

## ***Secularism in Palestinian Political Culture: A Tentative Discourse***

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper examines the historical influence of secularist ideologies on Palestinian political culture in general and on national identity in particular. In general, the articulation of Palestinian identity, especially following the 1948 Nakba has been dominated by secular visions and discourses. The foundation of that identity was the dispossession and dispersal experienced by Palestinians due to the establishment of Israel and later wars and hostilities. This branded the Palestinian national movement with a strong secular disposition, as a conscious strategy in its confrontation with Zionism. The secular political culture reflects a religious pluralism prevalent in Palestinian society for centuries, as well as a tradition of political pluralism, including left-wing political parties. The real challenge to secularism began to appear in the 1980s, at a time when the PLO was considerably weakened. This challenge has intensified in recent years, drawing on the disillusion with peace-making efforts, the on-going Israeli occupation, the rise of international political Islam and the subsequent rise of local religious mobilization.*

The term “secularism” indicates a clear separation of political institutions from the religious within the territorial state or a political entity. In a national political field, it implies that organizations, identities and ideologies have distinct paradigms, dynamics and determinants that differ from those pertaining to the religious field. The thesis that I propose in this paper can be summarized as follows; the dynamics of Palestinian identity formation, the role of the main political groups, and the nationalist visions that have dominated the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) were predominantly secular. This does not contradict the fact that most Palestinians have been and still are religious in the popular

meaning of religiosity<sup>1</sup>. The factors influencing the construction of the Palestinian Authority (PA) on national territory (though still without recognized borders) and the internal and external challenges and pressures it has been facing, are generating salient tensions between its secular heritage and current internal imperatives.

The national political field that was constructed by the PLO featured essentially secular ideologies (Arab nationalism, socialism and those of national liberation). The articulation of Palestinian identity and Palestinian rights after the Nakba in 1948 was dominated by a "secular" vision and discourse. Its main dynamic was the dispossession and dispersal experienced by Palestinians as a result of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The socio-economic and political processes that had impact on the Palestinian communities in their various settings informed this articulation. This branded/marked Palestinian nationalism with a strong secular disposition, which was not restricted to left-wing political groups, nor was it informed significantly by the special relation established between the PLO and the Soviet Union and non-aligned countries. Such factors were pertinent but not decisive. The secularism of Palestinian political culture evolved as a conscious strategy in the confrontation of the Palestinian national movement with Zionism and later Israel. Secular political culture has also reflected an acknowledgement of the religious pluralism that characterized Palestinian society for centuries long, and that was reflected in the early formation of the Palestinian national movement as it emerged in the first and second decades of the twentieth century. The real challenge to secularism in Palestinian political culture appeared in the 1980s. It arose at a time when the PLO was weakened by a convergence of events and changes that took place at the local, regional and international levels.

As an umbrella political institution, the PLO reconstructed and legitimated itself primarily through a secular, political discourse and secularly based institutions. At no stage did it resort to religious discourse or mythology to maintain its hegemony over the national political field. The establishment of the PA, given the conditions and circumstances of its establishment, initiated processes that left strong imprints on the Palestinian political field. As a self-governing body,

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1 Opinion polls on religious beliefs are not common in Arab countries. It is therefore not easy to gauge the spread of secular ideas, and their influence in the private sphere. A survey done by FAFO (Heiberg & Ovensen, 1993) questions some of widely held notions about religion. Some 20% of men come out, in the early 1990s, as 'secular', surprisingly the percentage is higher among women, reaching 30%. This is related to the survey's definition of secular (i.e. a secular person is someone whose life is not dictated by religion). Public opinion surveys indicate that popular religiosity is fairly widespread among Palestinians in the WBGS. See for example; Saeed & Hamammi, 1997.

the PA became the domain of the largest political faction of the PLO (Fateh) and of the/its opposition formed mainly by political Islam. Secularism was no longer taken for granted as it was in the heyday of the PLO, and increasingly moved on the defensive, as the Islamic movement ( Hamas and Islamic Jihad) became a movement with an organized popular base.

With the demise of the national institutions of the PLO (which were commanded by a discourse of liberation, self-determination and the safeguarding of the autonomy of the Palestinian political field), secularism in political culture began a descending trend. Simultaneous with this descending trend was a rise in the political manipulation of popular religiosity and “traditional” solidarities, and a strategy of “Islamization” of the public sphere.

### **Roots of secularism in Palestinian political culture**

Palestinian social historians tend to date the formation of a modern Palestinian national movement to the immediate years following the First World War. British colonialism and the increase in the Zionist colonization of Palestine in the period between the two World Wars sharpened the movement’s demand for independence and statehood. The increased awareness of the implications of the Zionist project and the creation of Arab territorial states (*duwal qutria*) in the region after the first World War, promoted the Palestinian national movement’s adoption of the aim to establish an independent, Palestinian, territorial state. Urbanization, the spread of literacy, the emergence of political parties, trade unions and other interregional associations, as well as the expansion of the press, were all processes participating in the vision of a Palestinian statehood built, more or less, on secular terms.

