



Maqdisi: An 11th Century Palestinian Consciousness

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It is safe to say that there has never been a thorough textual examination of the writings of ancient Arab writers, Palestinian or otherwise, regarding Palestinian identity. All of the texts known to discuss Palestinian identity date no earlier than the nineteenth century. Very rarely do these texts date as early as the eighteenth century and as such, the underlying assumption is that there is no point in seeking out older texts - the Palestinian identity is assumed to be contemporary, and no related earlier texts exist.

I believe this to be an erroneous assumption, however. Palestine, as a region, developed long before Islam and Christianity. Indeed, proof exists that its borders date as early as the fifth century BCE. Herodotus outlined this region nearly to its present-day borders, and called it "Palestine". He says, in the context of the Persian invasion of Greece:

*The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine have prepared 300 ships [...] This nation, according to its own self-description, has long lived on the Red Sea, where they still reside. This section of Syria and all of the areas extending from here until the border of Egypt is known by the name of Palestine.*¹

In another paragraph he says, “In the country extending from the land of the Phoenicians to the borders of Gaza City live the Syrians, who are called Palestinians.”

So, the area extending from the border of Phoenicia to the border of Egypt was one region called ‘Palestine’. Herodotus calls its people the ‘Syrians of Palestine’ to distinguish them from the other inhabitants of Syria, as is made clear later in the passage. These people, as we know, were called the Philists or the Philistines - that is to say, the ancient Palestinians. It was from them that this region acquired its name and its unique ethnic characteristics within the context of Greater Syria. They remained the most significant power in Palestine from the twelfth century BCE until the beginning of the fourth century BCE, when their independence was shaken by consecutive attacks from the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. (I have written a soon-to-be published book about the Philistines, which will demonstrate that they were Semites from the heart of the Arabian Peninsula and which invalidates the idea that their origins were Greek).

Based on this, Roman Palestine was not an invention of Rome. Rather it was adopted from a status quo that existed at least as early as the twelfth century BCE. The development of this region must have impacted the creation of an independent identity encompassing its inhabitants.

An aspect that requires more research is the concept of ‘the Holy Land’ and its affect on the permanence of Palestine as a region. It strikes me that, at times, the concept of the Holy Land supported the outlines of this region, while during other periods, it did not - depending on the Holy Land’s perceived borders. Certainly, this concept contributed to the establishment of Jerusalem as an indisputable and secure regional center. Thus, the region was provided an axis. However, it was not always a factor in establishing the borders of *terra sancta*, which shifted greatly over time. During some periods, the Holy Land included most of eastern Jordan, parts of Syria and Lebanon and more.

During the Arab-Islamic era, dozens of cultural and political personalities were associated with this ancient and developed region and described as ‘Palestinian’. For the most part, then, the Islamic empire was not assumed to be one indivisible unit. Rather, the Palestinian identity was equivalent to the Syrian (*Shami*) identity and sometimes encompassed it.

For example, take the following account from al-Tabari discussing the rule of Caliph Abdel Malik bin Marwan, who had called on his supporters in Palestine and other



areas of Greater Syria to consolidate his rule in Iraq. Large numbers of supporters rose to the occasion.

However, a violent clash took place between the people of al-Sham and the Kharasanis, supporters of the caliph, who incurred serious injuries. A man from Homs then stood up and called for his people's retreat. "Oh people of Homs, to run is better than to rot, and death is easier than humiliation." Then a man from Kalab (it seems he was from Palestine) said, "Syria is your Syria, and this home is your home. A Palestinian death is better than a peninsula death. So I am returning. Those who wish, may come with me." Then he left and the people of al-Sham left with him.

Here, the man from Homs introduced himself by his city while the man from Kalab introduced himself as a Palestinian. A 'Palestinian' death for him was better than death in the remoteness of the Arab peninsula.

All this clears up any doubt that Palestine was, historically, the most cohesive region in Greater Syria - even more so than Lebanon, whose mountainous territory was often divided by sects. It was surely more cohesive than Syria, which was only recently formed as a region in its current borders. Palestine was perhaps only behind Egypt, Iraq and Yemen in terms of establishment and development as a region in its own right.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to explore one extremely important and relevant text. Its significance lies in the fact that it is the single oldest text written by a Palestinian intellectual, in which he irrefutably asserts his Palestinian identity. Maqdisi, the Jerusalemite geographer, is considered to be one of the most important cultural figures Palestine produced during the Arab-Islamic era. This text, which dates back more than one thousand years, comes to us in a paucity of texts referring to the Palestinian identity. I believe that shedding light on this text will contribute to the development of the debate over Palestinian identity and thus play a significant role in influencing what has been taken as conventional wisdom about the development of a Palestinian national consciousness.

Abu Abdallah Mohammed bin Ahmad bin al-Bana al-Bashari al-Maqdisi was born in 946 CE in Jerusalem and died in the year 1000, according to general estimates. His grandfather (al-Bana) was a revered architect employed by Ibn Toulon to build the Acre seaport, according to Maqdisi himself. He wrote his famous book, *Ahsan al-Taqaesim Fee Marifat al-Aqaleem*, [*The Soundest Divisions in Understanding the Regions*] while in his forties, and after a long journey through the Arab-Islamic world. This book won him a place - perhaps even the last - among the most renowned Arab geographers.

Maqdisi here speaks of his journey to Persia.

One day I sat next to some builders in Shiraz; they were chiseling with poor picks and their stones were the thickness of clay. If the stone was even, they would draw a line with the pick and perhaps this would cause it to break. But if the line was straight, they would set it in place. I told them: if you use a wedge, you can make a hole in the stone. And I told them of the construction in Palestine and I engaged them in matters of construction.

The master stonecutter asked me: Are you Egyptian?

