Dependence, Adaptation &Authenticity

Palestinian Nationalism's Break with Pan-Arabism

Introduction

The contribution of common suffering to a national identity has special relevance to the current Palestinian national movement, as contemporary political events and experiences have shaped Palestinian identity. Hardship and injustice, extremely common themes in the ideology of the Palestinian national movement, serve to distinguish Palestinian identity from a broader Arab identity. While all Arabs have a shared history of colonial and imperial injustices, only Palestinians have been denied any opportunity for independent governance and statehood. This struggle for citizenship and statehood is an experience Palestinians, but not other Arabs, have suffered, creating a Palestinian national identity independent from the Pan-Arab movement.

While this collective Palestinian identity was forming, Arab nationalism remained the dominant ideology in the region. The failure of Arab nationalism in the Palestinian territory contributed to the unique experience that now defines membership in the Palestinian nation. This independent Palestinian nationalism movement developed due to the unique political environment of territorial Palestine after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the failure of states to comply with Palestinian political demands, and the increased legitimacy of Palestinian exceptionalism.

A Unique Palestinian Identity

The development of Palestinian nationalism and its divergence from the broader Pan-Arab national movement can be attributed in part to the unique political environment of Palestine during and immediately following British rule. Often considered artificial and politicized, the borders established by the British and French after World War I quickly shaped distinct political experiences in each mandated territory. While newly established borders could not incorporate the vast array of linguistic, tribal, regional, and local ties that existed in the Middle East, the new borders created their own social and cultural communities as a result of "distinctly different historical courses."[1] Beyond their historical difference, changes in the political system, such as the fall of the Ottoman

A map of British and French mandates in the aftermath of WWI, including the British mandate of Palestine

Empire, the growing Zionist challenge, and the creation of the British mandate over Palestine, led to new political identities taking shape as well. The transition from Ottoman to British rule in Palestine was uncharacteristic of the larger Arab region, as a class of elites had been able to maintain its influence despite the discriminatory policies of the Young Turks, a reform movement aimed at replacing the Ottoman Empire.[2] In an attempt by the Old Guard to re-establish its authority, it produced some of the first claims of distinct Palestinian national identity. These attempts, directed at countering the growing threat of Zionism, manifested themselves in the establishment of the Muslim-Christian Association in 1918, whose members were viewed as the "first generation of Palestinian politicians whose ideals formed the basis of Palestinian nationalism."[3]

As political life under the mandate system began to take shape, state-building activities were markedly absent for Arabs in the Palestinian mandate. While other territories were taking restricted but genuine steps toward building independent states, non-Jewish areas of Palestine were making little progress.[4] Other territories and emerging states were actively moving towards official independence, expanding bureaucracies, establishing military and internal security forces, and extending their influence into a variety of economic sectors.[5] While nominal independence may have been limited by the powerful influence of the British and French governments, these fundamental state-building activities represented a crucial aspect of the political environment that was missing from Palestine.

Early attempts at organizing against the British and establishing Palestinian Arab institutions,

such as the Palestinian Executive Committee and the 1936 revolt, made little progress towards a functioning independent state. The Executive Committee dissolved after the death of its leader in 1934, and the rebellion ended in an internal strife that killed more Palestinians than the British and Jewish forces combined.[6] The lack of success was largely due to the failed Syrian state, as well as the goal of the British government to create a Jewish state within Palestine. Regardless of the cause, life under British Palestine diverged considerably from the broader experience of other Arab states, laying the groundwork for a distinct Palestinian identity.

The rise of Zionism also became a unique aspect of the Palestinian experience. As Zionism threatened the territory of Palestine, the goal of early Palestinian nationalists changed to "resist or expel the source of the threat," which reflected both a unique experience and a common struggle "in which territory became the main – though by no means sole – shaper of the nation."[7] Palestinian identity relied on this fight over territory. During this time, the Balfour Declaration, which made Palestine home for the Jewish people, increased Zionist tensions in the region. This led to a unique political environment for Arab Palestinians and undermined the legitimacy of pan-Arab claims.

The early texts of Theodor Herzl, one of the founders of the Zionist movement, demonstrate the deeply ingrained notions of Palestinian identity. He writes, "Palestine is our unforgettable historic homeland. The very name would be a marvelously effective rallying cry."[8] This narrative and invocation of "Palestine" as a rallying cry solidifies Palestinian identity and clearly distinguishes Palestinians from their Arab neighbors. If they embrace the dream of a single Arab nation-state, their claims to territorial Palestine would be less legitimate. In order to mirror the successes of Zionism, Palestinian Arabs have to move toward Palestine rather than Arabia to serve as their basis of identity.

