PALESTINIAN REFUGEES: Dethroning the Nation at the Crowing of the 'Statelet'

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The Oslo agreements proposed a two-state solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza existing alongside Israel. However, the refugees’ right of return and claims to land and property expropriated by Israel during the 1948 were removed from the equation, although they represent the core issues in the conflict. Based on the territorial divisions that preceded the 1967 war, or the ‘green line’, the agreements implicitly rendered the 1948 war and its consequences for the majority of the Palestinian population a non-negotiable historical reality. In a manner of speaking, the crowning of the ‘state’ (PA) dethroned the nation. In this paper, I review these processes in which refugees have been dismissed, and relegated as relics of an unredeemable past and not as subjects of history in the past-present and whose participation is fundamental in seeking a resolution to the conflict. Based on anthropological research in the region, I argue that, despite the passage of time, refugees continue to hold on to their rights and dream of return, albeit reshaped by the contingencies of exile. I conclude by suggesting that the Israeli state and society must take political, legal and practical responsibility for the refugee problem. This implies that the right of return, decolonization and de-Zionization are inseparable processes.
The Palestine national struggle is one of the few that has lingered on into the twenty-first century without shedding the burden of colonial settlement. In fact, for the majority of the population, especially for the refugees, the prospects of a return to home and homeland seem further than they were prior to the ‘peace’ process. The signing of the Declaration of Principles (DoP) in 1993 and related agreements that followed, also known as ‘Oslo’, posed as a smokescreen behind which the Israeli occupation continued to extend its tentacles, swallowing more Arab land and implanting Jewish settlement. Ominously, the agreements lured Palestinian partners into ‘peace’ proposals, which threatened to give away the refugees’ right of return, through political agreements signed by the Palestinian ‘partner’ and blessed by the international community.

In effect, the Oslo ‘peace’ process furthered the fragmentation of the Palestinian historical, political and demographic landscape and forced the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to concede to its own demise as a national liberation movement. The various agreements transformed the PLO to a weak political entity, bereft of real authority and power and incapable of mobilizing consent around a strategic national vision. In fact, the Oslo agreements ensured that the Israeli military government maintained its sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza (Aronson 1996: 29–30). Moreover, by signing the DoP, the PLO agreed to abandon armed struggle as a means of liberation, and to recognize the Israeli state established on 78 per cent of Palestinian land, prior to any military withdrawal or negotiations on the refugee right of return. Significantly, the DoP omitted the United Nations General Assembly Resolution (UNGAR) 194 (III),1 which provides for the refugees’ right of return, compensation and restitution.2

Following the Oslo agreements, many of the PLO’s leaders and cadres relocated to Gaza and the West Bank, and were transformed into officials working within the PA’s various institutions.3 Concurrently, refugees in exile were rendered more vulnerable than ever to the discriminatory policies of host-states, especially those living in Lebanon. The withdrawal of the PLO from Lebanon, and the shift in its political discourse in the absence of a clear strategic vision that unifies the nation, entrenched divisions based largely on who would benefit from the ‘peace’ process. Although in reality the boundaries were fluid and not mutually exclusive, nonetheless a growing political schism began to emerge between ‘1948 refugees,’ and the ‘1967 displaced’, between an ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ divide, and between opponents and supporters of the ‘peace’ agreements. In a manner of speaking, the gap widened between the potential citizens of a future Palestinian statelet on the West Bank and Gaza, and those who a few decades ago had inhabited the villages and towns of what became Israel during the 1948 war.

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1 According to the UNGAR 194 (III), ‘[T]he refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible’ (UN 1948).

2 According to the Interim Agreement, the Israeli state maintains sovereignty and key functions that subjugate the PA and the territories under its jurisdiction to Israeli control. For example, in Annex II: ‘It is understood that, subsequent to the Israel withdrawal, Israel will continue to be responsible for external security, and for internal security and public order of settlements and Israelis. Israeli military forces and civilians may continue to use roads freely within the Gaza Strip and the Jericho area.’ In

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It is important to recall that the idea of a two-state solution espoused in the Oslo framework is not new. Its genesis dates back to the aftermath of the October war in 1973 and was given political expression during the Twelfth Palestine National Council (PNC) meeting in June 1974, when it called for the establishment of a Palestinian authority on any part of Palestine to be liberated. At the time the PNC reaffirmed that such an entity represents a transitional stage that would not compromise the strategic objective of establishing a secular and democratic state in all of Palestine (Muslih 1990: 24). Since then the tactical objective of a ‘mini-state’ upheld by the PLO turned into a strategic goal for ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Oslo agreements transformed the idea of the state (the ‘mini’ was omitted) to what seemed as an impending reality, at least this was the hope of the Palestinian negotiators at Oslo. Indeed, this political shift espoused by its Chairman, Yasser Arafat, jolted the popular-national sentiment to use a Gramscian concept based on an organic link between the right of return and the liberation of the land, that is, return and sovereignty, viewed as concomitant and inseparable processes and held as the cardinal principles around which national consent was mobilized. With the Oslo agreement, the nation was being dethroned in order to crown the state; at least half the Palestinians had little to gain by the establishment of the Oslo ‘statelet’, a term that better fits its shrinking and fragmented borders and territorial scope.4

