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The Palestinian national movement
From self-rule to statehood

Ahmad Samih Khalidi

Over the span of a hundred years or so, from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first, the Palestinian national movement has been woven of many strands – a patchwork of various ideological and political influences, social and religious impulses, and proactive and reactive forces taking shape and evolving with the passage of different circumstances and under the impact of varying local and international conditions.

The attempt to pinpoint a specific beginning may be as fruitless as it is uninstructive. As with most modern nationalisms and their Middle Eastern variants, the national movement that emerged from the soil of Arab Palestine did not begin to take tangible political form until the turn of the twentieth century. This is not to deny a strong pre-existing sense of locale or territorial belonging, or that of a broader, if amorphous ‘Palestinian’ persona or identity – particularly among the educated and politically conscious elite. But this persona was also complex and multilayered, its varied threads comprising anti-Turkish Arabism, ‘Modernist’ Ottomanism, Islamist reformist tendencies, and pan-Arab and Greater Syrian nationalism – all with a different weight and impact at different times.

These sometimes contesting and at other times converging forces provided the underlay for other later influences. Indeed, it is arguable whether there is any one real ‘movement’ that can be ascribed to the Palestinian Arab population until well after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and the dramatic emergence of a new external twin threat – that of Zionism and its eventual sponsor, the British Mandate.

The subsequent development and direction of the Palestinian national movement has been addressed elsewhere repeatedly and at length. Rather than provide yet another narrative, the main body of this essay will focus on a number of specific and related themes in respect of Palestinian political demands and aspirations that run through the period until the end of the British Mandate. The emphasis will be less on who the Palestinians are (were) and more on what did the Arab population of Palestine – or those who claimed to speak on their behalf – want.

As will be seen, Palestinian political demands emerged slowly after the First World War, fired essentially by the notion of self-determination for the prevailing Arab majority and freedom from foreign rule. This took on an ever shifting and expanding aspect, from the relatively modest call for self-rule under the British Mandate to the demand for full independence and
statehood by the late 1940s, culminating in the abortive experiment of the All Palestine Government in October 1948. In a short postscript, the final part of this essay will touch upon the emergence of the contemporary (post-1948) Palestinian movement and its eventual move away from full ‘liberation’ back to the notion of sovereign statehood – albeit in only part of the Palestinian national patrimony.

Home-rule to national government

The intertwined challenges of emergent Zionism and British Mandatory rule (armed with the mission of establishing a ‘homeland for the Jewish people’, as ordained by the 1917 Balfour Declaration and subsequently endorsed by the League of Nations) elicited an evolving if amorphous and multifaceted political resistance. The Palestinian Arabs’ postwar efforts at articulating their demands were largely uncoordinated and scattered. They took the form of petitions, memoranda directed at the new British conquerors, and an increasingly vocal press campaign led by the more active and educated urban sectors of society, the effective if self-appointed representatives of the Arab population of Palestine at the time.

While local Arab awareness of Zionism and protests against its associated manifestations of land settlement and immigration preceded the First World War, a number of new themes emerged with the defeat of the Turks and the prospects of a new regional and global order fired by Allied promises to the Arabs (and other peoples) of independence and self-determination. A prominent such theme was to assert the primacy of the Arab-Muslim historic claim to Palestine and to decry the denial of the Arab majority’s political rights in favour of the small Jewish minority as implicit in the Balfour Declaration. But manifest right from the start was the demand for some form of freedom to self-government – variously termed ‘home rule’ (hukumah ahliyyah), ‘self-rule’ (hukum dhati) or ‘national government’ (hukumah wataniyyah).

As early as 1918, a petition from one of the numerous Muslim–Christian Associations that sprang up after the war in the first attempts at local representation expressed the fear that the native Arab majority’s aspirations would be ignored, and it called for the Arabs to be given a say in determining their future:

Palestine is Arab, inhabited by over three million Muslims and Christians, whereas the national [Arabic: wataniyeen] Jews number no more than twenty thousand of whom around half are settlers (who have become Arabs) . . . How is it thus conceivable that the minority should be granted self-rule and that Palestine should be considered their homeland? . . . We have also taken note of the official declaration made by the great powers of Britain and France . . . whose message is that the object of these two aforementioned powers is the final liberation of those peoples who have been oppressed by the Turks and the establishment of home rule and interests based on the authority on the free choice of their national citizens. And as we are the nationals, the owners of this land, we call upon you not to make any decision regarding the fate of Palestine before consulting us in the belief that the state of Great Britain that saved us from the Turks will not hand us over to the Jews.