The single most important event in the development of Palestinian identity occurred in 1948, and is commonly referred to in Arabic as the *Nakba* or "disaster." The establishment of Israel and the resultant Palestine War created a massive Palestinian diaspora: hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled their homes. As many searched for refugee camps, the struggle and loss of their homes became a shared experience through which a powerful identity took shape. Since the *Nakba*, "hardship

and oppression have given force to the concept of 'the Palestinian people,'" creating a degree of solidarity that strengthened the Palestinian identity.[9]

This emerging sense of identity was strongest for refugees who were physically removed from territorial Palestine. Palestinians in Lebanese, Jordanian, and Syrian refugee camps have exhibited stronger cultural identities due to "physical proximity, endogamy, and ethnocentrism;" those surrounded by non-Palestinian Arabs felt the strongest sense of Palestinian identity and solidarity, perhaps fueled by the promise of a return to their homeland.[10] This difference would eventually be disastrous for the relationship between Palestinians and the members of other Arab lands; rejection, discrimination, and violent conflict reinforced their identity as distinct from the broader Arab world.

Rejection by Arab States

After the *Nakba* of 1948, Palestinians were forced to turn to the Arab nationalist ideology out of political practicality and existing power relations within the state of Israel. Pan-Arab ideology was an "inevitable choice for Palestinians, a choice that was not only driven by the strength of the cultural forces of the Arab enterprise, but also by the realities of power in the conflict for Palestine."[11] While the *Nakba* crystallized the concept of independent Palestinian experience and identity, political weakness and dispersal forced Palestinians to put their faith in Arab nationalism. This allegiance, however, did not signify an affinity for the Arab regimes – nationalist groups still aimed to topple those governments.

Even before the establishment of an independent Arab state, Palestinian leaders were criticizing King Faisal of Iraq and Syria for his stance on Zionism and the Palestinian mandate. There was a significant number of Palestinian leaders in Damascus, Syria, and though they "expressed pan-Arab demands and sentiments, their focus on Palestine over-shadowed all other matters."[12] With the mounting threat of French rule in Syria, Faisal was increasingly dependent on the British for political support and was therefore receptive to British demands for

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As a tribute to the budding Palestinian art scene, and particularly Palestinian graffiti artists who work on Israeli security walls, famous graffiti artist Banksy produced this and other works in Bethlehem.

Arab-Jewish cooperation. In 1919, he met with the President of the World Zionist Organization and made an informal agreement that "permitted Jewish immigration into Palestine without supporting the idea of a Jewish national home."[13] As early as 1919, Palestinians began to see conflicts between their own interests and those of Arab governments, but depended on pan-Arab nationalism due to their own political weakness. This conflict became ever more apparent after 1948, as Palestinians fell further under Israeli control, socially, economically, and politically.

Because Palestinians and other Arabs share linguistic and cultural ties, individual Palestinians reached positions of influence in Arab governments. Arab regimes adopted a dedication to the supposed liberation of Palestine. These connections, however, were countered by the loss of status and rise of poverty among Palestinians. Life for Palestinian refugees in Arab host countries was characterized by police brutality, limited permission to travel, discriminatory rules, and imprisonment.[14] In a series of 1977 interviews conducted by Rosemary Sayigh, a journalist and scholar of Middle Eastern history, in a Lebanese refugee camp, fourteen out of twenty respondents remembered a particular instance in which they first became aware of their Palestinian identity. These occurrences almost always included discrimination or hostility. Regional differences in characteristics did not distinguish Palestinians nearly as much as their "loss of status and displacement" and the pity attributed to their status.[15]

Such discriminatory reminders have served to emphasize the distinct experience of Palestinian Arabs; as a result, both Israel and Arab host-countries have enacted programs pushing for conformity.

Palestinians under Israeli and Arab control "experienced a systematic and coercive attempt at de-Palestinization, mainly through harsh political control and educational attempts to reconstruct their collective identity."[16] In the West Bank, a Jordanian identity was pushed onto Palestinians; in Israel, an Israeli Arab identity. These attempts, however, only solidified Palestinian identity.

