

National identity in the context of ethnic cleansing and settler-colonialism. The case of Palestine

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Abstract—The Palestinian Authority was formed at the height of the neo-liberalism under the supremacy of a settler colonial repressive regime to dominated internally by Palestinian financial, and estate capital. The split between Fatah and Hamas heightened the vulnerability of the wide majority of Palestinians who have to face not only high rates of unemployment and poverty, but also an ongoing military repressive occupation and aggressive Jewish settlers. In the Gaza Strip Palestinians live under a suffocating siege and a ghetto situation. Both Fatah and Hamas endorsed neo-liberal policies, and both fostered a relatively large salaried middle class. The fragmentation of a weakened Left deprived Palestinians in the two territories of an alternative political vision and a strategy of struggle to that presented by the major two political parties in these areas. However, statelessness, neo-liberalism, fragmentation and settler-colonialism pose an existential threat to all Palestinians. With no political future on the horizon under continued settler colonial occupation, the situation is increasingly getting explosive as Palestinians have nothing to lose. — *Settler-colonialism, Palestinian Authority, the myth of state building, the collapse of the political field, national identity.*

Abstract—L’Autorità palestinese è stata formata al culmine del neoliberalismo sotto la supremazia di un regime repressivo coloniale per dominare internamente il capitale finanziario e immobiliare palestinese. La scissione tra Fatah e Hamas ha aumentato la vulnerabilità della grande maggioranza dei palestinesi che devono affrontare non solo alti tassi di disoccupazione e povertà, ma anche un’occupazione militare repressiva in corso e coloni ebrei aggressivi. Nella Striscia di Gaza i palestinesi vivono sotto un assedio soffocante e una situazione da ghetto. Sia Fatah che Hamas hanno approvato politiche neo-liberali, ed entrambi hanno favorito una classe media salariata relativamente ampia. La frammentazione di una sinistra indebolita ha privato i palestinesi dei due territori di una visione politica alternativa e di una strategia di lotta a quella presentata dai due principali partiti politici di queste zone. Tuttavia, l’apolidia, il neoliberalismo, la frammentazione e il colonialismo rappresentano una minaccia esistenziale per tutti i palestinesi. Senza alcun futuro politico all’orizzonte sotto la continua occupazione coloniale dei coloni, la situazione diventa sempre più esplosiva poiché i palestinesi non hanno nulla da perdere. — *Colonialismo di insediamento, Autorità palestinese, mito della costruzione dello stato, collasso del campo politico, identità nazionale.*

One needs to be critically alert as to who narrates history, to what is narrated, and to what is left untold. This is illustrated clearly by the fact that while

Israelis celebrate the day Israel’s establishment as the day of their independence, Palestinians recall it as the day of their Nakba. (i.e., national catastrophe) For Palestinian

the 15th of May of each year is remembered since 1948 as the day when their homeland was plundered subjected to ethnic cleansing, dispossessed by settler-colonialists assisted by British Imperialism, and they as a people scattered. Now in the seventy years that have passed since the Nakba Palestinians continue to be stateless, displaced, oppressed, occupied, colonized, discriminated against, and denied basic rights. However, Palestinians have not stopped fighting for their historic right and continue to fight for their freedom and independence since the time when British Imperialism, in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, promised Palestine as a Jewish homeland and opened the country to the Zionist project to colonize it. A project that was successfully implemented in May 1948 with the establishment of Israel over 78% of the land of Palestine. In June 1967, Israel occupied by military force the remaining 22% of Palestine and subjected it to a process of settler colonialism.

OUTLINING OF THE CURRENT FEATURES OF THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION

The first thing to remark is that the historical reality of the forceful settler-colonization of Palestine has been intentionally veiled by the promotion of a specific discourse on the “Palestinian-Israeli conflict.” A discourse that obscures or denies the fact of the double process of imperialism and settler colonialism (British and Zionist) that Palestine was subjected to between the First World War and 1948. A process that included systematic ethnic cleansing. (Pappé 2007; Peters and Newman 2013) A process that was resumed in 1967 to engulf the whole of Palestine. This process is the defining feature of the Palestinian question.

Palestinian communities inside historic Palestine and in the *shatat* (diasporas) face political and socio-economic conditions that vary in terms of their severity of control, exclusion, discrimination and marginalization. Those who remained in their original homeland (i.e. historic Palestine), and who form roughly half the total estimated number of Palestinians (6.5 million in 2017) remain subject to varying degrees of discrimination, control and ethnic cleansing. Palestinians who possess Israeli nationality are treated as third class citizens by the Israeli state, (Hawari 2017) Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to an apartheid system,¹ while those in the Gaza

Strip are under a very strict and suffocating system of siege. (Pappé 2014) A recent study concluded:

Prominent human rights advocates and scholars have argued that the killings of Palestinians and their forceful expulsion from mandate Palestine in 1948, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, and the violence and discrimination directed at Palestinians by the Israeli regime have violated a number of human rights protections contained in international human rights law, genocide being among them. (Center for Constitutional Rights 2016)

Palestinian communities in *shatat* (diasporas) are either stateless communities existing with no or with restricted social and political rights in refugee camps and/or individuals denied the right of return to their native homeland (as required by the United Nations resolution 194) or as immigrants or migrant workers that lack the necessary protection afforded by citizens of sovereign states.

