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The discourse of homeland: the construction of Palestinian national identity in Palestinian secularist and Islamist discourses

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Nationalism is a notoriously complex, slippery notion that has been the subject of much scholarly debate and scrutiny. The last two decades, however, had seen a proliferation of methodological orientations which emphasized the socially constructed nature of national phenomena. The conception of nation as an ‘imagined community’ highlights the active role of discourse through which notions of national homogeneity, historic continuity and shared present and destiny are constituted, re-constituted and inculcated in and through discourse, often by a nationalist and engaged intelligentsia. Informed by the work of Wodak and colleagues [(1999). The discursive construction of national identity. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; (2007). Commemorating the past: The discursive construction of official narratives about the rebirth of the second Austrian republic. Discourse & Communication, 1(3), 337–363], the present study examines the construction of the ‘homeland’ in Palestinian nationalist discourses. Drawing on a corpus of Palestinian constitutive documents, including political speeches and national tracts, this article probes into the constituent themes of Palestinian national identity as expressed and consistently presented in Palestinian official secularist and Islamist discourses. In particular, the study draws attention to the discursive processes through which a common Palestinian identity is forged and the similarities and ideological tensions between secularists and Islamists in the construction of the ‘nation’.

Keywords: national identity; nationalism; homeland; Palestinian; critical discourse analysis; Fateh’s PLO; HAMAS; constituent elements; ideological tensions

1. Introduction

The decades-old conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people is inarguably one of the most central geopolitical issues that has long dominated world politics and is by far the most important Arab-Islamic issue. This centrality stems not just from the significant challenges it poses to international peace and security, but because lies at its heart a clash of Palestinian and Jewish Zionist nationalisms, each with its respective narratives, foundational assumptions and competing claims to territory and legitimacy. Over the past few decades, a growing body of scholarly literature has paid due attention to the nature and history of Palestinian nationalism since the early decades of the past century (Farsoun & Aruri, 2006; Gerber, 2008; Hamid, 1975; Khalidi, 1997a, 1997b; Kimmerling & Migdal, 1993; Lybarger, 2007; Muslih, 1987; Quandt, 1973; R. Sayigh, 2007; Y. Sayigh, 1997). The picture, however, has been complicated further with the emergence of Palestinian Islamist movements, mainly the Islamic Resistance Movement (known by the acronym HAMAS) since the late 1980s as a major player in the Palestinian political scene. Hamas has been the most serious rival to the secular-nationalist Yasir Arafat’s Palestinian National Liberation Movement (a.k.a. FATEH), which is the main faction of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, PLO. These two Palestinian movements have often been locked in
an ‘ideological’ rivalry over the nature and definition of the conflict with Israel, the conceptual-
ization of the Palestinian homeland, and the role regional and international actors play in relation
to the Palestinian situation.

Much of this ideological competition takes place in and through discursive acts where ideolo-
ically motivated meanings are produced, inculcated, legitimized or contested (van Dijk, 1998, 2001; Fairclough, 1992; Wodak, 1996). It is through discourse that political actors create, maintain, assert or resist social conditions or the status quo (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 1999) and seek to construct and reconstruct social identities, relations and structures. Informed by a Critical Discourse Analytic approach (cf. Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 1996; Wodak et al., 1999), this paper aims to examine how Palestinian national identity is constructed in discourse. It probes into the constituent elements of Palestinian national identity and the ‘nation’ as expressed and consistently presented in Palestinian official secularist and Isla-
mist discourses and the processes by which a shared sense of common Palestinian identity is
forged and the similarities and ideological tensions between secularists and Islamists in the con-
struction of the Palestinian ‘nation’.

2. Theoretical background: nationalism and national identity

Nationalism is a notoriously complex, slippery notion that has been the subject of much scho-
larly debate and scrutiny (Anderson, 1991; Billig, 1995; Hearn, 2006; Smith, 1998; Spencer & Wollman, 2002). The last two decades witnessed a proliferation of methodological ori-
entations that emphasized the socially constructed nature of national phenomena; critical attention
has since been paid to the constitutive role of discourse in the formation of nations and national
identity. Causal-historical, top-down analyses were eschewed in favour of more bottom-up,
discourse-analytic approaches to nationalism and national identity. Anderson’s (1991) notion
of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ has been especially influential. This conception of
nations as ‘imagined communities’, as ‘mental constructs’ (Wodak et al., 1999, p. 2), highlights
the constitutive role of discourse through which concepts of national homogeneity, historic
continuity and shared present are constituted, re-constituted and inculcated through discourse,
often by a nationalist and engaged intelligentsia.

After all, nations are not accidental acts of human organization, but they have to be actively
constructed by discourse actors who draw on those elements, real or imagined, which are experi-
enced by members of the collective group they represent and whom they proclaim to defend. These elements seek to define the ethnic and other boundaries of ‘our’ nation as distinct in
relation to ‘other’ nations and groups. Nationalism, therefore, can be thought of as an ideological
boundary-setting, that is, ‘an ideology of boundedness and a believed or claimed congruity
between people, territory and state, or population, geography and politics’ (Lindholm Schulz,
2003, p. 15). Thus, there is often a nationalist tendency to assert, or over-emphasize, national
uniqueness and homogeneity while largely ignoring or downplaying existing intra-national
economic, social and ideological differences among the members of the ingroup.

