



## PALESTINE VERSUS THE PALESTINIANS? THE IRON LAWS AND IRONIES OF A PEOPLE DENIED

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*An iron law of the conflict over Palestine has been the refusal by the Zionist movement and its backers, first Great Britain and then the United States, to make room for the existence of Palestinians as a political community. This non-recognition is rooted in historical forces that predate the existence of the Zionist movement and the Palestinians as a people. Consequently, there is a tension between identity and territory, with obvious repercussions for the following questions: Who are the Palestinians? What do they want? And who speaks for them? This essay calls for a critical reappraisal of the relationship between the concepts "Palestine" and "Palestinians," as well as of the state-centered project of successive phases of the Palestinian national movement.*

THE EMERGENCE IN 2007 of two Palestinian "authorities" in two geographical areas—Hamis in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank—has given new urgency to several perennial questions: Who are the Palestinians? In what sense do they constitute a political community? What do they want? Who speaks for them? The nearly century-long persistence of these questions highlights some of the iron laws and ironies of modern Palestinian history that merit consideration in discussions about the causes and consequences of the current predicament and about how to come up with creative strategies for achieving freedom, peace, and justice. By "iron laws" I mean the formative historical forces produced by the overwhelming asymmetry of power relations that have imprisoned Palestinians in what Rashid Khalidi has termed an iron cage.<sup>1</sup> By "ironies" I mean the paradoxes of history that subvert nationalist narratives about the past. I argue that iron laws and ironies point to the need for a critical reappraisal of the relationship between "Palestine" and "Palestinians" as concepts, and of the state-centered project of successive phases of the Palestinian national movement.

### OF IRONIES AND IRON LAWS

The central dynamic or iron law of the conflict over Palestine, since it began in the late nineteenth century, has been the adamant refusal by the most

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powerful forces in this conflict—the Zionist movement (later the Israeli government) and its key supporters (first Great Britain, later the United States)—either to recognize or to make room for the existence of Palestinians as a political community. This nonrecognition has made it possible for the twin engines of the conflict—territorial appropriation and demographic displacement of Palestinians from their ancestral lands—to continue operating largely unabated, as they have for over a century. It also explains, incidentally, Israel's central public relations message, which is (as these things usually are) the reverse projection of reality: namely, that what needs to be recognized is *Israel's* right to exist.

In this sense, the boycott of the Palestinian Authority by Israel, the United States, and, to a lesser degree, the European Union following Hamas's electoral victory in January 2006 is not a rupture but a continuation of a fundamental pattern in the history of the conflict. This pattern has a long pedigree stretching from the late nineteenth-century Zionist slogan of “a land without people for a people without a land,” to the careful political erasure of the indigenous inhabitants in the wording of the 1922 League of Nations Mandate Charter for Palestine, to the brazen denial of their existence as a political community after 1948, as epitomized in Israeli prime minister Golda Meir's infamous 1969 statement, “The Palestinian people do not exist.”<sup>2</sup> And the pattern has continued into the more recent phase, with the iron-clad “no negotiations with the terrorist Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)” line of successive Israeli governments (and, with fleeting exceptions, U.S. administrations) from the 1967 war until Oslo in 1993; to the “we will not negotiate with Arafat” mantra of the post-Oslo era; and to the “Mahmud Abbas is too weak to talk with” trope that circulated prior to the 2006 elections. Dov Weisglass, political advisor to former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, summed up this pattern as follows:

With the proper management, we succeeded in removing the issue of the political process from the agenda. And we educated the world to understand that there is no one to talk to. And we received a no-one-to-talk-to certificate . . . The certificate will be revoked only when this-and-this happens—when Palestine becomes Finland.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, never—at least not until the fundamental dynamics of land expropriation and demographic displacement have run their course to the satisfaction of the Israeli ruling elite, thus allowing Israel to finally declare its borders.

Paradoxically, the stubborn nonrecognition or erasure of Palestinians as a political community is the product of discursive and material forces that predate the existence of the Palestinians as a people in the modern sense of the word: that is to say, as a collectivity whose members assume a natural and neat fit between identity and territory, the inevitable expression of which is state sovereignty. This does not mean that those who today call themselves Palestinians are not the indigenous inhabitants of the territories that became

Mandatory Palestine in 1922. Rather, it means that instead of a natural fit, there has been and continues to be an “out of phase” tension between Palestine and the Palestinians, as if one could exist only at the expense of the other. A feature of this situation is a temporal lag whereby the Palestinians are continuously one or two steps behind in their approach to events at hand, and, consequently, systematically unable to frame the rules of the conflict. Well before it would have been possible for the Palestinians to attain them, the rules demanded a nationalist consciousness in every mind and a land deed backed by cadastral surveys in every hand as prerequisites for the rights to claim the land, to speak, and to be recognized as a political community. For the Palestinians, to accept these prerequisites was to enter a race they could never win; to refuse them was to be cast outside the official political process (hence leaving “no one to speak to”).

