

## Palestinians Organizing in Diaspora

### PART I Roundtable on Palestinian Diaspora and Representation

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[This is PART I of a three-part roundtable on Palestinian Diaspora and Representation moderated by *Jadaliyya* Co-Editor [Noura Erakat](#). It features [Naseer Aruri](#), [Seif Da'na](#), [Karma Nabulsi](#), and [Sherene Seikaly](#).]

1. **Palestinians are not unique for organizing themselves in diaspora. The Tamils of Sri Lanka have recently elected their transnational government and other ethnic polities like indigenous communities in Latin America, including the Mayans of Zapata, have organized themselves within their homelands, as opposed to without. How can the Palestinian national body be contextualized in a legacy of diasporic politics and calls for self-determination more generally? Can a “people” be adequately represented in diaspora? What lessons can be drawn from other case studies for organizing Palestinians in diaspora and inversely, what lessons can be drawn from the Palestinian experience?**

#### **Naseer Aruri**

Given the relationship between the Palestinian body politic and its adversary, we need to raise a few questions relating to the settler colonialist nature of Zionism and the state of Israel. First, when did settler colonialism emerge as a framework of analysis? How has the PLO's shift in strategy from liberation through resistance to independence through negotiations and statism been reflected in the shift in analytical and strategic paradigms on Palestine, Palestinian liberation, and modes of resistance and representation? And how did the movement strategize its analytical framework following the loss of land as a result of Zionist settler colonialism, and how this framework was intellectually neglected and politically abandoned, and lost with the passing of time. For us, Palestinians, who are going through a second Nakba, today is yesterday.

#### **Seif Dana**

True, every diaspora experience is unique. The Palestinian experience of living and experiencing the diaspora have been shaped by a variety of factors that need to be highlighted to comprehend the experience and draw necessary lessons for future course.

#### 1- Colonial Zionism

The expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs that led to the formation of many Palestinian communities in exile has been critical for the formation and transformation of the specific Zionist colonial genre. The pure settlement-colony, which is distinguished from other colonies of settlement (mixed settlement, plantation, and ethnic plantation) in its conquering of both land and labor (a condition that ineluctably shapes identity and brings about the erasure and negation of the other) dictated from the start the expulsion of Palestinians.

The shift from the “ethnic plantation colony,” the form Zionist colonization took at the beginning to the pure-settlement colony, which has characterized the Israeli state and nation building since 1904 with the second wave of Jewish European “immigration” had serious implications and led to the Nakba (for details see Shafir 1989. For the various colonial settlements types see Peterburge 2007).

The ethnic plantation colony is based on land control, similar to the mixed settlement and plantation colony, yet “unlike the plantation colony, it employed local rather than imported labor, [and] in distinction to the miscegenation prevalent in the mixed colony, it possessed a full-blown European national identity and opposed ethnic mixture” (Shafir 1989: 9).

The pure settlement colony represents the underlying structural arrangements that have shaped every aspect of the colonial experience since the second wave of Jewish-European settlement in Palestine in 1904. Fredrickson explains that “the pure form, in which European settlers exterminated or pushed aside the indigenous peoples, developed an economy based on white labor, and were thus able in the long run to regain the sense of cultural or ethnic homogeneity identified with a European conception of nationality” (1988: 220-21). Thus, the difference between the ethnic plantation colony and the pure settlement colony resides in labor; in Palestine, this meant a shift from Arab to Jewish labor.

As such, pure settlement colonies involve the conquering not only of land, but of labor as well, excluding the natives from the economy. These colonies, therefore, are “inherently genocidal” (Churchill 1997), rest on the principle of “replacing a nation with another nation and a culture with another culture by means of extermination” (Akash 2002; 2004), and have the “purest form of racist impulse” (Fredrickson 1988: 221).

Colonial Zionism prepared the foundations for the expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs, shaped the Israeli culture that imagined the diaspora Jew, not the Palestinian, as the other (negation of exile), and, therefore, excised the Palestinians from the Jewish European awareness and Zionist discourse (*A land without a people for a people without a land*).

The PLO strategy and the hegemony of the state discourse or the two state solution (at least since 1974 and the adoption of the ten-point plan, or since the late 1950s for Fatah) ignores this fundamental fact (see discussion below).

## 2- Al-Nakba and its consequences

The outcome of uprooting almost a whole nation was not limited to the creation of the refugee problem, and refugee as a new social and political category that composed the majority of the Palestinians. New political, social, economic, and spatial realities were created in which the old regime of power relations and the traditional political elite consisting mainly of competing groups of land-owners and urban elite, collapsed. The disintegration of the traditional elite and the new realities offered a political space for new elite groups to form.