3. Arab and Palestinian nationalisms: a brief historical note

Palestinian nationalism, like other nationalisms in several Arab countries (for a discussion of
Arab nationalism, see Dawisha, 2003; Sheehi, 2004), was shaped by the extraordinary political
and socio-economic circumstances at the turn of the twentieth century, especially in the years
that followed the end of WWI and the beginning of the British Mandate for Palestine (1920–
1948). Khalidi’s (1997a, 1997b) cogent work provides a path-breaking analysis of the origins
of Palestinian nationalism and the emergence of a national consciousness, especially during
these formative years. Khalidi (1997a, p. 171) shows that much like other Arab national identities, Palestinian national identity was multi-layered and inflected by a multiplicity of transnational, regional and local loyalties, in particular Arabism and Islam. He shows that these constituent elements of Palestinian collective identity – Muslim and Christian religious attachments to the land, the conception of Palestine as a discrete entity belonging to a larger Arab or Ottoman whole, local patriotism, family and communal alliances, and the rejection of external British control over Palestine – were widespread before WWI and already pre-dated Arab Palestinians’ violent encounter with Zionism (for a similar argument, see Gerber, 2008; Kimmerling & Migdal, 1993; Muslih, 1987).

It was, and still is as this study shows, that the Palestinians’ violent encounter with the Zionist movement – and later Israel – and their rejection of Zionist ‘encroachment’ on the land have greatly contributed to a heightened sense of national and political self-identification and helped solidify a Palestinian nationalist movement (Quandt, Jabber, & Lesch, 1973). Present realities, political transformations, ideological affiliations and factional politics have all given way to various expressions of national identity by the mainly secular Palestinian groups of the PLO.

The eruption of the first Palestinian popular uprising (a.k.a. the first Intifada) in 1987 signalled the emergence of an Islamist nationalist identity in competition with the secular nationalism of the PLO, which had been synonymous with the Palestinian national movement for over two decades. The first Intifada had signified a seismic shift in the political thinking and practice of the Palestinian Islamist movement which during the 1970s till mid-1980s had largely concentrated on passive resistance, on da’wah (i.e. on social and religious mobilization through education, religious education and social welfare programmes), while avoiding a direct military confrontation with Israel. The emergence of Islamic nationalism embodied mainly in Hamas introduced an alternative form of Palestinian nationalism competing with Fateh’s secular nationalism.2 Hamas posited itself as a competitor to Fateh’s PLO, and in the process it has drawn on Palestinian nationalist narratives and symbols, but also influenced the secular Fateh to integrate new forms of nationalist imagining by drawing on religious rhetoric and symbols.

4. A note on methodology

This article takes a constructionist view of Palestinian national identity discourses and sees them as intrinsically constitutive of Palestinian national identity as well as shaped by historical and political contexts and processes of national identity formation. The analysis is largely inspired by the methodological approach of the Vienna-based discourse historical approach developed by Wodak et al. (1999), de Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) and Wodak and de Cillia (2007) in their work on the discursive construction of Austrian identity. A characteristic feature of the discourse-historical approach is that it seeks to systematically incorporate all relevant historical, political and other background knowledge in the analysis of text.

In their work, Wodak et al. (1999) distinguish between three levels of analysis: thematic contents, discourse strategies and forms and means of realization. Themes, or topics, are overall meanings which cannot be observed directly, but are assigned to discourse by language users. They are typically constructed from propositions at word- and clause-levels which are then subsumed into higher-level macro-propositions that form part of the thematic structure of a text or a group of texts (van Dijk, 2001). Wodak et al. also distinguish between four macro-strategies, which are applied consciously and subconsciously by discourse users to achieve a certain political, psychological, communicative or other kind of objective. Constructive and Deconstructive strategies as well as strategies of justification and transformation are employed to maintain, defend, transform or dismantle certain elements of a particular national identity.
These global strategies are textually realized in various other sub-strategies and linguistic structures. Special attention in Wodak et al.’s work is given to the use of lexical and syntactic selections, and metaphors in constructing social actors and intra-national sameness or difference.

The various strategies and means of realization provided by Wodak et al. (1999, pp. 36–42) offer a useful analytical roadmap for the analysis of Palestinian identity formation processes. Thus, the analysis adopted here is largely thematic aiming to elicit the most recurrent themes drawn upon in the construction of national identity and the major strategies and linguistic manifestations of these themes. It especially focuses on the use of pronouns and deixis, metaphors, transitivity and lexical selections that all seem to be salient linguistic features predominantly drawn upon in the discursive construction of the Palestinian national identity.

This study examines a body of canonical forms of nationalist expression, including key political speeches and statements, national tracts, articles, interviews and an election manifesto (see the list of these texts in the appendix). These texts, which are available in English and Arabic, were produced at crucial (discursive) moments in the eventful Palestinian modern history, so their production not only reflected and affected the meanings, the language and the voices of those who produced them, but they are continually reproduced, recontextualized and disseminated in various channels of communication. The texts come from different genres since it was not possible to find a sizable set of texts belonging to one genre. While the generic features of these texts are clearly different, a comparison of the generic features is not the aim of the analysis. Rather, the analysis is intended to identify key recurrent themes in the construction of Palestinian national identity and their linguistic expressions across a diverse group of texts.