There is no end to the ironies produced by this “out of phase” tension. Four such ironies deserve special attention, for each marks a watershed moment of both erasure and birth of either identity or territory (but not of both simultaneously). The first irony is that the establishment of a state called Palestine represented a devastating defeat of the political aspirations of those who would later become the Palestinian people. Up until 1920, the creation of a separate political entity in southern Syria was by far the least-favored option among those who articulated specific political opinions (admittedly a minority) during the last decades of Ottoman rule.<sup>4</sup>

The second irony is that the very creation of a Palestinian state by the British through the League of Nations was predicated upon the carefully crafted denial of the existence of Palestinians as a political community. Thus, the long negotiations between the British government and leaders of the Zionist movement preceding the Balfour Declaration (1917) on the status of “non-Jews” (over 90 percent of the population) resulted in a formula whereby they were allowed only civil and religious rights, while Jews were explicitly recognized as having political rights. This formula was inserted verbatim into the Mandate Charter, where the word “Arab” is never mentioned and the word “Palestinian” appears only once (ironically, in reference to facilitating “Palestinian citizenship” for Jews). Rashid Khalidi argues persuasively that the nascent Palestinian political organizations did not come to terms with the implications of these developments—the formation of a Palestinian state and their simultaneous erasure—until well into the Mandate period. By then it was too late, and the Palestinians became the only exception to the pattern of decolonization of Arab lands after World War II. While it is not clear what “too late” means in historical time if linearity is not assumed, Britain’s active refusal to allow the Palestinians to form the very institutions that the Mandate was charged with developing, combined with the inability of the local leaders to adapt a political culture honed by centuries of Ottoman imperial rule in ways that could effectively counter British rule and the Zionist project, underscore the tension between identity and territory that has dogged Palestinians since the beginning of the conflict. This tension is likely to continue as long as the Palestinian national movement

remains within the conceptual terrain laid out by the Zionist movement and the imperial powers that established the modern state system in the Middle East.

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Palestinians as a people. Of course, the privileging of a Palestinian national identity over other existing forms of identification had been gaining momentum since the creation of a Palestinian state after World War I, and there is no doubt that the Great Revolt of 1936–39 against British rule made that process irreversible. Nevertheless, the shared memories of the traumatic uprooting of their society and the experiences of being dispossessed, displaced, and stateless are what have

come to define “Palestinian-ness.” They are also what energized the second phase of the Palestinian national movement, which eventually led the international concert of nations, through the United Nations (minus Israel and the United States), to recognize the Palestinians as a political community and the PLO as its “sole legitimate representative.”

The fourth irony has not yet occurred, but very well may in the near future: The Palestinians in the occupied territories are being force-fed a state (or two) against their will after many decades of demanding one. I say “against their will” because it is difficult to imagine Palestinians willingly signing off on a deal that gives up their right of return, all of East Jerusalem, and half the West Bank in exchange for a state with no defined borders, no territorial contiguity, no sovereignty, no economic viability, no means of self-defense, and no control over resources. In short, the formation of a Palestinian state as repeatedly called for by U.S. President George W. Bush and Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert has become the vehicle for preempting, rather than delivering, self-determination for the Palestinian people.

### **CAN THE PALESTINIANS SPEAK?**

The tension between land and people that permeates these ironies predates the modern era. In a general sense, this is partly due to the fact that those who call themselves Palestinians have the (mis)fortune of being indigenous to a rather small and economically marginal landscape that is holy to the world’s three major monotheistic religions and is a strategic land bridge connecting the African and Asian continents. Consequently, the inhabitants who tilled the fields, built the terraces, and ran the neighborhood shops have a Janus-faced relationship to the place they call home.

On the one hand, they have woven over the centuries a thick web of specific and intimate relations to the land that informs the entire range of their existence, from subsistence to self-worth. Without it, they would be, according to a phrase given new resonance by Edward Said, “out of place.” In rural areas, to give but a small example, every noticeable geological marker—whether a

boulder, hillside, or spring—and every significant manifestation of human labor on the land—whether a garden, terrace, or olive grove—possessed a name that was passed down the generations. These named markers are sites of memories that anchor durable, discrete, and interlinked social spaces (especially in the hill areas) where individuals and communities are constituted; hence the strong regional identities that have easily survived the nationalist turn and remain a strong presence in Palestinian culture.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, this holy and strategic landscape is vulnerable to the ideological abstractions and desires—hence, appropriation in the name of God and civilization—of forces more powerful than its inhabitants. Apart from the Crusades, the penultimate moment of European appropriation of this landscape (minus people) was the nineteenth-century transformation of a collection of districts situated in two Ottoman provinces into a European-dominated Holy Land.<sup>6</sup> Through a variety of scholarly and religious enterprises that involved a great deal of walking, surveying, digging, and building, the land was secured and redeemed. (The passionate pursuit of the same activities by the Zionist movement and the Israeli state is but a continuation of this pattern.) In this manner, abstractions and desires were transformed into a competing web of specific relations to the land at the expense of the already-existing networks. For example, biblical geographers, a new breed of academics, diligently traced the footsteps of Jesus Christ, remapping the terrain along the way, and ultimately shaped the borders of Mandate Palestine. Like the archaeologists, pilgrims, and other Europeans that populated the landscape in increasing numbers, biblical geographers usually ignored the inhabitants altogether, or else represented them either as unsightly and irritating obstacles to modernity to be swept away or as pristine remnants of a passing traditional society whose days were numbered. Thus, the making of the Holy Land laid the discursive and material foundations for the denial of the Palestinians' right to exist even before they became a people, and ensured the success of the Zionist movement well before that movement was articulated.