Since the early 1990s a number of processes and events have, at various levels accentuated the colonization, dispossession, discrimination and “bantustanization” of the Palestinian communities. There was, first, the drastic changes in the international system that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union that acted as the main international ally of the PLO. This collapse promoted and accelerated the neo-liberal globalization of capitalism. The collapse of socialism and ascendance of neoliberalism on a world scale facilitated an international political discourse that altered the standing and perception of the Palestinian question substantively. They included secondly, the Middle East undergoing major political changes following the signing of the Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel (in 1978), the Islamist revolution in Iran (1979), the Gulf Wars in the early 1990s, and the rise of the financial power of the Gulf states with the impetus that gave to radical Islamic movements.

The enforced exit of the PLO from Lebanon and the fragmentation of its forces, the eruption of the first Pales-

on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination”. A study coordinated by the Middle East Project of the Democracy and Governance Programme, Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa concluded that Israel’s practices in the 1967 Palestinian occupied territories amount to apartheid and colonialism (HSRC, *Occupation, Colonialism, Apartheid? A re-assessment of Israel’s practices in the occupied Palestinian territories under international law*, Cape Town, May 2009). There are some features of a “reserve” system similar to what the indigenous peoples in America and Australia were subjected to, that do not alter the main thrust of the argument. On some of the specific features of the Zionist colonization of Palestine, see Machover (2005).

1 In the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, John Dugard, 2007 reached the conclusion that Israel’s policies “resemble those of apartheid” and added that it “is difficult to resist the conclusion that many of Israel’s laws and practices violate the 1966 Convention

tinian intifada at the end of 1987, and the political and financial isolation of the PLO in the early 1990, isolation paved the way to the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993. This signing and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, under an ongoing military occupation and settler-colonialism was a dynamic that had its own special ramifications. Most of all the establishment of the PA in the specific political context (national, regional, and international) have major outcomes on the Palestinian political field, the grammar of the Palestinian question, and on national identity or sentiment.

THE DISMANTLEMENT OF THE PALESTINIAN NATIONAL POLITICAL FIELD

The Palestinian national political field² emerged as a national liberation movement following the 1948 monumental destruction of the old field in the late 1960s. It took the form of the PLO with a leading center located outside historic Palestine. This field remained effectively under the hegemony of the PLO until it was maneuvered to transfer itself into a self-governing authority (on parts of the West Bank [WB] and Gaza Strip [GS] in the form of the Palestinian Authority [PA]) in 1994 following the signing with Israel of the Oslo accords. This transformation was managed under the rubric of Palestinian state building within the confines of a regime of settler-colonialism. Twenty-five years of negotiations have shown clearly that no state building was possible under the rubrics of an encroaching settler-colonialism.

One major outcome of Oslo accords and the pursuit of Palestinian statehood was the stripping of the PLO of its historic function as the all-embracing national institution representing the components of all the Palestinian people. By acknowledging the right of Israel to exist, the PLO accepted the Zionist narrative. Israel, on the other hand, accepted the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people (that is as a negotiating (minor) partner) without acknowledging their right to independent statehood on their homeland, or part of their homeland nor the right of return for Palestinians forced out of their homeland.

The transformation from a national liberation movement to a self-governing authority seeking statehood led, inevitably, to the marginalization of the institutions of the

PLO as the emphasis came to rest on the state-building institutions of the PA. This translated into a neglect of the national political field and its fragmentation into separate local fields or political spaces, reflecting the geo-political distribution of the Palestinians. This was reflected by the gradual emergence of a new political discourse that gained overwhelming dominance after the death of Arafat in 2004. A ‘state-centered’ jargon attained a formal status in the official discourse of the PA, the discourse of Palestinian and international NGOs, and the discourse of international organizations as the “two-state” solution attained a kind of a undisputed status.

The new discourse (embodying political plans and perceptions) promoted a diffused legitimacy to the fragmentation of Palestine as a geography, history, demography, a cause, and rights. The terminology for Palestine was replaced by the ‘Palestinian occupied territories.’ This language invaded the discourse of the leadership of the PA and Arab diplomatic language (as in the Peace Initiative proposed by the Arab Summit I, held in Beirut in 2002), and the official Arab (and international) media. Palestinians who remained on their homeland in 1948 were referred to as Israeli Arabs and were not classified by Israel mainly by their religion and ethnicity (Muslims, Christians, Druze, and Bedouins).

Refugees were rarely featured as Palestinians who were ethnically cleansed and forcibly evicted from Palestine, and their future was no longer determined by their right of return to their homeland as an indigenous people, and by compensation for dispossession, and prolonged suffering and deprivation. At best they were defined as a humanitarian problem to be dealt with through UNRWA which has come increasingly under pressure in recent years in a clear attempt to drive it out of existence and with it the Palestinian refugee cause. Palestinian refugees appeared also often as a security problem by states where their camps are located and were/are treated as third class citizens subject to overt or covert (or both) discriminatory laws and regulation.