The rupturing of the PLO, which had previously represented the unifying umbrella representing all Palestinians, was accompanied by the rise of Islamic political movements and organizations. Organizations like Hamas did not replace the PLO, or secular and nationalist trends and organizations. Nonetheless, Hamas and other Islamic organizations have since emerged as significant actors to be reckoned with, and were able to draw upon the growing dissent in Palestinian society, including former Marxists and progressive elements.5 An ‘Islamic’ discourse was invoked in ways that promised an alternative pathway to the dominant Fatah organization and the Palestine Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza, both of which were headed by Yaser Arafat. The Islamic organizations, primarily Hamas, posed as the guardians of the Palestinian national interests, refusing to acquiesce to the principles set up in the Oslo agreements, including the abdication of armed struggle. Moreover, in contrast to the PA, Hamas was viewed as having avoided the seduction of power and its corrupting influence, and as a grassroots organization offering health, education and welfare programmes to the impoverished populace. If one were to overlook the religious dimension, Gramsci would have called Hamas activists organic intellectuals and revolutionaries involved in a counter-hegemonic struggle. Furthermore, Hamas’s discourse converged with others in the Arab world, especially in Egypt, Morocco and Jordan, posing as the political and cultural antithesis of

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3 I have purposely omitted the ‘National’ in the acronym PNA in line with my argument that the PA has limited powers and authority and is incapable of representing and acting on behalf of the nation at large.

4 See PNA 2005b.

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the ‘West’ and its imperial presence in the Arab world. Thus, organizations such as Hamas appealed to a significant segment of the population living under the daily oppression of a brutal Israeli occupation. On its part, Israel’s role in indirectly contributing to the Hamas victory in the recent election is no small matter. The Israeli army first destroyed the PLO’s military power and infrastructure in Lebanon in 1982, and then lured its leadership when at their weakest point to the West Bank and Gaza and into the webs of the Oslo agreements. The Israeli government then struck the final blow by confining Arafat in his headquarters in Ramallah, refusing to deliver the promised state, but tantalizing him with its mirage nevertheless. Instead of independence, the Israeli army, their checkpoints, the Jewish settlers, death, the infamous Wall and home demolitions regulated the daily lives of Palestinians. In this environment, any Palestinian alternative was deemed as an improvement.

The political shifts that followed Oslo also compelled the Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel to evaluate their status and relationship to the Israeli state, to the PA and to the nation at large. In addition to the emergence of a strong Islamic movement within what is known as ‘Israel proper’, there were others who widened their political and legal struggle against Israeli laws that discriminate against them as a national minority or for a form of autonomy. Among the Palestinian Arabs in Israel, there are internally displaced persons (those uprooted in 1948 but remaining within Israel in 1948), who, in the years that followed the Oslo agreements, intensified their activities and links with the larger and growing movement calling for the right of return of all those uprooted by the Israeli wars.

The Oslo framework for peace and Palestinian refugees

The principles underpinning the Oslo agreements and similar proposals that followed, such as the Geneva Accords and the Road Map, are based on the idea of territorial partition, in which the 1967 war is erroneously represented as the historical ceiling and roots of the conflict, thereby concealing the violent expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948, which turned them into the ‘refugee problem’. Although, until his death in 2004, Arafat never publicly signed away the right of return, his policies and those of his supporters had transformed it from a central national precept to a negotiable right (Pappe 2004: 243).

In light of the above and from the perspective of refugees living in host countries, the relocation of the Palestinian leadership to Gaza and the West Bank implied the crossing of geo-political boundaries without seeking national consensus or participation. As politicians and negotiators scuffled over items on the ‘agenda’, usually drowned by a media campaign discussing
‘Israel’s security needs’, the fate of the refugees and the history of land confiscation in 1948 receded to the realm of the unspoken and the future final-status negotiations, which were repeatedly postponed.

Here it is important to point out that Palestinian refugees reside both outside and within Palestine. In the West Bank and Gaza there are over 1.6 million refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), more than half of them in Gaza (UNRWA 2005). This is a significant ratio when compared to the total refugee population estimated at approximately 3.7 million, and when taking into consideration that the figure excludes the refugees and displaced persons not registered with the Agency. The UNRWA acts as the welfare state providing refugees with different social and relief services. The PA and the UNRWA therefore have paradoxical mandates on the same territory: the PA aims at establishing an independent state and, if successful, will have the authority to represent its ‘citizens’. At one level of analysis, this will result in the de jure if not de facto termination of Palestinian ‘statelessness’ across the board, including the refugees within its jurisdiction, albeit a theoretical assumption laden with legal and political complications. In contrast, the UNRWA’s existence attests to the unfulfilled right of return for refugees. The UNRWA is bound by the UN Charter and its Resolutions, including UNGAR 194 (III), and has become a fundamental institution attesting to the international responsibility towards the problem of refugees and their political and legal rights. It is therefore safe to suggest that the simultaneous existence of both the PA and UNRWA in the same Palestinian territory demonstrates that the refugees have not yet obtained their rights as embedded in international law and statutes.