What it means to belong to a Palestinian political community, and how others perceive that belonging, became more complicated after the disappearance of Palestine in 1948. Because the massive territorial conquest and demographic displacement of that catastrophe were but links in a chain of erasures, it is not surprising that the Israeli government and the international community succeeded, at least for a while, in transforming the Palestinian struggle for independence and self-determination into a de-politicized humanitarian "refugee problem."<sup>7</sup> Thus, and as a community denied, the Palestinians discovered that the closer they came to finding their own voice, the more they were perceived as a destabilizing force. This is why, for example, Arab regime politics became characterized by a policy of sacralization of Palestine in rhetoric and oppression of Palestinians in practice, thus reinforcing the already-existing tension between land and people.<sup>8</sup> The two iconic moments in this regard were, first, the annexation of the West Bank (1950) accompanied by the imposition of Jordanian citizenship on its inhabitants (effectively criminalizing Palestinian

nationalist speech), and second, the founding of the PLO in 1964 by the Arab League at the behest of Egypt's Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir for the precise purpose of preempting a rising Palestinian national movement from speaking for the Palestinians.

The takeover of the PLO by the Palestinian Resistance Movement soon after the 1967 war and the historic "Gun and Olive Branch" speech of Yasir Arafat at the UN in 1974—both of which solidified the recognition of the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people"—mark the moment when the Palestinians came closest to speaking for themselves. I hasten to add that as a national movement defined by exile, the PLO never paid much attention to the Palestinians who remained in what became Israel; neither did they develop an institutional presence among them. Indeed, and in an ironic twist, these Palestinians were shunned and ignored in the Arab world for having stayed on their lands as citizens of an enemy state. As for the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation after 1967, the Fatah-dominated PLO leadership was interested in agents, not partners. This being the case, it made concerted efforts to prevent the rise of autonomous national political institutions in the occupied territories, especially following the 1976 elections and the first intifada (1987–91). Thus, the PLO, despite the strong popular support it enjoyed in the territories, did not invest significant resources in political mobilization and institution-building there until well after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Nevertheless, PLO leaders, especially Arafat, deserve credit for reconstituting the Palestinian national movement and giving it a voice. It is precisely this achievement, however, that was abandoned with the signing of the Oslo Accord on the White House lawn in September 1993. In yet another moment pregnant with irony, the Declaration of Principles—which ostensibly recognized both the PLO as an organization that represents the Palestinian people and the principle of land for peace—directly led to the virtual demise of the PLO and to the creation of new realities on the ground that make a viable Palestinian state impossible.

It is true that by the time the Oslo Accord was signed, the PLO was in a very weakened state. Arafat's success in the 1970s in pushing the Palestinian national movement toward accepting a politically negotiated settlement based on a two-state solution had prompted Israel to launch its 1982 invasion of Lebanon with the specific aim of physically destroying the movement's infrastructure and easing the de-facto annexation of the occupied territories. This goal was largely achieved a decade later as the institutions of the PLO, abandoned in Lebanon and hollowed out in Tunisian exile, were dealt a deadly blow as a result of Arafat's decision to support Saddam Hussein in 1990: Arab and international financial and political support were cut off, and the large, wealthy, and politically active Palestinian community in Kuwait, a key pillar of the PLO, was forcibly uprooted and dispersed. In any case, the desperate Oslo gamble did not pay off. Almost fifteen years into the "peace process," it is clear that the Palestinians have failed, despite great sacrifices,

to give rise to a representative and effective leadership capable of moving them toward statehood, to say nothing of the right of return, equality, or prosperity.

### **OPPORTUNITY OR DISASTER?**

Three recent watershed events—the removal of Israeli settlements in Gaza (completed September 2005), the sweeping electoral victory of Hamas (January 2006), and the failure of Israel's invasion of Lebanon (July–August 2006)—mark the beginning of a new stage in the history of the Palestinians' struggle for national self-determination. When set against the background of the U.S. military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, the escalating U.S. campaign for the isolation and possible invasion of Iran, and the recodification of political language along sectarian and ethnic lines (especially the Sunni/Shi'i binary), these events pose an unprecedented challenge to the state system in the Middle East that emerged after World War I, as well as to some of the national identities consolidated over the course of the twentieth century. Ironically, a Palestinian state might come into being at a moment when this system seems to be on the verge of imminent collapse.