Religious attachment to Palestine of its Arab population goes back a long way in time. Both Christians and Moslems, and the small Jewish minority in Palestine shared the idea of the place as a unit and its special and holy nature well before the rise of the Palestinian national movement. However, prior to the first decade of the last century, Palestine was conceived by the Palestinians as a religious unit, but not as political one. Other factors helped in shaping of the people of Palestine’s conception of their country as a territorial unit. These include the Ottoman administrative practice which, since 1874, included a large part of Palestine within the boundaries of the *sanjaq* (province) of Jerusalem held under the direct authority of Istanbul. Fear of European imperialism was another factor, in addition to the strong local attachments to place.<sup>2</sup> Local loyalties were increasingly complemented by the awareness of larger localities with the spread of modern means of transport, urbanization and education. With the rise of political

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2 On the formation of a modern Palestinian national identity during the mandate period, see Khalidi, 1997.

Zionism, the Arab Revolt and the imposition of the British colonial rule, the attachment of Palestinians to the land of Palestine began to acquire a modern nationalist articulation. The confrontation with Zionist colonization and British colonialism generated a secular, or nationalist, dimension to Palestinian identity in the form of a *national* individuality transcending that of religion, sect and locality. The new identity “imagined” Palestine as forming a national community and not simply an administrative unit or a holy space.<sup>3</sup> The highly secular discourse of Turkish nationalism “accelerated a decline in the saliency of religious identification in the Empire before and during the War” (Khalidi, 1997: 157). The diminution of the importance and relevance of Ottomanism and official religion by the end of World War I allowed nationalism to implant itself with relative ease. Palestinian nationalism that was emerging among Palestinians retained a strong commitment to Arabism. However, developments following the imposition of British rule over Palestine and the rising tide of Jewish immigration led Palestinians to become increasingly preoccupied with events taking place in Palestine.

The incipient organizational structure of Palestinian nationalism lies in Moslem-Christian associations established in the late 1910s and early 1920s in the various cities and towns of Palestine.<sup>4</sup> These associations were originally called “Arab Associations”, and it seems that that they were called “Moslem-Christian associations” under British pressure seeking to deflect from their nationalist character (Porath, 1974 cited by Shbib, 1998: 79); in one case, at least, (in Nablus) the association changed its name to the Patriotic Arab Association. In any case, they were established in response to the British occupation and the boost it was giving to the Zionist project. They were formed with the intention of unifying Palestinians against what was viewed as an attempt by the British and the Zionists to divide them on religious and other grounds (Khalidi, 1997: 169).

The Palestinians’ response to British occupation and to Zionist colonization of Palestine was not confined to the formation of Moslem-Christian associations. Establishing a national identity adopted other forms, such as turning the Nabi Musa annual popular religious meeting into a nationwide annual Palestinian

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3 The use of the term “Palestinian nation” (*umma philistinia*) appeared in the local press in Palestine as early as 1914 (Khalidi, 1997: 155).

4 The first Moslem-Christian association was established in Jaffa, in March 1918, and was followed some months later by another (the largest and best organized) in Jerusalem. By 1921, these associations were established in all the main towns of Palestine (Tsimhoni, in Ben-Dor (ed.), 1976: 73). With the sacking of Faisal from Syria at the hands of the French in 1920, it became clear to Palestinian political activists that the idea of a Palestine within a Syrian Arab state was dead (Kimmerling & Migdal, 1993: 78-80).

festival (Kimmerling & Migdal, 1993: 77). Still, more important was the holding of regular national congresses during the period 1919-1928. Some seven congresses were held during this period and all were consciously organized on non-sectarian terms. Representatives at Moslem-Christian associations attended the first three congresses.<sup>5</sup> Attendance of the other congresses grew to include personalities from various bodies other than the Moslem-Christian associations. After 1928, the Palestinian political field witnessed the consolidation of political parties. By 1936, seven such parties existed (Hourani, 1980: 9-13). Representatives of political parties, in addition to other committees and associations, attended the congress held during the general strike of 1936. The congress elected the Higher Arab Committee (with Haj Amin al-Husseini heading the committee), which led the Palestinian national movement up until the *Nakba*, in 1948.

The Palestinian national movement was clearly interested in emphasizing its non-sectarian nature i.e. in defining Palestinian identity in national terms.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when in autumn of 1921 a Palestinian Moslem-Christian delegation went to London to relate their cause before British authorities, it took care to include in its demands not only the nullification of the Balfour Declaration, halting Jewish immigration and ending any transfer of Arab or state land to Jewish control, but also the creation of a "national government" with a parliament to be democratically elected by the country's Muslims, Christians and Jews (Kimmerling & Migdal, 1993: 82). Although it is perfectly true that the elite of the Palestinian national movement cultivated what can be termed a Palestinian "civil religion", one should not over-exaggerate its secular character. Palestinians did construct, between the two world wars, a distinct national identity with a strong, secular bias, and the significance of local or religious identities was significantly undermined by the changes and challenges facing Palestinian society during this period. On the other hand, non-national identities – including those of clan, region and religion – were subject to the forces and articulations that produced them. Among these forces were British rule itself and the rivalry between the various Palestinian towns of notable families.<sup>7</sup> Here one must include additional

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5 The Third congress, held in Haifa (December 1920), outlined the political platform of the Palestinian national movement that underwent very little change during the next two decades. The platform affirmed, among other things, that unity among Palestinians should supersede any other loyalties, such as those of religion, region, or kinship (Kimmerling & Migdal, 1993: 81).

6 This was how one article in one Palestinian paper described the establishment of a Moslem-Christian Society in Gaza in 1920 (Khalidi, 1997: 169).