Following the signing of the DoP in 1993, the UNRWA became a site deflecting the tension between the displaced ‘nation’ (refugees) and the ‘state’ (PA). Indeed, anxiety gripped refugees, when in his annual report to the United Nations General Assembly, Ilter Turkmen, the UNRWA’s Commissioner General at the time, stated that, in light of the ‘historic changes’ and the anticipated extension of the PA ‘self-rule’ to the rest of the West Bank, UNRWA would soon begin preparing for the eventual ‘handover of its installations, services and programmes’ to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (UN 1994: 1). Moreover, in October 1993, the Agency introduced its ‘Peace Implementation Programme’ (PIP), aimed at supporting the ‘transitional period’, to help improve the ‘living conditions’ and the anticipated extension of the PA ‘self-rule’ to the rest of the West Bank, UNRWA would soon begin preparing for the eventual ‘handover of its installations, services and programmes’ to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (UN 1994: 1). Moreover, in October 1993, the Agency introduced its ‘Peace Implementation Programme’ (PIP), aimed at supporting the ‘transitional period’, to help improve the ‘living conditions’ and infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza. By 30 June 1994 out of the $187 million for the PIP project, $122 million were allocated to projects in the West Bank and Gaza. The remaining funds were to be distributed to refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (UN 1994: 18–19).9 Refugees – including those living in the West Bank and Gaza – protested and insisted that political agreements pertaining to the West

6 ‘Israel proper’ refers to the Palestinian areas upon which Israel was established during the 1948 war. During the war some 150,000 Palestinians remained within those areas, today the population has increased to over 1,000,000. For more information see <http://www.adalah.org/eng/background/history.php>.

7 The US Road Map proposed a three-phase process ending in 2005 that would lead to two states (a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and Israel). In general the onus is placed on the Palestinians to end unconditionally all ‘violence and terrorism’. For the full text, see PNA (2005b). Similarly, the Geneva Accord (October 2003; also referred to as Geneva Understandings) is an unofficial treaty drafted by a number of Israelis and Palestinians. For more on its dangers to the refugee issue, see Eldar (2003).
Bank and Gaza (Oslo) do not constitute a resolution of the ‘refugee problem’. Thus, UNRWA’s public announcements to dismantle itself as a UN Agency were deemed as politically threatening to refugees at large.10

Furthermore, in 1997, following an announcement that the Agency was planning further cuts in services due to a crisis in its budget, refugees protested against what was perceived as the Agency’s dubious entanglement with the ‘peace’ process. According to Muhammed Laham, president of the Dheisheh Public Service Committee as quoted in an article by Hamzeh-Muheisen, ‘UNRWA’s recent cutbacks, whether UNRWA likes it or not, fall directly in line with the Israeli program aimed at eliminating the refugee problem which lies at the core of the Palestinian issue’ (1997: 2–3). Oslo’s dismal failure, as well as public expressions of dissent and opposition, ensured that the Agency continued to provide services, although these have suffered from cut-backs with negative repercussions on the socio-economic conditions of refugees. Consequently, it is not surprising that refugees believe that ‘this peace is for “them,” the 1967-people, not for “us- the people of 1948”’ (Farah 1997: 291).

Two trends: pragmatism and the resurrection of memory/history

With the passage of time, the dangers of Oslo for the refugee issue became clearer, and US support for the Israeli position on the right of return bolder. This was expressed by the US President who, on the 14 April 2004, for the first time in US history explicitly called for accepting the ‘realities’ on the ground, referring to the large illegal Jewish settlements and for protecting the Jewish character of the state:11

The United States is strongly committed to Israel’s security and well-being as a Jewish state. It seems clear that an agreed, just… realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel.12

However, Bush’s statement echoed a growing ‘pragmatic’ trend that argued that the right of return is an unachievable objective, due to Israel’s rejectionist position and ‘facts on the ground’. The Israeli position is perhaps best exemplified in the words of Shlomo Gazit, special adviser to the Israeli negotiating team, who proposed that:13
b. Israel will not recognize a Palestinian ‘right of return’. Israel will not recognize any Palestinian legal arguments based on UN resolutions or any other international resolutions.

d. Israel will continue to allow reunification of families based on humanitarian considerations, and will be the only authority to decide who, how many, when and how they will be allowed to enter. (Gazit 1995:25)

Nonetheless, many Palestinians justified their participation at Oslo based on the idea of ‘stages’ believing that an ‘interim self-government’ will evolve into a sovereign state. This optimistic evolutionary vision leading to a sovereign state was founded on the premise that in the ‘New World Order’ the US is more likely to pressure Israel than it did during the Cold War.

As early as 1992 Azmi Bishara and other analysts challenged those who believed in the ‘stages’ strategy, warning that even the minimalist idea of ‘autonomy’ will only become acceptable for the Israelis once the Palestinians in exile are excluded and the question of Palestine is reduced to the occupied territories, where water, land and the ‘air itself’ have been removed from the autonomy equation (Bishara 1992: 4). Similarly, George T. Abed suggested that any settlement that ‘falls short of Palestinian aspirations for self-determination and repatriation carries fateful risks, including what could appear to be a permanent exile for the Palestinian majority and the consequences that entails’ (Abed 1992: 15). The late Edward Said, who was involved in the run-up to the Madrid Conference, eventually became one of the voices most critical of Oslo and the PLO leadership. Said characterized the leadership as preoccupied with maintaining their positions and lacked the ‘discipline of detail’, noting that the Palestinian negotiating team relied on facts, figures and even maps produced by the Israelis and never had a vision or the seriousness to develop a systematic strategy (Said 1995: 64–5).