The appeal is noteworthy in its territorial designation of ‘Palestine’ as the locus of the demand for home rule without a clear definition of its borders, but implicitly including all the lands then designated as such by the British military authorities. But, while the sense of injustice and grievance at the terms of the Balfour Declaration was widespread both inside and outside Palestine, the demand for home or self-rule was at apparent odds with the strong pan-Arab and
pan-Syrian sentiments that emerged at roughly the same time from the Hashemite-led revolt against the Turks. However, pan-Syrian Palestinian sentiment (which maintained a residual hold on significant sectors of educated Palestinian opinion for some time to come) was largely contingent on the fortunes of the Hashemite thrust for Arab independence in the Levant. With the French colonial defeat of Feisal’s experiment in Damascus in summer 1920, the Palestinian Arabs began to talk more explicitly of their local political and territorial demands centring on Palestine itself.

The Third Palestinian Arab Congress in December 1920 comprised a broad selection of Palestinian notables and public personalities and marked a distinct new phase in the development of a national movement that supplanted the religiously based Muslim–Christian Associations. In a more refined version of ‘home rule’, the Congress upgraded its demands for Great Britain to agree to a national government accountable to a parliamentary assembly whose members are to be elected by the Arabic-speaking peoples who were living in Palestine until the beginning of the [First World] War, in fulfillment of its lofty principles that it seeks to implement in Arabic-speaking Iraq and Transjordan, and as a reinforcement of the deep seated goodwill between it and the entire Arab nation.³

If Iraq and Transjordan and other ‘formerly subjugated peoples’ were worthy of ‘a national government’, there could be no good reason to deny this to the Palestinian Arabs. This was shortly followed up with the call for a new constitution that ‘allows the people to run their own internal affairs with the help of the supporting [British] state’, and that includes ‘full religious freedoms and equality [for Arabs and Jews] to be guaranteed in a manner that cannot be revoked or changed by any Palestinian parliament’ as well as – what is possibly the first Palestinian claim to a national armed force – ‘a land force to be designated to a national gendarmerie that would thus save the British treasury large amounts of money’.⁴

But the demands for a ‘national government’ were caught in a trap. The Palestinian Arabs adamantly refused to participate in any form of government, premised on the terms of the Balfour Declaration, that required the establishment of a Jewish national home – as offered by the British. For their part, the British refused to deal with any Palestinian national political demands until the terms of the Mandate (and thus the Balfour Declaration) had been accepted. This set up a vicious circle that irked both sides.⁵

After an outbreak of Arab–Jewish violence in 1920 and 1921, and in partial appeasement of Arab concerns, the British opted to offer the Arabs a measure of religious rather than political authority, centring on the newly appointed mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, and the Supreme Muslim Council of which he was made head. Husseini’s British-aided entry into national politics eventually swept him into the position of leader of the Palestinian national movement and combined spiritual and political leader of the Palestinians for the next two decades. The mufti’s growing role helped to infuse Palestinian politics with an Islamist hue that was to carry over into the post-1948 era.

Towards ‘independence’

As the British Mandate took hold after 1922, the first glimmerings of a change in the Palestinian demands began to appear. In appealing to the ‘civilized world’, and in what seemed to be a step up from the demand for self-rule or national government, the Palestine Delegation called on the League of Nations to ‘recognize the independence [emphasis added] of Palestine, the same
as her sister states, in accordance with the pledges given to the Arabs and in the interest of the Covenant of the League and of justice and peace.  

The exact lexicon of Palestinian Arab demands was not always consistent; self-rule and self-government were often conflated, confused or otherwise merged with the notion of parliamentary rule and, latterly, ‘independence’, with no clear distinction between them. The evolution of these demands was also a reflection of the manner in which Zionist national goals were perceived and how they were being implemented on the ground, separately or under perceived British sponsorship. But the theme of independence began to take firmer grip after the late 1920s, and in particular after the 1929 riots over the Wailing Wall. As the Arabs’ immediate attention was drawn towards combating Jewish claims to contested religious sites, and against Zionist immigration and land sales, the desire for ‘independence’ was reflected in the programmes of the new political parties that sought to capture Palestinian aspirations and which now began to dominate the Palestinian political landscape.