7 The British authorities played on the divisions between the leading Palestinian families to ease the course of their rule. Greek Orthodox Christians (the largest Christian community in Palestine) who fought to Arabize the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, sought support of this from



tensions existing at the time, such as those between villages and towns, landlord and peasant, coastal towns and inner towns.

Two trends marked Palestinian political culture before the *Nakba*, one a nationalist trend that increasingly placed Arab Palestine at the core of its concerns, and the second, a somewhat marginal trend that was more clearly secular, with a socialist perspective. The latter was represented by the communist party, which was established in the early twenties by Jewish immigrants, but later was Arabized in terms of membership and by a fusion with Palestinian nationalism. The first trend, which continued to be dominant, presented a nationalist perspective that clearly shunned sectarianism. Thus, all of the Palestinian political parties that emerged during this period had Palestinian Christian representatives in their leadership. Christians comprised 20% of the leadership of the Moslem-Christian Associations that were mentioned earlier, and they comprised 23% of the leadership of the Defense Party (*hizb al-difa'* led by the Nashashibi family); 31% of the Arab Palestinian Party (*al-hizb al-arabi al-filistini* led by al-Husseini family); 25% of the leadership of the National Bloc party (*hizb al-kutla al-watania*); 43% of the leadership of the Reform Party (*hizb al-islah*); and 9% of the Independence Party (*hizb al-istiqlal*) (Bayan Nuwayhid al Hoot, 1986). Two of the 10 members of the Higher Arab Committee formed in 1936 following the call for the general strike of that year, were Christian Palestinians. Christians comprised some 11% of the Arab population of Palestine in the 1940s.

No distinct Islamic party made a decided appearance in the Palestinian political field until 1946 when the Moslem Brotherhood became active. However, this does not mean that Islam as a popular religion was not utilized for political mobilization. This was best exemplified by the al-Qassam movement (led by Sheikh Iz al-Deen al-Qassam who was killed by the British, in 1935), which relied on underground guerrilla groups and considered British colonialism the main enemy. The title of Mufti (a religious post which bore specific privileges and was filled by appointment by Ottoman rulers, and later by the British and then the Jordanians) was used as a form of an "asset" in the juggle for positions

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the Muslim leadership. It is probably true to say that Palestinian Christians, as a religious minority, had a strong interest in consolidating nationalism as a secular ideology and a dominant dimension of identity. For them, such an identity provided both security and integration. It is worth mentioning that the two leading newspapers at the time, *al-Karmil* and *Filastin*, were founded and run by Christians and most of their material was written by Christians. The newspaper *Sawt al-Sha'b* was run by Isa al-Bandak, a prominent Greek Orthodox Bethlehemite. The two papers adopted a strong nationalist and anti-Zionist stance. Christian historians and educators such as George Antonius and Khalil al-Sakakini remained in the vanguard of the Palestinian national movement.

of influence among the Jerusalemite families. Islam was clearly acknowledged to be a constituent of Arabism, but not a substitute (Al-Sharif, 1996: 27-29).

It should be indicated that having a university education and belonging to a family with status was almost a precondition for recruitment to an elite position during this period of Palestinian history (for the PLO faction, a university education was an asset, but belonging to one of the known Palestinian families was certainly not a condition). The conspicuous presence of Palestinian Christians in the Palestinian national movement carried a clear message that signaled the movement's "secular" national project in contrast to the Zionist project that elevated the Jewish nature of the sought-after state.<sup>8</sup> This dimension remained a feature of the Palestinian national movement when it reemerged in the sixties, in the form of the PLO, and in which Christians held leading positions in two of its main political factions after Fateh (i.e. PFLP and DFLP).

One of the central, dominant political concepts/beliefs among Palestinians after 1948 and up to the establishment of the PLO, was that of "return" which replaced that of "independence" from the pre-1948 period. In the years that followed the *Nakba*, there was little differentiation within Palestinian national discourse, between Zionism and Judaism, or between Jew and Israeli. This remained so until the 1967 war and the upsurge of the resistance movement and its capture of the PLO (Gresh, 1983: 30-31). The differentiation between Jews and Israelis and between Israelis and Zionists emerged as the PLO reconstructed the Palestinian political field. Palestinian communists distinguished between Judaism and Zionism very early on, but it was the PLO that made it explicit and a part of the national discourse. In January 1968, at a press release, Fateh revealed its position as follows: Palestinians "know that on the day the flag of Palestine is hoisted over the freed democratic, peaceful land, a new era will begin in which Palestinian Jews will again live in harmony side by side with the original owners of the land, the Arab Palestinians" (Gresh, 1983: p.31).

### **The PLO: "Institutionalization" of a secular political culture**

The defeat of the Palestinian national project in 1948 (conceptualized as *Nakba* or catastrophe), the victory of the Zionist project in establishing a Jewish state on 78% of the area of Palestine, and the shattering of Palestinian society into fragments, left a deep imprint on Palestinian political culture and its collective

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8 The main specializations of the pre-1948 elite university education were as follows: Law, Sharia Law, Medicine, Social Sciences, Engineering, Literature and History (See: Bayan Nuwayhid al Hoot, 1986: 671-73).

memory. The Palestinian political field - as generated by the Palestinian national movement - ceased to exist. Palestinian territory that was not taken over by Israel was either annexed or brought under the control of other territorial states. Refugee camps for dispersed/fleeing Palestinians were erected in or around the various Arab cities and towns of countries neighboring Palestine.