While most Palestinians living in the area controlled by Israel were expelled or dislocated, the West Bank came under direct Jordanian control and was isolated until 1967 from Gaza that came under Egypt’s control. In both areas the composition of local political elite groups would vary since 1948. The aftermath of the 1948 War or *Nakba* led to the creation of four separate realities (and many sub-realities) for the Palestinians where various elite groups would be formed in exile, the West Bank, Gaza, and inside ‘Israel’.

The relationship between and within the political elite in the four areas would determine the politics of the Palestinian national movement and the PLO’s discomfited fate. Although the most obvious tension within the Palestinian movement seemed to have taken place between political organizations and within the institutions of the PLO in exile, some experts stress the “tensions inherent in the dynamics governing the relationship between those sections of Palestinian society that remained on the land (in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza) and those dispersed in other countries, primarily Jordan, Syria and Lebanon” (Tamari 2003).

Prior to 1948 Palestinians did not compose an undifferentiated mass. Sociologically, Palestinians were and remain sharply bifurcated. The *Nakba* and diaspora were and are, therefore, felt and experienced differently across the Palestinian communities. While many prosperous members of the fortunate few managed to deposit and transfer large sums of their wealth, accumulated, before but certainly, during the early 1940's economic recovery, in foreign and Arab banks, the majority retained no more of their property than they inadvertently carried into the cruel exile in the tatters of their battered attire. Although immovable assets and urban buildings constituted two-thirds of the national wealth and were robbed by ruthless conquerors, bank records and estimates of movable assets show that millions of Sterling Pounds were either transferred or have already been deposited in English and Arab banks (see Smith 1984: 117-122).

Not only was exile experienced differently, a few even made fortunes out of the national tragedy. Therefore, many Palestinian communities existed in exile, not one. The separation was geographic, economic, social, and political. Those who acquired employment, especially as civil servants, and investment opportunities of their wealth in the underdeveloped, but oil rich Arab Gulf states, such as Kuwait, grew to form the richest and most influential Palestinian community in exile. Together with their wealth and political sway, the Palestinian community in Kuwait, the real birthplace of Fatah movement, would play a decisive role in the history of the Palestinian national movement and the PLO.

In the West Bank, the Jordanian administration's discriminatory policies and favoritism would deform local economy and produce a dependency of novel form. More advanced in every standard, and "far outdistancing neighboring Arab countries on almost every economic indicator" (Kimmerling and Migdal 2003: 138), the West Bank, mutilated under the new regime, was reduced to no more than a satellite to the impecunious East Bank. After annexing the West Bank, a few of the local political elite retained commitment and remained dedicated to the 'Government of all Palestine' established in Gaza by the former elite attempting to consolidate and extend their power into the new age. "Other prominent Palestinians either retired into obscurity or were absorbed into the political life of the kingdom of Jordan" (Waines 1971: 170). The latter's influence extended throughout the Jordanian governance of the West Bank, delimiting the political spectrum. Despite political oppression, dissent existed, but, at a level narrower than that of Gaza.

A cataclysm of refugees inundating the Gaza Strip altered the local demography in a manner unprecedented. Gaza's population increased three folds, almost seventy percent of whom were newly arriving refugees, becoming one of the most densely populated areas in the world. While 50 percent of Gaza's population lived in refugee camps, "the agricultural lands in the Strip were concentrated in the hands of 19 percent of the original population, who were the only ones able to sustain a living from it."(Jamal 2005:20). Due to deteriorating economic conditions, and the elites' monopoly over land ownership, tension between refugees and the local elite prompted almost immediately reaching severe levels at certain times. Politically, however, and due to the Egyptian political rhetoric, the political spectrum was spectacular- communists, Arab nationalists, Ba'athists, and Islamic groups. Unlike Jordan, Egypt did not annex Gaza, but also neither allowed the "consolidation of a local political force independent of the will of Cairo... [nor] endorse[d] the traditional leadership"(Jamal 2005: 21)

Inside the area controlled by Israel, Arab Palestinians were the odd man out. Not only that they "found themselves on the lowest rung of the social and economic ladder...they became citizens of a state that celebrated its independence around the event that they considered their biggest catastrophe"(Kimmerling and Migdal 2003:169). Facing an overwhelming power, now oppressed minority in their homeland, Palestinians would render Israel's de-Palestinization and de-Arabization policy a total failure. Attesting to a robust non-chauvinist-nationalist tradition that, contrary to Israeli propaganda, preceded Israel's establishment, they marvelously proceeded to take up every possible hue in the political spectrum in order to defend an identity under attack.