The ‘Arab Independence Party’ (also known as the Istiqlalists), founded in 1932, included a number of well-known Palestinian and Arab political personalities and figures. It called for the establishment of ‘Arab parliamentary rule in Palestine’ and described its beliefs as ‘(a) The total independence of all the Arab countries. (b) The Arab countries are an integral whole that brooks no division. (c) Palestine is an Arab land and is a natural part of Syria.’ This territorial equivocation between ‘independence’ and ‘Arab unity’ is seemingly contradictory. Yet, for the pan-Arab Istiqlalists (and other pan-Arabists), there was no such contradiction, based on the assumption that all the Arab lands should eventually be united under independent Arab rule. For the Istiqlalists, the struggle for ‘independence’ was necessarily directed against the British, who formed the main impediment to such a goal.

Other parties had other ideas. The escalating conflict with the Zionist movement produced a number of currents vying for Palestinian representation and leadership. One such current, led by the Jerusalemite Nashashibi family, coalesced under the rubric of the National Defense Party (NDP). Its December 1934 founding document sought ‘independence for Palestine in such a manner that ensures that it will have Arab sovereignty, and the non-recognition of any international conventions that lead to any form of foreign control or external influence, or any political or administrative situation that derogates from such independence’.

A major rival to the NDP (and the Istiqlalists) was the Arab Palestinian Party (APP), established by Haj Amin al-Husseini’s nephew and right-hand man, Jamal Husseini, in March 1935. The APP echoed the programme of the NDP in calling for ‘the independence of Palestine’ and added an explicit demand for an end to the Mandate as part of its basic constitution. The APP also called for ‘safeguarding Palestine’s Arab character and combating the establishment of a national home for the Jews’ and, in a clear signal of its pan-Arab sympathies, declared that its goals comprised ‘binding Palestine to the Arab states in a totally independent pan-national political union’. Other minor political parties, such as the small Nablus-based National Bloc Party (NBP) and the Arab Palestinian Reform Party (APRP), established in Jerusalem by Hussein Khalidi, also took varying and nuanced positions on the balance between national independence and pan-Arabism. But the call for ‘independence’ was a common and central theme to all the main parties.

Whereas they largely failed to develop into effective mass popular organizations, these emerging political parties nonetheless jointly represented the various shades of the Palestinian national movement at the time. The collective call for independence was a natural reaction to the Arab majority’s concern that it would become a minority under Zionist rule mixed with pan-Arab aspirations and a more localized demand for self-government. Faced with conflicting demands, the British began to refine the notion of a Legislative Council and sought to provide
the Arabs with a political outlet via a limited form of self-rule, but without any readiness on
their part to meet crucial Arab demands on a halt to land sales to the Jews and Jewish
immigration.

By the late 1930s the political situation in Palestine was heading towards deadlock and esca-
lating violence, partly in response to the failure of the British Legislative Council’s proposals
and partly on account of developments in Syria, where the national movement had just suc-
cessfully renegotiated the terms of the French Mandate after a series of strikes and demonstra-
tions. In the context of the Palestinians’ primary concerns regarding the pace of Jewish
immigration and land acquisition, together with their broader fears of national dispossession,
the climate was combustible. The result was the general strike leading to the Arab revolt of
1936–9.

Independence to statehood

As a series of local strikes gathered pace and transformed into a general strike in early 1936, ani-
mated and encouraged by the Istiqlalists and fired by the example of armed resistance offered
by Izz ad-Din al-Qassam (the Islamist Syrian preacher who led an abortive armed rebellion
against the British and became a subsequent nationalist and Islamist icon), the most notable
development on the Palestinian political front was the establishment of the Arab Higher
Committee (AHC), made up of the five main Palestinian political parties, other smaller group-
ings and a number of leading independent figures, with Haj Amin al-Husseini as its president
(he also retained his post as head of the Supreme Muslim Council). The AHC thus took on the
role of political representative of the Palestinian Arabs and the body speaking on their behalf.