The stance taken by the President Trump Administration at the end of 2017 and first months of 2018 is indicative of attempts by Western dominant powers (i.e., US) to continually down-size the Palestinian question. It was reduced from the whole of Palestine (as the home of Palestinians) to the area occupied in 1967 by Israel (i.e., to WB and GS). Then it continued to move towards the Israeli position where The President of the United States, removed East Jerusalem from the “negotiation” table, and then the refugee question has to be excluded and the saga continues (borders, colonial settlements. . .).

2 A political field (as a field of political forces) refers to space created by a nation-state or national liberation movement and as such, they manage spaces that are open for political contestation between political groups and parties for power and influence. It is national institutions (judicial, executive, legislative, educational, etc.,) that define the boundaries of the field. On the concept of “field” in sociology. (Bourdieu 1993)

Once the Palestinian question is taken out of its historical context, it becomes easy to fragment it into discreet issues up (separately) for bilateral negotiations between two parties of vastly unequal power.

Many of the changes in viewing the Palestinian question are anchored in the conceptualization of its roots and the mechanisms of its reproduction. If we disregard the mythical and biblical idiom of the Zionist narrative, which depicts Palestine as a divine promised land for Jews, Zionism amounts to nothing more than a European settler-colonial ideology that emerged at the end of the 19th century in response to pogroms, discrimination, and repression of Jews in Europe. It adopted the main elements of the European settler-colonialist ideology but relied strongly, and still does, on the major Western colonial powers and empires for the realization of its project; first the British Empire and then the United States. Zionism is a European phenomenon that was prompted by anti-Semitism, which is another European phenomenon. It does not have any of the attributes of national liberation movements that it claims, as its main target was, and remains, the ethnic cleansing of indigenous people of Palestine.³ (Hilal 1976; Wolfe 2006; Achcar 2017)

FROM THE “NATIONAL” TO THE “LOCAL”

The focus of the Palestinian political elite moved towards state building on parts of historic Palestine (i.e., the WB and GS) and on the strengthening of the institutions of the PA before the end of the Israeli military occupation was bound to result in the neglect of the institutions of the PLO and their national representative functions. Palestinian communities outside the WB and GS were left to their own resources and devices in the hope that an independent Palestinian state is in the making. Not only that proved illusionary, after a quarter of a century of “negotiations,” but also in reality the settler-colonial project intensified after The Oslo accords.

Both the external pressures of the occupying settler-colonial power and the internal pressures that were mounted by the political opposition (mainly Islamic) and the supervision of neo-liberal international financial institutions and donors, resulted in June 2007, in the split of the PA into two distinct (territorially, institutionally and politically), self-governing authorities; one in the WB, led by Fatah and the other in GS led by Hamas. Both

authorities continued to be under the overall control (economic, security and military) of Israel. The political split between the GS and WB concluded the fragmentation of the Palestinian national political field according to geo-political criteria.

The Palestinian political field lost its national character leaving behind local crippled (in their lack of autonomy) fields formed on geo-political basis. The PLO retained, in name, the attribute of the representative of all Palestinians, but in reality, it lost its representative, legitimate, and functional institutions. The waning of regular organizational and political links between Palestinian communities exposed Palestinian communities to new dangers and vulnerabilities. The West Bank became subject to “Bantustanization” and to being turned into a number of “ghettos,” as it was converted into separated enclaves or “reservations” encircled by Israeli Jewish settlements that are located on higher ground than Palestinian towns and refugee camps. The latter are further encircled by by-pass roads, by the Segregation Wall, and by area “C” (forms 62% of the total area of the West Bank) which remains under total Israeli civil, military and security control.

The Palestinian national political field that was constructed in the sixties faced a synergy of processes and forces (international, regional, and national), that interacted in the eighties and early nineties of the last century to expedite its break up into local “fields”. I will not dwell on these processes and forces here, as I discussed these in detail somewhere else (Hilal 2017b). The break up appears in many forms; as a crisis of representation; a crisis of leadership; a crisis engendered by the inability to formulate a clear national strategy, and as a reflection of the predominance of a high level of political poverty among Palestinian political parties.⁴

The demise of national institutions was not confined to the legislative and political spheres such as the Palestinian National Council (PNC), but included the civil domain, such as popular organizations (women, workers, students), trade unions (teachers, writers, lawyers, engineers, doctors, etc.), voluntary organizations that provided the Palestinian communities with channels of interaction and participation. The process of political fragmentation and individuation (as a result of neo-liberal commercialization of life) widened inequality in income, wealth and life chances at the regional, community, fam-

³ In his “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native”, Wolfe notes: “As Palestinians become more and more dispensable, Gaza and the West Bank become less and less like Bantustans and more and more like reservations (or, for that matter, like the Warsaw Ghetto). Porous borders do not offer a way out” (Wolfe 2006: 404).