The first watershed event is Israel's unilateral and accelerated imposition of its "end game," or what it perceives as the final status arrangements, including borders. The evacuation of the Gaza settlements signals the beginning of the end of a century-long process of demographic displacement and land expropriation, the latest phase of which kicked into high gear following the signing of the Oslo Accords. For the first time, it is now fairly certain that some Palestinian lands will not become part of Israel, and that roughly half the Palestinian people will remain within the boundaries of Mandatory Palestine. True, land is still being appropriated in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and tens of thousands of Palestinians have been forced under the pressures of military occupation and settlement building to leave their homes since the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000.<sup>9</sup> True, Gaza is still under occupation, for the redeployment merely turned it from a multi-room to a single warehouse-size prison. And true, the unilateral withdrawal did not bolster a two-state, land-for-peace trajectory. Rather, its aim was to cement Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem and roughly half the West Bank, thereby preventing the establishment of a viable Palestinian state.<sup>10</sup> Still, and partly as a result of dogged resistance and demographic realities in Gaza (1.5 million Palestinians facing 7,000 settlers), one can say with some confidence that the long-standing debate within the Zionist movement between land maximalists and demographic maximalists is almost settled. The political manifestation of this compromise is the formation of the new Kadima Party, which as a result of Israel's March 2006 elections eclipsed the two major political tendencies—Labor and Likud—that have dominated the politics of the Yishuv (the pre-1948 Jewish community in Palestine) and Israel since the early twentieth century. The demographic and territorial manifestation of this compromise is the doubling of the settler population in the West Bank

over the past decade and its consolidation into five major blocs. The logistical manifestation is the construction of the multi-billion dollar barrier, bypass, and movement-control system that facilitates the integration of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories into Israel, primarily by turning Palestinian population centers into open-air prisons.<sup>11</sup>

The second watershed event is the sweeping victory of Hamas in the Palestinian parliamentary elections held on 25 January 2006. This victory marks both the official end of a half century in which the Palestinian national movement was dominated by a secular political culture, and the beginning of a new phase of unknown duration in which an Islamist political culture will be an integral, if not dominant, part of the movement. The election was not in itself a major turning point. Rather, it was another milestone in the ongoing slow-motion collapse since the 1990s of the post-1948 phase of the Palestinian national movement. Other milestones include the demise of the PLO as a viable institution after Oslo; the suspicious death on 10 November 2004 of Arafat (who can be considered an institution in human form); and the implosion of his Fatah movement after four decades of dominating the Palestinian national scene. Indeed, the internal corrosion and lack of vitality of Fatah in its current configuration were such that Hamas itself was surprised at the magnitude of its electoral victory in January 2006, as well as by its rapid military takeover of Gaza in mid-June 2007.<sup>12</sup>

On the regional level, Hamas's victory is part of the larger trend of political Islam's ascendance through the iconic vehicle of the secular liberal political order of the Enlightenment: the ballot box. The incredible scenes of women supporters of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood scaling walls to reach polling stations sealed off by police in the November 2005 parliamentary elections reveal a great deal about the determination of Islamist parties, which have swept to victories in many countries, most recently Turkey, to translate decades of grassroots organizing into political power.

It is ironic that the most ruthless regime of political and economic sanctions in recent history was imposed, in the wake of the Hamas victory, on the occupied and not the occupier, and—of all things—for the sin of following the very path of peaceful and democratic change they had been urged to pursue. The unwillingness to accept the results of free and open elections dealt a fresh blow to the credibility of the international community in the eyes of most Palestinians; it also killed any hopes for a new political horizon raised by Hamas's decision to enter the political arena created by the Oslo Accord. The sanctions buttressed an ever-tighter Israeli military siege calculated to slowly fragment Palestinian society and to starve the population into political capitulation. (Dov Weisglass described this policy in the following way: "It's like an appointment with a dietician. The Palestinians will get a lot thinner, but won't die."<sup>13</sup>) Consequently, the daily life of Palestinians in the occupied territories, already on the verge of a humanitarian disaster in Gaza, deteriorated at an alarming pace.<sup>14</sup> The most frequently asked question in the five-star hotel lobbies and conference rooms where international financial and human rights organizations meet



has become: When (not if) will Palestinian society collapse? And what will be the long-term consequences?<sup>15</sup>

The rise of political Islam in the Palestinian context has led to mixed reactions. Those interested solely in anti-imperialist credentials tend to see Hamas as the Palestinians' last great hope: an ideologically tight and disciplined organization that has steadfastly opposed the Oslo Accord and refused to disavow armed struggle in return for the kinds of privileges and special treatment from Israel that the Fatah leadership enjoys. Hamas also has a different mix of territoriality and identity than Fatah. It stresses Arab and Muslim elements as much as, if not more than, Palestinian ones, and it has not clearly committed itself to a two-state solution along the lines of UN Resolution 242. To many, especially to the overwhelmingly refugee population of the Gaza Strip, Hamas is seen as less likely to bargain away the right of return or give up claims to Jerusalem.

