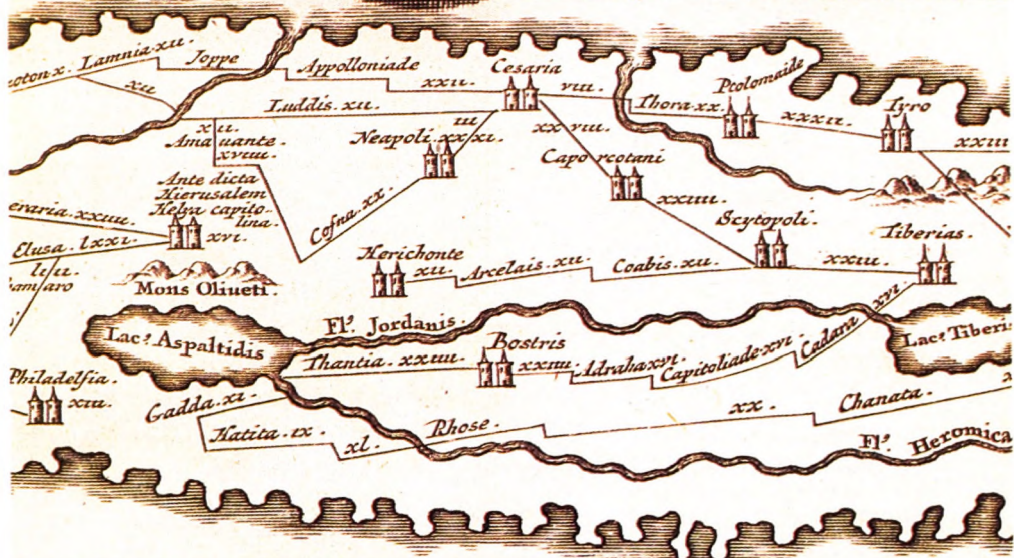
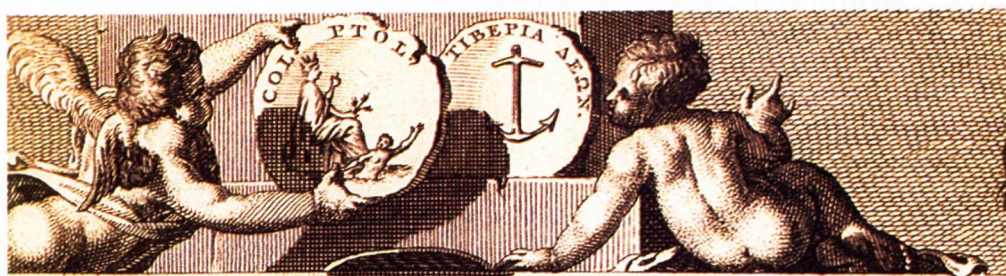




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# Palestinian Nationalism: The Difficulties of Narrating an Ambivalent Identity

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**ABSTRACT:** *The essay examines the challenges that face the articulation of the Palestinian identity. By reflecting on the various difficulties that face historians in their attempts to study Palestinian national identity, the essay outlines a narrative for the historical emergence of this particular identity.*

The notions of nation and nationalism have played a central role in the process of shaping, making and constructing our modern world. Since the nineteenth century, the nation has proclaimed itself the guardian and champion of all history. For that reason alone a historical study concerned with the present ought to seriously consider the impact that the ideas of nation and nationalism have had — and continue to have — on our understanding of certain historical events.

With the birth of the nation, national historical narratives were also born for the need arose to create, construct and write authoritative lineages and chronologies that would present the nation as an ancient and primordial entity. Accordingly, it has been the task of historians to provide the nation with a sense of historical legitimacy. Through differentiating between the *past* and the *present*, writing organizes the content of history and forces the silent body, i.e., the nation, to speak (de Certeau, 1988). The distinction between the *dead* past and the *living* present is what invents the historical chronology that divides the past into different periods assumed to be homogeneous with beginnings and endings entirely based on the historian's decision that a different time has come. It is such separation between past and present that enables the nation to appear as the messiah of history not only because, to borrow the words of Benjamin, it "consummates all history," but also because it presents itself as the end of history (Benjamin, 1978: 312). Studying the formation and development of a specific national identity is, indeed, almost more of an academic exercise in "historical teleology" than a search for the historical roots of the nation. It is a process, which begins from an already known conclusion whereby the historian selects a number of events and narrates them retrospectively leading to the known conclusion.