After 1948, each of the main Palestinian population concentrations had to cope with the repercussions of the *Nakba* in the state territorial political field they happened to be/live in. After the *Nakba*, two somewhat contradictory processes seemed to be active; a reconstruction of the Palestinian identity, and an enlistment in political movements and ideologies that are not territorially tied; i.e. pan-national, internationalist, or Islamist. Arabism nationalism, in its versions that were dominant/prevalent at the time, became the dominant/prevaling, galvanizing political force for most Palestinians. Affiliations with Communist or Islamic political parties, ideologies, and movements were of secondary importance. Arabism, in its Nasserist (including the Arab Nationalists' Movement which remained pro-Nasserist until its adoption of Marxism after the 1967 war) and Ba'thist versions, envisaged the creation of the unifying pan-Arab State and the liberation of Palestine. That is, it bore/held a commitment to return exiled Palestinians to their freed homeland and to protect them, for the time being, from the repression or restrictions of the territorial Arab states.

The secularism of the main currents of pan-Arab nationalism is evident in its emphasis on the cultural, non-sectarian and political definition of nationalism. Arab nationalist movements and parties distinguished their political discourse by their antagonism towards imperialism and Zionism (and Israel as a Zionist entity). In the fifties and sixties (up until the 1967 war), their attacks included what was termed "Arab reactionaries" - mostly states that stressed the Islamic nature of the state and whose rulers claimed to be descendants of the Prophet. In the fifties and sixties, both strands of Arab nationalism (Nasserism and Ba'thism) emphasized Arabism as the basis of solidarity, not religion and, in fact, Nasser had to enter into direct conflict with the Moslem Brotherhood. Both types of regime established friendly relations with the Soviet Union and non-

aligned states, and used socialism as a/the key component in their political discourse<sup>9</sup>.

The weakening of Arab nationalist regimes after the 1967 war had, among Palestinians, reinforced the call to institutionalize Palestinian patriotic nationalism. It prompted the regrouping of Palestinian resistance factions to take over the PLO that had been created a few years earlier by the nationalist Arab states.

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9 In Jordan all political parties were banned in 1957, except for the Moslem Brotherhood. The ban remained effective until 1989.



These factions dominated the fourth PNC session that followed the 1967 war, a session that witnessed the amendment of the PLO Charter<sup>10</sup>. The key amendments of the Charter included a reformulation of the relationship between Arab and Palestinian nationalisms and the role of armed struggle. The new Charter stresses that the “Palestinian Arab people insists upon the originality and independence of its national revolution (*thaora wataniya*) and rejects every manner of interference, guardianship and subordination” (article 28). This is significant due to the fact that it was national rights that were singled out as the determining factor of Palestinian identity, unlike the religious and mythical factors that were emphasized in political Zionism.

The Charter remained ambiguous, however, in regard to the future of Jews in future Palestine. Article 6 depicts that “Jews who were permanently in Palestine up to the beginning of the Zionist invasion will be considered Palestinians” (Hourani, 1980: chapter 3). This ambiguity was retained because Fateh had not yet formulated a unified position on the question of a democratic state in Palestine. However the movement clarified its position on the issue a few months after the fourth Palestine National Council (PNC) meeting, which amended the Charter. The third Fateh Congress defined the future Palestinian State as “a democratic, progressive, non-sectarian state in which Jews, Christians and Muslims would live together in peace and enjoy the same rights” (Gresh, 1980: 32).

In 1970, Fateh published a text entitled ‘The Palestinian revolution and the Jews’. The publication refused a “rump state” in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and envisaged a democratic state on the whole of Palestine. This state, the text outlined, will be non-racist and non-sectarian unlike that of Lebanon or Cyprus. Thus, the proposed democratic state will accept all Israeli Jews who so desire (Gresh, 1983: 41-43). In a draft resolution submitted to the sixth PNC (September 1969), the DFLP (full name of group) put forth a proposal that envisages “the setting up of a popular democratic Palestinian state for Arabs and Jews alike in which there would be no discrimination and no room for class or national subjugation and in which the right of both Arabs and Jews to perpetuate and develop their indigenous culture would be respected” (Gresh, 1983: 40). The proposed resolution goes on to say that the Palestinian democratic state will be part of a federal Arab state.

The fifth PNC adopted the establishment of a democratic state in Palestine as a strategic aim without revealing its composition or the criteria for citizenship. It was Arafat, as the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO, who clarified this ambiguity some six years later. In his address to the United Nations’ General Assembly in November 1974, Arafat foresaw in the future democratic

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10 The national Charter that was reformulated in 1968 remained unchanged until it was re-amended, in 1998, as a requirement of the Oslo accords.

state of Palestine “all the Jews that live now in Palestine, and who are willing to live with us in peace, and without discrimination” (Hourani, 1980: 212).

The debate on the creation of a democratic Palestinian state gradually lost its significance as more attention was diverted to a two-state solution soon after the ten-point program was approved by the PNC in 1974. It was the 1973 Arab-Israeli War that turned the idea of a Palestinian state on the WBGs into a live issue<sup>11</sup>. The idea became more attractive with the affirmation - regional and international - of the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, which was interpreted as necessitating the establishment of Palestinian sovereignty over any freed Palestinian territory. It is here that we find the publicly acknowledged project of the two-state solution, a project that gradually gained ascendancy within the PLO, and with it came a decline of interest in the idea of a democratic state on the whole of Palestine.<sup>12</sup>

In short, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war prompted the newly formed Palestinian national movement to raise the notion of the creation of a Palestinian secular democratic state. The 1973 October war prompted the PLO (at the 12<sup>th</sup> session of the PNC held in Cairo, July 1974) to adopt a program calling for the establishment of a “fighting national authority on any Palestinian territory liberated from Israeli control” (for details see: Cobban, 1984). However, the character of the proposed “authority” remained undefined. It needed the first Intifada to give it a clearer definition.