The call for independence appeared clearly in the AHC’s Memorandum submitted to the
Royal (Peel) Commission regarding its recommendations for partition in July 1937. In expres-
sing its adamant opposition to the notion of partition, the AHC urged the British government
to recognize that the

only solution compatible with justice and a true desire for peace in the land must be based
on the following principles (1) the recognition of the right of the Arabs to complete inde-
pendence in their own land; (2) the cessation of the experiment of the Jewish National
Home; (3) the cessation of the of the British Mandate and its replacement by a treaty simi-
lar to treaties existing between Britain and Iraq, Britain and Egypt and between France and
Syria, creating in Palestine a sovereign state [emphasis added]; (4) the immediate cessation of
all Jewish immigration and of land sales to Jews pending the negotiation and conclusion of
the treaty.10

Most striking, however, is the clear reference to a ‘sovereign state’ in a new reformulation of
Palestinian political demands that stressed statehood as a strategic objective. But the political
momentum appears to have been lost against the backdrop of continued large-scale Arab–
Jewish strife in Palestine and harsh British repression of the Arab revolt. In late 1937, the mufti
escaped British arrest and went into exile, and the AHC was riven with splits and divisions.
Meanwhile, the British government began to search increasingly desperately for a solution as
the situation in Europe darkened. In early 1938, the British convened the St James’s Confer-
ence in London, attended by Palestinian representatives. More significantly, there were delega-
tions from Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Transjordan, thus marking the first stage of
the process whereby the ultimate say on Palestine gradually shifted away from the Palestinian
national movement and towards the Arab states.

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The British White Paper of May 1939 set a cap on Jewish immigration, limited land sales, and effectively reneged on the Balfour Declaration. Its most important clause, however, called for the establishment, ‘within ten years, of an independent Palestinian state [emphasis added] in such treaty relations with the United Kingdom’ and in which ‘Arabs and Jews share in government in such a way as to ensure that the essential interests of each community are safeguarded’. Despite the far-reaching nature of this proposal, it was rejected by both the Arab states and the AHC, mostly on the grounds that independence, as offered, was contingent on Jewish consent. The AHC also objected to the fact that the trajectory to independence was reversible if the British authorities deemed this necessary. It was, of course, vehemently opposed by the Zionist movement, as it seemed to block the path to a Jewish state, the primary Zionist strategic objective.

The White Paper was eventually overtaken by the outbreak of the Second World War only a few months later. The political/diplomatic process in Palestine was largely suspended for the duration of the conflict (although Jewish terrorist activities against the British and Arabs escalated). Meanwhile, the AHC had been dispersed and effectively disbanded, and the Palestinian cause came increasingly to be determined by the positions and actions of the Arab states.

Between the establishment of the Arab League in 1945 and the 1947 UN partition plan, the Arab states unequivocally adopted the Palestinian demands for a fully independent state. Arab efforts to head off partition at the UN took their most elaborate form in a detailed blueprint for a unitary Palestinian state that was put to the 1946 London Conference convened by the British as a last-ditch attempt to resolve the Palestine problem. The plan called for a transitional Arab–Jewish government, made up of four Arab and three Jewish ministers appointed by the British High Commissioner, to prepare for the election of an Arab–Jewish ‘Founding Council’. This would draft a constitution for the new state on the following basis: 1) that the state of Palestine would be a unitary state; 2) that it would have a democratic constitution and an elected parliament; and 3) that the constitution would offer guarantees of the sanctity and preservation of the Holy places and freedom of access and worship to them as currently existed.

The Arab plan also included citizenship for all those who had been legal residents of Palestine for the previous ten years, the use of Hebrew as an official second language, a maximum of 30 per cent of parliamentary seats for the Jewish population, a ban on further Jewish immigration, curtailed land sales, and any changes to the guarantees and rights of the Jewish population to be ratified by a majority of the Jewish members of parliament.

Speaking on behalf of a newly reconstituted (by the Arab League) AHC, the mufti welcomed Arab support for ‘independence and national sovereignty’ but suggested that the plan needed to be modified, as it was unduly generous to the Jewish minority, whose numbers did not warrant a 3:4 ratio of participation in government. Effectively, however, the plan represented the most advanced Arab–Palestinian version of an independent Palestinian state pre-1948. But this new formulation was largely academic. Since the 1942 Biltmore programme, the Zionist movement had already made clear its intention to establish a Jewish state and was in no mood to consider anything less in Palestine. And the international community, spearheaded by the USA, was heading rapidly towards partition.

