



PERSPECTIVES

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Palestinians: Invented People

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The concept of Palestinian identity and nationalism is a recent invention. Both historically and in contemporary times, the Arabs living in the area now known as Palestine were regarded both by outsiders and by their own spokespeople as members of the greater Arab population, without a separate or distinct identity. Today, however, it is clear that Palestinian nationalism has emerged and become a political factor.

The recent statement uttered by US Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich that the Palestinians are an “invented people” has been criticized by political opponents as indicating a lack of sobriety and stability. Yet, whatever one’s views of Gingrich’s sagacity or judgment on other issues, or one’s opinions on the more general issue of the desirability and character of a Palestinian state existing alongside the State of Israel, the accuracy of his statement cannot be denied. This conclusion stems from two factors. The first is that Arabs living in the area now known as Palestine were regarded, both historically and in contemporary times, not as a separate entity but as part of the general Arab people. This has been recognized by Arab spokesmen, by scholars, and by objective international official reports. The second is that no independent Palestinian state has ever existed, let alone one that manifested a “Palestinian identity.”

A few examples can illustrate this. The first Congress of Muslim-Christian Associations in the area met in February 1919 to consider the future of the territory formerly ruled by the Ottoman Empire, which dissolved after World

War I. The Congress declared: "We consider Palestine as part of Arab Syria as it has never been separated from it at any time. We are connected with it by national, religious, linguistic, moral, economic, and geographical bonds." The celebrated scholar Philip Hitti, testifying before the Anglo-American Committee in 1946, stated there was no such thing as Palestine in history, "absolutely not."

The United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), in its September 3, 1947 report, remarked that Palestinian nationalism, as distinct from Arab nationalism, was a relatively new phenomenon. It concluded that Palestinian identity was part of a rich tapestry of identities, mostly predicated on Arab and Islamic solidarity.

The Palestinians themselves reached the same conclusion. Palestinian spokesperson Ahmad Shuqeiri told the UN Security Council in 1956 that Palestine was nothing more than southern Syria. The head of the Military Operations Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Zuheir Muhsein, declared on March 31, 1977, "Only for political reasons do we carefully underline our Palestinian identity. ...the existence of a separate Palestinian identity is there for tactical reasons." The PLO, in its own Charter or amended Basic Law (article 1), states that Palestine is part of the Arab nation.

That "Arab nation" never included a state known as "Palestine." Indeed, the inhabitants of the general Palestinian area were not subjects of an Arab nation but of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the area from 1516-1918. This was the last recognized sovereign power in the area. The area of Palestine was a district of the Empire, officially a *vilayet* (province), not a political entity. No independent Palestinian state has ever been established, nor was there a single administrative or cultural unit of Palestinians. Arabs in the area were not different in any way from other Arabs in the Middle East. Nor was Israel established on the ashes of any state other than the Ottoman Empire.

On the other hand, a sovereign Jewish state existed prior to the rise of the Roman Empire. While the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, changed the name of the land to Syria Palestina, and banished the Jews from Jerusalem, this did not eradicate all Jewish presence in the area. Moreover, the Jews in the Diaspora maintained a strong consciousness of the historical connection of the Jewish people to Palestine – a connection that was acknowledged in the League of Nations mandate. Jewish nationalism has used legends of individuals like Moses as common ancestors and founders of the Jewish people.

Other nations have used myths about their origin: Vercingetorix and Clovis in France; Arminius in Germany; and Romulus and Remus in Italy. Similarly, Jewish nationalism may include not only centuries-old traditions but also certain invented elements. What is important, however, is that the Jews constitute a people – a set of individuals linked together not only by a common religion, but also as members of an ethnic community with memories of a shared past, common ceremonies and culture, and mutual legal codes, social behavior, myths and symbols. Between Jews there is a peoplehood, a subjective belief in their common descent from ancestors in Judea and Samaria.

The first official naming of “Palestine” as a distinct, defined territorial area came with the decision of the League of Nations, dealing with areas of the former Ottoman Empire, to create a Mandate for Palestine. This was accorded to Great Britain, which ruled the area from the Mediterranean Sea to west of the Jordan River from 1922 until May 1948.

All people living in that area were regarded as “Palestinians” without any ethnic connotations. Ironically, the name was used not by Arabs but only by Jews in the area, as in *The Palestinian* (now the Jerusalem) Post, and the Palestine Symphony (now Israel Philharmonic) Orchestra. Only after the State of Israel was established in May 1948 did the term “Palestinian” become exclusively used in referring to Arabs in the area.

It is now clear that a concept of Palestinian identity and nationalism has emerged and become a political factor. Whether it first emerged from literary societies and missionary groups a century ago, from the impact of the Arab Revolt of 1916-1918 in the Hijazi desert in Arabia, or as imitation of the actions of the Young Turks who in 1908 seized power in the Ottoman Empire is irrelevant. The new concept became important as a claim to self-determination by Arabs in the period after World War I in reaction to the increasing importance of Zionism and the assertion of self-determination by the Jewish people. The single most important factor leading to the idea and development of a Palestinian national identity was the creation of Israel and the Arab defeat by Israel in 1948-49. One might say it was even an imitation of the Zionist movement. Palestinian national identity was formally asserted only with the formation of the PLO in 1964.

The essential problem is not simply a terminological one – a refusal by many to acknowledge that the category of Palestinian identity is a recent invention. Rather, the insistence on a presumed, time honored right of a Palestinian people to the disputed land is being used as a weapon against the right of Israel to exist.

Such an insistence is a handicap to a peaceful, negotiated agreement between the Palestinians and Israel. The decision about the exercise of sovereign power in Palestine remains to be determined in an overall peace settlement.

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