



Egypt's Unique Role in the Reawakening and Reorganization of the Palestinian National Movement: 1948-1967

David Aaron Wallsh

The years between 1948 and 1967 witnessed the extraordinary revival of the Palestinian national movement. Following Israel's 1948 defeat of invading Arab armies—what Palestinians term *al-nakbah* (the catastrophe)—Palestinian society was rendered geographically divided, socially fragmented, leaderless, and bereft of any viable national institutions. Yet, less than two decades later Palestinians could boast of increasing Arab and international recognition of their plight, an armed resistance movement, and the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The political consolidation that took place during this period is best divided into two separate stages. First, contrary to the opinions of some scholars, the decade after the *nakbah* (up to 1959) constituted the national movement's "formative years," a time during which a small cadre of Palestinian activists launched a fury of political, social and military processes meant to reawaken the shattered national spirit.¹ Second, the period from 1959 to 1967 can be seen as the time when the idea for a representative and distinct Palestinian national institution took shape and materialized.

David Aaron Wallsh, Fletcher MALD 2011, is a first-year student concentrating in International Security and International Political Economy, with a geographic focus on the Middle East. Prior to Fletcher, he received an MA in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The year 1959 marks the transition between these two stages and, as such, holds particular significance. At an Arab League Council (ALC) session in March, Egypt initiated what would be a five year campaign for the creation of a 'Palestinian Entity.' Fateh was established in October and began distributing its monthly publication, *Filastinuna*, in November. Also in November, a group of Palestinian students from universities across the Arab world came together to form an unprecedented, cross-border national union, the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS).²

The profound transformation of Palestinian society and the achievements of its national movement beg the question of how such a weak and divided society consolidated. Yezid Sayigh notes that the collective experience of exile, dispersion and shared longing to return to a specific territory made patriotism a natural feeling among Palestinians.³ But early Palestinian patriotism emphasized a range of sometimes conflicting identities, including religion, kinship, or Arab ethnicity.⁴ The

The profound transformation of Palestinian society and the achievements of its national movement beg the question of how such a weak and divided society consolidated.

development of a distinctly Palestinian nationalism, Sayigh argues, was not inevitable.⁵ A study of the activities of both Palestinians and the Arab states in which they found themselves after 1948 reveals that the reemergence of Palestinian nationalism was largely a result of Egypt's commitment to the Palestinian cause. In the critical years after the *nakbah*, Egypt played a unique and indispensable role in reawakening and reorganizing the Palestinian national movement through its campaign to champion the cause of Arab nationalism and its concomitant support of popular organizations, military activity, and the relentless pursuit of a Palestinian entity.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL BACKGROUND

Why is it that Egypt not only supported the Palestinian cause, but contributed more than any other Arab state? Indeed, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iraq each absorbed thousands of Palestinian refugees after the 1948 war and equally shared in the humiliating defeat to Israel in that war. A brief overview of the local (Egypt and Gaza) and regional background will shed light on this question by examining Egypt's administration of the Gaza Strip and its rising stature in the inter-Arab arena, respectively.

Local Background

After the 1948 war and the conclusion of its armistice agreement with Israel in February 1949, Egypt found itself in control of a coastal strip of land stretching from the Rafah border crossing in the south to an area just north of Gaza City. The area, which was officially named the 'Gaza Strip' in 1955, was home to approximately 200,000 refugees and 88,000 original residents.⁶ While in the middle of the war the whole of Palestine was placed under the temporary civil administration of the newly-created All-Palestine Government (APG), soon after the armistice agreement Egypt established its military administration in Gaza. A governor-general was selected from the Egyptian military to head the administration and was vested with full authority over local affairs. As was the case in Syria and Lebanon, Palestinians in Egypt were left politically disenfranchised.⁷