All Palestine Government

As the Arab states took command of the Palestine issue after 1945, the Palestinian cause became increasingly subject to inter-Arab rivalries, primarily between Egypt and Transjordan, but with Iraq and Syria as other major players. Consequently, the Palestinians (and the AHC) lost much of their autonomy and control over their political fate. For his part, the mufti sought to
manoeuvre between the competing Arab powers, leaning largely on Egypt to thwart Transjordanian ambitions and to prevent King Abdullah of Jordan (with whom he had relations of mutual enmity and profound suspicion) from annexing any part of Palestine to his kingdom.

Britain’s announcement in September 1947 that it was going to withdraw from Palestine prompted the mufti to call upon the Arab League to set up a Palestinian government-in-exile, but to no avail. This demand was to be repeated and rejected several times between late 1947 and May 1948, as were the mufti’s calls for the appointment of Palestinian military governors or even a loan to cover AHC expenses. Palestinian weaknesses, inter-Arab competition and British pressure on account of London’s deep antipathy towards the mufti meant that, as the Mandate came to an end on 15 May, the AHC had little if any effective administration, military force or means of government on the ground in Palestine – in sharp contrast to their Zionist antagonists, who had already gone on the offensive.

Slowly, and in response to the evident supremacy of the Zionist forces in the field and the growing distress and forceful displacement of the Palestinian Arabs, the Arab League began to move towards endorsement of an independent Palestinian government. First, a ‘temporary civil administration’ was set up in July 1948, despite strong Jordanian reservations, British opposition and Palestinian discontent at what was seen as a half measure. In September, a subsequent decision (led by Cairo and directed mostly against Amman) was taken to set up a twelve-man All Palestine Government (APG), under the premiership of the former AHC Jerusalemite member Ahmad Hilmi Abdelbaqi, to be based in Gaza, then under full Arab (Egyptian) military control. In the first of a series of similar declarations of ‘independence’ that presaged what was to follow some decades later, the AHC declared that

the inhabitants of Palestine, by virtue of their natural right to self-determination and in accordance with the resolutions of the Arab League, have decided to declare Palestine in its entirety . . . as an independent state under a government known as the All-Palestine Government which is based on democratic principles.15

The decision elicited joy and hope among the Palestinians, and in particular the growing refugee population, and the mufti – defying Cairo’s will – ended his eleven-year exile by turning up in Gaza to rapturous popular welcome. The AHC/APG set about trying to rebuild some semblance of Palestinian military capability and sought to elicit international recognition from the UN. It issued several thousand ‘Palestinian’ passports and convened a National Council against ferocious Transjordanian opposition, passed a provisional constitution, designated a national flag and declared Jerusalem as its capital. And it asserted the right of the Palestinian people to a ‘free sovereign and democratic state, with its borders defined as Syria and Lebanon in the North, Syria and Transjordan in the East, the Mediterranean in the West and Egypt in the South’.

But the APG was doomed from the start. Confronted with Transjordanian rejection, international indifference, lukewarm Arab support, inter-Arab competition, minimal military muscle and no real political reach into the Palestinian heartland, as well as an overwhelmingly superior Israel-Zionist foe, the entire experiment in independent Palestinian statehood veered rapidly towards a virtual space somewhere between farce and tragedy.

The upshot was that Transjordan effectively imposed itself on the ground on what was to become the West Bank partly by disarming the APG’s armed (Jihad Muqadass – Holy War) forces in the areas allocated to the kingdom by dint of the tacit understanding between the newly declared State of Israel and the king. Most critical, however, was a large-scale Israeli offensive in October that drove the Egyptian army out of its positions in most of southern
Palestine. The mufti was recalled to Cairo, the APG fell apart, and in December 1948 the now leaderless, powerless and broken Palestinians responded to a National Congress called by Abdullah, who duly proclaimed the union of what remained of Palestine and Jordan.