It is important to remember, however, that historically, Fatah fighters have carried out the vast majority of attacks on Israeli military targets up to the second intifada, and roughly 50 percent of such attacks since then; Hamas, meanwhile, has concentrated more on bombing civilian targets, carrying out twice as many such attacks as Fatah. Hamas also has strong ties to and receives aid from Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia, which in turn have strong ties to the United States. And although this is no longer the case, there was for a while a convergence of interests and a significant degree of collaboration (during the 1970s and 1980s) between Israel and the Muslim Brotherhood (later Hamas) in opposing the PLO. Finally, while it is difficult to imagine what Hamas could have done to escape the sanctions trap or to dissuade powerful elements within Fatah from working closely with Israel and the United States to sabotage their new government, there is no doubt that Hamas made a strategic blunder by attempting to play by two different sets of rules at the same time: as both the government within the framework of the Oslo Accord, and as the opposition to that very framework.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, there is more to Palestinian self-determination than an anti-imperialist agenda. There is the question of what kind of society Palestinians aspire to build, a question that involves weighty economic, social, and cultural issues. Here Hamas faces a dilemma. On the one hand, it has allowed many Palestinians to transcend helplessness and deprivation by combining social, moral, and political agendas in one political language and by providing the infrastructure for realizing these agendas at the neighborhood level. On the other hand, although Hamas won partly because it is the most effective organizer of grassroots civil society and self-help institutions in Palestine, its worldview and tactics pose a major problem for most international solidarity and civil society movements (labor, feminist, human rights, and so on), which are grounded in the principles of secular humanism and nonviolence.<sup>17</sup> Since the Palestinians cannot possibly achieve freedom

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and self-determination by themselves, it is imperative that they come to grips with the following two questions. First, how can they realize the progressive potential of international law and human rights principles without subscribing uncritically to the underlying epistemological foundations of these principles (which, as we know from recent history, have also anchored racism, imperial expansion, colonial exploitation, ethnic cleansing, and genocide)? And second, how can the Palestinians acknowledge and mine the progressive potential of the cultural and religious traditions to which they are heirs without ossifying them into defensive shields that reinforce internal stratifications?

The third watershed event was Israel's defeat by Hizballah in the July 2006 war, albeit at a very high price for Lebanon as a whole. If 1967 marks the peak of Israeli military power in the region, 2006 marks its lowest ebb. The process of decline began with the war of attrition with Egypt after 1967 and has continued, despite apparent successes, through the 1973 war, the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the forced withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, and the reoccupation of Area A of the occupied territories in April 2002. All these events point to a simple truth: The use of violence to impose new realities on the ground is yielding fewer and fewer dividends. In Iraq and Afghanistan, as in Palestine and Lebanon, the cost to the United States and Israel of sustaining a high level of coercion is becoming more and more formidable. This can be seen not only in the increasing resistance and radicalization in the Middle East and the Islamic world as a whole, but also in the economic hemorrhage and, more importantly, in the severe social and economic disparities that are causing serious domestic discontent in these regions. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 made possible the marriage between neo-liberalism and military adventure, but that honeymoon is nearing an end. Sooner or later—probably later, and probably after a series of horrors that will make the hyper-violence of recent years look tame in comparison, for U.S. and Israeli leaders still seem to be in denial about the consequences of their failed policies of coercion—a process of political negotiations will take root. The most important long-term political commitment Palestinians can make at this point is to figure out new and creative ways of preparing for and framing these negotiations so as not to repeat the mistakes of Oslo.

#### **ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE STRATEGIES**

Shortly before he died, Arafat made yet another of his “We are not Red Indians” remarks:

We have made the Palestinian case the biggest problem in the world. Look at the Hague ruling on the wall. One hundred and thirty countries supported us at the General Assembly. One hundred and seven years after the [founding Zionist] Basel Conference, 90 years after the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Israel

has failed to wipe us out. We are here, in Palestine, facing them. We are not Red Indians.<sup>18</sup>

It is true. To this date, all settler societies that did not manage to (mostly) wipe out or ethnically cleanse their native populations have failed to maintain ethnic supremacy. It is also true that Palestinians now constitute roughly half the population within the borders of Mandate Palestine. But there is no guarantee that this historical pattern will hold true for the Palestinians, and in any case, waiting for historical laws to work themselves out in the fullness of time is a passive approach that glorifies tactics and disdains strategy. It assumes that time is on the Palestinians' side; that the higher Palestinian birthrate will hasten a demographic solution; and that meanwhile, steadfastness and refusal to accept defeat are sufficient courses of action. This passive approach is a recipe for failure, and it has failed.