In addition to Arab and Arab-identity-oriented movements, Palestinian Arabs would make up the core of the few non-racist Israeli movements such as the Israeli Communist Party. Astounding opposition to Israel's policies led by Al-Ard,

Abna'a Al-Ard, and Abna'a Al-Balad movements would legendarily enter Palestinian history and the history of the Palestinian national movement. Ghassan Kanafani's examination of the "Literature of Resistance" of Palestinians under Israel's military rule illuminates on artistically innovative, nationally and historically conscious writers since 1948. Mahmud Darwish's grand poem "Al-Ard" commemorated the confrontation of "Land Day" of March 30<sup>th</sup> 1976, in which Israel murdered six Palestinians defending their land.

The forcible de-peasantization of the would be refugees, and dispersion of Palestinians induced, among many things, the collapse and demise of the Palestinian political elite that led the Palestinian struggle against Britain and the Zionist movement before 1948. Prior social arrangements such as clan structure, land ownership, and religious clerkship and offices that constituted the power bases of traditional leadership were eliminated by the 1948 War. The Government of All Palestine established by Haj Amin Husseini and former political leaders, was the last attempt to consolidate the traditional elite into the new arrangements but died soon after the war. It was discredited by Palestinians for mishandling resistance, and sanctioned by some Arab regimes, such as Jordan's King Abdullah, that perceived it as a competing force (see Shlaim 1990).

### **Karma Nabulsi**

There is a long and very rich mobilizing tradition of peoples who have organized collectively against their repression in exile over the centuries. Struggles for liberation against tyranny and unrepresentative rule historically, and quite typically, have had a large exile component. It becomes even more pronounced in the cases like that of the Palestinian people who were subjected to ethnic cleansing on such a massive scale. Yet when you cross the borders of your country, and become a refugee, you do not lose your humanity. What I mean here is that you do not become reduced merely to a legal status as a refugee (much as you need to hold fast to that status, since it expresses the absence of particular rights you are claiming as a refugee).

However, at that moment, and from that day forward, your political agency, your role in struggling to overcome that predicament becomes even more essential, more integral as a person, and especially as part of a people. Actually it is this that is at the heart of the Palestinian cause: the Palestinian revolution was created by Palestinian refugees who were insisting on a return to their homes. They were not claiming this right as refugees, but as a people dispossessed altogether: the claim is a collective one. It is important to highlight this point because the liberal model of the state comprised of individuals – refugees – with individual rights neither captures the collective predicament nor solves it. It is as a people with political and civic rights – collective rights – that we struggle to overturn the injustices together. This leads us to the question of political representation of course and - as in any struggle to liberate ourselves - the question of freely representing ourselves as the first step becomes the key challenge we must address together.

It is also why I never much liked the term diaspora, although it is the term that most readily comes to hand. By implication, it denies the political predicament we are in, and of our unity as a people who are seeking to overturn the ethnic cleansing of the Nakba. Accordingly I find the term *Al Shatat* more sympathetic and more inclusive of our current state of affairs. Once Palestinians who are part of the core body politic can return to their homes, and chose to do so, then what remains of those who do not chose to return home (and there will be some) will then make up what will become the Palestinian diaspora. But until that moment, those Palestinians in enforced exile outside of Palestine are the people - and indeed happen to be the majority of the people. So it is vital not to implicitly accept the outcomes of this ethnic cleansing, or the language that has emerged from this violent coercion; one which frames our predicament as being one of "people" inside Palestine, and a "diaspora" with refugees outside of it.

This central quest - to free ourselves and to represent ourselves freely - has been the dual challenge facing Palestinians since the Zionist colonial project began at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The violent combination of colonial and apartheid forces, together with the comprehensive, constant, and brutal repression by the Arab regimes, has meant that the urgent task of Palestinians is to overcome the geographic and physical fragmentation imposed by

ethnic cleansing. This means that those Palestinians under occupation, who under the Oslo framework might have more privileges in terms of political voice (especially in the West Bank), do not claim that voice, or seize the role of representation that belongs to all Palestinians, equally. This is a complex task given the current pressures. But here one takes great heart from the fact that the young generation of Palestinian activists in the West Bank and Gaza are increasingly aware of their responsibilities in this regard, and their understanding of their role as being one of ensuring the voices of the millions who are excluded are indeed heard, and have equal value and weight to their own. Given this analysis, most of my own work, especially since the mid 1990s, has of necessity focused exclusively on exploring and establishing the precise mobilizing and representative mechanisms that can overcome this violent fragmentation, in the study of the philosophy and practices of democratic revolutions of the past and present. My own sense is that we can only overcome our current predicament through the force that the democratic will and mass mobilization of all our people – all – bring to this battle: with their energy, their commitment, and life. It is also because I believe that the struggle, and the land, and the claims to it actually belong to the people, being a committed adherent to the principle of popular sovereignty. This means that our cause cannot be run by an elite or a vanguard or a group who are as unrepresentative as the current few unelected officials currently holding the reins of official power in Ramallah.

