

## Whither Palestinian Resistance?

### PART III Roundtable on Palestinian Diaspora and Representation

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[This is PART III 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](#). Read the [INTRO](#) and [PART I: Palestinians Organizing in Diaspora](#) and [PART II: A Positive Model or Doomed for Failure?](#)]

- 3. For many Palestinians who had hitherto been involved in the Palestinian Liberation Organization and its associated bodies like the Palestinian National Council, the advent of the peace process and particularly the terms of the Oslo Accords signaled a collapse in a resistance platform and instead a turn to complicit accommodation of Israeli colonialism and apartheid. Do you agree with this sentiment? If so, what factors do you believe contributed to the collapse of the resistance platform and do you believe it can be rehabilitated? If not, what do you believe constitutes a resistance platform today? In either case, how can the Palestinian national body continue its struggle for self-determination in light of the peace process's most recent collapse?**

#### **Naseer Aruri**

The Palestinian struggle for 'independence' or self-determination since the 1967 occupation passed through three stages: Para-military, known as "armed struggle," diplomatic/political, political, and statist. Initially, the armed struggle was declared as the means to establish a single democratic secular state in all of Palestine in which equality among Christians, Muslims and Jews would prevail. That was a short-lived endeavor, which effectively came to an end in the early 1970s. An unwritten agreement was then reached between the PLO and the Arab states, in which the former agreed to tone down its revolutionary rhetoric, give up the "armed struggle," and launch a form of diplomatic struggle jointly with the Arab states in pursuit of a mini-state in the West Bank and Gaza.

The diplomatic struggle proceeded since 1973/74 (Algiers and Rabat summits, which recognized the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people). But while pseudo diplomacy was the major focus of the PLO's work during the 70s, 80s and 90s, there was an important political struggle going on inside the occupied territories. It was the endeavor of civil/political society applying a non-violent struggle under the banner of the Palestinian National Front PNF during the 1970s). Their techniques varied from non-payment of taxes, to boycotts, demonstrations, and other peaceful means designed to not only declare the occupation. For the next two decades, this unwritten agreement, and the search for a "two-state solution," was to consume the combined energies of Palestinians and Arabs.

The third phase is the statist, the search for statehood began with the PLO quest for international recognition, as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, claimed the largest portion of Arab and Palestinian resources, and that came at the expense of fundamental national and human rights, including refugee rights and interests. The PLO was easily enticed to embark on the Oslo process, just as it had been persuaded to enter into the joint diplomatic struggle for a futile two-state solution two decades earlier. Israel's aim was to side-line the

political/civil society struggle going on inside the Occupied Territories. From there the road to Oslo was paved for an unprepared PLO, and the result was the present disaster.

For the millions of Palestinians scattered outside pre-1948 Palestine, Oslo meant that there would never be restitution or a right of return, there would never be adequate representation. For the Palestinians inside Israel, Oslo meant that they would have to accept, for all times, their status as second-class citizens—the cutters of wood and hewers of water.

Oslo succeeded in dismantling the fabric of civil society and destroying its grassroots political struggle. In its place, we now have a state apparatus without a state. Thus, Oslo's biggest damage was the one inflicted on civil society.

Peace may never be at hand as long as the 1948 Nakba is not recognized for what it is—a form of ethnic cleansing, a colonial settler enterprise, which covets the land without the people.

The ultimate goal of the colonial settler regime is to destroy the political and national existence of a whole community of people, and thus deny it the possibility of self-determination. It is a process of politicide, one that has as its ultimate goal the dissolution of the Palestinian people's existence as a legitimate national, social, and economic entity, which may also include partial or total ethnic cleansing."

This is what Israel has been doing to the Palestinian people, persistently between 1948 and the present —destroying the very fabric of the Palestinian nation and obliterating the Palestinian WUJUD (presence).

Of course the so-called peace process could never succeed in these conditions. First, a colonial settler regime is inconsistent with peace and so is the pursuit of politicide. A two-state solution is not in the offing, given the lack of intent to withdraw from occupied land, and to permit any sovereignty other than Israeli on any piece of land lying between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Consequently, a real state in the West Bank and Gaza is simply not in the cards. That also goes for Fayyad's 2011 project.