It is easy to understand the temptations of this recipe, for its primary ingredient is faith in truth and progress, and its primary consequence is avoiding the thankless busy-bee life of patient institution-building. Many of us would like to believe that international law counts for something and will eventually be adhered to. We would like to believe that achieving self-determination in the age of decolonization is as inevitable for Palestinians as it was for other peoples and that justice will prevail. These beliefs, however, are not iron laws or even necessarily realistic expectations. They are merely the products of a positivist epistemological orientation and/or a moral stance that guides action. We may have already seen the best there is to see; there is no inevitability in the salvation of the Palestinians. If the post-colonial era is any indication, the success of anti-colonial struggles in achieving real independence or economic development—or even in warding off future colonial occupations—has been fleeting.

Passive strategy is also tempting for reasons having to do with the convenient reluctance to abandon the primacy of the purely political, and hence to embark upon painful reevaluations. Foregrounding the political sidesteps the complex and sensitive task of integrating social and cultural issues into the national agenda on the pretext that there will be time enough to do so later, a stance that has the effect of maintaining an internally repressive and exploitative status quo.<sup>19</sup> It also makes it possible to avoid the burden of having to understand global cultural dynamics in general (and those of Israeli and U.S. societies in particular) and of having to formulate fine-tuned strategies for dealing with them. The reluctance to engage with these crucial issues is partly due to the enormous pressures, restrictions, and fast-paced changes that most Palestinians are subjected to. Through mutual help and inventive strategies for daily survival—primarily, though by no means exclusively, at the family, neighborhood/village, and regional levels—they have managed to endure and resist far longer than most observers thought possible. But this all-consuming effort comes at a price, insofar as it fosters a strong provincial, cynical, and self-absorbed current in Palestinian political culture that shuns the urgent need

to look both inward and outward. Thus, the Palestinians, though the weakest party in the conflict, have tolerated successive leaderships that have been largely co-opted, that have committed strategic blunders, and that have acquiesced in rules specifically designed to preempt substantive self-determination. Simply put, there can be no freedom or justice without a broader definition of what constitutes the “political” in a way that accords as much attention to Palestinians as to Palestine, or without building coalitions across international and psychological boundaries in ways that inevitably involve a rethinking of what self-determination and sovereignty mean.

### **BEYOND THE IDENTITY/TERRITORY/SOVEREIGNTY MATRIX**

I am aware that a postnationalist analysis of the modern history of a people who have yet to achieve their national aspirations is tortuous conceptual terrain, if not a political minefield. Questioning the territorial dimension of peopledom and the meaning of sovereignty while the conflict is still “hot” could be understood by some as challenging the very right of Palestinians to Palestine, as well as undermining the political language of self-determination that lies at the heart of the Palestinian national struggle. These are not trivial concerns. Israeli revisionist historians can afford to dismantle Zionist nationalist mythology precisely because there is a well-developed official Israeli historical narrative that can be targeted, and because Israel is the superpower of the Middle East, possessing a high level of self-confidence and achievement. The Palestinians, by contrast, are by far the weaker party in an ongoing conflict. Their material and cultural patrimony, from places to place names, has been and continues to be subject to a systematic process of physical erasure and discursive silencing.

This, along with the absence of national institutions and a succession of severe ruptures starting with the 1948 war, is why Palestinian national narratives are fragmented and revolve for the most part around two binaries: erasure/affirmation and colonization/resistance. The first is obsessed with identity politics and often assumes things that ought to be explained, such as how the Palestinians became a people and what their relationship is to place. The latter is absorbed by the political confrontation with Zionism and often perches on the moral high ground of victimhood while turning a blind eye to internal contradictions.<sup>20</sup> For these reasons, neither narrative genre can lay the foundation for a new mobilizing political language informed by sensitivity to social and cultural practices that produce and transform what it means to be a Palestinian. These practices both reflect and transcend the incredibly diverse contexts in which Palestinians live: whether under foreign military occupation, as putative citizens of a country built on the ashes of their history, or as refugees in a hostile world.

The above provisional reflections on the changing nature of the Palestinian political community emphasize a long-term perspective, foreground the power of discursive formations, and seek to promote a critical discussion of the identity/territory/sovereignty matrix in the hope that this exercise can point toward

new political horizons.<sup>21</sup> The motivation is as obvious as it is fraught with danger: We are at the cusp of a watershed moment filled with potential opportunities and very real dangers for the Palestinians. If the Palestinians do not manage, sooner rather than later, to become a united political community on the basis of a clear agenda and effective strategies, their suffering as a dispossessed and oppressed people will continue into the foreseeable future, with severe consequences for themselves and for the region as a whole.

If history is any guide, there is room for agency and for an active strategy even in the direst of circumstances. There are already numerous calls for the revitalization and reconfiguration of the PLO or for a new representative body—a crucial first step. But there is little discussion of how the new or reconfigured body will differ from the old PLO in terms of institutional structure, goals, and program.<sup>22</sup> Three brief comments, by way of conclusion, may be useful.