⁴ The concept of political poverty was brought to my attention by Yassin al-Hajj Saleh (2004), in his article “Concept of the Political Poverty Line”.

ity and gender levels.⁵

Political fragmentation was an outcome of the demise of national institutions and the transformation of the Palestinian liberation movement into a state building enterprise before of the lifting of the settler-colonial occupation. Fragmentation can mean, eventually, a disregarding of the right of Palestinian communities to take part in the struggle for collective and historic rights and to be represented in the national institutions. The fact that some political parties or factions are still active in more than one Palestinian community (particularly Fatah, Hamas) does not mean more than that they, operate autonomously in each community without an effective unifying national political strategy or framework, given the restrictions and limitations imposed by geopolitics on their activities and modes of organizations. Since the Oslo accords, the main contest for power has been between Fatah and Hamas and entirely focused within the WB and GS where each retains a significant presence.⁶ The somewhat high rate of “support” (electoral rather than political) for Fatah and Hamas in the WB and GS relates to the resources each had access to in these two areas, particularly in terms of employment and career promotion where each formed self-governing authorities.

However, the most noticeable fact following the

5 See also reports of the Independent Commission on Human Rights - the monthly Diwan of Grievances (Ramallah and The Gaza) on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. Azmi Al-Shaabi, Advisor to the Board of Directors of the AMAN (Coalition for Integrity and Accountability), confirmed that the salaries of some managers in some public institutions were more than USD 10,000, whereas in similar institutions for the same tasks and responsibilities, the salary did not exceed USD 2,000. The civil service staff of the Civil Service Law shall be subject to the salary scale established in this law, in which the Minister’s salary shall not exceed USD 3,000. See, Sama News Agency, July 16, 2015. (<https://bit.ly/3n0KvsZ>) For differences in rates of poverty, unemployment, and income, see the regular surveys carried out by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. (<https://bit.ly/3eYplXS>).

6 The percentage of members (the percentage of supporters is higher) in political organizations in the WB and the GS in 2012 was about 21%. It is likely to be less among Palestinians in the *shatat* and Jordan. See, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies; Arab Public Opinion Measurement Project, Arab Indicator 2012, June 2013, Doha, Qatar (Figure 92). Recent public opinion polls by PSR (September 2017; public opinion poll N. 65) in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip indicate that Fatah and Hamas are supported by less than 50% (25% for Fatah and 21% for Hamas) and the Left by about 5%; the Islamic Jihad by about 4%; those who viewed themselves as independent nationalists came to 6%, and those as Independent Islamists to 3%; Some 36% said they do not support any of the existing parties. and between a quarter and a third of the respondents do not support any of the known political organizations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. See regular published polls by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey (PSR).

demise of the PLO and the emergence, in its place, of self-governing authorities in the WB and GS, has been the intensification of settler-colonialism and the barbarism of the Zionist regime. Colonial settlements, land confiscation, the construction of a segregation wall, military checkpoints, bypass roads (for Israelis only), house demolition,⁷ and imprisonment without trial, continued without any deterrent.⁸ These include Palestinian political leaders, elected legislative council members, ministers, and activists, etc.). This is not to mention daily violence and the destruction administered by Israeli extreme right-wing settlers.

By the end of 2015 some Israeli sources estimate no less than 800 thousand Jewish colonial settlers were living on the occupied area of the West Bank on land expropriated by force.⁹ These form about 13% of Israel’s Jewish population and about a fifth of the Palestinians residing in the West Bank. It is part of the process of colonization that has been active in the part of Palestine that was conquered in 1948.¹⁰ The Zionist colonialists in the WB had gained influence in the army, government and political society to a much higher extent than their size.¹¹

EVICTING PALESTINIANS FROM HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY AND DENYING THEM THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION

ethnic cleansing of a large number of Palestinians from their homeland and its total occupation by Israel in June 1967 sanctioned a Zionist discourse that denies the right of Palestinians to be a people, have their own history, geography and demand self-determination. The process of neo-liberal capitalist globalization and the rise in the last two decades of the right-wing governments worldwide, and in Israel, enhanced the discourse that evicts Palestinians from history, and geography and criminalizes their

7 Since the occupation of the Palestinian territories following the Six Day War in 1967 down to 2015, it has been estimated by the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions that Israel has razed 48,488 Palestinian structures (<https://icahd.org/>). This does not include the large number of houses destroyed or seriously damaged by the Israeli army during its three wars on GS in 2008, 2012, and 2014.

8 See, for example Nashif (2008). It is estimated that a quarter of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has been imprisoned by the colonial occupying power since 1967.

9 See <https://bit.ly/3pXp3a8>.

10 On the relationship between Zionism and colonization and control over land and the creation of “ghettos”, see Razi Nabulsi (2017).

11 On the growth of the influence of right-wing Jewish settlers in the WB on Israeli politics and society, see Israeli Scene 2016, The Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies (MADAR) presents the MADAR Strategic Report 2017. (<https://bit.ly/3n0shrL>).

struggle for freedom and self-determination. This discourse was (and still is) used to defend and vindicate the use of excessive repression and collective despotism against Palestinians and justify land theft and settler-colonization.