While Egypt's later contributions to Palestinian nationalism were unparalleled, it must also be noted that Cairo made daily life and political organizing quite difficult for Palestinians in the first few years after the war. Gaza has suffered from overcrowding and severe unemployment since 1948. Despite sharing Gaza's only open land border, Egypt refused to allow large numbers of refugees into Egypt to obtain residence or work.⁸ International travel (including travel from Gaza to Egypt) was cumbersome for both Gazans and Palestinians in Egypt; travel and identity documents were issued by the then Cairo-based APG and grew increasingly worthless as Arab recognition of the APG declined.⁹ Moreover, in an effort to avoid further confrontation with Israel and to restore unity with Jordan's King Abdullah, who had annexationist ambitions in the West Bank, the Egyptian monarchy actively sought to dismantle what remained of Palestinian national institutions after the war. Mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the nationalist leader and driving force behind the APG, was "summoned" to Cairo as early as February 1949 where he was placed under strict surveillance. Soon after, APG headquarters was also moved from Gaza to Cairo for closer monitoring and its responsibilities were diminished.¹⁰ Also in 1949, Egyptian military authorities in Gaza moved quickly to disarm bands of Palestinian fighters, repatriate hundreds of Egyptian volunteers associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and dismantle a local radio station.¹¹

Despite these activities, the most distinctive feature of Egypt's administration in Gaza was its temporary nature. While Israel excluded Palestinians from its political system and Jordan forcibly included them in its polity, Egypt never attempted to annex the Gaza Strip. It certainly governed according to the interests of Cairo, but Gaza nonetheless remained the only place after the *nakbah* where Palestinians could preserve their identity on their land. As a result, Gazans never called for the expulsion of the

Egypt played a unique and indispensable role in reawakening and reorganizing the Palestinian national movement.

Egyptian administration or organized opposition against it, even though they often blamed Egypt for their economic and other woes.¹²

Regional Background

In addition to Egypt's position vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip, its support of Palestinian nationalism must further be viewed in the context of inter-Arab and international politics. Perhaps more than any specific action or policy, the rise in popularity of Arab nationalism and its premier advocate, Egyptian leader Gamal Abd al-Nasir, in the 1950s and 1960s empowered Palestinians everywhere. Nasir's anti-imperialist, Pan-Arab rhetoric and actions elevated him to *de facto* leadership of the Arab world; and the fact that he made the liberation of Palestine a top priority of Arab nationalism led many Palestinians to see him as a natural ally.¹³ No wonder then that many of those Palestinians

who were politically active in the early years after 1948 were involved with Arab nationalist opposition parties and organizations. However, the realization among Palestinians that they could not rely on the Arab world to secure their future—which accompanied the decline of Pan-Arabism in the 1960s—can also be seen as an indirect result of Egyptian action, or lack thereof.¹⁴

But in the early 1950s, the future of Arab nationalism seemed promising. In 1952, Egypt's dissatisfaction with the continued British presence near the Suez Canal, economic issues, and the conduct of the war against Israel led to a *coup* by a group of nationalist military officers dubbed the Free Officers. The new government, which was at first led by Muhammad Naguib and also included Nasir, was originally weary of instigating Israel and therefore cautious in its support of the Palestinians. Yet uncontrollable Palestinian infiltration into Israel, harsh Israeli reprisals, and Palestinian demonstrations in response soon led Egypt to support Palestinian commando activity.¹⁵

Tensions escalated between Israel and Egypt when Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal Company in 1956. Israel partnered with Britain and France in attacking Egypt that October, and

Israel's ensuing five month occupation of Gaza jolted Palestinians. It convinced many of them both of the need for armed resistance against Israel and that Nasir was their partner in this struggle.¹⁶ In fact, the establishment of Fateh—though itself not an adherent of Arab nationalism—should be seen as a direct result of the 1956 occupation. Fateh was founded by Palestinian activists who sensed relatively early that only an autonomous Palestinian organization could be relied upon to conduct armed resistance. This opinion would later come to define the Palestinian national movement.¹⁷

Gazans never called for the expulsion of the Egyptian administration or organized opposition against it, even though they often blamed Egypt for their...woes.