First, such a body should speak for the Palestinians, not just for Palestine, and needs to be far more democratic and demographically representative than its predecessor. It should be grounded in all three major segments of the Palestinian people today: the five million or so in the Diaspora, who constitute one of the largest and oldest refugee populations in modern times; the roughly 3.8 million in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, who have been living for over four decades under a brutal military occupation; and the (usually forgotten) 1.2 million Palestinian citizens of Israel, who constitute almost 20 percent of that country's population. Mechanisms have to be developed to allow the voices of all these Palestinians, especially those of the dispersed Palestinian refugees, to be articulated and debated.<sup>23</sup> Reconstituted along these lines, the new entity would be more accurately called the Organization for the Liberation of Palestinians, not the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Such a body should also be more politically inclusive. The integration of Hamas and of the political tendencies of the Palestinian citizens of Israel is the most pressing task. The combination of a political and territorial split between Fatah and Hamas, and the likelihood that it will only deepen in the foreseeable future, have greatly raised the stock of a one-state solution and made obvious the fact that change within Israel is key. Palestinian citizens of Israel are well placed to contribute to the formulation of effective strategies addressing these two issues.<sup>24</sup> As to Hamas, it is by far the strongest and most cohesive force in the occupied territories. It can be ignored only at the expense of fragmenting the Palestinian body politic, with negative long-term consequences.

Second, the new entity needs to implement creative long-term strategies that rewrite the rules of the game and break iron laws. It is important to pursue, link, and synergize three parallel goals that do not have to conflict with one another: to free Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem from military occupation; to secure the right of Palestinian refugee communities to return or to receive compensation; and to promote equality and cultural autonomy for the Palestinian citizens of Israel. While it is almost impossible to imagine how Palestinians can make progress on these fronts without the institutional

infrastructure of a sovereign state on Palestinian land, given the unlikelihood of such a state in the foreseeable future, ways have to be found.

Third, Palestinians cannot afford to give up the moral high ground by resorting to tactics and strategies that allow for indiscriminate violence. Palestinians do have the right under international law to use violence to end an illegal foreign military occupation. They also have the legal and moral right to defend themselves against those using violence to take their lands or their lives. But this is a far cry from glorifying armed struggle and deliberately targeting civilians for political ends. What kind of society can be built on such actions? How can grassroots mobilization take place if attention and resources are focused on militias, especially when these militias, unable to confront the Israeli military, have turned on each other and on their own society? And what are the costs of such actions in terms of how Palestinians are perceived by world public opinion, especially in the two important arenas of Israel and the United States?

All of the above calls for a rethinking of the identity/territory/sovereignty matrix, beginning with the obvious facts that Israelis now constitute a nation in Palestine and that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not just a Palestinian or Israeli concern. The conflict has been an international concern from the League of Nations Mandate Charter in 1922 and the UN Partition Resolution in 1947 all the way through the International Court of Justice ruling on the illegality of the Apartheid Wall in 2004. Whatever the strategy, internationalization is bound to take place, at least as a transitional phase. There is also no doubt that internationalization requires compromises on the territorial dimension of peoplehood and on sovereignty in the classical sense for both Palestinians and Israelis. The questions are: What kind of internationalization? And to whose benefit? Besides, it may well be that by the time the Palestinians are strong enough, statehood might not be the only or even best form of self-determination in an increasingly global and interdependent world, just as nationalism may not be the most fruitful form of realizing justice, equality, and freedom for communities bound by a single identity.

For a variety of reasons, the world has paid more attention to this conflict than to any other in modern history. This attention can turn the weaknesses of Palestinians into sources of strength, and it can transform the "out of phase" tension between identity and territory into a beacon for new political horizons. The iron law and ironies of their history have made the Palestinians a potent symbol of the dark side of modernity, and the cause of Palestine has become a conspicuous element in progressive movements across the globe. All those who have experienced modernity not as progress and prosperity or as self-determination and redemption, but as colonial occupation, territorial partition, and demographic displacement, can potentially see themselves in the Palestinian experience. But harnessing the tremendous political energy of Palestinian communities and their supporters worldwide requires the establishment of a representative entity that can clearly articulate what the Palestinians want and why, and can define the parameters for strategic action. Coming up with different strategies and the means to realize them involves, in turn, the

ability to imagine different futures and to move toward a political culture that can see beyond the identity/territory/sovereignty matrix.

## NOTES

1. Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006). In this and earlier works, especially his book of essays on Palestinian identity [*Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)], Khalidi has produced the dominant narrative framework on the history of modern Palestinian nationalism and national movements.

2. *Sunday Times* (London), 15 June 1969, p. 12.

3. Interview with Ari Shavit, *Ha'Aretz*, 8 October 2004. Reprinted in *Journal of Palestine Studies* 36, no. 2 (Winter 2005), Doc. C.

4. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, chap. 7.