Herbert C. Kelman, Professor of Social Ethics who chaired the Middle East Seminar at Harvard University, perhaps best exemplifies the pragmatic position. He proposed that in both Israeli and Palestinian societies the environment was conducive to a solution anchored in ‘pragmatism based on interest’. Kelman, like other pragmatists, minimizes the impact that the vast asymmetry of power has on such negotiations. In his view, a fundamental formula for peace involves a mutual recognition of ‘each other’s nationhood’ (Kelman 1992: 28–9). Yet, acknowledging ‘nationhood’, according to the author, neither guarantees the right to self-determination (he is referring to the Palestinians, because the Israelis have a state) nor should it jeopardize in any way the integrity of the Israeli state, meaning its Jewish character (ibid.: 32–3).

A cursory glance at the literature on the refugee issue reveals its metamorphosis from a central tenet in the national agenda, to a marginal and ‘negotiable’ question. In fact, the bulk of the policy-driven studies during
the Oslo period focused on refugees as a demographic and socio-economic problematic, not a political and legal question. The primary themes in this policy-driven literature are human resources, public health, infrastructure and a theme titled ‘possible solutions’, whereby authors put forward ‘practical’ solutions for this ‘most intractable’ of issues. These studies paralleled the political tract, especially the proceedings at the Refugee Working Group, and in many of them refugees appear as statistical summaries, objects of legal arguments or as passive victims whose tangible political participation in history and society, and in the political process, is deemed insignificant, although it is important to note that, during the same period, a number of valuable studies were published countering the marginalization of refugees.

Within this larger political context, ideas insinuating that UNGAR 194 (III) and its verbatim implementation are ‘unrealistic’ seemed to circulate more widely. Already in 1992 Shaath stated that the final status will be guided by UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338. According to him, these resolutions give the possibility of invoking UNGAR 181 and 194, where they may be able to negotiate the right of return (Shaath 1992: 73). Shaath did not explain why UNGAR 194 (III) was omitted in the first place, and what vision of a compromise the PLO had, or whether it had any as to the future of the refugees. Most importantly, why were mechanisms that ensured the participation of refugees, wherein they would have been able to contribute to this vision, absent? At best, Palestinian officials began to adapt their statements and views on the right of return according to the audience. As one Palestinian observer commented:

We are now witness to a medley of mediocre political leaders playing word-games with this most fundamental of issues – Nabil Shaath a Palestinian Authority (PA) minister asserting the right of return while on a visit to Lebanon and then declaring that it is negotiable as soon as he returns to the West Bank; or Sari Nusseibeh, another PA official, demanding the relinquishment of that right (would he give up his home in Jerusalem, I wonder?) (Al-Qattan 2003)

In response to Shaath’s statement in Lebanon on the right of return, Nabil Amr, Palestinian Information Minister, rushed to calm Israeli fears on radio declaring that a ‘pragmatic solution’ is needed and that ‘the right of return issue will be solved only in agreement with Israel. We will not harm the Jewish character of the state of Israel and the solution will therefore be pragmatic’ (Nashashibi 2003).

The refugee issue did become, as Tamari noted, one that generated ‘a dichotomy within Palestinian society between the contingencies of state building, and the demands of the diaspora for representation and repatriation’ (1995: 9). Some Palestinians involved in the Oslo negotiations criticized
those who opposed its premises on the basis that they were nostalgic for an older era of liberation. Hanan Ashrawi, for example, explained:19 ‘There are too many things being worked out. Problems of factional politics, rewards and punishments, a “liberation movement” mindset as opposed to a “state-building” mindset’ (1994: 21). A similar view was expressed by Tamari, who noted that:

We have an intelligentsia which is not willing to fight the fight that all Third World intellectuals and political activists are fighting today. They want to go back to the nostalgia of the liberationist struggle, because they got addicted to being resistance forces against foreign occupation. (Tamari 1994: 18)

Another pragmatic expert on refugees is Donna Artz,20 who, in January 1996, proposed that, to solve the refugee problem, three basic negotiation principles should be followed, among them: ‘that discussion of the refugee question should be forward, not backward-looking, so that age-old battles over fault and causes of dislocation will not be relitigated’. According to Artz, terms such as ‘return’, ‘expulsion’, ‘transfer’ and ‘rights’ and even ‘refugee’ are too politically charged and require a great deal of ‘rhetorical constraints’. In brief, she called for the permanent settlement of refugees in host countries, without much worry or attention to international law and unresolved histories of injustice (Artz 1996).

On his part, Nusseibeh, the Palestinian official in Jerusalem, was explicit in his pragmatic approach when in September 2001 he wrote that ‘one obstacle to ending the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is the Palestinian insistence that Israel allow these refugees to return to their homes and lands’. In Tel-Aviv he further clarified his view by noting that ‘[t]he Palestinian dream of the past needs to be replaced with the (new) dream, that we need to create for the future’ (Nusseibeh 2001, emphasis added).