The APG represented the highest point of Palestinian political aspirations after 1917, but matched with the least potential for their fulfilment. The notion of an independent and unitary Palestinian state in 1948 was the culmination of a gradual evolution of Palestinian political demands and their most developed and ‘modern’ manifestation – a self-conscious echo of the similar demands of all the other Arab peoples – indeed, of the Zionist movement itself. But the prospects of independent statehood in the prevailing circumstances were negligible if not non-existent. Whether the Palestinians could have done otherwise is open to debate. That they failed to achieve any of what they sought – or those who purported to speak on their behalf said they wanted – over thirty years of struggle before 1948 is not.

**Epilogue**

The 1948 Nakba left Palestinian society pulverized, its people dispersed, its land occupied, its leadership discredited and broken. With the mufti fading into irrelevance, the APG held on to its seat at the Arab League until 1959. The 23 per cent of Mandatory Palestine that was not occupied by Israel was held in Arab custody – the West Bank integrated into a unitary Jordanian state and the Gaza Strip under Egyptian military rule. The Palestinians went into something akin to national concussion, their cause a moral factor embedded in the Arab consciousness but with no clear voice or direction of their own.

But, by the late 1950s, significant if scattered signs of post-1948 stirrings began to emerge out of the debris of the Nakba. Fired by the experience of Israel’s six-month occupation of the Gaza Strip in 1956, a new sense of activism and national reassertion gave birth to Fatah – the Palestinian National Liberation Movement. Fatah’s original Gaza-based founders, such as Yasser Arafat and Khalil al-Wazir, were inspired by the Algerian model of armed struggle and resistance as a means of reawakening the Palestinian people and keeping the ‘cause’ alive.

Fatah drew on a number of converging groups and trends, both Islamist (many of its first leaders came from a Muslim Brotherhood background) and nationalist. But, most of all, it set about rekindling a Palestinian sense of pride and self-assertion that was directed as much against the trials and tribulations of the Arab diaspora and the Arab states’ iron hold over the Palestine problem as against the injustice that had befallen the Palestinians at the hands of the Zionists. Alongside the call to arms, a much debated issue at the time was that of ‘entity-building’ (bina’a al-kayan and kayanniyah) – i.e., reconstructing a collective Palestinian political persona. This was essentially about identity and national empowerment rather than state-building or any programmatic attempt at laying the foundations of statehood along the lines of the Zionist movement.

But this attempt to re-create a Palestinian political persona was also an Arab enterprise. It was aimed both at containing and co-opting any nascent Palestinian activism that could spark a confrontation with Israel and also at preventing other Arab parties from monopolizing or determining the fate of the struggle over Palestine. In 1960, Iraq’s new revolutionary leader, Abdulkarim Qassem, then in competition with Egypt’s Nasser and Jordan’s King Hussein over the Palestine issue, was the first Arab leader to urge the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza as a concrete manifestation of a Palestinian entity and the first step towards full liberation.

For the emergent Palestinian national movement, however, entity-consciousness was not to be confused with statehood – and certainly not a state in just part of Palestine. The dominant...
theme of the movement as represented by Fatah and other smaller groups was that of full ‘liberation’ – i.e., of all Palestinian lands occupied in 1948. ‘Liberation’ encompassed a broad notion of ‘return’, and the two were bound together through the agency of armed struggle. In 1964, Egypt took the lead in giving the ‘entity-building’ exercise a notional institutional form via the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), with a seat at the Arab League that replaced the now defunct APG chair.

The 1967 war gave the Palestinian national movement an unexpected but vital boost by providing indisputable evidence of the political bankruptcy of the Arab regimes and by posing the image of the Palestinian revolutionary-guerrilla as a more hopeful political counter-example. By 1968, the PLO began to assert itself as a broad national institution and passed a revised and authoritative version of its original 1964 Charter. Its ‘liberationist’ language was unequivocal:

"Palestine with the boundaries it had during the British Mandate is an indivisible territorial unit... armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine... The Palestinian Arab people assert their absolute determination and firm resolution to continue their armed struggle and work for an armed popular revolution for the liberation of their country and their return to it." 16

The Charter goes on to declare that the partition of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of the State of Israel ‘are entirely illegal regardless of the passage of time because they were contrary to the will of the Palestinian people and to their natural right to their homeland.’