It was the first Intifada, which came a few years after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the dispersal of the PLO forces over a large number of countries, the split within the ranks of the PLO, and the decline of its regional standing, that prompted the formulation a clear conception of a two-state settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Declaration of Independence that was adopted unanimously at the PNC held in November 1988 at the peak of the first Intifada, provided a clear secular conception of the future Palestinian territorial state. The Declaration affirms that:

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- 11 The eighth PNC (February 1971), after clashes in Jordan, asserted the idea of a democratic state. It stated that the “armed struggle of the Palestinian people is not a racial or a religious struggle directed against the Jews”. The PNC resolution stated that Palestine will be a state where all those who wish so “will be able to live in peace there with the same rights and the same duties, in the framework of the Arab nation’s aspirations to national liberation and total unity...” (Hourani, 1980: 176).
  - 12 The eighth PNC (February 1971) articulated a progressive role for the PLO not only on the political level but also on the social level. It envisaged it building a Palestinian society “that is dominated by the principles of democracy, justice, freedom and equality...and where feudal and backward relations are barred” (Hourani, 1980: 175).

"The State of Palestine is the state of Palestinians wherever they may be. The state is for them to enjoy in it their collective national and cultural identity, theirs to pursue in it a complete equality of rights. In it will be safeguarded their political and religious convictions and their human dignity by means of a parliamentary democratic system of governance, itself based on freedom of expression and freedom to form parties. The rights of minorities will duly be respected by the majority, and minorities must abide by decisions of the majority. Governance will be based on principles of social justice, equality, and non-discrimination in public rights of men and women, on ground of race, color, or sex under the aegis of a constitution which ensures the rule of law and an independent judiciary. Thus, all these principles allow no departure from Palestine's age-old spiritual and civilizational heritage of tolerance and religious coexistence".

It is ironic that at the time the PNC was celebrating its Declaration of Independence with a clearly secularist conception of a Palestinian state, the Palestinian political field was about to be invaded by an anti-secular political force. The main Islamic movements that emerged in the 1980s to challenge the PLO, were the Islamic Jihad<sup>13</sup> and Hamas<sup>14</sup>. Both have strong links with the Moslem Brotherhood movement. Both rejected the nationalist, secular discourse of the PLO, and sought an Islamic conception of the state based on the Islamic community (*umma*). A discussion of the reasons behind the rise of political Islam is beyond the scope of this paper. An explanation would have to be sought in the socio-economic processes that were brought about by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBGs). It also must take into consideration the changes that the PLO underwent in the seventies and eighties, and the rapid expansion of university educations in the WBGs at a time when employment opportunities for graduates were decreasing. Relevant here are the continued attempts to weaken the PLO by supporting Palestinian groups challenging its legitimacy and representativeness. All this occurred in a context of important changes in the region (including the Iranian revolution of 1979, the camp David

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13 The Islamic Jihad Movement emerged in the early 1980s from disparate origins, including the Moslem Brotherhood. The influence of the Khumayni revolution, the impact of Palestinian nationalism and the lower middle class origin of many of its members has been noted by researchers (see: Sayigh, 1997: 627).

14 Hamas (the acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement) is an offshoot of the Palestinian branch of the Moslem Brotherhood Society. The branch remained politically inactive, working through "Islamic societies" in the towns of the WBGs. Its main mission was the encouragement of observing Islam and widening its social base by religious schools, training centers and charitable associations. Hamas published its founding Charter in August 1988, after constituting an active force in the Intifada after February 1988.

accords between Egypt and Israel, the failure of attempts at Arab unity, the exit of the PLO from Lebanon, etc.) and internationally (particularly in the second half of the eighties).

The Islamist challenge first began to surface in WBGS in the 1980s through elections for university student bodies and professional associations. But it was during the first few months of the first Intifada that Hamas began issuing instructions independent of those of the Unified Leadership of the Intifada that was led by representatives of the main PLO factions. Although this setting itself apart from the other political factions did not take place in the second Intifada, Hamas was, nevertheless, able to broaden its support through two mechanisms; first, by using a certain interpretation of Jihad to mount a series of suicide-bombings inside Israel mostly against civilian targets and second, using its financial resources to alleviate the hardships that Israeli measures inflicted against the Palestinian civilian population. As the second Intifada entered its second year, public opinion polls revealed that Fateh and Hamas had gained almost equal support.

The impact of the Islamist movement on the political field became increasingly evident as it increased its support in the WBGS. Its growing influence began to become detectable/apparent in the PLO's official discourse. Statements with religious invocations and citations of Quranic verses began, increasingly, to appear in PLO statements, communiqués and speeches<sup>15</sup>. This practice was officially standardized following the establishment of the PA in 1994, as the challenge presented by political Islam heightened.