5. For a discussion of social space and the specific material and cultural networks that define them, see Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

6. This argument is elaborated in Doumani, "Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine: Writing Palestinians into History," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1992), pp. 5–28.

7. Gabi Piterberg addresses this issue in his essay "Can the Subaltern Remember? A Pessimistic View of the Victims of Zionism" in Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein, eds., *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 177–200.

8. Another way to express this tension is to say that the Palestinian question as a whole became feminized. Arab regimes, media, and, to a certain extent, popular culture bowed at the feet of Palestine the She-Goddess but blamed the Palestinians for "losing" Palestine and ruthlessly disciplined them for "overstepping" or "misbehaving," using the same language and tone as a patriarch dealing with a female member of the family or a troublemaking child. I thank Afim Saba for

a spirited discussion of this issue with me (July 2007).

9. Unofficial estimates put that number at 10 percent of the population.

10. According to Dov Weisglass, Sharon's chief of staff, the plan "supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians." He continues: "When you freeze [the peace] process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the [Palestinian] refugees, the borders and Jerusalem." BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle-east/3720176.stm>

11. From this perspective, the recurrent invasions of Gaza, such as those of the summer of 2006 which led to the death of hundreds of civilians and destruction of Gaza's only electrical station (not to mention bridges, agricultural areas, and other infrastructure) is not a failure of this unilateral policy of fixing borders, but a structural feature of a system of long-term confinement that requires periodic reoccupation of the prison space.

12. It is possible that Fatah, as a movement encompassing a variety of political ideologies and factions, could reemerge invigorated. The often-stated desire of most of its members, especially those in the middle ranks, for reform and a new leadership led to the creation of two Fatah lists in the 2006 elections.

13. Quoted by Gideon Levy, *Ha'Aretz*, 19 February 2006.

14. The most damaging consequence of this isolation was the drying up of funds needed to pay the salaries of civil service employees, whose income is the backbone of the Palestinians' struggle for daily survival.

15. The excellent Web site of the Institute for Middle East Understanding includes a detailed list of and links to major reports issued by international and other organizations: <http://imeu.net/news/documents-reports.shtml>. See, for example, *Report 2007: Israel and the Occupied Territories*, released on 4 June 2007 by Amnesty

International; and the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967, John Dugard, released on 22 February 2007.

16. For example, instead of living up to its election slogan (“change and reform”) by reconfiguring how the PA operates, Hamas made an enormous number of political appointments to the civil service in a short period of time, making it difficult for most Palestinians to distinguish Hamas’s motivations on the local level from those of Fatah operatives.

17. For example, see the press release by MADRE, an international women’s human rights organization: “Palestine in the Age of Hamas: The Challenge of Progressive Solidarity,” issued on 10 July 2007. <http://www.madre.org/articles/me/ageofhamas07.html>. The press release contests neither the legitimacy of Hamas’s leadership of the government after its electoral victory nor its anti-imperialist credentials, and it calls for challenging Israel and U.S. foreign policy. At the same time, MADRE has this to say about Hamas: “Let’s be clear: Hamas’s long-term social vision is repressive. Hamas is a movement driven by militarism and nationalism. It aims to institutionalize reactionary ideas about gender and sexuality, and it uses religion as a smokescreen to pursue its agenda.” No doubt each one of these claims can be contested and qualified, but each is worthy of discussion and should not be ignored, for the mobilizing language of contemporary politics shapes the lives of future generations.

18. Interview with Graham Usher, *Al-Abram Weekly Online*, no. 715 (4–10 November 2004). <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/715/re17.htm>

19. This is an old debate within national liberation movements. The most heated discussions in the 1970s and 1980s concerned the status of women and the problem of prioritizing and linking the political, social, and cultural issues around which they should be mobilized.

20. These binaries are discussed in some detail in Doumani, “Rediscovering Ottoman Palestine.”

21. I do not intend to instrumentalize these reflections for the purpose of arguing for or against either the one-state or two-state solution. Neither is even a remote possibility for the foreseeable future. Taking an “agnostic stand” on the final shape of a political settlement allows one to foreground important issues otherwise buried by the internal logic of this or that position. I thank George Bisharat for the phrase and the insight. This was the basis for the special section we co-edited: “Open Forum: Strategizing Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 35, no. 3 (Spring 2006), pp. 37–82.

22. It is ironic that the leaders of Fatah (Arafat, then Abbas), who had discarded the PLO in favor of the PA as the body that speaks for Palestinians (in effect leaving out half the population from the political process), rediscovered the PLO only after the January 2006 electoral victory put Hamas (not a member of the PLO) in charge of the PA.

23. The issues involved are addressed in detail by The Civitas Project, directed by Karma Nabulsi. See *Palestinians Register: Laying Foundations and Setting Directions* (Oxford: Nuffield College, 2006).

24. There is no reason, for example, why a Palestinian citizen of Israel cannot become the leader of a reconfigured PLO.