It is not surprising, therefore, that one can often find a number of different narratives on the evolution of each nation. Despite the fact that historians eventually come to an agreement regarding the outcome, they rarely agree about what came before. Each national historical narrative

depends on what the historian has chosen as a beginning point and as significant events. Of course, we are not speaking of conscious selection on the part of the historian, but rather of a process in which interests intersect with ideology, the structure of knowledge, and historical imagination – all of which influence the historian.

The history of Palestinian national identity is a salient example of the multiplicity of historical narratives resulting from a number of historical imaginations. The implications of such multiple narrations are particularly weighty in the Palestinian context because the Palestinians form a national group whose very existence is often questioned by some. Although such questioning of Palestinian ‘nationness’ is largely connected with Zionist negation, even complete denial of the existence of the Palestinians, it is also a result of internal contradictions inside the Palestinian discourse itself. For in the final analysis, such a discourse emerged out of historical processes that were often intended to precisely prevent its emergence.

The construction of a modern Palestinian identity points to a number of challenges and contradictions that simultaneously produced it and made it ambiguous. For example, as textual evidence reveals, the Palestinian discourse of the nineteen sixties was essentially a pan-Arabist discourse that stemmed from a belief in the existence of a larger Arab nation. At the same time it argued that the Palestinians constituted a nationed people in its attempts to counter the Zionist discourse that vehemently denied the mere existence of the Palestinians through insisting that they were simply Arabs living in Palestine and as such ought to be absorbed by a larger Arab nation. In other words, the Palestinian discourse was involved in both rejecting the Arab sameness argument, because Zionism employed it, and at the same time it was advocating it for entirely different reasons. In any case, the Palestinian discourse, together with other Arab discourses, has already bypassed the sixties’ predicament, because the current political conditions signal the defeat of the Arab nation project in the face of the Arab nation-states. Now, even the most fervent proponents of Arab nationalism accept the existence of different Arab identities, while Palestinians are generally recognized by the international community, and even by Israel, as a people. Nonetheless, since such developments are essentially political in nature, they do not necessarily imply that there is agreement regarding how a collective Palestinian identity came into existence, or the nature and boundaries of such an identity.

In this context, studying the history of Palestinian identity through a reading of the past is a matter of utmost importance to the Palestinians, not because it is necessary for the negotiation process, but because it connects with the way the Palestinians define themselves, envision their future and determine the boundaries of their national political community. After all, ideas about, and imaginings of, history are neither merely illusions nor are they necessarily true depictions of reality. Rather, they are basically epistemologies through which individuals understand reality and deal with it.

When an identity is formulated and assimilated — be it individually or collectively — it becomes the spectacles through which an individual sees the world. In this way, “it becomes a barricade behind which hides the believer ... whether as a fundamentalist, as a universalist, or as a racist fascist”, as Ali Harb (1995: 49) has pointed out.

A close look at some of the most important writings on Palestinian history reveals that most historians have not adequately considered the question of Palestinian national identity. The few studies dealing with the issue expose, at best, disagreements among historians on the origins and evolution of the Palestinians as a people. There are many different attitudes towards Palestinian identity, ranging from total negation of its existence,<sup>1</sup> to insistence on a long historical presence that goes back to the Cannones.<sup>2</sup> Between these two extremes we find some historians, particularly Israeli, who view Palestinian identity as a reaction to the Zionist presence, with relatively recent origins dating back to the 1960s. In fact, the claim has been made by some Israeli historians that “the Zionist movement is one of the most successful national movements in history for it started with the aim of forming one national group, and it ended up with forming two.”<sup>3</sup> On the Palestinian side we find studies that view the formation of Palestinian identity as a recent historical process going back to the events surrounding the outset of Zionist immigration to Palestine, the British Mandate period and the failure of the Arab nationalist movement in the aftermath of WWI. Muhammad Muslih, for example, argued that Palestinian nationalism was “ushered into its own independent existence mainly as a result of the chaos and disarray of the larger Arab nationalist movement” after the fall of Faysal’s government between 1918 and 1920. (Muslih, 1988: x)

The starting point for my reflections on the history of Palestinian identity is the belief that nations are not infinite primordial entities as some national thinkers claim; rather, a nation or people as a collectivity, is basically an imagined political community produced at a specific time and place.<sup>4</sup> The production of the imagined community is not only an economic and political process, but also, to a large extent, a cultural-rhetorical one. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Both Arab nationalist historians and Zionist historians hold this view. The Israeli historian Ben Zion Natanyah (Benjamin Netanyahu’s father) has frequently declared that in his opinion there is nothing called a Palestinian people: “I do not believe that the Arabs who call themselves Palestinians have the right to demand a state. It is clear to me that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people.” (*Al Quds* 9/18/1998).