5. Palestinian nationalist discourses: historical continuity and common political present

The nationalist discourses of Fateh and Hamas are based on a tapestry of central themes and tropes that define the nation not only in primordialist terms – of a territorialist, organic connection to the land – but also in terms of a common political present accentuated by Palestinian conditions of dislocation, exile and a prolonged military occupation. The differences between Fateh and Hamas are related to their respective ideological orientations to the conceptualization of the political and cultural make-up of the ‘homeland’ and its relation to a larger Arab and Islamic milieu.

5.1 A territorialist, historical discourse: attachment to the land

Because territory has always been at the core of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, the conception of this ‘territory’ in Palestinian nationalist discourses has been a defining component of Palestinian national self-perception and struggle. A unique national identity is predominantly constructed based on an attachment to a territorial homeland whose people are inseparably linked to it by common origin, historical continuity and religion. This is textually realized in a clustering of lexical, grammatical and metaphorical selections. In extract 1, for instance, references such as ‘integral bonds’ and ‘everlasting union’ signify an organic, perennial connection between the people and the land. This essentialist imagining of the nation is further reinforced in the personifying process verbs associated with the people (born, grew, developed, never separated and excelled) that compare the development of the Palestinian people to stages in human life.

1. Palestine, the land of the three monotheistic faiths, is where the Palestinian Arab people was born, on which it grew, developed and excelled. The Palestinian people was never separated from or diminished in its integral bonds with Palestine. Thus the Palestinian Arab people ensured for itself an everlasting union between itself, its land, and its history. (Opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence 15 November 1988)
Similarly, in extract 2, a perennial form of national self-identification is invoked in references such as ‘patrimonial land’, ‘undying connection’ and ‘nourished by an unfolding series of civilizations’. This nationalist appeal to a perennial nation enduring from generation to generation since time immemorial is crucial to nationalists’ labour as they select and rediscover a unique ethnic past; ‘the rediscovery of the ethnic past’, according to Smith (1998, p. 45), ‘furnishes vital memories, values, symbols and myths, without which nationalism would be powerless’.

2. Resolute throughout that history, the Palestinian Arab people forged its national identity, rising even to unimagined levels in its defence, as invasion, the design of others, and the appeal special to Palestine’s ancient and luminous place on the eminence where powers and civilizations are joined. All this intervened thereby to deprive the people of its political independence. Yet the undying connection between Palestine and its people secured for the Land its character, and for the people its national genius. Nourished by an unfolding series of civilizations and cultures, inspired by a heritage rich in variety and kind, the Palestinian Arab people added to its stature by consolidating a union between itself and its patrimonial Land. (Declaration of Independence, 15 November 1988)

Primordial attachments may involve expressing religious ties between members of the social group and the territorial homeland. References abound in Palestinian discourses to the religious significance of Palestine as the meeting place for ancient civilizations and the three monotheistic religions. For example, the reference to Palestine in extract 1 as ‘the land of the three monotheistic faiths’ and in the following extracts as ‘the cradle of monotheistic religion’, ‘one of Islam’s greatest fronts’ and ‘Palestine is the navel of the earth’ establish Palestine not just as a modern geo-political reality, but also as occupying a religio-symbolic space in the collective consciousness of Palestinians.

3. Palestine is the cradle of monotheistic religions; it is the land of Al-Aqsa, and the land of the Nativity Church and the Holy Sepulchre. (PA’s President Abbas on the occasion of the opening session of the second Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) on 18 February 2006)

4. On the basis of the belief that we stand at one of Islam’s greatest fronts. (Hamas Election Manifesto for the Legislative Elections held on 25 January 2006, as cited in Tamimi, 2007, p. 292)

5. Palestine is the navel of earth, the convergence of continents, the object of greed for the greedy, since the dawn of history. (HAMAS’s Charter, 1988, article 34)

These extracts involve a positive representation of Palestine’s religious history as a land special for its people who constitute the totality of Muslims, Christians and Jews that lived in this area before Israel’s creation. At the same time, there is a political element to this reference in that it implies a denial of Zionist claims that the land is exclusively Jewish. The concern here with creating a strong connection with a unique religious and historical place does mirror similar tendencies in other nationalist discourses to search for the nation’s roots in a glorious and distant past.

Although not stated as clearly as in the PLO’s secular discourse on the nation, a territorial attachment can be located in Hamas’ discourse though this attachment is explicitly framed in specific religious values, as I will discuss in Section 6.2.1 below. For now, it is interesting to note that the value of Palestine as a coveted place for imperial and invading powers is the same in the PLO and Hamas’ discourses. Both make frequent assertions of the place of Palestinians in history by appealing to their role as the trustees and vanguards of these Muslim and Christian holy places. Consider, for instance, the reference to Palestine in ‘as invasion, the design of others, and the appeal special to Palestine’s ancient and luminous place’ and ‘the object of greed for the greedy’ in extracts 2 and 5, respectively. Gerber (2008, p. 207) shows that the memory of the Crusades for control of the holy lands has persisted throughout the ages which was used among other things in Palestinians’ commemoration rites and further contributed to an awareness of Palestine’s religious particularity and their role as protectors of the land. This particularity burst into a fully blown sense of national identity as the Palestinians’
national aspirations at the turn of the twentieth century collided with the Zionists’ biblically invoked statehood ambitions.