The Geneva Accords, like Oslo, are also dismissive of refugees. In Article 7 for example, the Accords propose that Israel, among many other countries, will contribute a lump sum (paid in instalments) towards an international fund to compensate refugees, following which refugees will have no right to make further claims arising from the Palestinian refugee problem against Israel. As the members of the Right of Return Coalition stated in November 2003, the Geneva Accord is an ‘extension of earlier initiatives that distort the significance of Palestinian rights that are recognized under international law’.21 Regardless of the differences in reasons and perspectives, the pragmatists seemed to concur that the conflict can be resolved by the establishment of a Palestinian ‘state’ on the West Bank and Gaza, minus all that Israel deems is necessary for its ‘security’. As for refugees, the pragmatists call upon them to forget and forgo their material and immaterial

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17 Dr Nabil Shaath is the PNA’s Minister of Planning and International Cooperation.

18 Salim Tamari is the Director of the Institute of Jerusalem Studies, and participated in the Refugee Working Group (RWG) meetings in the Arab-Israeli multilateral peace negotiations in the early 1990s.

19 Ashrawi was the spokeswoman for the Palestinian delegation to the bilateral peace talks in Washington, DC in 1994 but later announced she would not serve in any official capacity in the new Palestinian authority and has since been working on human rights monitoring.

20 Arzt is a Professor of Law at Syracuse University in the US. In 1997, the Council on Foreign Relations published her book titled Refugees into Citizens: Palestinians and the End of the Arab-Israeli Conflict.
losses, and generally describe their right and yearning to return as a ‘nostalgic dream’.

The danger in these political arrangements originating in the Oslo agreements lies in an official Palestinian concession to an interpretation that subsumes or displaces UNGAR 194 (III) within the ‘right to self-determination’ as meaning the establishment of a sovereign state, while the right of return, compensation and restitution would be restricted to citizenship rights and perhaps relocation within the Palestinian statelet on the West Bank and Gaza only. According to the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, adopted by the UNGA in Resolution 1514 (XV) on 14 December 1960, ‘All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development’ (Brownlie 2002: 229). At the time the Resolution was passed, the reference pertaining to self-determination referred to the active participation of the nation in the political process. As Joffe explains:

[T]he original vision of the sovereign state was amplified by the addition of the concept of nation, in which sovereignty was enshrined. The sovereign state, in short, became the sovereign nation-state. It has been this concept that has tended to be exemplified in the decolonization process – hence references to ‘peoples’ in UN resolutions on the subject and the close relationship between ‘people’ and ‘territory’. (Joffe 1987: 22, emphasis added)

Thus, the plight of the Palestinians is complicated by the fact that they are still struggling to achieve self-determination and decolonization in a postcolonial world, when the 1960 UN Resolution 1514 (XV) seems to belong to a bygone era. The Palestinian national aims are further compounded by a postmodern literature that celebrates hybridity and decentred subjects, and thus views any claims to identity centred on territorial and historical rights as conservative nationalism. Regardless of one’s view on this debate, the Palestinian refugees living in exile were not called upon either as part of the ‘nation’ or in line with democratic processes to partake in deciding their political fate. The Oslo agreements, in their summary execution of the historical roots of the conflict, fractured the relationship between nation, state and territory.

The history/memory trend

In contrast to the pragmatists, the second trend, also diverse in perspectives and backgrounds, turned to underscore the importance of history and the memory of the 1948 Nakba to the Palestinian national question and to a
lasting peace in the region. These writers include a select few from within the Israeli academic establishment, generally known as the ‘New Israeli Historians’, who used state archives to produce evidence that debunked the Israeli official history of 1948. Israeli organizations such as Zochrot also aimed at involving the Jewish public in remembering the Nakba and supporting the Palestinian Right of Return. Yet, Israeli Jews who publicly oppose the Zionist version of the 1948 history of the war remain few. The Israeli fear of unravelling the past is best symbolized in the case of Teddy Katz, whose MA thesis on the 1948 massacre in Tantura by Zionist paramilitary organizations, became national news and he was pressured into the Israeli courts to invalidate his own findings.

On their part, Palestinians have been resisting, writing and talking about their expulsion for decades, but as the ‘natives’ they were given little attention either in Israel or in the West. Many sought to reconstruct the histories of destroyed villages by piecing together the ‘remains’. The writers on demolished villages outlined genealogical charts of Palestinian families and kin groups, and recorded cultural life, including: marriage patterns, folk tales, food preservation, embroidery, social, political and economic relationships and land ownership. Using the empirical method, the purpose was to rectify the historical record distorted by dominant and hegemonic narratives, or, to fill in gaps in official or professional histories.