<sup>2</sup> The Palestinian historian Bayan Nweihed al-Hout adopted this position in a lecture that she gave at the Beirut theatre in April 1998. She argues something similar in her book *Filastin: al-qadeya-al-sha’b-al-hadara* (Palestine: The Cause, the People, the Civilization) (Beirut: dar al-istiqlal lil-dirasat wal-nashr, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> This claim is attributed to the Israeli historian Meir Pa’el who apparently repeats it frequently. I quote it here on the basis of a personal communication from the historian Ilan Pappe during a meeting in Ramallah in February 1998.

<sup>4</sup> For further elaboration on this issue, see Anderson, 1991.

writing its history must not be limited to the political events that produce the nation-people, it must also include the discourse through which the nation is produced and constructed, and the history employed in this production process.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the study of the emergence of the Palestinians as a people, in my opinion, must be observed not only through the development of their political institutions, but also through the study of the Palestinian imagination, the type of discourse it produced, and the influencing historical factors — all of which contributed to the formation of a Palestinian consciousness with loyalty to the collectivity and helped draw the boundaries of this collectivity. I realize that limiting the discussion to consciousness and discourse has dangerous implications, because in Palestinian self-consciousness many see a kind of false consciousness. This is one of the political challenges to the study of the historical emergence and development of Palestinian identity. However, it is a matter that must not be ignored if we are seriously interested, in an academic sense, in the historical understanding of this identity, after all, consciousness influences reality and reality influences consciousness. Self-consciousness is not only connected to the way the one imagines the self, but also to the way others see, represent and interact with us and vice versa.

Rashid Khalidi rightly maintains that one of the main challenges facing historians of Palestinian identity today is the fact that the emergence of a distinctive identity on the political level intersects with, but does not completely depend on, the exclusion of the Palestinians and their becoming 'the Other' for national groups who view themselves as notably different from the Palestinians and whose historical narrations can attest to it. This is exactly what makes the study of Palestinian identity, based on its own textual sources, a nearly impossible task. The historian of Palestine, therefore, cannot solely depend on "Palestinian sources," but must also rely on, and borrow from, historical texts belonging to the other nations of the region, because such textual sources often employ the same historical events on which the Palestinian narrative is trying to base itself. There are many examples of this. For instance, is it possible to claim that the period of Arab renaissance at the end of the nineteenth century - or the period of the political emergence of Arab national thought during the First World War - are exclusive only to Lebanese history, or to Palestinian history, or to any other single history? Is it possible to claim that Jewish history in Palestine is a matter relevant only to Israeli history and not a part of the history of the Palestinians? Are not these historical issues echoed in several historical texts of different groups in our region?

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<sup>5</sup> The dominant tendency in the study of the evolution of Palestinian identity is the history of the evolution of the Palestinian political institution. An example of this is the Palestinian historian Maher al-Shareef, 1995.

This intersection of and frequent conflict between Palestinian history and the histories of the others today poses yet another difficulty for students of Palestinian history and identity. Because the development of this identity is often explained according to meanings produced in other texts that often ignore the Palestinians, the Palestinian historian is faced with the responsibility of recovering those parts of Palestinian memory that have been colonized by competing historical discourses. The historian of Palestine has the difficult task of defining modern Palestinian history and separating it from its Israeli counterpart and from the wider Arab history or that of neighboring countries.