### **Seif Dana**

Yes. I agree. Actually, a tacit willingness to accommodate the Zionist colonization of Palestine existed since the early 1970s. The quest for a mini-state by the Palestinian elite began much earlier and became possible after this group took over the PLO. The Palestinian elite control of the PLO since 1974 was truly nothing less than a coup d'état .It replaced the liberation discourse that enfolded early Palestinian revolutionary thoughts with the state discourse, which entails not only a tacit recognition of the Zionist colonial scheme, but clearly showed that Palestinian (and Arab) elite shared structural interest with the Israeli elite. This, at least partially, explain not only much about the Oslo era (an agreement intended originally to prepare the foundations for a neo-liberal Middle East rather than achieve alleged peace), but also the futility of all attempts to reform and rehabilitate the PLO. The story of the Palestinian elite in exile since Al-Nakba is important and is worth narrating to understand the sequence of events from 1970 on.

In the aftermath of the Nakba, wealthy and influential Palestinians embarked on economic schemes and extended their economic base to the rest of the Arab world and beyond. The economic success story of the Nakba duly bred Palestinian bourgeoisie is more than just impressive. In less than five years after the Nakba, Palestinian owned firms dominated the Arab economy and were the central player in enormous economic ventures that were regional in scale. The story of the Contracting and Trading Industry (CAT), one of several ventures that operated at the regional level and had international connections, testifies to a significant impact these ventures had on the development of Palestinian and PLO politics later.

It all began with the early 1940s economic recovery when CAT, a Palestinian venture established by the Lebanese businessman residing in Palestine, Emile Bustani, received major construction contracts from the British Army during the war. After the war, CAT extended its operation to the rest of the Middle East, operating in construction of, among many things, oil pipelines and oil installations. In the early 1950s, CAT formed a partnership with the British Motherwell Bridge and Engineering company. The new breed, MotherCat, specializing in refineries construction, pipelines and oil tank farms, was the only one in the world that was capable of providing the kind and size of pipe needed for the Middle East oilfields (Smith 1984: 137).

Successfully performing major construction work for British Petroleum and Shell (such as the construction of the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC) in the early 1950s) CAT's operation extended to all British controlled Arab Gulf States. CAT and MotherCat won "major contracts for the construction of oil pipelines, oil terminals and storage depots, roads, power plants, water-supply installations, port and harbor works, pumping stations and commercial buildings in Kuwait, Qatar, The Emirates and, later, in Saudi Arabia, and Oman as well. In Qatar, CAT obtained a virtual monopoly on foreign trade and construction for the oil industry in the early 1950s" (Ibid: 135).

Scores of Palestinian firms and Palestinian businessmen embarked on other ventures that would also extend their operations to the rest of the Middle East. Investors from the pre-war Arab Bank branch in Haifa would establish the Arabia Insurance Company, with branches in most Arab countries and even in Britain, the Cortas Canning and Refrigeration Company, Al Mashriq Financial Investment Company of Beirut, and the Beirut-based Intra Bank that became the largest financial institution in Lebanon with assets amounting to just under LL 1,000 million (\$325 million) in 1965. In addition to their actual specialization, these corporations would own airlines (Middle East Airline operating from Lebanon), Casinos, publishing houses, radio and TV interests.

The power of this group was not only in being the best and most-fit instrument suitable for a possible integration of the Arab economy, but also in their access to political power in Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Lebanon, Libya, Bahrain, and their political involvement in Palestinian politics and PLO since the beginning. Fuad Saba of the Arab Bank and the founder of the Al Mashriq Financial Institution that handled businesses for CAT, Arabia Insurance, and other Palestinians owned firms, was responsible for setting up the Palestine National Fund and was appointed Secretary of the Arab Higher Committee (Ibid: 132-3). Emile Bustani's death in a crash while campaigning for the presidency in Lebanon, in addition to other seemingly unexplainable accidental deaths of several Palestinian businessmen initiated many conspiracy theories regarding their fate. The Palestinian elite not only created a structure for a possible economic integration of the Arab world, but assumed that they have successfully integrated into the Arab surroundings.