However, in the last decade attention to history/memory has increased, especially oral narratives and life histories. In my view, this trend towards using the oral trope and life histories is not only indicative of theoretical shifts and academic interests, but became crucial following the Oslo agreements in the 1990s, prompted largely by the neglect of the refugee issue. The Birzeit University Centre for Research and Documentation of Palestinian Society, as an example, is one among several other organizations which published a series of books on the destroyed villages. Saleh Abdel Jawad, director of the Centre, had summarized the purpose of the project by noting that:

The Israelis are waiting for the young generation of Palestinians to forget the watan (homeland), so it is imperative to preserve the life of the villages in the minds of the youth. In spite of the fact that we failed in our political struggle – the Oslo agreement is the crystallization of this failure – we don’t have to lose our history. (Katz 1995)

Preserving Palestinian memory is also the objective of institutions such as the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre and the Palestinian Institute for Cultural Landscape Studies, both located in the West Bank. In Lebanon, the Arab Resource Centre for Popular Arts (ARCPA), established in 1990 in Beirut, initiated a project using children and youth, mainly from refugee camps, to
interview their elders using oral history as testimony on the 1948 Nakba. Also in Lebanon, Rosemary Sayigh (1994), an anthropologist based in Beirut, relied heavily on oral narratives to reconstruct the social histories of Sabra and Shatila camps. In 2002, Sayigh edited a special issue on oral history, where several writers and academics from the region wrote on the uses of oral history. 26

In the Palestinian effort to reconstruct the past, little attention was given to urban centres, but this has been changing in recent years, notably because of the efforts of the Institute of Jerusalem Studies. 27 Yet documenting the histories of the farmers or peasants originating in destroyed villages, to which most refugees belong, continues and these studies share a common theme that underscores attachment to the land and villages. May Seikaly (2003), for example, documented the history of Suhmata, a village near Acre depopulated and destroyed in 1948. The author observed that, despite dispersal, the villagers have been able to maintain contact in a ‘loose network of communication based on their common identification associated with their roots and promoting continuity’ (2003: 16). Another Palestinian writer turned to his own village of origin. Mahmoud ‘Issa stated:

[M]y concern will be mainly concentrated about [sic] the local historiography of a small Palestinian village, Lubya, from the end of the Ottoman Empire, through the British Mandate period in 1917–1948, and the fate of its inhabitants in exile after its total demolishment [sic] in 1948. The information below is the direct outcome of interviewing hundreds of people...dispersed through the four corners of the world. Memory is still fresh, alive. (‘Issa 2003: 3)

In this context, to document and preserve memory, a number of NGOs and internet websites have emerged or turned their attention to demolished villages, including Shami, 28 which provides a website allowing Palestinians to enter their individual memories of their original village. Indeed, a sense of urgency propelled many to document ‘memory’, and oral history became important for detailing life in Palestine and the experiences of expulsion. However, in much of the work on oral history a rigid positivism has guided the approach, which favoured the ‘scientific method’. As an example, Al-Nakba’s Oral History Project of al-Awda Coalition notes: ‘Our policy is to allow the individual to talk as much as he/she can as long [sic] we decide that he or she is providing quality information. From our limited experience such individuals with quality data could offer more information than ten regular [sic] persons’ (PalestineRemembered 2003: 3). Thus, a ‘good source of information’ would be those able to remember ‘facts’ deemed objective by the interviewer and those initiating the project, with the assumption that their forms of knowledge and academic and theoretical frameworks were capable of redeeming the necessary elements in narratives in order to

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26 Those interviewed or who wrote articles on oral history were: Faiha Abdulhadi, Gaby Abed, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, Jamil Arafat, Sam Bahour, Rawan and Dima Damen, Sahera Dirbas, Randa Farah, Mahmoud ‘Issa, Saleh Abdel Jawad, Nazmi al-Ju’beh, Sharif Kanaana, Sonia Nimr Thomas Ricks, May Seikaly, Awatef Sheikh, Salim Tamari and Adel Yahya.

reconstruct a ‘professional’ history. The ‘fact’ that ‘facts’ are mediated by active subjects, or that the past and present are inseparable, rarely entered into the writing or reproduction of the narratives.

Thus, for the pragmatists, studies on refugees presented necessary statistics to find ways to resettle them in host countries, thus removing them as an ‘obstacle’ to the ‘peace’ process, while, for the ‘memory trend’, refugees represented raw archival sites from which to dig out the ‘authentic’ native culture, which has survived in exile and which needed to be ‘rescued from beneath the colonial rubble’ (Cohn 1981: 240). While earlier work involving villagers and refugees, especially women, aimed at documenting ‘culture’ and ‘folklore’, today refugees are a source of historical ‘evidence’, particularly on the Nakba of 1948. Thus, it is not only politicians who absent refugees, some academics and researchers join politicians – if sometimes inadvertently – in diminishing their role into that of folkloric remnants, thereby neglecting their present agency and participation in the political and historical process.

However, it is difficult not to justify or validate the ‘preservationist’ goals, despite disagreements or variations in theoretical assumptions and approaches, in the context of a relentless Zionist attempt to wipe the Palestinian social, historical and geographical landscape. According to Sub Laban, during the last few years alone, Israel has destroyed hundreds of archaeological buildings and sites that belonged to the Palestinian historical and cultural heritage. Even the Christian Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was not spared Israeli gunfire in 2002. The city of Nablus, which dates back to the Canaanites or, to 1400 BC witnessed massive destruction especially in the old city, including the Salah Mosque, previously a Byzantine church. The author quotes Hamdan Taha, Director General of the antiquities department of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, as saying: ‘[T]he main goal behind these assaults . . . is to cause political harm to the Palestinians’ cultural identity’ (Sub Laban 2004: 2). Similarly, for the second time since its occupation in 1967, the Israeli army broke into Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre on 13 April 2002 causing a great deal of damage. The Centre’s building dates back to 1927 and housed valuable art work, ancient manuscripts and the offices of the poet Mahmoud Darwish.29

