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Conference Paper

The Transformation of Palestine

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I will trace the main political development in Palestine since the beginning of what came to be known as the "Palestinian Question" at the beginning of the 20th century.[1] Implicit in this overview of the history of the Palestinian Question is the assumption that along its progression the conflict fundamentally altered meanings, images, and identities of the parties involved.[2] Framing the conflict as the Israeli//Palestinian conflict is in itself the outcome of a profound transformation in both camps.[3] Indeed, the conflict was dubbed the Arab-Zionist, Arab-Israeli, and Palestinian-Israeli respectively. This has been a reflection of, and contributed to, the awakening, sharpening, and crystallization of the independent national consciousness among the Palestinian people, and to framing the current internal dynamics of Israeli politics.[4]

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict was born at the end of last century as a result of "incompatible national aspirations" between the indigenous population of Palestine (the Palestinians) and the Zionist movement over the land of Palestine.[5] Zionism started in Europe as a reaction to mounting anti-semitism there, and aspired to build a Jewish state in Palestine by encouraging European Jews to migrate to Palestine and settle there in a classical settler-colonial project. Ample evidence shows the high level of coordination between Zionism and European colonialism, but of notable importance is the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which proclaimed a British commitment to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.[6] Such a pledge did not take into account the aspirations of the Palestinian people for independence and self-determination whether in a federated Arab kingdom or a separate republic.[7] In fact Arabs were not even consulted in the deliberations that led to such a declaration.[8] Palestinians who regard themselves as the "rightful indigenous inheritors of all the Arab communities that have settled in Palestine since time immemorial" rejected this

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[1] Ahmad Shukairy, Liberation - Not Negotiation, (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1966) introduction.

[2] Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983) p.73

[3] Ahmed Al-Deik, Mujtama' al-Intifadah, [Arabic: The Intifadah Society] (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1993) p.52-56

[4] John Edwin Mroz, Beyond Security: Private perceptions among Arabs and Israelis, (New York: The International Peace Academy, 1980) pp. 88-98

[5] Avi Shlaim, " Prelude To The Accord: Likud, Labour, and the Palestinians," *Journal of Palestine Studies*. Vol. 23 no. 2 (Spring 1994) p. 5

[6] Benny Morris, Righteous Victims: A history of the Zionist-Arab Conflict 1881-1999, (New York: Alfred Kopf, 1999) p.74 see also Mark Tessler, A History of The Israeli Palestinian Conflict, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) pp. 273-334

[7] Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, "Palestinians: The Making of a People, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) p.79

[8] Ann Mosely Lesch, "The Palestinian Arab Nationalist Movement Under the Mandate," in William Quandt *et. al.* The Politics of Palestinian Nationalism, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) p. 16

declaration and went on with their resistance against both the Jewish emigration and the British authorities.[9]

Indeed, the Palestinian people were engaged in irregular decolonization efforts against the British Mandate authority, which peaked during the Great Revolt of 1936-39. The leadership then -- composed of an *ad hoc* coalition of religious, traditional, and nationalist "Notables"-- failed to translate the concerns and the demands of the Palestinians and the partial success of the Revolt into clear political gains resulting in the independence of Palestine.[10] More importantly, they were quite unprepared for the imminent battle over the future of Palestine with the Zionist movement, which had enormous international backing, and the Jewish community in Palestine (the Yishuv).[11] The ruling elite of the Arab countries have adopted a hard line position on behalf of the Palestinians on the question of Palestine, rejecting all attempts to compromise, including the UN partition plan. The disastrous outcome of having such a leadership, with uninformed, misguided, ulterior, or simply unrealistic policy choices was soon to be witnessed by Palestinians in the momentous events of 1948 (the Nakba).[12]