A quick glance at the discourse that has come to dominate the Palestinian question, not only within the Israeli narrative but as part of the wider narrative current in the language of international organizations and international mass media as well as in the language of regional bodies (such as the Arab League), reveals the following:¹²

- Firstly, Palestine has been undersized to the confines of the WB and GS (i.e. to 22% of the size of historic Palestine). As far as the Israeli political class is concerned, and this is shared by the political class in U.S. and Europe and in other places, the area of the WB (including Jerusalem) remains a contested area. This is while Israel continues to implement an annexationist policy of the maximum area of WB, with the minimum of the native Palestinian population, in order to protect and maintain the “Jewish” character of Israel. The populated areas in the West Bank (and Gaza Strip) form disconnected “ghettos” over which Palestinians can form a “state” as long as it remains under Israeli military and security control.
- Secondly, Israel used Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 (since they do not mention Palestinians) to promote the idea that there is no such thing as a Palestinian people, and the Palestinian areas it occupied in June 1967 were negotiable, and for Jerusalem (both East and West) to remain “united” and the eternal capital of Israel.
- Thirdly, to promote the idea implanted in the Oslo accords that the Palestinian question revolves round the fate of the Palestinians in the WB and GS Strip who are represented by the PA. Other Palestinians do not figure as part of the question. Palestinian history is dated from June war of 1967 (i.e., with the occupation of the WB and GS). This is very convenient for Israel as it absolves it from the crime of ethnic cleansing, and from the responsibility of rectifying the historic injustice it, with assistance from imperialist powers, committed against Palestinians.¹³ It also obliterates

the record of the long history of Palestinian resistance to settler colonialism, and its long and ongoing bloody Palestinian struggle for self-determination and freedom from the colonial yoke.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE MYTH OF STATE BUILDING UNDER SETTLER-COLONIALISM

The right to construct an independent Palestinian state on the WB and GS was not clearly stated in the Oslo accords, and was assumed by the Palestinian leadership to be the unstated result of negotiations with Israel. After nearly a quarter of a century of negotiations, it became clear that it was not on the Israeli (or American) political agenda. What is on the agenda is creeping land annexation and raising the number of colonial settlers in the WB, while avoiding annexing territory with dense Palestinian populations to avoid undermining the “Jewish” character of the Israeli state or promoting the prospect of a unified democratic state in historic Palestine.

With “Bantustanization” of the WB the prospects of Palestinian independent statehood can be averted, and the population kept under Israeli military, administrative, and economic control and manipulation. The United Nations warned a few years ago, and has repeated the same warning since, that the GS cannot sustain itself given its extremely high population density, its limited resources and the severe restrictions imposed on it.¹⁴ The idea of state building under Israeli settler-colonialism was disseminated with the idea that sustainable development can take place under colonial conditions. This idea was endorsed by the Palestinian Authority soon after its establishment in 1994, partly because it hoped that the transition from limited self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to independent statehood was a likely process. The idea of sustainable economic development under settler-colonialism is still alive despite the fact the PA has

right of return, the colonial-military occupation of Palestinian territories, and discriminatory practices against Palestinian citizens of Israel (WCAR NGO Forum Declaration and Programme of Action,” (Durban, South Africa, 28 August – 3 September 2001).

¹⁴ The report states that the “substantial population growth rate will thus add some 500,000 people to a living area which is restricted and already heavily urbanized. Fundamental infrastructure in electricity, water and sanitation, municipal and social services, is struggling to keep pace with the needs of the growing population.” It adds: “By 2020, electricity provision will need to double to meet demand, damage to the coastal aquifer will be irreversible without immediate remedial action, and hundreds of new schools and expanded health services will be needed for an overwhelmingly young population.” The report adds, “Tens of thousands of housing units are needed today.” (See United Nations News Centre, 27 August 2012: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42751>).

¹² For more on this, see Hilal (2015).

¹³ In 2001, the UN held the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa. In addition to the diplomatic forum, an NGO Forum was held and resulted in a document that proclaimed, among other things, Israel a racist, apartheid state that committed systematic human rights violations, including the denial of Palestinian refugees’

no control over natural resources (or in fact over much of the territory of West Bank), over border crossings (and trade), over movements inside the WB and between this region and the GS and between both these and the Jerusalem area. The building of the Separation Wall and bypass roads, the permit system, the presence of permanent check points, the continuous expansion of colonies, and Israeli total control of area C and easy access to the rest have ensured Israel of control of the major aspects of Palestinian life.

The Palestinian Authority was created and remains to this day a precarious political construction (an “authority without authority” as the President of that Authority declared many time in recent years) dependent on foreign aid and Israeli assessments and choices. Assessments and choices that made the continued colonial occupation not only the “cheapest in the history of occupations”, but also a very profitable one.

The idea was propagated by the European Union and adopted by the PA after the second intifada, that building efficient and transparent state-like institutions would prompt international support for an independent Palestinian state. The PA succeeded building institutions that were certified, by World Bank and the IMF, as worthy of statehood. However, statehood was not granted nor was it created. The naivety of the whole idea was exposed when the USA threatened to use its full power and influence to defeat the Palestinian application in the Security Council, which it did in December 2014).

THE DYNAMICS OF PALESTINIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

What propels and keeps Palestinian patriotism at a high pitch is a question that deserves consideration. Palestinians continue to be a stateless people, without a functioning national liberation movement, and without any prospects in the near future of achieving self-determination. Nevertheless, Palestinian patriotism continues to be very much alive in Palestinian communities.