### **Sherene Seikaly**

The Oxford American Dictionary defines Diaspora as first and foremost “the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel” and second as “the dispersion of any people from their original homeland.”

The notion of “diaspora” was central to Zionist understandings of the Jewish people as “abnormal.” Three foundational myths (the negation of exile, the return to the land of Israel, and the return to history) constituted Zionism’s colonial settler project (Piterberg, 2001). In understanding de-territorialization as a condition of abnormality, Zionism constructed the territorial nation as the necessary historical subject on the path to self-fulfillment.

I appreciate here Karma Nabulsi’s move away from diaspora when she says: “it denies the political predicament we are in.” I am interested in how we can begin to imagine a politics that demands Palestinian self-determination *in*, liberation *on*, and return *to* the land of Palestine, while dismantling the territorial nation-state as the natural and irreducible form of human collectivity. Seif Dana’s point that “many Palestinian communities existed in exile, not one” is central here. How do we critique the inherited essentialism and elitism of Palestinian nationalism, while still recognizing and demanding the nation-state as an object of struggle?

Zionist scholars explain that the mantra “a land without a people for a people without a land” did not in fact imply that Zionist were unaware that there were *people* on the land of Palestine. They were more precise. Palestinians were not *a people*. These “inhabitants” were disparate, an amalgam, a motley crew. It was the very denial of the Palestinian’s status as a people, a unified collective with legitimate political demands that was the basic infrastructure for British colonial rule. In November 1917, the British government instated its commitment to a Jewish National Home in Palestine through the Balfour Declaration, which pledged to facilitate Jewish immigration and land settlement while promising to safeguard the “civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.” Thus, from its inception, the facilitation of the Zionist enterprise was premised on the invisibility of the native people, who are neither named, nor possess even the potential for political rights. Through the dual policies of land settlement and Hebrew labor, and under the political and economic facilitation of British colonial rule, the Zionist movement began partitioning Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century as farmers and sharecroppers were increasingly dispossessed from their lands and livelihoods.

Despite the denial of their collectivity, Palestinians forged a multiplicity of registers to resist this project of enforced invisibility. These included various efforts of political and economic elites, women, laborers, farmers, villagers youth

and local leaders to mobilize their aspirations and demands for self-determination. These at times disparate efforts found their culmination in the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939 that included national boycotts and armed struggle against both British colonialism and Zionist settlement. British colonial tactics to suppress the revolt such as collective punishment, mass arrests, house demolitions, and torture were painful harbingers of what was to come.

Some Zionist conventional scholarship continues, until today, to portray the *nakba* as a result of Palestinian "political deficiency" and the absence of an adequate "national spirit." For over five decades now, scholars from all walks (Palestinian, American, European, and Israeli) have responded to this blame the victim approach by providing incisive accounts of Palestinian nationalism, urban life, literary and cultural production, populist politics and mobilization, the women's movement, the struggle for labor rights, constructions and experiences of religiosity and much more. Such scholarship has seared a critical light through the accusation that Palestinians lacked the characteristics of a collectivity; that they stood outside of history.

Yet in a sense, historiographic debate continues to revolve around the relentless specter of the nation's success or failure. Has the time now come to begin to imagine stepping out of the nation-state as the ultimate framing device? This labor could potentially allow us to dismantle and transcend the paradigm of Palestinian failure versus Israeli success as a civilizational and developmental fact on the ground. For indeed, the nagging and intrinsic problem that Zionism faced in the 1880s continues apace today: How can the vision of a democratic Jewish state be realized as long as Palestinians live in, around, underneath, or between the borders of the state of Israel? Indeed as Josseph Massad has put it: "Israel's inability to complete its mission of thoroughly colonizing Palestine, of expelling all Palestinians, of "gathering" all Jews in the world in its colony, keeps it uneasy and keeps its project always in the present continuous." Moreover, the question of the authenticity of Palestinian nationalism and collectivity seems to miss a basic point. People struggled against the process of their dispossession from lands that they and their families had continuously resided for hundreds of years, regardless of their adherence or lack thereof to a nineteenth century European understanding of identity as bound to constructed myths and carefully drawn borders.