By the late 1960s, the refugee experience had driven a political and ideological wedge between Arab regimes and Palestinian leaders. A huge ideological shift occurred with the rise of *Fatah*, a secular Palestinian political party, and the failure of the Six-Day War of 1967 with Israel. The creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964, including the *Fatah*, revived the movement for the liberation of Palestine, which had been failing due to the fragmented parties that came before.[17] The war itself was a massive embarrassment for Arab governments. The swift and effortless victory of Israel over Arab armies validated the *Fatah* concept of armed struggle within Palestine. Sayigh's interviews, conducted ten years after the war, reflected a strong impression of the Six-Day War as a "defeat for the Arabs with positive effects for Palestine," an ability to feel more Palestinian through these political events.[18] The Six-Day War and the rise of the PLO and *Fatah* are described among Palestinian populations as "the Revolution" a signal to awaken the Palestinian national consciousness. After decades of dependence on Arab nationalism, Palestinians could now depend on their uniquely Palestinian ideology for liberation.[19] Disillusionment with Arab regimes and the disaster of the Six-Day War led to the rise of more violent groups including *Fatah* and the PLO, faith in local-based action, and an ideological shift towards Palestine-based identity.

In 1970, a series of events known as "Black September" resulted in military conflict between the PLO and Jordanian forces under King Hussein. Thousands of civilians were killed or arrested, including occupants of Palestinian refugee camps. The aim was to end the military

"Though the Palestinian national movement depended on pan-Arab ideology until the late 1960s, the ideological strength of the Arab-based identity was eroded by the political realities of that period, and Palestinians saw a return to a dependence on their own unique identity."

regime of Jordan.[20] In reality, these refugee camps were areas in Amman, the capital of Jordan, that differed from other poor neighborhoods in the origin of their inhabitants.[21] As Syrian troops moved into northern Jordan to support the PLO, Hussein went so far as to ask the United States for Israeli air support against Syrian troops, leading to the defeat of the PLO. Nine months later, the Jordanian position on Palestine was clarified by a series of artillery strikes and the arrest of 20,000 Palestinians in Jordan; Jordan intended to make a nation strictly for "authentic Jordanians."[22]

The political compromise, reduced political and social status, and direct violence that originally turned the Palestinians toward a pan-Arab ideology now cemented the difference between the two. Though the Palestinian national movement depended on pan-Arab ideology until the late 1960s, the ideological strength of the Arab-based identity was eroded by the political realities of that period, and Palestinians saw a return to a dependence on their own unique identity.

The Restoration of a Palestinian Identity

The late 1960s and early 1970s finalized Palestinian disenchantment with Arab Nationalism as a vehicle for achieving Palestinian goals. Palestinian groups began to adopt a primordialist perspective of nationality, shifting their sights away from the pan-Arab nationalism and towards the creation of an independent Palestinian nation. Through rhetoric and several academic projects, Palestinian leadership began to assert the existence of a distinct Palestinian

people and territory. In 1968, the Department of Culture was founded in an attempt to increase research regarding Palestinian culture among various Palestinian communities. Among the major projects of this department were the *Encyclopedia Palaestina* and the *Palestine Atlas*, which contained entries and maps designed to support the ethnic and historical bonds of the Palestinian people.[23]

Palestinian organizations also promoted a "master commemorative narrative," a cycle in which Palestinians inhabit land, fight off invasions, only to face future invasions.[24] Palestinian groups used this narrative to develop a solidarity based upon recent experiences and historical struggles, creating a powerful identity for a stateless people. This narrative gave them a role in history, a new perspective on their current struggle, and hope that they will prevail as they have in the past. While Palestinians did not constitute a distinct cultural, linguistic, religious, or territorial group until the 20th century, their current struggle in this historical framework provides a powerful and attractive basis for identity that can compete with pan-Arabism.
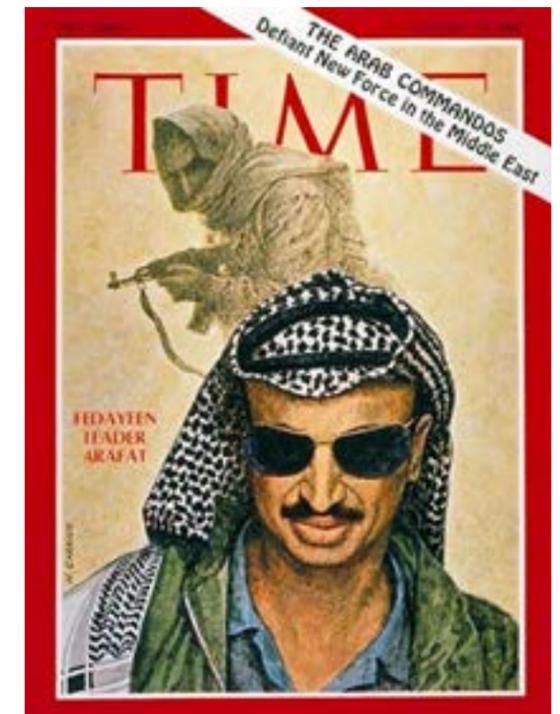
Yasser Arafat on the cover of Time magazine during *Fatah's* rise to prominence after the Qibya raid. The rise of *Fatah* represented a growing sense of self-reliance in the Palestinian national movement, which also raised tensions with Arab regimes.