Three main dynamics keep Palestinian patriotism alive, as it defines itself in terms of the desire for liberation and freedom from oppression, occupation, and discrimination. These are:

- Firstly, the existing Palestinian condition as created and maintained by a racist settler-colonialism, by regimes of discrimination;
- Secondly, the rich, varied, and ongoing forms of resistance (individual and collective) against Palestinian dispossession and repression;

- Thirdly, a vibrant cultural field that not only keeps the Palestinian historic narrative live but also enriches it with experiences spurred by the different Palestinian communities that exist in historic Palestine and outside it.

In short, a historic narrative that is articulated by conditions of statelessness, dispossession and discrimination is what propels Palestinian patriotism.

It is important to note that a political field is dominated and defined by inclusive national institutions (executive, legislative, judicial, etc.). The institutions of a nation-state or a national liberation movement (at least at the ideal-typical level) define the contours of the political national field. The PA tried to jump from the one field to the other, but succeeded in losing the one (i.e., national liberation movement) without gaining the other (i.e., the nation-state). The political field needs to be distinguished from the cultural field, where culture is defined in the inclusive sense that includes literature, art, music, theatre, songs, architecture, customs, etc. It is within the cultural field that the debate on the structure, values, history, and future of the society takes place. National identity is constructed, reconstructed, and debated within the cultural field, with interventions from the political field. It is worth noting that the Palestinian cultural field was till early 1990s dominated by “secular” and “democratic” values (of freedom and equality and justice) as a quick glance at the list of influential intellectuals (artists, novelist, poets, film-makers, journalists, historians, etc.) would show and the constituent factions of the PLO clearly indicate. (Hilal 2002; Hilal 2017a)

The fragmentation of the Palestinian people, society and political field did abate for specific periods the effectiveness of resistance against the colonial state, but has not dampened the vitality of Palestinian identity or patriotism.¹⁵ Recently this ongoing vitality has shown itself in the brave acts of resistance of youth against Israeli soldiers and settlers that started in October 2015 and continued for months. These acts expressed the strength and endurance of Palestinian patriotism and the deep hatred to Israel’s colonial occupation and oppression.¹⁶ Patriotism

15 “Identity”, I suggest, has no significance unless it is the expression of belonging or unless it contains claims or assertions over certain rights (consequently the relationship to another or others). It has no meaning unless it bears a political, social or historical content or all of that. National identity is constructed, reconstructed, and debated through the cultural field, which narrates a people’s history and its interpretations of that history.

16 Between October 2015 and March 2016, individual Palestinians conducted spontaneous, mostly individual attacks on Israeli soldiers and settlers. There were 211 stabbings, 83 shootings, and 42 car-

expresses itself in the mass funerals of the young men and women felled by Israeli bullets, by popular demonstrations demanding the handover of their bodies seized by the Israeli military. It is also manifested in the resolve of the fight of the inhabitants of the village of al-'Araqueeb in the Negev, which has been destroyed by the Israeli authorities 128 times (up to January 2018) and rebuilt by the Palestinian villagers as many. It was expressed by the 16-years-old Ahed Tamimi from the village of Nabi Salih who was held prisoner because she challenged with her bare fists armed Israeli soldiers as they invaded (in December 2017) her family's home. Such stories abound but do not always appear in the news. It is also expressed in the massive peaceful processions towards the fence in Gaza Strip and elsewhere demanding the right of return.

It is pertinent to cite some of the findings of a survey, carried out by the Center for Development Studies at Birzeit University. The survey was supervised and implemented in the last week of February 2016, on the attitudes of Palestinians in four communities (three in historical Palestine (1948, WB, and GS) and the fourth in Lebanon) on a large number of issues including that of identity.¹⁷ An analysis of the results of the survey on this aspect indicate the following: (Hilal 2016c) The political and cultural fields act in relative autonomy in relation to each other. While the Palestinian national political field (Hilal 2016a) was, particularly following Oslo, dismantled and left behind local fields, the Palestinian cultural field remained intact to a large extent and continued the task of upholding and protecting the Palestinian national narrative. It kept the Palestinian national identity alive from the impact of the diverse and adverse conditions to which various Palestinian communities have been subjected. In other words, what was fragmented and shattered was not national identity, as claimed by some,¹⁸ but the political field, as it existed in the 1970s

ramming attacks, killing 30 Israelis and two Americans. In the same period, over 200 Palestinians were killed, many were under the age of 18 and most were considered by human rights organizations as extrajudicial executions or murders. They were extrajudicial murders in the sense that they were murders committed by state agents outside any due process but motivated by a state agenda (i.e., by a settler-colonial racist state).

17 See Centre of Development Studies (2017). On the issue of Palestinian youth Hilal (2013a), Hilal (2016b).

18 Here is an example: "There is noticeable amputation, fuzziness and ambiguity around Palestinians' perception of themselves and the others, which paved its way into the political culture and its impact thereon to the extent that it weakens its ability to enhance democratization" (Zubeidi 2002: 50). No evidence appeared to agree within the findings of the survey conducted by the Center for Development Studies - Birzeit University.

and 1980s as the PLO institutions were marginalized and national professional, and grassroots organizations were dismantled. The Palestinian people have lost their active national institutions and were actively prevented for building their nation-state. It is surprising therefore that the survey, mentioned above, showed only a small minority in the four Palestinian communities studied (WB, GS, Palestinians in Lebanon and Palestinians with Israeli passports) who considered both the PA and the PLO or any of Islamic movements as their representative.