### **The contest for cultural hegemony**

In accordance with the standard meaning of secularism, one can say that since its inception in the sixties, the PLO has acted as a secular force. The term "secular" (*'ilmani*), as such, was not prevalent in Palestinian political discourse. This was, in part, to avoid antagonizing Arab states that supported the PLO (financially), and partly because until 1988, the PLO refrained from defining the internal and external boundaries of the future Palestinian state once the idea of a secular democratic state on the whole of Palestine was dropped. However, the PLO maintained a secular political culture in its self-conception and its mode of organization and programs.

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15 The first time such an invocation "in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful" was used in an official PLO Executive Committee statement was in March 1988 (Sayigh, 1997: 625).

Secularism in the political culture of the PLO political field was most evident/apparent in its discourse, as well as in the discourse of its factions<sup>16</sup>. The deliberations and resolutions of the various meetings of the PNC, the Palestinian Central Council and Executive Committee were conducted, argued and articulated in a secular discourse. This applied to the leadership meetings of the various political groups that constituted part of the PLO. The PLO presented itself to Palestinians, to the Arab world, to the non-aligned countries, to the United Nations and to the Socialist countries as a modern, national liberation movement committed to all that is associated with such movements.

The Palestinian leadership realized, soon after its forceful eviction from Jordan in 1970/71, the immense forces aligned against the Palestinian national struggle. This realization prompted it to be more aware of the need for international support and the need to acquire international legitimacy. This encouraged a secular discourse and outlook, particularly since, in the early seventies, the Soviet Union and the socialist countries and non-aligned states, became strong supporters of the PLO. The fact that the socialist countries became strong backers of the PLO and provided it with a variety of aid facilities, including numerous scholarships for Palestinian students, helped in consolidating a secular outlook.

The PLO's secularism was reflected in its proposal of a secular democratic state in Palestine in which Israeli Jews would enjoy full citizenship. It was also reflected in the distinction between Zionism as a political ideology and Judaism as a 'revealed religion'. This facilitated the opening of a dialogue between the PLO and the Israelis. The process began with the Israeli Communist Party (Rakah), but soon expanded to include additional Zionist political organizations and figures.

The influence of the Palestinian Left on the PLO was greater than its actual following, although in the 1970s and 1980s it had a sizeable, vocal following. Given the populist and pragmatic nationalist character of Fateh as the leading political movement within the PLO, it was not hostile, as such, to Marxist or to secular ideas, as more than one ideological stream existed within the movement. As I mentioned earlier, in the late sixties, Fateh took the initiative to advance the idea of a Palestinian, secular, democratic state in order to stress its break with Arab pan-nationalist and Islamic ideologies.

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16 No differences of opinion took place within PLO factions on religious grounds or pretexts. It is also worthwhile to point out that two of the main PLO factions (that came after Fateh, in terms of size and influence within the PLO) had, since the beginning, two leaders of Christian origin that led two left-wing, secular political organizations. Only in May 2000 did one of the two (George Habash) retire from that position, remaining a highly respected personality.



The above can include the distinct secular nature of influential Palestinian literature and art, whether in the form of poetry or novels and short stories, or in the form of paintings and films (See Al-Jayyusi (ed.)(1977): Volume 1 & 2). This secularist perspective also dominated the publications (magazines, pamphlets, newsletters, newspapers, books and posters...) of the PLO and its constituent political groups. In short, secularism was taken for granted as an integral element of the PLO's political culture, i.e. as part of the Palestinian, nationalist discourse. Religious belief and practices were relegated to the private sphere. The challenge to having secularism as an integral part of nationalism emerged from outside the ranks of the PLO. It appeared the moment the effectiveness and mobilizing ability of the PLO institutions and factions began to erode, and as the regional and international political milieu underwent stupendous changes. The Oslo accords reflected and affirmed this erosion. With the establishment of the PA, the question of secularism took on new dimensions and complexities.

### **Secular political culture on the defensive**

The establishment of the Palestinian Authority involved the restructuring of the national political field which now centered on the transformation of the PA from a self-governing authority on a limited area in the WBGS to a sovereign Palestinian state on the whole area of the WBGS (including East Jerusalem) without jeopardizing the rights of Palestinian refugees. The emerging political field possessed several salient features. These features, given the transitional nature of the PA, remain contestable and negotiable to the players in the political fields and they are subject to the influence of external forces.

The Islamic movement, Hamas in particular, entered the political field from outside of the PLO (both organizationally and in terms of political culture). As a political movement, very similar to the political factions of the PLO, since its inception in early 1988, Hamas underwent rapid changes. Its charter (published in August 1998), compared to the relatively modern and sophisticated discourse used by Salvation Islamic Front (*Hizb al-Khalas al-Islami*) - which is very much allied to Hamas - appears extremely naïve, simplistic, essentialist, conspiratorial and almost racist in its generalizations and stereotyping.<sup>17</sup> The charter viewed the liberation of Palestine as a religious duty and considered the land of Palestine as Moslem (an Islamic waqf). Apart from raising the banner of jihad, it called for "spreading Islamic awareness to local Arab and Moslem masses". Hamas' engagement in the nationalist struggle was a main factor in its rapidly gaining popular support and in legitimizing its role as a player in the national

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17 The charter calls for an Islamic state over the whole of Palestine without specifying its economic, social or political structure. It opposed the call for a secular, democratic state raised by the PLO in 1969 (see: Sayigh, 1997: 631).

political field. Thus, a few years later, when the PA was established, it was confronted with an Islamic movement that had already developed a modern, organizational structure (with a politburo, military and security apparatus, specialized institutions...). In contrast with the PA, Hamas soon developed a political discourse that incorporated a good part of modern civil society's terminology.