In the mid-1980s, Ted Swedenburg (1991), an anthropologist working in the Occupied Territories at the time, turned his attention to memory, situating it in its political context and in its relationship to the present and future. His study underscores the relationship between popular memory, on the one hand, and dominant and hegemonic discourses, on the other. Swedenburg sees this relationship as occurring in the present and examined the way subjects mediated the ‘facts’. In his approach, what was said was as significant as the ‘silences’ in narratives. In his research on the Palestinian Revolt in 1936–9, he notes that '[t]he silences and the gaps, therefore, were
not merely unfortunate lapses in memory, but effects of repression’ (1991: 164). The author concludes that for Palestinians a history that teaches them to remember their past as a unified people is important to warn them against the dangers of fragmentation (ibid.: 166).

**Incorporating refugee narratives, interpretations and perspective**

The anthropological research I conducted in Jordan in Palestinian refugee camps, and upon which I will draw in the next part of the paper, falls under the second trend on history/memory (Farah 1999). I was interested in the role of popular memory in contributing to the forging of the nation in exile, and in turn how memory and by implication identity was being reshaped following the political shifts. I relied on anthropological methods of inquiry, mainly participant-observation conducted between 1995 and 1999 mostly in al-Baq’a refugee camp the largest in the Middle East, located in Jordan about 20km north-west of the capital, Amman.

It is important to underscore that, although life histories have individual authors, no individual exists outside a social context and ‘individual’ narratives draw upon the myriad of relationships and historical processes and events that inform an individual life. The individual-collective, personal-public and past-present are in fact inextricable processes and concepts. In this approach, oral histories are akin to maps, wherein refugees appear as active agents occupying different positions in power structures and relationships, and expose how subjects navigate and act upon them. Although the narratives varied by individuals, generation, gender and socio-economic status, a Palestinian narrative trope emerged. Underpinning and, to a large extent, organizing the individual narrative was the 1948 Nakba as the pivotal moment before and after which refugee lives unfolded.

**Land, expulsion and resistance**

My daughter, in the balad [village of origin], we used to gather firewood, harvest and used animal manure to fertilize the land. My father used to plough the land, we planted beans, chickpeas, lentils, wheat, corn, cantaloupes, water melons... Women planted the hakoura [garden], men planted in the fields, in the hakoura women planted cauliflower, potatoes, etc. tomatoes, squash, okra... we prepared lentils, and many meals with all kinds of vegetables... We [women] used to wake up maybe at four in the morning, we followed the stars, for example, we...
would say, the *Thurayya*, or the *Mizan* is out [names of stars]. We used to cook in the dark . . . We also went to get things from the cities: from Yafa [Jaffa], al-Lydd, al-Ramleh, and al-Qods [Jerusalem] . . . women did many things, we joined in the olive harvest, many things. (Imm Sa’eed)32

It came as no surprise that land and its produce represented the most fundamental reference in the stories and narratives of refugees. Imm Saeed’s introduction above is similar to all others of her generation. Whether in Lebanon, Syria or Jordan the village land emerges as the landscape, source of livelihood and the ultimate foundation upon which their social, cultural, political and economic lives were spun. For older women, the original village and its land reminded them of their numerous tasks, which contributed significantly to the household and village economy, tasks and skills which they lost upon their displacement. Palestine was imagined as the ‘peasant way of life’ rooted in land and the rural hinterland, characterizing the national ethos and culture of exile. 33

While the narratives often exaggerated or romanticized the past, for example, the ‘abundance’ and the harmonious sense of community of villages of origin, based on what Tonnies called *gemeinschaft*,34 this was only with the intent of emphasizing poverty and dispossession in the present. Time and place in these narratives and interviews are subjected to Palestinian history and form the grid upon which events, lives and relationships are compared and contrasted. There are other landmarks that appear consistently in refugee narratives, including: the war of 1967 when most of the refugees now living in Jordan were uprooted for the second time; al-Karameh battle in 1968 between the Palestinian Resistance Movement (PRM) and the Jordanian army, on the one hand, and the Israeli army, on the other; and the 1970–1 clashes between the Jordanian army and the PRM. The narrators interweave the larger history with their individual trajectories: the martyrdom of a family member, imprisonment and relocation seeking shelter or work are propelled by larger processes and the history of the conflict. The Palestinian literary trope has been described as statements of oppositions, or contrasts between here and there, before and after 1948, inside and outside, now and then, etc.35 The narratives of refugees are similarly organized and perhaps this is a universal way of explaining lives in societies that have been abruptly uprooted.

The village of origin in these narratives represented the ‘beginning’ of the individual and collective history and identity, where the dead ancestors and village saints lay buried from ‘time immemorial’, and a long genealogical chart, usually and effortlessly recounted by older women, established and reaffirmed the ‘roots’. In fact the symbols of roots, trees and seeds punctuate the life histories, symbols of belonging and historical depth for those forcefully displaced. Moreover, the emphasis on village kin as the ‘imagined

32 Please note that I have used pseudonyms during my research. Imm Saeed was a woman in her late fifties when I interviewed her in al-Baq’a camp, Jordan, in 1996.