The legitimacy of historical claims, however, remains weak. Even among the general public of Palestine and the diaspora, more recent events such as the *Nakba* and the refugee experience played a much larger role in determining identity. *Fatah*'s central concept of *kiyan*, or "being," created an identity based on an independent existence, meaning either individually or in a political body.[25] The struggle for an independent state, therefore, was inseparable from the personal and political identities of Palestinians; the distinction between their existence as human beings and their existence within a national community became blurred. As one young *Fatah* member from the West Bank explained, the Palestinian people had lost their sense of identity, but *Fatah* "reawakened Palestinian national identity and brought it back to life."[26] Regardless of whether Palestinian identity was reawakened or constructed in conjunction with the renewed national movement, the focus on Palestinian identity through historical experience appealed to stateless Palestinians who felt betrayed by their Arab neighbors.

Claims to a distinct Palestinian national identity were also advantaged by their connection to a specific piece of land. In contrast to the less tangible historical, linguistic, and cultural unification of pan-Arabism, Palestinian identity was formed on a concrete longing for a tangible place.[27] The importance of land was also reflected in the political controversy over archaeological digs. When Israel gained control over the Old City in Jerusalem in 1967, such excavations were executed almost immediately. These sites were useful tools in spreading nationalist ideology, as its former and current inhabitants could share the glory of previous civilizations along with the ritual of restoration. In excavating the land, archaeologists produced "material culture" – concrete signs of particular histories and historicities.[28] Through the creation of this culture, archaeology powerfully legitimized "existing cultural and political worlds."[29] By developing the religious and historical significance of a certain site or territory, the political landscape and identity was explained, justified, and adjusted. Thus, Palestinians inevitably feel a greater attachment to the land of their ancestors and all its Islamic and historical attributes.

The influence of Palestinian identity has outstripped that of pan-Arabism because the former actively appeals to a wide range of social strata while the latter can be seen as elitist. In contrast to the pan-Arab discourse used by Palestinian writers during the British mandate, which were seen as elitist and targeted towards audiences outside of Palestine, the Palestinian discourse from the late 1960s onward was "aimed more at the Palestinian public itself and at the lower social strata."[30] This shift resulted from a growing disconnect between the common people and the Arab elites.

Although this focus on the lower-class public was also related to the socialist leanings of some nationalist groups at the time, it added to the appeal of Palestinian nationalist discourse as it broke from the pan-Arab movement. Most of *Fatah*'s founding members were lower-middle class refugees raised in the Gaza strip and educated in Egypt, a fact which added legitimacy to the impression of *Fatah* as a people's revolution.[31] Rather than spreading nationalist doctrine through

A camp administered by the UN Relief and Works Agency for homeless Palestinian Arab refugees near Damascus just after the Six-Day War.

Israeli soldiers and officials enter the Temple Mount after the Israeli Defense Forces captured eastern Jerusalem and the West Bank

literature and formal educational institutions, they used other forms of disseminating nationalist ideology. This included the mediation of local intelligentsias, students, teachers, and political leaders, while encouraging active participation in nationalist organizations, meetings and family life.[32]

Conclusion

Palestinians have not abandoned their Arab identity. While there was an ideological and political split between pan-Arabism and Palestinian nationalism, most Palestinians still support the idea of a united Arab nation. *Fatah* ideology has reversed the order of needs: Palestine no longer needs a pan-Arab movement for liberation, but the unity of a pan-Arab movement needs a liberated Palestine.[33]

The intrinsic appeal of Palestinian identity presented during the 1960s was built on the unique experience of Palestinians under the British mandate system, the subsequent diaspora, and governance of other Arab nations, including the reduced status of refugees. The British mandate system created a Palestine separated from other Arab territories through more than just geographic borders; this difference translated into an Arab-Palestinian relationship characterized by conflicting interests, discrimination, and begrudging interdependency. Palestinians needed Arab governments for political and military muscle, and Arab governments needed Palestine to act as a scapegoat to stabilize their own regimes.

The flexibility of an identity defined through experience does not lead to the conclusion that such beliefs are any less legitimate than other nationalist claims. The Palestinian national identity can be described as "an identity-in-process, set on a goal but constantly evolving in response to new stages of crisis."[34] State institutions may someday consolidate a single interpretation of Palestinian identity, but it currently remains as a diverse and dynamic concept formed by members of a nation. The interplay between ideas and political events is as reciprocal as it is complex, and Palestinian nationalism, it seems, is no exception.

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