of the nineteenth century. As argued by some, including Rashid Khalidi (Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness, 1997), the awakening of Arab consciousness in modern times and the consequent rise of Arab nationalism can be attributed, inter alia, to the impact of the First World War and the activities of Zionism. The Palestinians were part of the Arab World sharing with it many of its internal developments

as well as some of its external influences. Zionism was particularly influential in shaping their current politics and in determining their political destiny.

Historically, the Palestine question can be related to the problem of Western intervention - cultural penetration in the form of ideas of nationalism and political penetration in the form of colonial rule. However, while Jewish nationalism originated from the intellectual and emotional responses to the pogroms of Eastern Europe and Russia, Arab nationalism was a direct reaction to Ottoman (Turkish) oppression and European colonialism.

Along its historic continuum, Palestine became the object of conflicting political claims and intense religious attachments. In time, these played an important part in the development of two separate but conflicting nationalisms: Arab nationalism and Zionism. Both forms of nationalism strove to gain control of Palestine.

The two opposing nationalist movements appeared around the same time, toward the end of the nineteenth century, and reached the peak of their political strength later in the twentieth century. In the meantime, although their aspirations centered on Palestine, their fortunes and misfortunes depended heavily on European politics, particularly those of the great powers.

The awakening interest of Arabs in their cultural heritage and traditions gave birth to Arab nationalism in the key cities of the Fertile Crescent. The political organization and strength of the nascent Arab national movement was in Syria, particularly in Damascus. However, Western colonial rule and the threat of Zionism caused Arab nationalism to splinter, thus the political elite of Syria, Iraq, and Palestine were propelled towards local priorities and concerns. In particular, the Palestinian *a'ayan* (notables) were disenchanted with the fragmentation of the Arab nationalist movement, which contradicted their aspiration of national self-determination and political independence.

Hence, Palestinian nationalism developed its own ideology and institutional framework because of two important developments after World War I. According to Muhammad Muslih, a noted political scientist "one internal (development), pertained to the fragmentation of the Arab nationalist movement, and the other, external, pertained to the dismemberment of Syria at the hands of Britain and France." Zionism, then, was one of the catalysts that instigated Palestinian nationalism but never contributed to its creation. It provided the Palestinians with a centralized focus for their national struggle. However, regardless of its unique characteristics, Palestinian nationalism incorporated the ideals of pan-Arabism

revolving around Arab unity and independence. Unfortunately, the Palestinians could not escape their own traditional rivalries, and their national movement fell victim to internal divisions and political fragmentation.

A National Movement, National Interests

It is evident that Palestinian national identity in the 1930s and 1940s was in a state of flux, revolving around factionalist politics based on tribalism and parochialism. Yet, nationalism was the mobilizing and driving force behind the Palestinian revolt against the British Mandate (1922-1948) and political Zionism. The British policy of "divide and rule" succeeded, and the rivalry between the leading Palestinian families took a sharp turn during the first decade of the British mandate. The families manipulated all the ties of kin, class, and patronage to win over new supporters. Unfortunately, the traditional leadership did not realize in the late 1930s that their factionalism would help lead to the loss of part of Palestine in 1948. A Jewish state would be established in most of the country, and the rest would be placed under Jordanian and Egyptian rule.

Since the 1948 war, Palestinian society has been dominated by the fact of expulsion from the land. The population was fragmented and dispersed, and after fifty years of dispossession there is a growing heterogeneity in the economic and political spheres. The diasporized Palestinians today, almost four million, are alienated from their homeland. They are dependent largely on the goodwill of their hosts to be able to remain and provide themselves with the basics of life. Although "the homeland" stands as the major "objectification" of Palestinian identity, being physically absent from it, for the majority, makes it an abstraction. In the midst of social, economic and political alienation, we find that Palestinians have retained a strong sense of selfhood and national identity.