If the non-independence of Palestinian history is one challenge facing the historian, resisting the temptation to invent a totally independent Palestinian narrative is another. After all, the difference of the Palestinians' national identity from that of their neighbors does not mean that it is possible to comprehend outside the context of histories that are not, literally speaking, their own. The particularity of the Palestinian *nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948, for instance, ties the Palestinian narrative to its Israeli counterpart, whether both parties like it or not. Thus, the inability of many historians to appreciate or even consider how difficult it is for Palestinians to be part of any national identity of any of their neighboring countries, poses a real problem involved in studies of Palestinian identity. Not recognizing the connections between Palestinian history and competing histories has led some to view Palestinian identity as a recent phenomenon, the product of modern political national activities that emerged in the 1960s. This perspective points to yet another problem facing historians, one which often leads them to the rather simplistic solution of viewing the evolution of Palestinian identity through the region's political history. This, I believe, totally ignores the complex roots of Palestinian identity. True, it is important to consider the impact on the production of Palestinian identity of dominant Middle East ideologies, such as Arab nationalism and Islamism, of the imposed western divisions on the region, and of Zionism. However, these factors, albeit important, do not explain the evidence that suggests that part of the urban intellectuals in Palestine, and the *mashreq* (the eastern part of the Arab world) generally, began to imagine Palestine as a distinct political unit long before colonial divisions and intensive Jewish immigration, even though this imagining was not accompanied by a distinct Palestinian national consciousness.

For example, in 1908, the writer (and former Ottoman official in Jerusalem), Najib <sup>6</sup>Azuri, proposed the idea of expanding the *Sanjak* (district in the Ottoman Empire) of Jerusalem to include northern Palestine, explaining that this was necessary to develop the land of Palestine.<sup>6</sup> His vision of Palestine corresponds with both Palestine's borders as they were drawn a

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<sup>6</sup> Azuri proposed this to the Ottoman Parliament that was restored in 1908 in a newspaper article that appeared on September 23, 1908. See Rashid Khalidi, 1997: 28-29.

decade later by the British, as well as with the borders indicated in the statement issued by the First Palestinian Arab Congress that was held in Jerusalem on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1919. In the protest statement sent by the participants to the Peace Conference, they stated that they represent “all Muslim and Christian residents of Palestine, which is made of the regions of Jerusalem, Nablus, Arab Acre.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the protest letter sent by the Muslim-Christian committee in Jaffa to General Allenby in 1918 spoke in the name of “the Arab Palestinian.”<sup>8</sup>

The mere emergence of the idea of the land of Palestine with defined borders similar to those relied on later by the British Mandate reveals that in some circles the idea of a Palestine distinct from its neighbors existed. A number of historians accept this view, believing that the Palestinian imagining of the boundaries of their national group is a product of conditions that indeed existed in the nineteenth century. However, they do not agree on the main reason behind such an imagining. Among those historians is Rashid Khalidi, who argues that the centrality of Jerusalem in the popular imagination of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish residents turned it into a symbol for all other places in Palestine and turned visiting it into an important part of the religious identity of the residents of Palestine (1997: 28-9). Other historians who share Khalidi’s view usually point out the importance of the administrative status of Jerusalem in the lives of the people of the region from the middle of the nineteenth century on. They point out that Jerusalem was the administrative and political capital for all nearby areas, particularly in the period after 1887, when it became the capital of an independent *Sanjak* carrying its name and sent delegates to *Majlis al-Mab’outhan* (the Ottoman parliament). Therefore, as Kimmerling and Migdal point out, such a special administrative status for Jerusalem was important for the eventual birth of an independent Palestinian identity in the aftermath of Ottoman rule (Kimmerling and Migdal, 1993: 68-69). Kimmerling and Migdal based their argument on an essay by Butrus Abu-Manneh (1978: 25) in which he argued that the autonomous status of Jerusalem “was of tremendous importance for the emergence of Palestine.”

While agreeing with the general sentiment that the emergence of Palestinian identity ought to be examined based on developments related to the later part of Ottoman rule in Palestine, Beshara Doumani does not accept that this was due to the centrality of Jerusalem in Palestinian life. Instead, he argues that historians of Palestinian identity ought, first and foremost, to examine the “economic, social, and cultural relations between the inhabitants of the various regions of Palestine during the Ottoman period . . . [should

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<sup>7</sup> Documents of the Palestinian Arab resistance to the British occupation and to Zionism 1918-1939. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Dirasat al-filastaneyeh): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Documents of the Palestinian National Movement 1918-1939 (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Dirasat al-Filastaneyeh).

want to understand] why Palestine became a nation in the minds of the people who call themselves Palestinians today”(Doumani, 1995: 245). Keeping that in mind, Doumani points out that Palestine “produced large agricultural surplus and was integrated into the world capitalist economy as an exporter of wheat, barley, sesame, olive oil, soap and cotton during 1856-1882 period” (Ibid.: 4). In this context, it was Nablus, and not Jerusalem, that in the nineteenth century constituted the main commercial center to the villages in a region spreading from Hebron in the south and to the Galilee in the north. Its trade relations with the Greater Syrian hinterlands, particularly with Damascus, made *Jabal Nablus*, in effect, the actual center of Palestine.