By 1969, the Fatah leader, Yasser Arafat, had been elected Chairman of the PLO. In a further and more ‘progressive’ elaboration of its liberationist line, Fatah adopted the goal of a unitary ‘secular democratic state in the whole of Palestine’ on the basis of one man, one vote. This echoed some of the previous pre-1948 concepts of statehood and independence, albeit in a sketchy form. But, with no real political drive or traction behind this call (or any positive response from the Israeli side), it quickly faded into political obscurity.

More important was the strategic change in direction after the 1973 Arab–Israeli war. Under the impression that the postwar diplomatic process was about to produce a comprehensive Arab–Israeli settlement, and keen to ensure that the Palestinians would not be bypassed or ignored, the PLO under Arafat quietly began to debate a shift away from the liberationist impulse towards a more pragmatic political programme based on Palestinian statehood in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 alone, rather than all of Palestine.

In 1974 the PLO’s parliament and highest authority, the Palestine National Council (PNC), called for a ‘national authority’ to be established in any part of Palestine, and in 1977 the PNC openly called for the establishment a Palestinian state for the first time since 1948. This process culminated in the PNC’s ‘declaration of independence’ in 1988 and, as part of its political programme, its explicit adoption of the two-state solution and the partition of Palestine between Arabs and Jews based on the 1967 borders, as explicated in UN Resolution 242. The fact that the 1988 decision was a direct and unambiguous violation of the 1968 Charter appears to have been of little consequence either to the PLO’s leaders or to the majority of PNC members.

A Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza along the June 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital and the right of return for the 1948 refugees, thus became the PLO’s national programme and the point of convergence and lowest common denominator between most nationalist and leftist trends. It has been the consistent demand of the PLO’s leadership since, and it remains the core demand of the PLO/PA today as part of its bid for international recognition at the UN.
Statehood in part of Palestine, however, can be seen as an anomaly rather than as a historically consistent Palestinian national demand. The post-Oslo experience of the PA may also have soured the prospects and popular faith in any viable form of partial Palestinian statehood, and its appeal may be waning under pressure from scepticism and doubt from the Islamists (including Hamas) and a growing sense among the younger and more active elements of Palestinian society that a two-state solution along the lines of the 1988 PNC program is no longer either feasible or necessarily desirable.

The twin declarations of independence of 1948 and 1988 and the PLO’s 2011 attempt to secure recognition of a Palestinian state at the UN provide a convenient set of bookends for the history of the Palestinian national movement and the evolution of its demands. But they mark neither the beginning nor the end of the struggle. Self-rule, national government, independence, entity-building, liberation and the two-state solution can all be seen as part of a continuum whose end remains unfulfilled and whose prospects are uncertain at best. Whether we are heading towards another cycle of Palestinian national farce-cum-tragedy remains to be seen, but the Palestinians’ unwavering aspiration for freedom is as undeniable as it is unlikely to dissipate in the near future.

Notes

1 The most reliable statistics suggest that there were some 700,000 Muslims and Christians in Palestine at the time of the First World War, compared to around 65,000 Jews (both local Ottoman and foreign citizens). See the detailed discussion in G. Kramer, A History of Palestine (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 137–8.


4 ‘Memorandum from the First Palestinian Arab Delegation to the British Colonial Secretary regarding the Aspirations of the Arabs of Palestine and their Views of the Mandatory Government and Zionist Immigration’, 24 October 1921, ibid., p. 34.

5 Speaking to a Palestine Delegation in London (whom the British refused to grant representative status and met in their ‘purely personal’ capacity), the Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, set the tone for the British response to Arab entreaties: ‘The British Government mean to carry out the Balfour Declaration. I have told you again and again. I told you so at Jerusalem. I told you at the House of Commons the other day. I tell you so now. They mean to carry out the Balfour Declaration. They do. What is the use of looking at anything else? The government is not a thing of straw to be blown by the wind this way and that way. It is bound to carry out the Declaration.’ ‘Report of Conference held at Colonial Office’, 22 August 1921. Original English text in B. N. al-Hout, Political Leaders and Institutions in Palestine 1917–1948 (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies) [in Arabic]. Hereafter, al-Hout, Political Leaders.


10 ‘Memorandum Submitted by the Arab Higher Committee to the Permanent Mandates Commission and the Secretary of State for the Colonies’, 23 July 1937, ibid., p. 760.
Further reading