Nasir's popularity in the Arab world extended beyond Palestinian circles, and in 1958 he achieved the first tangible manifestation of Arab nationalism when he orchestrated the merger of Egypt and Syria to form the United Arab Republic (UAR). The creation of the UAR served as

yet another impetus for Palestinian mobilization, as it appeared that unity would strengthen the Arab world and hasten the liberation of Palestine. In fact, just after the UAR was formed the first legislative and executive councils were established in Gaza.¹⁸ Conversely, as alluded to above, it stands to reason that the dissolution of the UAR in 1961—not to mention Algeria securing its independence from France through armed resistance months later—had the opposite effect of pushing more and more Palestinians away from Arab nationalism and towards self-reliance.¹⁹

Through Arab nationalism Nasir helped to reawaken the political consciousness of countless Palestinians, while the movement's decline equally convinced them of the need for an autonomous Palestinian movement. But in addition to ideology, the Egyptian government enacted a number of specific policies designed to bolster Palestinian nationalism within its conception. One of the most important of these steps was the decision to allow masses of Palestinians, including many Gazans, to study in Egyptian universities. Cairo's political and financial support of Palestinian students provided

young activists with one of their first mediums for reorganizing after the *nakbah*. As Laurie Brand writes, “A politicized core of Palestinians had been champing at the bit, awaiting any political opening to reorganize more freely. Nasir gave them their chance.”²⁰

PALESTINIAN STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

Popular organizations played a groundbreaking role in raising the political consciousness of Palestinians as early as the 1950s. At the time, prevailing regional politics rendered cross-border organizing impossible, which caused many young activists to turn to social associations and unions in their host countries. Mass organizations would later develop connecting Palestinians in different countries and representing constituencies ranging from workers and women to teachers and students. The most important of these groups was the Palestinian Students Union (PSU) in Cairo.²¹ It was in Egypt’s universities that future Palestinian leaders such as Yasir Arafat, Salah Khalaf, and others first met and began to revive the national movement; and it is no coincidence that a decade and a half later these same individuals would constitute the leadership of Fateh and the PLO.²² Over the course of the 1950s, the PSU would successfully raise the profile of the Palestinian issue in the Arab arena and internationally, and for the first time unite Palestinians in a national organization across international borders.

The Palestinian Students Union was founded in Egypt in 1944 (although records suggest a Palestinian student association existed in Cairo as early as 1911). At that time Egypt boasted the oldest and most prestigious university system in the Arab world. The relatively low cost of living, availability of stipends and scholarships, and Cairo’s status as a nationalist and cultural center in the 1950s further combined to attract thousands of Palestinian students. After the 1952 revolution, the Free Officers expanded the monarchy’s previous policy of open admissions for Palestinian students, making Egypt the primary educator of Palestinians (including Gazans). Nasir, who was vying for leadership of the Arab world in the 1950s, likely calculated that the benefits of educating Palestinians far exceeded the costs.

Egyptian universities would produce educated and politicized graduates who would find work throughout the Arab world and who would be grateful to the Egyptian regime. Equally, the small size of Egypt’s Palestinian community meant that Palestinian students posed little political danger.²³

As Nasir’s popularity and the number of Palestinians studying in Egypt both grew, so did the PSU. One of its former leaders described it as “a sort of umbrella organization grouping Palestinian students of various political stripes.”²⁴ It was the only Palestinian organization at the time to hold democratic elections, and therefore the only institution that could legitimately claim to represent Palestinians. The union’s major breakthrough came in 1954, when a Palestinian student delegation, including Yasir Arafat, was selected to accompany an Egyptian delegation at an international youth festival in Warsaw. With no legitimate bodies of international standing existing then to represent Palestinians, Warsaw provided the PSU with a first opportunity to assert a Palestinian national identity on an international stage.