The earlier decision of the Moslem Brotherhood to engage in militant struggle against the Israeli occupation entailed new techniques of mobilization and modes of organization. It meant projecting the readiness of the leadership and cadres of Hamas to become exposed to imprisonment, exile, and other forms of repression. It also meant establishing a niche in the Palestinian political field. It did not take long before Hamas began to use, though selectively, a nationalistic discourse. Thus, Sheikh Ahmed Yasin, the spiritual leader of Hamas, could criticize the PLO for not embracing Islam as a perspective and a constitution, while simultaneously speaking of the future in terms of "a multi-party democratic state, in which power goes to whoever wins the general elections". In 1990, the official Hamas spokesman, Zahhar, spoke of the PLO as "representing us all", and his movement demanded to be allocated 40% of the PNC seats. What this meant was that Hamas was showing readiness, before the establishment of the PA, to abide by some of the rules laid down by PLO (including the "quota" representational system). At the same time, it was demanding the change of others (e.g. in the same statement, Zahhar expected the PLO to abrogate the political program it adopted in 1988 and which called for a two-state solution (Sayigh, 1997: 651). The mainstream leadership of the PLO reacted by stipulating that if Hamas wanted to be a player in the national political field, it had to play by the established rules. As a new comer to the field, Hamas was trying to change the rules in order to maximize its impact. As the dominant player in the field, Fateh was, understandably enough, anxious not to have its dominant position undermined by the new comer.<sup>18</sup>

Upon its establishment, the PA found itself politically challenged from both political Islam and from most of the PLO's secular factions. For a while, an oppositional political coalition was established under the name of the "ten member group" (including Hamas and Islamic Jihad and secular political organizations and factions) which operated out of Damascus. The coalition opposed the Oslo accords and vowed to eradicate them. Although the coalition proved to be ineffective and lost impetus by 1998, nevertheless, it did help in integrating the Islamic movement into the Palestinian political field. The hostile views of the Islamists on secularism and its restrictive posture towards women acquired organized presence in the political culture. For the Islamists, the state cannot be

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18 For a chronology of the relationship between Fateh and Hamas between 1989 and 1993, see Sayigh, 1997: 638-662.

neutral with respect to religion, and should institutionalize Islam in the various fields of life. They did show readiness to compromise in the political field guided by an interest to survive, but showed less readiness to compromise in the cultural field, where religion is given a central place and in which the politics of identity was significant.

As the ruling party in the PA prior to the second Intifada, Fateh steered a course that gave priority to state formation placing itself at the helm. However, its leadership paid little attention to the issues of the internal boundaries of the state (or the relations of state to society) it sought to build. This entailed preparedness on the part of Fateh to make concessions to the Islamists in the cultural field, as long as it did not obstruct its state-building project. Its consolidation of control over state institutions (legislative, executive, security and indirectly judicial), and its control over the quasi-state resources were at the top of its leadership's agenda.

The predisposition of Fateh to accept a compromise with political Islam in the cultural field is not the only factor that explains the relative ease with which the Islamists were so quickly able to make an imprint on Palestinian political culture and on certain aspects of popular modes of behavior. The Palestinian secular organizations' main agenda stressed, understandably, their role in the political field, a role which was marginalized in the 1990s by the PA. Some attempted to gain a niche in the political field by weaving an alliance with the Islamists in outright opposition to the PA, while others tried to do so by building an alliance with Fateh, or by acting as a "loyal" opposition. When alliance with the Islamists failed, a rapprochement with Fateh was sought under a slogan of the necessity of "national unity" and/or the need to "revive the PLO institutions". This left the socio-cultural field with its detailed concerns (education, work, health, mass media, legislation and the relationship of women to the public sphere) without genuine attendance of secular political groups, and subject to organized influence of the Islamic movement. The effect of this has been the establishment of a kind of cultural hegemony that can be gauged through the influence that radical Islam has gained in Palestinian universities. It can also be gauged in the dominance of the "Islamic" mode of dress, in the proposed curricula for government schools,<sup>19</sup> in the increasing use of Qur'anic verses in official statements and speeches, in the self-censorship of newspaper articles relating to issues that touch on religion<sup>20</sup>, and in the Palestinian official media.

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19 There is, for example, a predominance of formal religious discourse and a dominance of traditional texts and a neglect of modernity in school texts for the Arabic language.

20 Palestinian Newspaper columnists have complained of frequent censorship by editors of articles that touch on religion, for fear of provoking Islamists.

Other factors have helped in promoting the cause of political Islam. Perhaps the most prominent of these relates to the structural features of Palestinian society and economy as they exist in the WBGS, and the distortions, dependency and fragmentation that decades of Israeli occupation have created. Nor can one ignore the disappointment and frustration within the “peace process”, the perceived mismanagement in some of the institutions of the PA, the fragmentation and decline of the Palestinian Left, and the role played by some Gulf states (including provision of financial aid to radical Islam).

What all this amounts to is the existence of a Palestinian civil society that is divided on and/or ambiguous to the internal boundaries of the Palestinian state-to-be. This applies to political parties, social movements and non-governmental organizations, as well as associations of private capital.