5.2 Suffering and resistance: the construction of a common political present

The ongoing violent encounter with Israel and the current Palestinian predicament are perhaps the single most important element of Palestinian self-identification and national identity construction. This element is not set far back in a mythologized past of national origin, but it is closely linked to traceable historical events and the immediate, collectively lived realities of the Palestinians.

The context and impact of Israeli violence feature quite extensively in the discourses of both Fateh and Hamas. What is common in both nationalist discourses is that there is not only an emphasis on Palestinian suffering, occupation and statelessness, but themes of popular resistance and national pride are often invoked. Textually, the nation is constructed in relation to a clearly differentiated ‘Other’ whereby Israel is depicted as the ‘colonizer’ and the ‘stranger’ that ‘usurped’ the land and ‘evicted’ its people. Let us take, for instance, extract 6 which sets up a perpetrator/victim dichotomy with Israeli Zionists are constructed as colonial aggressors while Palestinians are represented as their victims. This binary opposition is established linguistically in the use of deictic pronouns which clearly set a stark dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

6. If we return now to the historical roots of our cause we do so because present at this very moment in our midst are those, who, while they occupy our homes, as their cattle graze in our pastures, and as their hands pluck the fruit of our trees, claim at the same time that we are disembodied spirits, fictions without presence, without traditions or future. (Arafat’s speech to the UNGA, 1974)

In this extract, and in fact in the whole speech, Arafat uses metaphors and evocative imagery to portray an image of a coherent and stable community until it was disrupted by the Zionists. Note here the appropriation of a classic image of colonial aggression and land usurpation, ‘they occupy our homes’, ‘as their cattle graze in our pastures’ and ‘as their hands pluck the fruits of our tress’. The depiction of Palestine as a motherland that was violated by strangers is rhetorically powerful, aiming to convey the Palestinian historical experience and to evince strong national sentiments. Invoking the image of motherland and sexual rape by foreigners is common in nationalist discourses. For example, Thaiss (1987) shows that during the period leading up to the Islamic revolution in Iran, the USA was portrayed as ‘an adulterous infidel who raped and mistreated Iran, which was depicted as a mother – as a mother country’ (cited in Eriksen, 1993, p. 108).

The preoccupation with the current Palestinian predicament is also pervasive in Hamas’s discourse. Note that the speaker in extract 7 frames the situation as a nationalist, anti-occupation struggle and draws on themes of occupation, dispossession and dislocation that many Palestinians can collectively and individually relate to. Here strictly political and nationalist reasons are provided which indicates a move away from the largely doctrinal views in Hamas’s Charter.

7. Our message to the Israelis is this: we do not fight you because you belong to a certain faith or culture . . . Our conflict with you is not religious but political. We have no problem with Jews who have not attacked us – our problem is with those who came to our land, imposed themselves on us by force, destroyed our society and banished our people. We shall never recognise the right of any power to rob us of our land and deny us our national rights. We shall never recognise the legitimacy of a Zionist state created on our soil in order to atone for somebody else’s sins or solve somebody else’s problem. (Article by Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khalid Mish’al in the Guardian, 31 March 2006)

What is noteworthy in this extract is that the victim–perpetrator frame is predominant and national trauma is linked to a specific human agent. The transmission of this frame is aided by
the selection of value-laden expressions used to construct this version of reality, most saliently
done in the use of lexical selections and active clause structures. Negative agency is explicitly
ascribed to the Israelis as they are assigned an explicit ‘Actor’ role as agents of anti-Palestinian
violence and highly negative action processes ‘attacked’, ‘impose’, ‘destroyed’, ‘usurp’, ‘ban-
ished’, ‘rob’ and ‘hoist’ (for a discussion of transitivity selections, see Halliday, 1994). In the
same vein, Palestinians are ascribed the ‘Goal’ role as victims of Zionist violence. The explicit
attribution of participant roles to Palestinians and Israelis involves emphasizing the latter’s
political and moral responsibility for the displacement and suffering of the Palestinians.

The listing of various forms of suffering faced by the Palestinians involves the discursive
work of constructing a ‘a community of victims’ (Wodak et al., 1999, p. 212), that is, the creating
of a national solidarity bound together by conditions of statelessness, occupation and a pro-
tracted national crisis. This relates to what Lindholm Schulz (2003, p. 2) referred to as an identity
of ‘suffering’, i.e. ‘an identification created by the anxieties and injustices happening to the
Palestinians because of external forces’. The content of this identity acquires physical, temporal
and agency markers and takes expression variously along the dividing lines of homeland/exile,
past displacement/present occupation, and they-colonizers/we-colonized.