The success of the Palestinian bourgeoisie in exile, engrossing the envy of rising local bourgeoisie in the recently independent Arab countries, led to a series of new measures adopted by the Arab countries favoring compatriots for holding supervisory positions in the economy, and local companies, rather than Palestinian owned firms, for major contractual work. Such a strategy would stabilize these regimes and eliminate such structures that might make Arab unity in the future conceivable. Many Arab countries amended their agreements with oil corporations giving priorities to their nationals to hold key positions in oil ventures, while others, like Kuwait, gave this favoritism the power of the law as in the 1965 Industrial Law. In the exceptional cases in which Palestinian firms could still acquire contracts and were allowed to operate, they were required, as foreigners, to pay hefty fees. The new measures coupled with the nationalization of firms, resources, and assets in many countries such as Iraq after the Qasem revolution, Syria and Libya, and even arrest of Palestinian businessmen as in the case of Libya, bankrupted many of these firms, while others lost holdings to rising Arab businesses, especially in the Arab Gulf states.

The last of these pernicious measures took place in Jordan. Forced by the decision made during the Arab Summit Conference held in Rabat, Morocco, in 1974 to recognize the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and following the failure of the United Arab Kingdom initiative to unite the West and East Bank,

King Hussein temporarily abandoned his quest for controlling the West Bank and embarked on the program of Jordanizing the East Bank. As a result, influential Palestinians lost their powerful political posts in the government and civil administration. Thus, "Palestinian merchants, financiers, and industrialists who depended on the government for contracts and funds found themselves at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* their Jordanian rivals" (Ibid: 142). Losing ground in exile, many prosperous businessmen and ex-Jordanian loyalists switched allegiance to the PLO. The Palestinian bourgeoisie began their long quest for a state of their own, and the PLO was the effective instrument.

It is fair to conclude that the PLO did not really fail, miserably one might say, but enfolded the seeds of failure from the beginning. The destiny of diaspora activism was ill-fated from the beginning as well. . It failed to either contribute to the national liberation scheme or community building in the diaspora. Entwined structurally and politically with that of the PLO's scheme, the fate of the diaspora activism was sealed.

### **Karma Nabulsi**

Not to be too dialectical, but this same strategy to free ourselves and to represent ourselves freely is also the same self-mobilizational mechanism to unite ourselves. This is why a reconciliation of the factions (although always welcome), neither addresses nor solves the Palestinian predicament. Without the force of the popular will coming together in the equivalent of our own national public square, we cannot liberate ourselves. As this core aim is what binds us, the calls for direct elections to the PNC has taken new life. And I am confident, within the fold of the Arab revolutions that are currently underway, that it will succeed.

Many other strategies and frameworks that have either distracted us from our national responsibilities, or have not been able to have the strong effect they must, can function properly when emerging directly from a body comprised of the people themselves. It is here, too, that the early revolutionary generations' work can provide useful models. Our people, as we know, possess an extraordinary amount of talent, determination, and courage. Within a loose framework of the institutional unity that the PNC provides, all of these independent initiatives and gestures, all the civic activities in the realm of intellectual initiatives, of student activism, of workers' mobilizations, of culture production, of collective and individual enterprises and campaigning, of resistance through popular and legal strategies, can take both strength and direction. For we absolutely need this kind of intellectual, ideological, and sectoral pluralism, this vitality, this debate and contestation within the national architecture of our liberation struggle.

Here, the differences and divergences become a real strength, rather than simply adding to our current fragmentation and frustration. In our own revolutionary history at its best, and in every revolution's history, it is within the collective framework that the unique contributions of each find their home inside the collective. For me, this is the essence of political freedom.

### **Sherene Seikaly**

Nasser Aruri makes a powerful point in reminding us of the PLO's shift from armed struggle, to pseudo diplomacy, to pseudo state strategies. I would add here that there the Arab spring offers some lessons and reminders for the course of Palestinian politics. Grassroots mass mobilization was the force that inspired, executed, and undertook the uprisings and revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt. We are now witnessing various leadership figures scrambling to catch up to the will and strength of popular demand. Similarly, in 1936 the elite Palestinian leadership was at pains to harness the popular resistance to British colonialism and Zionist settlement. In the 1970s and later with the beginning of the *intifada* grassroots organizing led and the political leadership followed in the struggle against the occupation. This is the case today as broad efforts in the West Bank and Gaza and beyond call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions. As we witness the unlikely sight of courageous Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese lining that invented and impermeable border that has interrupted lives and families, the possibility of another moment of popular politics is upon us.