Months later, the PSU challenged the Egyptian regime when it organized a sit-in and hunger strike at its headquarters to protest Egypt’s inability to protect against Israeli raids. This event is notable because of the student demands, one of which was to discuss their grievances with Nasir. Nasir agreed to a meeting with PSU demonstrators and leadership, and a mutually beneficial

relationship ensued between both parties. The union scored another success in 1955 when it won full membership into the International Union of Students (IUS) in spite of Israeli opposition. Finally, according to Yasir Arafat, the PSU’s most important accomplishment was gaining Egyptian approval to publish and distribute its newsletter, *Sawt Filastin* (Voice of Palestine). Arafat saw *Sawt Filastin* as important for Palestinians everywhere, not just students in Egypt, as it was a way to

The PSU would successfully raise the profile of the Palestinian issue in the Arab arena and internationally, and for the first time unite Palestinians in a national organization.

communicate with “brothers” in Gaza, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and elsewhere and facilitate their ability to organize.²⁵

The General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS)

Given the success of the PSU, it was only a matter of time until an international Palestinian student organization was created. The idea originally came from Palestinian students in Iraq who, without any prior permission from the government, started plans on establishing a federation to unite the diaspora-wide Palestinian student groups. However, the fallout between Nasir and Iraqi president Abd al-Karim Qasim in 1959 led Qasim to expel pro-Nasirist Palestinian students, among them the leaders behind this idea. Many of these students later ended up in Cairo, where they joined forces with the PSU and together proposed to Nasir the idea of founding a general union of Palestinian students. Nasir, eager to boost his nationalist credentials, gave full support to the idea of a union headquartered in Cairo. He even circumvented an Egyptian law that prohibited organizations registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs, including the PSU, from operating transnationally and transferred jurisdiction over the GUPS to the executive branch.²⁶

The first meeting of the GUPS occurred in November 1959 at Cairo University. At the time, it was the only international forum in which Palestinians could express their political views and national identity. The GUPS quickly earned respect throughout the Arab world; its leaders found themselves in meetings with Arab heads of state and accepting sizable donations from countries wishing to exert their influence. Early GUPS achievements included: reaching an agreement with Jordanian student groups designating it as the only student group West Bank students were eligible to enter; passing unprecedented resolutions calling for the establishment of a Palestinian entity, a liberation organization, and a liberation army; and gaining

recognition from the Arab League as a “distinct entity.” Its greatest success though occurred in March 1965, when it organized a Palestine Symposium in Cairo. Through Nasir’s financial, political, and organizational support, the GUPS hosted the first conference of its kind, which was attended by political leaders, intellectuals, and delegations from fifty-eight countries.²⁷

MILITARY ORGANIZING

A second means through which the Egyptian government helped to revive Palestinian nationalism was by organizing Palestinian military units. While the new regime after 1952 initially showed signs of restraint vis-à-vis Israel, Palestinian infiltration from Gaza into Israel led to a series of Israeli reprisals that eventually forced its hand. Cairo thus decided to form units and support military activity as a means of deterring Israeli attacks.

Though Egypt never produced a militarily significant Palestinian fighting force, its contributions were nonetheless important. Commando activity gave Palestinians a concrete way to work towards the liberation of their homeland. As Moshe Shemesh explains, it was a symbol of the Palestinians’ “will to use force for the liberation of Filastin.”²⁸

As early as 1949 Egyptian military intelligence sponsored a group of Palestinians known as the *fida'iyyun* (men of sacrifice) to conduct unarmed reconnaissance missions inside Israel. Later, because it was prevented by the armistice agreement from deploying its forces inside Gaza, the Egyptian military established the Palestine Border Police (PBP) in a bid to control Palestinian infiltration. The PBP was composed of a few hundred volunteers and, as was the case in most Palestinian units later formed by Egypt, led by Egyptian military commanders. The PBP was not, however, willing or capable of stopping Palestinian infiltration and therefore decreased in size and responsibility. Discontented with these restrictions and continuing Israeli raids, Palestinians demonstrated in Gaza calling for