I said: No, I am Palestinian.

He said: I heard that you carve stones like you would carve wood.

I said: Yes.

He said: Your stones are malleable and your craft gentle.²

Here Maqdisi does not say, "I am Shami," (from Greater Syria) as expected based on the prevailing assumption. Greater Syria is Egypt's counterpart in the Arab classics and since the Palestinians were Shamis, Maqdisi should have declared himself Shami. But instead, he asserted the Palestinian identity in opposition to that of Egypt. Was this mere coincidence?

I would argue no. First, it is clear that in Maqdisi's consciousness, there was a specific and unique region - one that could be compared to Egypt - called Palestine. Second, Maqdisi affiliates himself with this region vocally and voluntarily. Finally, it is difficult to imagine that this sort of affiliation with this region was restricted only to this individual intellectual, and that it was the product of his own creation. One could therefore assume that the intellectual elite in this country (or at least a significant sector of them) at that time saw themselves as 'Palestinian', that is an elite that belonged to a region.

If this is a fair assumption, then it is unlikely that this elite adopted this identity in total isolation from the general public in Palestine. Further shoring up this proposition is the fact that those listening to Maqdisi were not surprised by his proffered identity and did not inquire further about it, which is to say that they had knowledge of this identity and its place in the region.

In short, this text indicates the existence of an exclusive Palestinian identity within certain borders. True, this identity may be mingled with other more expansive or narrower identities: Syrian, Islamic, Jerusalemite or others, however it was able to clearly stand on its own, and even at times above this milieu.

What is most interesting here, however, is that Maqdisi's declaration of identity is made in contrast with the other. The text in our hands is primarily a text about friction - that is, comparison and competition: Egyptian vs. Palestinian; the stones of Palestine vs. the stones of Shiraz; construction in Palestine vs. construction in Persia; a Persian master stonecutter vs. a Palestinian master stonecutter, and so on. It is a text that asserts a specific identity *proudly*, a stance that could not exist as the creation of a single intellectual, nor in isolation from a broader perceived Palestinian culture.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Maqdisi writes in an Arabic vernacular close to the Palestinian dialect. This continuity asserts that a Palestinian dialect has remained much the same for at least the past thousand years.

The question before us now is: what is the relationship between this ancient identity, as indicated in the text, and contemporary Palestinian identity?

I believe it impossible that modern-day Palestinian identity was created in isolation from this ancient identity. The contemporary identity could not have arrived, a lightning rod in a clear sky, in sudden reaction to the colonialist Zionist invasion. Nor can we say that it was born with the revolution against Ibrahim Pasha. The Maqdisi text demands a revisitation of the origins of Palestinian identity, and is a decisive text in this regard.

In my book, *Issues of Palestinian Culture*, I have argued that the history of Palestinian identity in Palestinian cultural life has been deeply corrupted by Zionist discourse. Generally, we Palestinians reiterate this discourse in asserting our identity and history.

We failed early on to seek out texts such as Maqdisi's and use them in the ongoing debate over the history of Palestinian identity. It must be asked, then, whether a serious and comprehensive research into our history and heritage might reveal other similar texts.

Here allow me to emphasize that Maqdisi's comments were not merely a minor, passing reference in his book. Rather, he repeatedly and proudly asserts this identity, which is an indication of the depth of his own association. As further evidence:

The Prince of Eden sent me a Quran to bind in leather. I asked about a plant [al-ashraas] found at the herbalists and they did not know it. They told me to go to the judge and maybe he would know the plant. When I asked him, he said: "Where are you from?"

I said, "From Palestine."

He said, "You are from the country of prosperity. If they had the plant, they would have eaten it. You must go and get starch [al-ashraas]."

Apparently, *al-ashraas*, is a plant used for leather-binding, at which Maqdisi was highly skilled. Note his pleased record of the judge's observation that Palestine is a country of prosperity. Again, we have an intellectual who affiliates himself with a specific region, which he knows well and which his conversant also knows well.

Alternatively, Maqdisi could have associated himself with *Beit al-Maqdis* [Jerusalem], which would have been more familiar to his listeners. Maqdisi, in particular, was not short of identities. In his book, he periodically identifies himself as a Jerusalemite, Palestinian, Syrian, Hanafi, Sufi, professor, sheikh, etc.

Following is a text in which he refers to his city, Jerusalem:

One day, I was in the council of the judge, Mukhtar Abi Yayha Ibn Bahram, in Basra, and Egypt [Cairo] was mentioned. I was asked: which city is nobler?

I said: Our city.

They said: Which one is sweeter?

I said: Ours.

They said: Which is better?

I said: Ours.

They said: Which is more bountiful?

I said: Ours.

They said: Which is bigger?

I said: Ours.

Those in the council were surprised at this. They said, "You are a man of conceit. You have claimed that which we cannot accept from you. You are like the owner of the camel during the Haj."

Maqdisi went on then to explain why his city was of such importance, proving to the council members that his 'camel' - Jerusalem of Palestine - was due the accolades he claimed.

And certainly, the Palestinian identity that Maqdisi refers to was at times weakened by other competing identities. This was especially true vis-a-vis the Syrian or Shami identity, which was a broader but competitive grouping. Still, the Palestinian identity maintained a manner of continuity. The periods of and reasons for its recession and resurrection remain to be researched; the fact that a Palestinian consciousness was established without a central state including all Palestine's regions, and lasted for long periods of time is crucial in understanding what held this identity together.

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Endnotes

¹ *The History of Herodotus* (Al-Mujama' al-Thaqafi Publications: Bahrain, Dubai, 2001) 522.

² *The Journey of Maqdisi*, "Ahsan al-Taqaesem Fee Marefet al-Aqaleem," (The Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing, Beirut: 2003) 362.