While in the previous extracts, Palestinians are positioned as objects of Zionist negative
actions, in the following extract they are positioned as agents of predominantly positive
actions of ‘confronting’, ‘challenging’ and ‘opposing’. A prevalent constructive strategy is
used to construct a single community that is geographically dispersed, yet unified as a single col-
llectivity sharing national cohesion and unity in the face of adversity and misfortune. The appeal
to a national identity characterized by national pride and resistance is established, for example,
in the following extract which aims to cement communal feelings of connectedness and national
purpose. The rhetorical deployment of the well-known metaphorical image of David pitted against
Goliath is used to attribute positive evaluations to the ‘ingroup’ and evoke feelings of national
pride and moral superiority, despite material weakness. This is especially the case during the first
Intifada (the uprising, in Arabic), which was mainly characterized by confrontations between
Palestinian stone-throwing youngsters and Israeli army forces.

8. Greetings to all of you from the sons of our hero people – men and women – and from the masses
of our blessed uprising . . . of confronting the occupation, oppression, injustice and the bestial crimes
which the Israeli occupiers are committing against them daily . . . Greetings to you from the stone-
throwing children, who are challenging the occupation and its aircraft, tanks and weaponry, recalling
the new image of the defenceless Palestinian David opposing the heavily-armed Israeli Goliath.
(Arafat’s speech to the UNGA, 1988)

By valorizing the sacrifices of the ‘people’, Arafat deploys a national category which defines
national identity in terms of resistance and heroism. At the same time, the whole speech is
replete with explicitly negative references to the ‘other’ such as ‘Israeli occupiers’, ‘Israeli
Goliath’, ‘Israeli officialdom’, ‘Israel’s leaders intoxicated and deluded’, ‘Israel’s military
machine’ and ‘Israel’s crimes’.

5.3 The quest for statehood

The Palestinians’ search for independent statehood dates back as early as the early years of the
British Mandate for Palestine and the increasingly violent conflict with Zionism. Gerber (2008,
p. 208) observes that during the early Mandate period (1918–1922), especially in the year 1918,
there was a clear demand by Palestinian Arabs for a Palestinian state independent of any other
power. Following the 1967 war, a Palestinian nationalist movement embodied by the PLO had
re-emerged with the explicit goal of achieving national liberation and sovereign statehood. To
Palestinians, having a state seemed to be the answer to these extraordinary conditions where
they seek to embody their Palestinian national identity and exercise the privileges of statehood. The ‘dream’ of statehood and ‘to be like other peoples on this Earth’, seems to be driven by the fact that to be stateless is to be something beyond normal, especially in a world order characterized by nation states. The PLO’s nationalist discourse has consistently reflected and reproduced this quest for statehood.

9. The state of Palestine is an Arab state and its people constitute a part of the Arab nation in terms of heritage, culture and ambitions for social development, unity and liberation. [The State of Palestine] calls upon Arab compatriots to consolidate and enhance the emergence in reality of our state, to mobilize potential, and to intensify efforts whose goal is to end Israeli occupation. (Arafat’s speech to the UNGA, 1988)

The definition of this state in discourses by the PLO remains clearly grounded in nationalist, non-religious and modernist terms in a territorially defined space encompassing the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem occupied since 1967. Further, this state is Arab-oriented, emphasizing an Arab social and cultural character. Note that in the above extract the Palestinian identity is placed within a larger pan-Arab cultural project for progress and liberation, while at the same time stating the particular Palestinian experience and drive for national liberation.

The quest for statehood is also reflected in Hamas’s official discourse which, since the movement’s inception in 1987, has undergone gradual but persistent revisions of its political thinking, strategies and discourse. These revisions signalled a noticed shift away from strictly doctrinal views of the homeland and the conflict with Israel, as found in earlier statements, towards political realism and a more Palestinian-inclusive discourse. Perhaps one of the clearest pronouncements of this change with regard to the establishment of a Palestinian state can be found in Hamas’s electoral platform of 2006, which may be the most significant document issued by Hamas 18 years after it published its Charter in 1988. The official platform articulated for the first time a comprehensive ‘state-building’ and ‘reform’ program, almost devoid of the strictly religious overtones and invocations frequently found in Hamas’s Charter:

10. The Change and Reform List believes that its participation in the legislative elections ... falls within the framework of the comprehensive program for the liberation of Palestine, the return of the Palestinian people to their lands and homes, and the establishment of the Palestinian independent state with Jerusalem as its capital. (Hamas Election Manifesto for the Legislative Elections held on 25 January 2006)

Note that this future ‘state’ is referred to as ‘independent’ and ‘sovereign’, while the program leaves out any mention of establishing an ‘Islamic’ state. This is clearly different from the conception of the state in the Hamas’s Charter with the state-to-be is defined along strictly doctrinal, anti-secular lines: ‘As to the objectives: discarding the evil, crushing it and defeating it, so that truth may prevail, homelands revert [to their owners], calls for prayer be heard from their mosques, announcing the reinstitution of the Muslim state’ over the total territory of historic Palestine (Hamas’s Charter, 1988, article 9).

The shift away from the overtly religious to the pragmatic in relation to state-building seems to be in response to both Palestinians’ realities and popular nationalist demands on the one hand, and to regional and international pressures, as it moves from the opposition ranks to a mainstream position where it is expected to govern and speak for all social and political components of Palestinian society.