After Syria's merger with Egypt—Palestinian *mughawir* intervened in the developing feud between Nasir and Qasim by smuggling weapons into Iraq to assist a rebellion by pro-Nasir elements in Mosul.

arms, conscription, and training. Nasir, having just taken control of the Revolutionary Council, was eager to diffuse the situation and acquiesced by transforming the PBP into 11 Battalion, Palestine Borders Guard (PBG) and increasing both its size and the quality of its weaponry.²⁹

The Palestine Borders Guard proved equally as ineffective at preventing infiltration. In February 1955 Israel conducted a particularly deadly raid inside Gaza in which over three dozen Egyptian soldiers were killed. Palestinians once again took to the streets protesting their inadequate protection, this time on the heels of a three day demonstration against Cairo's plans to resettle Palestinians in Sinai. At last Nasir relented to Palestinian demands: two full brigades were formed and Palestinian forces were raised to 15,000 men. Also, Egypt extended its military training for university students to include students in secondary school.³⁰

Israel's February 1955 raid and Nasir's change of policy further led Egyptian military intelligence to propose the establishment of a special task force to undertake commando missions inside Israel. Cairo quickly approved, and by April 1955 the *fida'iyyun* began combat activity. Later that year the *fida'iyyun* reached over 1,000 in number and were re-designated as 141 Battalion. Commando activity against Israel subsequently increased dramatically causing a rise in frequency and harshness of Israeli responses. The cycle of violence picked up throughout 1956, culminating in Israel's invasion of Egypt on October 29, 1956 as part of the tripartite invasion.³¹

In the aftermath of the 1956 war, Egypt grew dissatisfied with the *fida'iyyun* and the other military forces it had created. The strategy of forming Palestinian military units to deter larger attacks and Israeli reprisals had backfired.³² Egypt thus dismantled many of the battalions and brigades it had established and in their stead formed in 1957 the Palestinian Brigade, a new force touted as the "Palestinian army." The Brigade was composed of graduates from the Egyptian Military College known as "officers of the PA" and included almost 3,000 volunteers. Still, its functions were not offensive in nature and it was relegated to guarding facilities, engaging in

propaganda, and training units of newly created militia called the Popular Resistance.³³

Role of a Palestinian Army in the Arab Cold War

Palestinian fighting units in Gaza, Egypt and the broader UAR might not have been significant for their military capabilities and accomplishments, but they certainly played a substantial role in the inter-Arab arena. In Syria, for example, Palestinian units known as *maghawir* (commandos) were formed and, though restricted from operating inside Israel, were deployed by Syrian military intelligence against rivals domestically and abroad. In one particularly famous mission in March 1959—notably after Syria's merger with Egypt—Palestinian *mughawir* intervened in the developing feud between Nasir and Qasim by smuggling weapons into Iraq to assist a rebellion by pro-Nasir elements in Mosul.³⁴ Qasim thwarted this mission and the rift between Iraq and Egypt deepened. Both leaders saw themselves as champions of Arabism and a proxy war soon developed over who was more devoted to the Palestinian cause.

Accordingly, Qasim also began fostering Palestinian military units and in 1960 announced the establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Army.³⁵ Nasir responded in kind, and a race ensued over not only which country could best prepare for the military "liberation of *Filastin*," but also over who could deliver political independence. At around the same time as this dispute began, Israel started its project to divert water from the Jordan River, an initiative which threatened to strengthen it at the expense of the Palestinians. This action led to even further rivalry between Arab states as they competed to prove their anti-Israel credentials to the public. It was in this context that, according to Moshe Shemesh, "[inter-Arab] rivalry led to more activity on behalf of the Palestinian Entity."³⁶

CONCLUSION

In the mid-1960s, and especially after the 1967 war, Fateh's armed resistance movement gained considerable popularity within Palestinian circles, eventually causing Egypt to recalculate its support of the PLO and Shuqayri. Sayigh notes two main shortcomings of the PLO in its early

years: it failed both to act militarily against Israel and to provide the Palestinian masses with opportunities for political participation.³⁷ As a result, the Palestinian national movement would take a number of forms in the years and decades after 1967, embracing armed resistance, diplomacy, and—more recently—cooperation with Israel. Still, one cannot escape the fact that the agendas and infrastructure of the present-day national movement(s) owe a great deal to the “formative years” of the immediate post-*nakbah* era.