Yet, there are historians who argue that the European consciousness of the region in general, and of Palestine as a holy land in particular, as expressed in writings of European travelers, missionaries and archeologists in the nineteenth century, played an important role in shaping a local recognition of the distinctiveness of Palestine and its geographic unity, even though its frontiers were not clearly and accurately drawn (Nassar, 1997).<sup>9</sup> Alexander Scholch (1988: 27) stated this case when he wrote:

It is possible to state with certainty that imagining Palestine as a unit (as the *Holy Land* or as the *Land of Israel*) was far more developed and precise in the minds of Europeans in the second half of the nineteenth century than it was for its own local population or for the Ottoman administration.<sup>10</sup>

Scholch goes on to show that in the second half of the nineteenth century, the port of Jaffa—because of its connection with Jerusalem—was Palestine’s window to the world. Using Ottoman and European statistics, Scholch argued that from this port Palestine exported to Europe and imported various products and, consequently, Jaffa played a central role in shaping and constructing a particular and independent “meaning” of Palestine as an entity separate from its surroundings. (Ibid.: 163-174)

The different narrations of the emergence of Palestinian self-identification outlined above do not necessarily suggest that such identification was prevalent among the majority of Palestine’s residents, rather these narrations only point out the material conditions that laid the foundations for the eventual emergence of a Palestinian self-identification. There is almost a consensus that the loyalties and identifications of the residents of Palestine at the end of the Ottoman period were not national, but more a combination of local, regional and religious affiliations. The Ottoman, Arab, tribal and religious identities coexisted among the urban elite and the

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<sup>9</sup> I briefly refer to this possibility in my doctoral dissertation.

<sup>10</sup> This translation is my own from Kamel al-Assali’s Arabic translation of Alexander Scholch, 1988.

residents of villages, who often assumed local identities (Khalidi, 1997: 63-88). This multiplicity of identities did not necessarily reflect any kind of conflicts. Loyalty to the Ottomans did not negate being proud of Arab heritage, or not defending Palestine against foreign greed. This coexistence of loyalties always accompanied Palestinian discourse and later became one of the characteristics of Palestinian identity.

Herein lies the main problem for Palestinian historians, because the history of Palestinian self-consciousness cannot be characterized as chronological in the sense that with the passing of time it was continuously strengthened. On the contrary, Palestinian self-identification often appears to have oscillated between different historical belongings and loyalties. Sometimes, in the same event, the historian finds evidence of Palestinian particularity while, at the same time, he also finds insistence on a national identification broader than Palestine. This multiplicity was obvious during the mandate period as well as in the fifties and sixties.

The conference held in Jerusalem in 1919, for instance, was called "the Arab Palestinian Congress" and the statement issued by it emphasized the importance of the independence of Palestine and preserving its unity, at the same time asserting that it was part of Greater Arab Syria.<sup>11</sup> The same thing is evident in the nineteen fifties and early sixties. Examine the political program of any the Palestinian political movements of the time — say the Arab Nationalist Movement — and you will notice that the Palestinian concern with the liberation of Palestine from the Zionist movement was always expressed in the language of Arab nationalism.<sup>12</sup>

Along with the colonial division of the region based on the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), Jewish immigration to Palestine played a significant role in the evolution of a distinct Palestinian nation, which began to assume new directions and develop new characteristics. Due to the nature of Jewish settlement, which basically sought to build agricultural colonies, the Palestinian clash with the Zionist project began in the villages, not in the cities. This produced, simultaneously, one of the most outstanding and problematic characteristics of Palestinian identity. The peasant character became an essential part of the way Palestinians view and represent themselves. Later on, they would adopt peasant forms of dress, the *kufeyeh* headscarf and the village dance *the dabkeh*, as symbols of Palestinian national identity. At the same time, the fact that the city did not play the central role in shaping local consciousness is responsible for not generalizing this consciousness, which continued to compete with a number of other national perspectives. However, during the British Mandate period the peasant feeling

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<sup>11</sup> See the text of the statement in Nweihed al-Hout, 1986: 96.