6. Ideological tensions and concordances in the construction of the homeland
The extraordinary Palestinian experience always called for a national identity moulded variously by local, regional, pan-Arab or pan-Islamic affinities, depending on the specific Palestinian historical circumstances. As a result, an ideological struggle often arose within the Palestinian
nationalist movement between those who prioritized pan-Arab or pan-Islamic dimensions as prerequisites for changing the Palestinian situation, and those who emphasized Palestinian particularity, or what Kimmerling and Migdal refer to as ‘Palestinianism’ (1993).

Despite the common nationalist themes shared by the PLO’s Fateh and Hamas in the construction of national identity, there are areas of ideological tension which are not particular to the Palestinian context, but they mirror a larger ideological debate between secularists and Islamists in the broader Islamic and Arab worlds (for a discussion of this debate, see Abu-Rabi’, 2004). Such differences between the PLO and Hamas arise in relation to the concept of nation, the place of Palestine within its broader Arab and Islamic circles and the ideological frames underlying their national identity constructions.

6.1 The PLO: Palestinian particularity and pan-Arab sentiment

Since its establishment, the PLO has gradually shifted its political approach from a total rejection of the existence of Israel, as stated in its national Charter of 1968, to reaching a political compromise which ‘secures’ Palestinian national rights and statehood. While the approach has changed due to political circumstances as it was venturing different political solutions to the conflict with Israel, one can safely argue that a territorial, nationalist discourse has persisted irrespective of the political stage at which the PLO was. The predominant aspect of the PLO’s nationalism has been its focus on the unique Palestinian experience and the goal of ‘ending the occupation’, while still invoking pan-Arab nationalist sentiments. The point of reference in extract 9 above, for instance, is the Arab nation with the Palestinian people as a distinct political unity which shares common, integral bonds with a larger Arab cultural and political whole. Expressions like ‘Arab state’, ‘Arab Nation’ and ‘Arab compatriots’ are indicative of pan-Arab sentiments which are still echoed, despite losing much of the ideological potency they once enjoyed.

What characterizes the PLO’s discourse is an ostensible absence of a religious dimension to the conflict except for occasional references to verses in the Quran, which is common in Arab political rhetoric. In this respect, what is imagined in this nationalist discourse is a liberated, democratic and progressive Palestinian polity linked to a specific territory and is quintessentially Arab in culture and political aspirations.

6.2 Hamas: Islamist transnationalism versus Palestinian particularity

While Hamas’s discourse echoes the premises of the PLO’s grand nationalist narrative, it also emphasizes the Islamic nature of Palestine. In Hamas’s discourse, there is a slippage of the secular and the nationalist (anti-colonial struggle and self-determination) into the divine and the religious (Palestine as a religious endowment). As I pointed out above, much of this slippage can be observed especially in documents and statements produced over the past decade. A case in point relevant to our discussion of the difference between Hamas’s pragmatic and doctrinal discourses is in the way they construct the homeland and its relation to larger Arab and Islamic contexts.

6.2.1 The charter: Palestine as a religious endowment

The central worldview of the Charter is that Palestine is a religious waqf (an Islamic trust-land) that cannot be relinquished and it is incumbent upon ‘all Muslims’ wherever they are to struggle to redeem it to the vicinity of Islam. The Charter – made public in 18 August 1988 and has remained the subject of much citation and scrutiny especially in the propaganda war between
Israelis and Palestinians – is replete with Quranic verses, imagery and religious inductions. These situate the conflict in religious grounds and are powerful means through which political positions are ascribed divine authority and legitimacy. The frequent references to the sacredness of the land of Palestine and the holy places and to historical events of non-Muslim aggressions in Palestine (the Crusades and the Tatars) have the function of defining the conflict not merely as a recent political, territorial conflict, which is the result of objective political and socio-economic workings, but as a religious conflict steep in history and pre-destined for eternity.

11. The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine has been an Islamic Waqf throughout the generations and until the Day of Resurrection, no one can renounce it or part of it, or abandon it or part of it. (Hamas Charter, article 11)

Pan-Islamist themes, troupes and religious exegeses traverse the whole text and imbue Palestine with an Islamic identity overriding all other identities. Like other trans-nationally Islamist movements, the Charter’s invocations constitute a major rallying cry to all Muslims to mobilize for the defence of Palestine and seek legitimacy for the movement in the eyes of wider constituencies of supporters across the Arab and Muslim worlds and far beyond.

12. The Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine is an Individual Obligation. When our enemies usurp some Islamic lands, Jihad becomes a duty binding on all Muslims. In order to face the usurpation of Palestine by the Jews, we have no escape from raising the banner of Jihad. (Hamas Charter, article 15)

What is especially noteworthy in the Charter is that the particularity of Palestine – the cultural and social character of Palestine and the Palestinian experience – is de-emphasized while more emphasis is placed on expressing a transnational Islamist ideology which sees the ‘liberation’ of Palestine as one important stage in the drive to ‘the reinstitution of the Muslim state’ (article 9), and reviving a Pan-Islamic rejuvenation project standing in opposition to ‘Western’ cultural and political intervention and hegemony (see, articles 29 and 35). Under this view, Palestine is seen as an ‘Islamic land’ which has been ‘usurped’ by Zionism. The latter is constructed as an infringement on Muslim land, values and religion and hence ‘Jihad’ for its liberation becomes ‘a duty binding on all Muslims’.