What we see clearly is a situation where the fracturing of the political field does not lead to the fracturing of national identity. This occurred in 1948 when the Palestinian political field was completely demolished, and Palestinian society devastated, and Palestinians were subjected to ethnic cleansing and chased out of their homeland; yet Palestinian identity and patriotism succeeded in rejuvenating itself and laid the ground for the rebirth of a new national political field.

Palestinian identity presents itself in patriotic combative terms as it combines the endorsement of Palestinian historical narrative with the upholding of Palestinian national rights with a commitment to Palestinian identity. However, Palestinian identity appears with other identities in a plurality that is employed to enhance the national struggle and reaffirm historic rights. Thus Palestinians in the 1948 occupied area stressed their Arab identity alongside their Palestinian identity, emphasizing this in their ongoing confrontation with the Zionist colonial state and ideology, which endeavored to efface their identity as the native and original inhabitants of Palestine – an identity that appeared as part of Arab culture with Palestinian history. Palestinians in Lebanon strongly stressed their Palestinian identity notwithstanding the ongoing discrimination against them there. Here the stress amounts to an assertion of the historic rights of the Palestinian people to return to the homeland from which they were ethnically cleansed. Palestinian identity did not present itself as an essentialist configuration but carried a historical, cultural and political statement, and neighbored other identities.¹⁹

19 The percentage of those who identified themselves, first, as Palestinians exceeded any other self-identifications in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Being an Arab in the Palestinian territory occupied in 1948 came highest as either a first or second choice in self-identification; some 63% identified themselves first or second as Palestinian compared to 68% as Arabs. In Gaza Strip the ratio was 87% as Palestinian, and 81% chose a religious identity. In Lebanon 94% identified themselves in their first and second choice as Palestinian while 62% chose a religious identity. In the West Bank 92% considered themselves by first and second choice Palestinian compared to 63% who chose a religious identity. In the four communities, the family/clan was considered as the "primary" identity at very high

The above-mentioned research, among other studies, reveals the workings of a lively national identity, represented in the presence of a broad consensus in all four communities on identifying Palestine as the geography and demography of the Palestinian people, and on diagnosing the causes of the Palestinian political impasse. Consensus also appeared in the consideration of means to deal with the national impasse. The highest percentage in all four communities defined Palestine as it existed prior to 1948. True that the lowest rate of respondents who identified Palestine with its historical borders and defined Palestinians as those who were born and descendants of those born in historical Palestine was among the Palestinians of the area occupied in 1948. Still, the majority there (50%) defined Palestine according to its historical border, while 33% of them defined it as the West Bank and Gaza Strip with 17% approving the definition of the UN Partition Plan according to resolution 181. This low score compared to the other three Palestinian communities can be explained by the impact of two processes on Palestinians in Israel; firstly, the “Israelization” process to which they were subjected, and secondly, the “collateral damage” to which they were subjected as a result of the Oslo accords, which left them out of the negotiation process. Consequently, Palestinians with Israeli passports believed, rightly, that they no longer figure in the strategies of the PLO or the PA, as both acknowledged the right of Israel to exist.

The vitality of the popular Palestinian culture appeared in the hierarchy of the choices regarding what unites the Palestinian people. The order came as follows (according to age groups starting from the younger to the older age group): “land and homeland” scored the highest rate across the three age groups. “Religion” came second with a large gap between it and “land and homeland”, while the “collective feeling” came third and “history” ranked last. The fact that “land and homeland” scored the highest rate regarding what unites the Palestinian people was not arbitrary or uninformed; it reflected the spontaneous understanding that the Palestinian struggle against the Zionist movement and Israel has always been a struggle over Palestine as a homeland, which forms the object of national liberation for the Palestinian people.

rates (West Bank 67%, Gaza 78%, land occupied in 1948 around 79% and in Lebanon 70%).

NEO-LIBERALISM AND “STATE” BUILDING UNDER SETTLER-COLONIALISM

Palestinian communities underwent profound socio-economic change since the early 1990s. These changes were of three types; those related to social structure; changes related to the organization and ideology of political parties or movements, and changes related to the internal socio-economic and behavioral dynamics promoted by neo-liberalism. These developments as manifested in the WB and GS (probably also in other communities) left their imprints on the perceptions of the limits of political action, as they sponsored an individualism (resulting from the atomization of society) that is not amenable easily to collective action.

The creation of the PA, as the nub of the sought for Palestinian state, stimulated the enlargement of the middle class, defined by employment that require possession of “cultural” capital (high education and professional and special skills). In the WB and GS those employed in middle class jobs made (by the second decade of the current century) some 30 percent of the labor force by the middle of the first decade of this century. They populated the structures, institutions, and bodies of the PA (ministries, outfits, bureaus, and security apparatuses); the offices of the newly established private modern economic sector (communications, insurance, banks, high tech, etc.); and managed the relatively large number of NGOs. The emerging Palestinian middle class was not a unified class as it remained divided politically (between liberal nationalists, Islamists, and various strands of the left); by source of income (public sector, modern private sector, NGO sector, self-employed); by education (graduates of Palestinian universities, Arab universities, East European universities, Western universities, and other universities; and by place of work and residence (West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip). As a class, it is tied down by office work and became increasingly tied to bank loans undertaken to finance a middle-class style of life. The new middle class presents itself as difficult to mobilize for collective political action because of diverse interests, outlooks, and political affiliations. It could not enroll in a third intifada, particularly as the leadership of the PA was averse to such action and the leadership of Hamas was not in a position to act differently because of the total siege imposed on Gaza, and the restrictions on its activities in the WB.

