



PERSPECTIVES

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Palestinians and Internationalization: Means and Ends

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: From the 1920s to the present, Palestinian elites have called for Muslim, Arab, and other forms of international support in order to situate their cause at the head of emerging trends and movements. Internationalization has also served as a means to nationalize the Palestinian masses. But in the process, Palestinians have repeatedly ceded control to outside forces and interests, from Arab, pan-Arab, and revolutionary nationalists, to today's anti-globalization red-green alliance, which have manipulated Palestinian nationalism for their own ends. The root cause of this process is weak Palestinian national identity.

The boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement represents itself as a grassroots Palestinian effort to mobilize global support against Israel. In reality, it is a loosely coordinated effort by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Muslim Brotherhood, and the global left, purporting to speak in the name of the Palestinian people. In American parlance this is "Astroturf," a fake grassroots movement.

This latest iteration of elite Palestinian efforts to internationalize their conflict with Jews, Zionism, and Israel is emblematic of the Palestinian elites' century-long effort to mobilize international support in place of, and as a means of, nationalizing the Palestinian masses. In the process, however, they lost control over these processes, which became partially driven by the political needs and inherent anti-Semitism of Arab and Islamic countries, as well as by global geopolitics.

Internationalization was evident from as far back as the 1920s, the early age of pan-Muslim and anti-colonial politics. The emerging narrative of "al Aqsa is in danger" from the Jerusalem Mufti Amin Husseini saw a global fundraising

campaign to restore the mosques atop the Temple Mount that emphasized the threat allegedly posed by Jewish encroachment. As head of the Supreme Muslim Council, the Mufti orchestrated the Western Wall disturbances of 1929 and an Islamic conference that met in Jerusalem in 1931.

The general strike orchestrated by the Mufti at the beginning of the 1936-39 mass violence included a call for Arab intervention. Though this was unlikely, the prospect unnerved the British authorities and prevented the imposition of martial law, saving the rebels and prolonging the conflict. Criticism from Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his All-India Muslim League carried particular weight with Britain.

Though the Peel Commission, established in response to the Palestine violence, proposed to abandon the League of Nations mandate for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine and to partition the land into two states – one Jewish and the other Arab, the idea was vehemently rejected by the Mufti, who intensified the rampaging violence. The Bludan Conference of 1937 was one result, which featured leading Arab nationalist figures such as Riad al-Sulh of Lebanon and Muhammad Ali Alluba Pasha from Egypt. The conference called for a boycott against all “Jewish goods and activities” and against those of Britain. It was followed by a second, secret conference of Arab nationalists in Damascus and conferences in Cairo and Brussels in 1938. In all these, the Palestinian question was much discussed but mostly acted as an instrument for other nationalist movements. The Palestine issue was at once central and nominal.

In the age of pan-Arabism, there was similar interplay between the question of Palestine and the needs of Arab states. The creation of the Arab League in 1945 formally put the Palestinian issue at center stage. Among its first acts was to boycott Jews in Arab countries where they had lived for millennia. Another Bludan conference in 1946 included a call from the Mufti’s Arab Higher Committee for the Arab states to commit themselves to creating a unified army to prevent a Jewish state. Yet Arab leaders demurred, until the outbreak of civil war between Palestinians and Jews in 1947 began to force their hand. Military intervention, disaster, disgrace, and dispossession followed.

During the period of revolutionary nationalism, the Palestinian desire to broaden the conflict by enlisting Arab and Muslim allies was behind the Arab League’s creation of the PLO in 1964. But Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser was the real force behind the organization’s founding, and it was the KGB that maneuvered Yasser Arafat and his Fatah movement into leadership of the PLO after 1967. Liberating Palestine through “armed struggle” – the PLO’s euphemism for terrorism (and to a minor extent guerrilla warfare) – represented a form of magical thinking, but the “romantic” notion of revolutionary Palestinian nationalism, guided and funded by external forces, shaped the Palestinian nation and set back the cause of coexistence with Israel for decades.

The PLO was positioned as the quintessential liberation movement during the era of anti-imperial and anti-colonial warfare, and entered into alliances with the African National Congress, SWAPO, the Sandinistas, and a host of other “indigenous” movements. But standing behind these were the Soviet Union and its satellites, which provided training, funding, and support for what were essentially proxy wars against the US and its allies. The Palestinian cause quickly took center stage from most movements except the South African cause, while constructing a kleptocracy centered around Arafat and his inner circle. International terrorism and bloody low-intensity warfare were the primary results. West Bank and Diaspora Palestinians were relegated to a secondary position, even after the Oslo Accords.