The Zionist movement, on the other hand, had an entirely different narrative. Theodore Herzl provided the ideological platform of political Zionism in his book *The Jewish State,* although he did not start the movement as such.[13] Modern political Zionism started in Europe with a secular national platform with extensive religious motifs, and focused on the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.[14] Zionism claimed that the Jewish "attachment to this land is nurtured by biblical and historical evidence, and being convinced that their claim to the land of Israel" is legitimate and rightful, worked with the colonial powers to facilitate Jewish migration to Palestine.[15] There is little doubt that the Zionist project was a great success, it resulted in the creation of a Jewish state, in Palestine, and generated enough political and economic support for Israel to guarantee its perpetuity in a hostile environment. The dilemma that Zionism and the state of Israel failed to anticipate and then pre-empt was the creation of a new problem: a prolonged state of conflict. The nature and scope of the conflict has changed dramatically since then, but these underlying claims and ideas still govern the perceptions of the two parties, even during the negotiation rounds. Although many intellectual and political voices are now calling for a "binational state" for Jews and Arabs, or as Azmi Bishara, puts it: A state of its citizens, where all can live in freedom and equality.

The 1948 war ended in a decisive military and political victory for Israel and brought dire physical, social, political, and economic consequences to the existing Palestinian community in Palestine: five major cities were destroyed; the Palestinian neighborhoods in four other cities and more than 400 villages and towns were completely erased, and all their inhabitants were expelled to "temporary" refugee camps.[16] The cultural, economic, political and intellectual centers of the Palestinian society were thus destroyed.[17] This fatal blow to the Palestinians as a people, and to the aspirations they had

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[9] Sari Nusseibeh, and Mark Heller, No Trumpets, No Drums: Two-State Settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, (London : I. B. Tauris, 1991) p.32

[10] Kathleen Christison, Perceptions of Palestine: Their influence on U.S. Middle East policy, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) p.42-44

[11] Mark Tessler, A History of The Israeli Palestinian Conflict, pp.232-242 Benny Morris Righteous Victims, pp. 186-188

[12] William Cleveland, A Modern History of the Middle East, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994) pp. 254-263

[13] Ibid. p. 236

[14] Ibid. pp.236-237

[15] Nusseibeh, and Heller, No Trumpets, No Drums, p.4

[16] Sami Hidawi, The Bitter Harvest: A Modern History of Palestine, (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1991.) pp.84-86

[17] Rashid Khalidi, Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997) pp.204-207

of independence and statehood, shaped the future of the conflict forever.[18] The Nakba destroyed the socio-political fabric of the Palestinian society and changed the structure and geography of the Palestinian homeland beyond recognition. Moreover, more than 800,000 Palestinians citizens were forced out of their land in a mass exodus and became refugees in the neighboring Arab states.[19]

After 1948 the majority of the Palestinian population in the West Bank reluctantly acquiesced to the annexation of the territory to Jordan in 1951, believing that it was protection against Israeli occupation or exile.[20] During the following two decades, little in the way of asserting the Palestinian-ness of the West Bank was done, and it became commonly referred to as the West Bank of Jordan (meaning the Hashimite Kingdom and not just the river). The Gaza Strip was put under Egyptian military rule, strict limitations were put on guerrilla attacks against Israel, despite rhetorical commitment in varying degrees, on the part of the respective Arab regimes to the liberation of Palestine.[21] The seeds of resistance were abundant in refugee camps, both inside Palestine and in exile, and where a shared identity and fate could not have been mistaken. The resistance movement in the refugee camps was the foundation of the modern Palestinian national movement.[22]

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[18] Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, Palestinians: The Making of a People, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) pp. 126-156
[19] Benny Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, pp. 132-196. See also Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, Palestinians: The Making of a People," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) pp. 126-156
[20] Emile Sahliyeh, In Search Of Leadership: West Bank Politics Since 1967, (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1988) pp. 10-13
[21] Sami Hidawi, The Bitter Harvest: A Modern History of Palestine, (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1991.) pp.111-117
[22] Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, Palestinians: The Making of a People, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) pp. 209-218 and 226-239