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'ath 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'athists.

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 apposition 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
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 posing 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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