Another direct variation of the internationalization scheme was the coopting of the UN system, the centerpiece of postwar liberal internationalism. By riding the crest of Third Worldism, anti-imperialism, and anti-colonialism (trends backed in part by the Soviet Union), and with the explicit backing of Arab, Muslim, and Communist states, the “Palestine Question” became a central focus of the UN system from the mid-1960s onward.

UNRWA, of course, has been the health, education, and welfare arm of the Palestinians since 1950. But numerous other parts of the UN system provide moral, legal, and practical support. The General Assembly’s support for the Palestinians began in 1969 and 1970 with Resolution 2535, which “reaffirms the inalienable rights of the people of Palestine;” and 2672, which also states Palestinian “inalienable rights” and which added the “Question of Palestine” to the General Assembly’s agenda in 1974 (where it has remained to this day).

Other UN resolutions lent practical support: 3375 recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization as the “representative of the Palestinian people,” 3376 created the “Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People,” and 3379 “Determine[d] that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.” All three were passed on the same day in 1975. Resolution 3240 in 1977 created the Special Unit on Palestinian Rights within the UN Secretariat and the “International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.” Renamed the Division of Palestinian Rights, this unit supports the “Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People” through international meetings, liaison with NGOs, studies and bulletins, and training programs.

Support for the Palestinian cause is provided by more than 50 other committees or offices, including the Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, the Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories, disengagement observer and truce forces, the Human Rights Committee and the Human Rights Council, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the Committee on

Jerusalem, the Register of Damage caused by the Construction of the Wall, the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices, the “Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the OPT,” and the Conciliation Commission for Palestine, founded in 1948. The absurd degree to which Palestine dominates the UN is reflected by the Fourth Committee, which deals with “a variety of subjects which include those related to decolonization, Palestinian refugees and human rights, peacekeeping, mine action, outer space, public information, atomic radiation and University for Peace.”

Finally, in the age of leftist anti-globalization, there is the BDS movement. Ostensibly a product of the 2001 UN World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban; the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) of 2004; and the 2005 “Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS;” the true origins of the movement go back at least to the 1940s. The Arab League boycott and American Arab anti-Zionism are important foundations, as are the contributions of the General Union of Palestinian Students (founded in Cairo in 1959 to make Palestine the focus of Arab student life in the Middle East and then Europe) – out of which Students for Justice in Palestine emerged in 2000.

But the contributions of the New Left and especially the Jewish left of the late 1960s and 1970s (partially co-opted by the KGB and the PLO), and the American Muslim Brotherhood network, which has effectively taken over American Muslim institutions since the 1980s, cannot be ignored. The Communist-backed Palestine Solidarity Campaign, founded in London in 1982, and the Hamas (and thus Brotherhood) creation of the Palestine Return Centre in Britain in 1986, are also important.

The BDS movement is thus a red-green synthesis in which Palestinians are figureheads. Arguably, the movement is merely the spearhead of a larger anti-Western juggernaut, in which the dialectic between Communism and Islam remains unresolved. In this sense, the Palestinian cause matters little, except as a means to gain entry and thus dominate institutions such as the UN, international labor, churches, and educational systems. Shared anti-Zionism is a thin fig leaf for shared anti-Semitism and anti-liberalism, messages consumed with increasing vigor by hollowed out Western institutions.

But why internationalization? Early episodes had the benefit of honesty regarding motives and audiences. Pan-Islamic and pan-Arab rhetoric expressed fundamental ethnic and religious objections to Jewish nationalism, which both compensated for the lack of local national identities and, in turn, helped generate and define them. Jewish nationalism and Jewish sovereignty defied religiously mandated Muslim supremacy, and imperial ethnic requirements that demanded Arab domination. But the cost of internationalization was handing key levers for

Palestinian identity and self-determination over to Arab and then international leaders, who gave lip service to the cause of Palestine but who had other agendas. Arab politics were in turn chained to pressure from the “Arab street” about Palestine; activated by demagoguery, it could support or undermine local leaders.

Subsequent variations of internationalization grafted Palestinian nationalism onto ascending international tides and movements: nationalism, Third Worldism, international organizationalism, human rights, as well as “resistance” and terrorism. Gradually, elements of these were incorporated into Palestinian national identity; they sustain and define Palestine to a degree not seen with other ethno-national groups. And in turn, partly because Palestinian nationalism appeals to latent anti-Semitism, each of these tides and movements was converted to the Palestinian cause. In the process, their effectiveness and credibility were undermined.

At the heart of Palestinian internationalization is a weak Palestinian national identity that is in constant need of support from other causes and other rhetoric. Palestinian nationalism is secondary or reactive, coming into being notionally as part of larger waves of nationalization but mostly as a negative response to Zionism. Until positive dimensions are developed that take the movement beyond “resistance,” “steadfastness,” and anti-Semitism, Palestinian internationalization is likely to continue.

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