<sup>12</sup> Established in the early fifties by a number of Palestinian activists such as George Habash and Hani al-Hindi, this movement declared that the liberation of Palestine is not possible without Arab unity. See the interview of George Habash with Mahmoud Soueid published in Soueid, 1998: 11.

of distinctness found its political expression not in rural areas but in the city, through articles in local newspapers, political discourse and emerging parties. The different Palestinian newspapers, *Al Karmel*, *Filasteen* and *Al Munadi*, all without exception, conducted one campaign after another against the Zionist movement and its project in Palestine, demanding that Palestine remain for its people and politically independent. In 1914, Najeeb Nassar, the most prominent of Palestinian journalists and owner of the Haifa based *Al-Karmel* newspaper asked the Arabs of *Bilad al Sham* (Greater Syria) to support the people of Palestine, whom he called “the Palestinians.” In 1914 Nassar wrote: “We, your Palestinian brothers, share with you all your difficulties. So why don’t you, at least, feel with us a little the disasters raining on us ... and on our country.”<sup>13</sup>

Nassar’s text reveals recognition of the borders of the Palestinian group then. It also reveals the awareness of the difference between this group and another neighboring group—the people in the rest of Greater Syria. This awareness intensifies after the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and during the British Mandate period in general, when it starts to take a political turn. In 1923, for instance, in its founding statement, The National Arab party announced that its goal is “preserving Palestine for its people [...] and establishing a constitutional government in it (Mahaftha, 1989: 225).” Although the Arab identity of Palestine continued to constitute an important part of Palestinian discourse during the Mandate period, this discourse focuses more and more on the particularity of Palestine. In other words, despite the fact that Palestinian particularity was rooted in historical conditions preceding intensive Jewish settlement activity, it crystallized as a consciousness only after the Palestinian encounter with Jewish settlements.

The peasant rejection of settlement and the political expression of this rejection through urban institutions constitute, then, the practical starting point from which the Palestinians viewed themselves as an independent people. The emergence of the Zionist project into the light, and the British support it won through the Balfour Declaration, accelerated the development of a distinct political Palestinian identity. This identity began to express itself through societies and organizations that characterized themselves as Arab, Syrian, Islamic or Christian, but whose aim was defending Palestine against the Zionist threat. Imagining of the Palestinian collectivity begins to take a practical turn with the convening of several Palestinian conferences in reaction to Zionist threats and with the unambiguous demands to rights of self-determination for Palestine. This imagining takes on a more formal course in the post-1922 period, following the official establishment of the mandate and with it the political borders of Palestine. It later develops into a collective imagining to which the majority of the population in mandate Palestine concurs, until 1948.

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<sup>13</sup> *Al-Karmel*, Haifa 6/12/1914. Quoted in Ali Mahaftha, 1989: 23-24.

The development of a Palestinian national consciousness did not produce its own nation state, as was the case with the Arab neighbors of Palestine, but went through a period of disruption and discontinuity as a result of the events of 1948, which Palestinians, and other Arabs, refer to as the *Nakba*, i.e., the catastrophe. No doubt a tragic event on different levels — familial, personal and national — the catastrophe resulted in, first, the dismantling of the social structure for a significant part of the population in Palestine, who became refugees; and, second, the disappearance of urban centers from the lives of those Palestinians remaining in Palestine, who were transformed from city dwellers into groups living on the cities' margins. These two consequences mark a turning point in the nature of Palestinian discourse and its continuity. The first significantly aided the emergence of the Palestinians as a distinct group united by their shared experience of displacement. The latter put an end to the development of a Palestinian collective imagination, which was previously formulated in the cities.

The two issues are closely related, but the first is especially important because it encouraged the emergence of a new kind of Palestinian identity. The disappearance of local identifications as a result of uprooting accelerated the confirmation of a Palestinian particularity that can be termed national. After all, as Homi K. Bhabha correctly noted, the “nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin” (1994: 139). The exodus and the forced expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948 and the eventual erection of refugee camps all over the Middle East, presented the perfect context for the transformation of the old Palestinian local and communal belongings into a nationalist one. The construction of such a new form of a living *locality* that is far more complex than the *old community* and far more symbolic than *society*, to a great extent, altered “the meaning of home and belonging.” (Ibid.: 140)

The uprooting of the Palestinians, in this sense, affirmed for them a kind of particularity and created a condition ripe for the creation of a new kind of national imagining. Therefore, seen within the framework of Palestinian national discourse, the *nakba* (catastrophe of 1948) represented more a rhetorical shift than a beginning or an ending of an era. The identity that had seemed so clear before 1948, which had been finessed and expressed by the intellectuals of the city elite, was terminated with the end of the cities. The destruction of more than 400 Palestinian population centers led to the loss of the old local trait and its replacement with a new kind of belonging, i.e., to the refugee experience as distinctly Palestinian. It is important to notice that this experience and the rhetorical shift that accompanied it did not affect all Palestinian Arabs in the same way at the time. While it retained the Palestinian as “an Other,” it did so in relation to new groups—the neighboring Arab countries. The exclusion of refugees from all other identities forming around them deepened this feeling of “otherness.”