However, the Palestinian national movement was not monolithic and lacked a consensual mass-based political entity. Following the 1948 war, nationalism re-emerged in a different context, in refugee camps, schools and universities, where many organizations were formed including members and cadres from different social backgrounds. A shift from the politics of a'ayan (notables) to mass-based organizations, recruiting members from the lower strata of Palestinian society, became visible and distinctive.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Palestinian national identity was concretized in pan-Arab ideology. Palestinians were incorporated into the Arab World and became pro-active

in local Arab politics dominated by Arab sloganeering of unity, freedom and socialism. Consequently, the Palestinian question was Arabized, losing the quintessential dominance of its Palestinian character and identity. Of course, Palestinians were eventually frustrated and disappointed with Nasser's pan-Arabism that failed to liberate Palestine, and brought nothing but the nakba (eclipse/ disaster) to the Palestinian and entire Arab nation. This situation prompted the Palestinian elite and intelligentsia to explore their inner potentials through rejuvenating their nationalism and reviving their culture and identity through literary publications and the establishment of a new wave of mass-based and grassroots organizations at all levels.

Nonetheless, continuous debate takes place among Palestinians regarding their national interests. As mentioned earlier, Palestinian national identity and the process of nation building have become a concrete reality. Between 1982 and 1987, Palestinians in occupied territories started to build an infrastructure that challenged Israeli occupation. The 1987 Intifada played a crucial role in sparking a synchronized effort by the Palestinian Diaspora to discover the potential of its new empowerment. The mass organizations and the grassroots networks, along with the popular committees, formed the organizational nucleus of the uprising. At the same time, the Intifada managed to create a national debate among the various political groups within the PLO, between the "interior" and "exterior" and between the "nationalist" and "religious" camps.

It is not surprising that the dislocation and alienation of the Palestinians has strengthened their conceptualization of their national identity and intensified their sense of Palestinian nationalism. Literature, especially poetry, plays a crucial role in defining Palestinian nationalism as yearning to return to the homeland and to achieving independence. Through literature, scattered Palestinian communities have been able to unite, to identify with one another and consequently to establish a sense of a unified national identity, embodied in their collective struggle for self-determination.

The PLO and Palestinian Identity in the Making

With a new leadership in the early sixties, the Palestinian national movement took up the challenge of pursuing an independent Palestinian state. This heavy burden was shouldered by the PLO - officially created in 1964 by the Arab League. Nasser's Egypt initially backed the idea in order to co-opt the new organization and control it. The PLO was

headed by Ahmad Al-Shuqayri known for his affiliation with Nasser, and the Palestinian Liberation Army was directly under unified Arab command and headed by an Egyptian.

From its inception, the PLO was embroiled in factional bickering. Its existence and decision-making processes were affected by inter-Arab rivalries especially those between Syria and Egypt, and to a certain degree Jordan. Fatah, a leading organization within the PLO, emphasized military action against Israel and removed itself from the inter-Arab feud.

Irrespective of Fatah's predominance in the PLO, the June 1967 war was a disaster for the Arab states and the Palestinians. Many Palestinians suffered another exodus to Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon and were denied return to their homes, while others were destined to stay on their native soil under Israeli occupation.

In spite of this cataclysmic event that exacerbated the plight of the Palestinians, new orientations to Palestinian nationalism were brought to the fore by political organizations. Palestinian leaders became disenchanted with the Arab regimes despite their support and began to call for the establishment of Palestinian organizations independent of outside Arab control. Here, again, Palestinians were diverted from the cause of pan-Arabism and Arab unity in favor of Palestinian nationalism and the struggle for independence.

After the 1967 Naksa, there appeared a crushing need for the reconstruction of Palestinian life. Ideology, armed struggle, and diplomatic posturing became secondary to the building of an organization that could advocate the Palestinian cause and take action on behalf of all Palestinians. The task of this new leadership entailed activities such as purchasing arms, raising funds, and developing a territorial base that could facilitate closer ties to the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza, as well as launching military activities against Israel.