The dominant group of the business class consisted mainly of importers, and those with large financial and estate capital. This group is inclined to maintain good

connections with the PA bureaucratic and political elite and is motivated to keep or smooth relations with the Israeli authorities to protect their business interests. Any collective acts of resistance to the Israeli occupation are likely to be perceived as threatening directly their interests.

Those who are engaged in manual (unskilled or semi-skilled) work constitute (in WB and GS) roughly half the labor force, but remain dispersed among many tens of thousands of very small enterprises (89 percent employing fewer than five employees).²⁰ Most workers are not unionized, and therefore cannot play the role that trade unions played in Tunisia and Egypt during the mass uprising there against the established order or repeat the role of workers in the first intifada, who were organized and mobilized by political parties and trade unions. Furthermore, around 15% of the labor force in the West Bank is employed in the Israeli labor market, and dependent on that market for their livelihood.²¹

The social strata ripest for political organization is the unemployed, a high percentage of which comprises graduates and women. This sector could lead an intifada, as it is dissatisfied with the performance of the PA government in the WB and the de facto government in GS. They have little to lose from an uprising against Israel's occupation and have no stake in either government. They, however, lack the minimum of organization and leadership to act collectively. The Palestinian left who are the more qualified ideologically and programmatically to organize them in political and social struggle remains fragmented and has lost much of the relatively large social base it once had as well as its ideological and moral influence.

The conditions of collective political action for confronting the colonial settler state were circumvented not only by changes in the Palestinian political economy that I sketched above, but also by changes in two other areas: in the reorganization of social relations by the implanting neo-liberalism and in changes in the ethos governing political parties and movements.

The PA was formed at the height of the neo-liberalism era (as an economic and value system exalting the freedom of private capital and commitment to excessive individualism and minimum social protection to labor). (Haddad 2016; Turner and Shweiki 2014) Palestinian society in the WB and GS under the self-governing authority of the PA was made dependent on external transfers (on aid and transfer of taxes collected by the colonial

power), and was soon dominated internally by financial, and estate capital, and under the supremacy of a racist colonial regime. The society was plagued by high rates of unemployment and impoverishment, with a very small, wealthy Palestinian elite.²² A new reality appeared in urban centers of the WB and GS where the rich indulged in inconspicuous consumption and unashamed display of wealth. Such scenes would have been unthinkable before and during the first intifada. In 2016, the West Bank saw large-scale strikes by teachers demanding better salaries, and by workers demonstrating against a social security law proposed by the PA that discriminated against workers with low wages and insecure jobs. The situation in GS was appalling as the suffocating siege made deep impacts on all aspects of life.

Both Fatah and Hamas (as governing political parties) are committed to neo-liberal policies, and both gave priority to employing their cadres and supporters in government bureaucracies, services and security apparatuses in the WB and GS. The new bureaucracies presented an alien milieu to what dominated in the Palestinian national liberation movements in 1970s and 1980s. Individuals who viewed themselves as freedom fighters, revolutionaries and patriotic militants were asked to behave by the two governments and by business companies as employees as demanded by their office and position in the hierarchy of the bureaucracy. The Palestinian Left was too fragmented and emasculated to offer an alternative strategy instead of posturing as a mediator between the two competing political movements. (Hilal 2010)

However, statelessness, neo-liberalism and settler-colonialism continue to pose an existential threat to the middle class, thwarting its ability to plan its future, and a threat to the livelihood of the workers, university graduates and the mass of the unemployed. The middle class employed by the PA, the modern private sector and civil society organizations, has experienced, many times, the anxieties resulting from dependency of PA on external transfer and Israeli sanctions. The unpopularity of calls to dismantle the PA institutions relates to the fact that over 160 thousand employees depend for their livelihood on the salaries they receive from those institutions, although only a small percentage is content with the performance of the two “authorities” the WB, and GS.²³

²² West Bank-Gaza Strip unemployment stood at 29% in the second quarter of 2017 (20.5% in West Bank, 44% in Gaza). See State of Palestine, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), *Press Report on the Labor Force Survey Results* (April – June, 2017).

²³ On the make-up, and situation of the new middle class in WBG see Hilal (2013b). On the structure of employment in the WB and GS see Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) On the occasion

²⁰ PCBS, Establishment Census, Main Findings (April 2013).

²¹ PCBS, *Labour Force Survey* (July-Sep. 2017), (<https://bit.ly/3qRGLLA>).

Recent policies taken by the American Administration regarding Jerusalem, UNRWA and Refugees, and Israeli racist legislation to enhance its “Jewish” character can only enhance the anxiety of Palestinians, and announce an explosive situation as Palestinians reach a point of having nothing to lose except their chains.

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