Residents of east Palestine, except for the refugees among them, did not experience this exclusion in the same way. Significantly, Palestinian identity was “at its weakest in Jordan and the West Bank, its emergence delayed until Israeli rule replaced Jordanian rule.” (al-Budeiri, 1995: 18) This new identity took longer to take root in the West Bank mainly due to the active and repressive Jordanian policy to Jordanize East Palestine and its people. Hence, the complete adoption of the Palestinian identity in this part of Palestine in the period that followed the war of 1967, was the result of a combination of circumstances that included both Palestinian political activity coming from abroad, as well as the repressive policies of the Israeli occupation since 1967, which distanced the West Bank, socially and economically, from Jordan. In other words, Palestinian self-awareness in the West Bank appeared later in comparison with Palestinian self-awareness in the Diaspora and it was the product of special events and developments that did not affect the inhabitants of the refugee camps outside the West Bank. Mussa al-Budeiri (1998: 39) best reflected this when he wrote:

Growing up in “Jordanian” Jerusalem in the 1950s, what strikes me most today is the total absence of Palestine and Palestinian things in my worldview, both as a child and as an adolescent. True, on my daily trip to school I walked in the shadow of the wall built by the Jordanian army presumably to protect people from Israeli sniper fire . . . east Jerusalem and the West Bank, as the name implied, were no longer Palestine but Jordan; “Palestine” was over there, beyond the flimsy wall that started at Damascus Gate and stretched all the way to Shaykh Jarrah.

Although it is not possible to be certain of how representative al-Budeiri’s description is of the feelings of the population of east Jerusalem at the time, the fact remains that it is a position that reflects at least the sentiment that existed among segments of the West Bank residents. It is no secret that the residents of the “West Bank” (both urbanites and villagers) were quite aware of the distinction between themselves, “the residents”, and those who arrived during and after the war in 1948, “the refugees.” The notion of a Palestinian collective identity, which emerged among the refugees then and dominated modern Palestinian national discourse, was essentially based on the refugee camp experience. The emergence of a legal framework for determining who is legally a Palestinian and who is not — connected to the Oslo Peace Agreement — hence, centered around those who currently live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, will only make future studies of Palestinian identity more confusing because it excludes those Palestinians who do not reside in these areas. West Bank-Gaza centralism, in this sense, can only be described as a colonization of historical Palestinian discourse. The reductive

transformation of the Palestinians into a single, local group deprives those who lived the Palestinian experience of their Palestinianism, once again casting them as “refugees.” In a sense, those who lived the catastrophe are now facing a new catastrophe: the disappearance of their Palestinian identity, an identity which evolved from their personal diaspora experience in the years following the creation of the State of Israel.

This essay began by explaining the challenges that faced the articulation of the Palestinian identity. It then moved on to examine the difficulties that face historians in their attempts to study the historical emergence of this particular identity. In this context, it is important to stress the point that this article is not about whether Palestinians possess a legitimate identity or not. It is my conviction that the Palestinians constitute a national group with political and national rights that ought not be ignored, no matter how they read their history. The issue of how legitimate a nation is may be relevant for international law, but from the perspective of history it is meaningless and futile.

The main point in this article, however, is that nations, in the words of Homi Bhabha (1995: 1), “lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye.” In other words, the question is not whether historians—of Palestinian identity in this case—can actually come to agree on the origins of their nation, inasmuch as what kind of nation they envision they have. It is precisely in regard to this last point that the type of narration of the nation’s history is what matters most. For not only does it present a certain vision of the past, but in many ways it forms the foundations on which the nation views its present and its future. Realizing how elusive, ambivalent and plain national identities are, is essential in understanding that they are — and always will be — subject to change. What makes it hard in the Palestinian case is that due to dispersion, the change is now affecting different parts of the community differently. The mere creation of an authoritative national history of the nation will, in such a case, no doubt result in the marginalization of certain Palestinian segments.

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