Tolerance of division and diversity has characterized the Palestinian nationalist movement, and the sense of pluralism became almost a tradition. The PLO succeeded in reconstituting a shattered Palestinian society under difficult conditions and in a difficult environment. It managed to make operational a remarkable infrastructure against great odds, thus addressing the political and material needs of the dispersed Palestinians. Despite the militant elements in its organizational structure, the PLO succeeded in building a civilian-institutional infrastructure that catered to the needs of the Palestinian nation in

exile. There is no doubt that the PLO contrived to create a mass-based society in Lebanon during the 1970s. The political implications of building a myriad of social institutions were crucial to the development of a framework in which to deal with the internal political process and strategy formulations.

Palestinian National Identity and the Islamic Movement in the Al-Aqsa Intifada

Islamic forces have influenced the politics of Palestinian nationalism throughout its struggle for independence largely by giving it impetus and direction, in confrontation with the Zionists. To cite some examples: the incidents of 1920, the Wailing Wall Incident of 1929, the 1936 Arab Revolt and the role of Izzedin Al-Qassam, the 1948 war, the 1987 Intifada and the role of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the current Al-Aqsa Intifada.

Regardless of secular tendencies within the Palestinian national movement, the Islamic dimension has been a potent factor in the struggle for independence. It is no wonder then that the religious aspect, i.e. Islam, has always been a focal point in the Palestinian political debate and discourse, and has acted as the source of checks and balances within the Palestinian polity. The complexity of the conditions which triggered the formation of the Islamic movement led Hamas founders to create an equally complex strategy based on pragmatism and realism in adaptation to the political climate.

Today, the faltering political peace process gives wider support to the Islamic movement spearheaded by Hamas. It is apparent that a worsening state of affairs arms Hamas with more power, extended from the Palestinian public, to advance its own political agenda within overarching Islamic ideology.

During the current Intifada, Hamas garners the support of 30 percent of the Palestinian population.

Hamas plays an imperative role in catering to Palestinian socioeconomic and medical needs, let alone the fact that it has a noted presence through its military operations against Israel. In fact, Hamas appeals to sectors of Palestinian youth, women and some of the intellectual elite. Growing popularity of Hamas in the Palestinian street has prompted many Palestinians to shift from the nationalist bloc to the Islamic bloc, believing that Hamas will meet Palestinian national aspirations. But it is worth mentioning that Hamas's political agenda is to seek a Palestinian Islamic state, whereas the nationalist movement

continues to espouse the attainment of a secular Palestinian state within the borders of 1967. Therefore, it is important to keep such a distinction in mind in understanding the underlying forces of the Palestinian national discourse in the current Intifada. Thus, occupation and dire socioeconomic conditions, along with the perceived failure of the PNA, have all boosted the popularity of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Conclusion

Palestinian national identity has been shaped by the historical realities faced in the region, starting from colonialism until the eruption of the current Intifada. Many political ideologies of the century, such as Zionism, Nasserism and currently Islamic fundamentalism, have dramatically impacted the structure and substance of the Palestinian conception of their national identity.

It is worth mentioning that the Palestinian national identity has been greatly affected by the Islamic religious dimension, as highlighted above, which makes it today distinctive from previous forms of Palestinian national identity in earlier epochs of Palestinian history. Unfortunately today, the Palestinian national struggle for self-determination is portrayed by the Israeli government and media as "terrorism." Israel now intentionally confuses the political agenda of the Palestinian National Authority with that of Islamic Hamas, depicting both as terrorist organizations. Thus, Israel is taking advantage of the changing political dynamics after September 11 to distort the image of the Palestinian cause and the Palestinian National Authority so as to win the support of world public opinion. The aim is to perpetuate occupation and reinforce Israeli right-wing political interests. It is a political and intellectual blunder to incorporate the just cause of the Palestinians and their conflict against occupation into the "ideological" conflict between terrorism and the Western values of freedom and democracy. This "ideological" discourse is causing the recent change in global politics.