Hamas’ leadership realized fairly soon that the movement had to adapt itself to the imperatives of the political field dominated by the PA, and this adaptation involved, given the balance of internal power, giving priority to the issue of cultural hegemony. This became absolutely clear following the military confrontation with the PA security forces and Fateh activists in Gaza in November 1994, and the repeated imprisonment of leaders and cadres of Hamas following armed attacks on Israeli targets. It became clear to Hamas that its survival as a movement required its becoming a political player not seeking to take over political power, rather to establish a hegemony in the field in which there is the least resistance, i.e. in the cultural arena. This meant negotiating a tacit understanding with the PA that required acknowledgement by Hamas of the PA as the legitimate authority with the sole monopoly over the use of arms in the territories under its control. In return, Hamas would be allocated sufficient space to work for the “Islamization” of Palestinian society. The PA itself began to be drawn towards an Islamic lexicon.

It is worth noting in this context that the Palestinian Legislative Council, which is dominated by Fateh, could not overlook stating, in the proposed Basic Law, that the Shari’a constitutes a major source of Palestinian legislation. As such, the Basic Law, which was enacted by the PLC but remained without rectification by the president of the PA, provides an attempt to synthesize a secular perspective,<sup>21</sup> with a perspective that acknowledges Islam as a major source of legislation,<sup>22</sup> thus reflecting the tacit understanding between Hamas and Fateh.

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21 The secular outlook of the proposed Basic Law is clear in many of its articles. For example, it states (article 2) that the people are the source of all authority that is to be exercised through the separation of powers (executive, legislative, judiciary). It stipulates that the system of government in Palestine is a “parliamentary democratic” system that depends on political and party pluralism (article 5). It states that the principle of the supremacy of law is the basis of rule (article 6). It states that all Palestinians, regardless of sex, color, race, relig-

As a player in the emerging political field, Hamas has undergone reconstruction in the 1990s. This is evident in the changes in its political discourse mixing religious language with that of civil society and human rights. It has also adopted some of the terminology of Palestinian nationalism, and has acted in unison with the other political groups since the eruption of the second Intifada. The systematic attempts by Israel to undermine the PA by the destruction of its physical infrastructure, demolition of its symbols of sovereignty (airport, port, broadcasting stations, local and central headquarters, ...) and by assassination of political and security cadres, have, no doubt, strengthened Hamas. Hamas also gained strength by being given space to operate against Israel in response to the siege and systematic military attacks waged against the PA by the Israeli government. The emerging result is a political field contested by a two-party system (Fateh and Hamas).

The Development Studies Program at Birzeit University recorded (among individuals aged 16 years and above) 33.3% support of Fateh just before the eruption of the second Intifada, and 17.6% support of radical Islamic groups (13.9% for Hamas and 3.7% for Islamic Jihad). In February 2002, support of Fateh dropped to 23.6% and rose to 24.8% for Islamic groups (20.9% for Hamas and 3.9% for Islamic Jihad). Support of secular, left-wing groups remained around 5%.<sup>23</sup>

Disillusionment with the Oslo process culminated in the outbreak of the second Intifada. And despite the leading role of Fateh in this Intifada, the party lost popular support as it was viewed, rightly, as the ruling party. The Oslo process has led, among other things, to the worsening of the economic situation for a large percentage of Palestinians. The gain of the Islamic groups during the second Intifada was due to two reasons; the violence and new modes of repression used by Israel gave some credibility to the Islamists' strategy of armed resistance, which was replaced by negotiation by the PLO and the PA. Secondly, the

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ion, political opinion, or disability, are equal by law (article 9). The proposed Basic Law states that human and basic rights are mandatory and demand respect (article 10). Article 18 guarantees freedom of belief and worship and the practice of religious rites as long as this does not disrupt public order and morals. Article 19 states that each individual has the right to express and publish his opinion. This Basic Law guarantees the independence of universities, higher education institutions, and research centers. It also guarantees the freedom of scientific research, and literary, cultural and artistic creation.

22 Article four of the Basic Law states that "Islam is the official religion of the state in Palestine". It also states "the principles of the Shari'a (Islamic law) are a major source of legislation".

23 The Development Studies Program at Birzeit University, poll No. 1 (31 August – 2 September 2000) & poll No. 6 (2 - 9 February 2002).



Intifada squeezed the resources available to the PA, which affected public services, and allowed the Islamic groups to get involved in the provision of assistance to a population facing difficult socio-economic circumstances.

The decline of secular political parties has its impact on mass organizations and trade unions. These movements played an active role - acting as organizational and political fronts for the PLO and its political factions - in organizing resistance to the Israeli occupation and as providers of basic services. The failure of the first Intifada to achieve its political ends had its impact on these mass organizations.<sup>24</sup> In comparison, older types of solidarities (based on kinship and local ties) witnessed a re-emergence (albeit with new articulations) along side the process of the quasi-state formation of the PA. Such revivals are a reflection of the decline of secular political parties, which sustained and supported these organizations, as well as the decline that befell national political institutions (i.e., the leading institutions of the PLO). It is also due to the Palestinian state-formation process that has been suffocated and subjected to enormous restraining pressures that exploded in the second Intifada. Whether a Palestinian state-building process will resume shortly, and under what conditions, and whether secularism will be a feature of this process, or not, will depend on the outcome of the second Intifada; that is, on the new internal and external balance of forces such an outcome will reflect.

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24 The only exception is university student associations, which retained their strong connection with political parties. However, these associations remained separate associations within each of the eight Palestinian universities in West Bank and Gaza Strip. No active umbrella association for university students exists, except in name.

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