These foundations were undeniably nurtured, strengthened, or simply created by Egypt under the leadership of Gamal Abd al-Nasir. While Nasir created obstacles to Palestinian nationalism when in his interest, by the mid-1950s he surely calculated that a supportive stance vis-à-vis the Palestinians would increase his popularity and catapult Egypt’s standing in the Arab world. Regarding popular organizations, Nasir facilitated the establishment of the first ever post-*nakbah*, cross-border national organization (the GUPS), which was in fact designed more towards Palestinians’ political consciousness than any normal student-related activities. He furthermore sowed the seeds of armed resistance by training and arming thousands of fighters. Egypt’s unique

Cairo's lasting contribution to the institutionalization of the Palestinian national movement, to date, is the creation of the PLO.

role in this respect should not be underestimated; it is certainly not a coincidence that when increasing *fida'iyyun* activity reached an intolerable point for Israel, Jerusalem responded by assassinating the Egyptian military intelligence chief at the time.³⁸ While Egypt was not the only country to organize Palestinian military units, in many cases other leaders who did the same, such as Qasim in Iraq, did so largely as a response to Egyptian action.

Finally, Cairo's lasting contribution to the institutionalization of the Palestinian national movement, to date, is the creation of the PLO. For all their enthusiasm, Palestinians themselves in the mid-twentieth century lacked the international standing and organization to achieve such a success independently. They needed a regional backer. In that respect, Egypt stands out as the most crucial force behind the revival of post-*nakbah* Palestinian nationalism.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

Works Cited

- ¹ Moshe Shemesh, "The Palestinian Society in the Wake of the 1948 War: From Social Fragmentation to Consolidation," *Israel Studies* 9 (1) (2004): 89. (henceforth: Shemesh 1)
- ² *Ibid.*, 86.
- ³ Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: the Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993* (Washington, DC: Clarendon Press, 1997), 36.
- ⁴ Yezid Sayigh, "Escalation or Containment? Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Army, 1964-67," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30 (1) (1998): 18.
- ⁵ Sayigh 1997, 36.
- ⁶ See Laurie A. Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution Building and the Search for a State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 48; and Sayigh 1997, 40.
- ⁷ Sayigh 1997, 40.
- ⁸ Brand, 48.
- ⁹ Sayigh 1997, 41.
- ¹⁰ Brand, 24-25.
- ¹¹ Moshe Shemesh, *The Palestinian Entity 1959-1974: Arab Politics and the PLO* (London: Grank Cass & Co., 1988), 58.
- ¹² Brand, 50.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ¹⁴ Sayigh 1998, 18-19.
- ¹⁵ Brand, 60-61.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ¹⁷ Sayigh 1997, 83.
- ¹⁸ Brand, 26-27.
- ¹⁹ Sayigh 1998, 19.
- ²⁰ Brand, 41.
- ²¹ Sayigh 1997, 57.
- ²² Brand, 65.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 64-65.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65-70.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 71-72.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73-76.
- ²⁸ Shemesh 1998, 7.
- ²⁹ Sayigh 1997, 61-63.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 61-63.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 63-65.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 66.
- ³³ Shemesh 1988, 7.
- ³⁴ Sayigh 1997, 67-68.
- ³⁵ Shemesh 1988, 12-13.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ³⁷ Sayigh 1998, 19.
- ³⁸ Sayigh 1997, 64.