The ideological tension that generally characterizes Islamist and secularist discourses, as reflected in the Charter, goes beyond the specific Palestinian context to involve an ideological debate over the place of Palestine in relation to its larger Arab and Islamic universe and the meaning of its cultural identity. In this ideological contest over meanings, the PLO’s secular nationalism is constructed as un-Islamic and as a foreign concept that is a reflection of Western cultural hegemony. As clearly stated in extract 13, the categorical delegitimation of Western secularization as a by-product of western ‘ideological invasion’ expresses a direct rejection of PLO’s nationalist thought viewed as western-inspired and as aiding in the penetration of western thought in the body of the ‘umma’. In this sense, the PLO is exhorted to forgo its secular thought and dedicates itself to authentic and genuine ‘Islamic’ values and thought.

13. The PLO has adopted the idea of a Secular State, and so we think of it. Secular thought is diametrically opposed to religious thought. Thought is the basis for positions, for modes of conduct and for resolutions. Therefore, in spite of our appreciation for the PLO... we cannot substitute it for the Islamic nature of Palestine by adopting secular thought. (HAMAS Charter, article 27)

Instead of secular nationalism, nationalism is reframed and integrated in an Islamist ideology and acquires an overarching Islamic character: ‘nationalism (Wataniyya) as part and parcel of the religious faith’ and ‘[Hamas’s nationalism] carries, in addition to all those, the all important divine factors which lend to it its spirit and life’ (article 12). Under this view, Islam becomes the primary source of identification, including national identification, and Islamist categories are imported for explicit nationalist aims, which provide an imagining of the nation as belonging to a larger collective, seen here as the ‘the community of believers’, or ‘umma’.
Unlike the PLO’s Arab-oriented discourse, which draws on notions of Arab heritage, culture and history, the Charter anchors its view of the homeland in a strictly religious framework, which provides the ultimate source of meaning and its point of reference. It prioritizes the necessity of Islamizing the nation in conjunction with, if not overriding, the project of national liberation. But beyond generic religious injunctions and nationalist statements, there is little account in this ideologically Islamist document par excellence of how such an Islamizing project could be successfully implemented socially, institutionally and territorially, especially in a highly politicized and ideologically contentious Palestinian arena and a mobilized and largely secular, civil society.

6.2.2 Palestine in recent documents

Responding to its increasingly leading role in the Palestinian political arena over the past decade in addition to a rapidly changing geopolitical environment both regionally and internationally, evidently there has been a new discourse reinterpreting and renegotiating Hamas’s political thinking and practice in relation to internal and external realities. Traces of a new discourse can be clearly located in these texts, for instance, in the assimilation of notions of international law, human rights, social reform and political pluralism, etc. At the same time, strictly pan-Islamist rhetoric (e.g. Jihad, religious duty, explicit religious injunctions) typically found in earlier documents is largely left out. This new discourse involves two central elements: first, it involves an emphasis on Palestine as a discrete political entity with a distinctive collective identity accentuated by the ongoing violent conflict with Israel. Second, it involves making consistent appeals to Arab and Islamic circles as the cultural and political reserves for this national identity. Let us look at these two central elements.

First, while the Charter which is saturated with religious doctrines and themes that highlight the task of Islamizing the Palestinian nation as a prerequisite to the project of national liberation, what we see here is an explicitly nationalist, anti-occupation discourse preoccupied with the specific Palestinian reality and national constants (e.g. the return of Palestinian refugees). Note, for example, that extracts 14 and 15 establish a distinct national polity defined by a specific geopolitical boundaries and the reality of the occupation. That is, the homeland is represented as comprising the total area of historic Palestine, i.e. the pre-1948 British Mandate Palestine, which is ‘part of the Arab and Islamic land’. The appeal to a national collective is also established in relation to the ongoing Palestinian predicament. References in extract 15 such as ‘partners who share the homeland’, ‘subjected to the same oppressive measures’ and ‘Muslim brothers’ define national membership on the basis of belonging to the same cultural group, sharing a specific place and collectively experiencing a national crisis.

14. Historic Palestine is part of the Arab and Islamic land; the Palestinian people’s right to it does not diminish with the passage of time and no military or alleged legal procedures alter this fact. The Palestinian people are united as one wherever they may be living and are an inseparable part of the Arab and Islamic umma. (Hamas Election Manifesto, 2006)

15. As for the Christians living in Palestine, Hamas considers them to be partners who share the homeland and who have been subjected to the same oppressive measures to which their Muslim brothers have been subjected at the hands of the occupation authorities. (Hamas Memo)

Second, while Hamas’s recent discourse seems focused on Palestinian nationalist goals, it also invokes pan-Arab and pan-Islamic sentiments, thereby remaining faithful to its ostensibly Islamist outlook and also using these sentiments to mobilize Muslim and Arab audiences beyond the local context. Similar to PLO’s invocations of pan-Arab sentiments, expressions such as ‘breaking the geographic contiguity’ and ‘obstructing the project of Arab and Islamic
unity’ in the following extract seek to connect Palestinian national identity, or Palestinian-ness, to an Arab-Islamic cultural heritage and to the aspirations of the peoples of the region.

16. The Zionist entity constitutes an effective colonial means of breaking the geographic contiguity among the Arab countries in Asia and Africa; it is simply aimed at thwarting any renaissance project in the region. It seeks thus to accomplish the colonial goal of obstructing the project of Arab and Islamic unity. (Hamas Memo, 2000)

Here Israel is characterized much less as a religious sacrilege on Muslim land, but rather as a colonial enclave and a military occupation engaged in oppressive measures against Palestinians. In this breath, the Arab and Islamic nation is called upon to help the Palestinians in their struggle for national liberation, ‘All Muslims, both as individuals as well as communities, shoulder the duty of contributing whatever they can afford to the task of liberating Palestine’ (Hamas Memo, 2000). Such appeals are not communicated as overt religious injunctions, i.e. as a ‘religious obligation’ and ‘Jihad’, but rather are replaced by modally attenuated expressions in terms of ‘a responsibility to stand by your brothers and sisters’ which is similar to PLO’s appeals to ‘Arab compatriots’ to help realize Palestinian self-determination goals.

7. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper examined the constituent themes and key textual resources involved in the construction of the homeland and national identity in Palestinian Islamist and secularist discourses. As we have seen, despite ostensible ideological differences between Fateh’s and Hamas’s discourses on some key issues, both Islamist and secular nationalists largely share key constituent elements which define Palestinian political identity and have a direct bearing on the ongoing Israel/Palestine conflict. These involve the construction of a common history, including a territorial attachment to the land, the construction of a common political present based on Palestinian suffering and resistance to Israel, and the quest for statehood. In fact, both discourses share many of the vocabularies and perceptions of the homeland and the concerns with the state-building project.

Notwithstanding dominant views of Hamas as inflexible and rejectionist, a closer look at its more recent discourses shows a clear departure from the doctrinal and religious discourses, characterizing the movement’s earlier discourses. The tension between the doctrinal and the pragmatic is largely settled in favour of the latter. The analysis has shown that characteristic of Hamas’s recent texts is an anti-occupation discourse couched in general religious references that are in essence no different from that of Fateh’s discourse. The absence of a strictly religious discourse may be explained by recent developments which apparently impelled Hamas into treading a careful line between an Islamic centrist outlook, which is reflective of the ideological worldview of the trans-national Muslim Brotherhood, and a more pragmatist approach accommodating notions of human rights, international law, social reform, political pluralism and individual rights and freedoms. Whether these discursive shifts are tactical, aimed at managing a difficult Palestinian situation, or whether they are driven by a more fundamental and ongoing political rethinking remains to be seen.

In closing, much has been said about the ideological power of the nationalist identity discourse. Malesevic (2006, p. 227) correctly describes it as ‘a paramount discourse of our age’, for individuals, leaders and groups across varied political, ethnic or religious lines often resort to it in order to legitimize political actions and preserve one’s identity. Understanding this identity discourse, its historical and political driving force, its discursive structures and workings and its material consequences are a crucial step towards undoing some of nationalism’s tribalist shackles and built-in destructive potential and, even better, contemplating the vast space of universal human dignity and emancipation.
Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. I use the term ‘Islamist’ broadly as an ideologically explicit concept designating political groups holding an Islamically-oriented political agenda which seeks to Islamize their societies in outlook, discourse and practice and ultimately to establish an Islamic ‘state’. The term ‘secular’ refers to groups which do not take religion as the basis of political and social life. Unlike Islamists, secularists are generally married to the idea of establishing non-religious, civic society and state.

2. It is commonly acknowledged that Fateh’s affiliates come from a wide spectrum of ideologies, from the ‘secular’ and ‘the Marxist’ to the ‘right-wings’ and the ‘Muslim Brotherhoods’, hence its adoption of the notion of ‘movement’ rather than ‘party’ or ‘front’. But one can safely argue that Fateh espouses a fundamentally secular and nationalist ideology.

3. It is important to acknowledge that the analysis does not also delve into the contexts of production and consumption of each text given that this is a lengthy and complicated process which goes beyond the aims and word limit of the paper. Take, for example, Arafat’s speech at the UNGA in 1974 whose processes of production and consumption are quite complicated to be dealt with in this study.

References


**Appendix**

List of texts

- Speech by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO and President of the Palestinian Authority delivered on the occasion of the opening session of the second Palestinian legislative Council on 18 February 2006. Available from Palestine–Israel Journal available at http://www.pij.org/documents/a%20speech%20by%20president%20mahmoud%20abbas.pdf
- Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas’s commemoration speech on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba – Catastrophe in Arabic – 15 May 2008.
• Memo prepared by Hamas Political Bureau in June 2000 just before the eruption of the second Intifada (as cited in Tamimi, 2007, pp. 271–283).
• Memorandum prepared by Hamas Political Bureau in the late 1990s at the request of Western diplomats in the Jordanian capital Amman titled ‘This is what we struggle for’ (as cited in Tamimi, 2007, pp. 265–270).