33 The writings of the best-known authors and poets, for example, Ghassan Kanafani and Mahmoud Darwish, are filled with rural images affirming the centrality of the land to Palestinians.

34 In sociology, Ferdinand Tonnies (1855–1936) introduced the concept of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* to differentiate between a small, usually rural and harmonious community, where individuals share values and norms, and a complex and heterogeneous society, usually urban.

35 See, for example, Siddiq (1995).
community’ in the absence of the nation-state did not preclude a sense of belonging to a larger Palestinian nation and society with a distinctive cultural life. This is primarily due to the fact that villages were not homogeneous or bounded entities; rather there were historical links and relationships with other villages, urban centres and the larger region for centuries through social and economic transactions, trade routes and changing administrative and political arrangements. Nonetheless, refugees emphasize that their Palestine begins and ends in their original villages; they believe that it is through the return to these specific villages that the nation as a whole can be redeemed. There is a parallel in the way refugees situate their village within the nation, with the way refugees represent the Palestinian ‘camp’ as the ‘face of the nation’, symbolizing its predicament and resilience. ‘Al-Baq’a represents a fragment of Palestine in the emotional (metaphorical), but not in its literal sense. This is because this first and very great generation... each one of them feels that he can imagine his village through the camp’ (Nader, interviewed 1995).

Over time, the camp as a territorial unit became a space upon which the inhabitants mapped out a Palestinian identity. In the narratives of refugees, the camp is not a ‘place for refugees’ but is portrayed as an exiled fragment of Palestine, a temporary substitute universal village, and a suspension bridge from where Palestinians look simultaneously to the past and the future return, or to ‘here’ and ‘there’. The village of origin looms as ‘neighbourly’ when contrasted with relationships in the camp; in turn, the inhabitants boast of a culture of sharing as opposed to the ‘colder’ relationships that characterizes the wider Jordanian society. In the narratives, the camp is demarcated as a place for ‘peasants’ and often refugees would refer to Jordanians as ‘bedouins’, representing national differences through modes of livelihood. The delineation of differences between Palestinians and Jordanians takes on a heightened significance, precisely due to the similarities in cultures and the intertwined histories, in order to ward off the dangers of integration schemes that aim at resettling them in Jordan. In other contexts, refugees would draw upon Islam or Arab identity to emphasize similarities they have with Jordanians, this is especially the case when in the presence of Jordanians.

There was a man who wanted to sell me a piece of land for 30 liras in 1949 [in Jordan], at the time I had 150 dinars. I told him, no I am returning [to Palestine]... I will not move from this camp, I will stay here until I die or return to Saris [his original village near Jerusalem]. (Abu Adel, interviewed 1995)

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The present in refugee narratives is symbolized as a protracted state of temporary existence, a time out of the normal historical trajectory, displaced and ‘frozen’ time. Simultaneously, and especially for the first generation, the

36 For a good reference on linkages between cities, villages and regions, see the book by Doumani (1995) on the city of Nablus.

37 Abu Adel passed away around a year after I interviewed him. He died in a dilapidated, cold and damp shelter.
present is a lifetime of waiting, during which they continue with their daily lives, seek to improve on their socio-economic conditions and engage in political life. In a study on Cypriot refugees, Zetter introduces the concept of a ‘fragmented triangle’, wherein he posits that refugees have been torn away from their physical places and denied return; thus their past has been ruptured from the present and future. In his view, sustaining what he calls the ‘myth of home’ is fundamental in that it re-establishes continuity with the past and restores the triangle – past-present-future. The present mediates the past and future, but refugees have no control over the present, since it represents the external world and refugee households pass from the past to the future through the socio-economic system of the host society (Zetter 1999: 6–7). Adapting Zetter’s notion of the fragmented triangle, it is important to point out that, while the Palestinian narratives of return seemingly contradict the signs of economic integration in exile, memories of home have a political dimension and counter ‘forgetting’ and resettlement schemes.

Abdel Qader [al-Husseini] was a surveyor, not a military man, he wasn’t very capable, he was just a land surveyor. The [Palestinian] revolutionaries they were fighting [during the 1936–9 Rebellion]. As for him [al-Husseini], they [the British] went after him until they killed him in al-Qastal. (Abu Adel, interviewed 1995)

In popular memory, resistance draws upon a historical heritage and legacy, often challenging and reshaping official narratives. Well-known names in Palestinian history and the urban elite are sometimes ridiculed as cowards or defeatists. In contrast, the narrators bestow the characteristics of courage and resilience upon the peasantry. Abdel Qader al-Husseini, for example, a Palestinian leader killed during the 1936–9 Rebellion appears regularly as a prominent leader in official histories, yet in the refugee narratives he is sometimes regarded as inept. Refugees reposition local villagers as the ‘real’ and tough heroes in the struggle, most of whom have been neglected in the official or ‘professional’ history books.

Abu Adel, quoted above, is well-known among the villagers of Saris and neighbouring villages. He played an important role in resisting the British Mandatory authorities and Zionist militias. In the late 1930s, the British Mandatory government had offered a considerable sum of money to capture him, but he was able to elude them and hid in Jordan for several years before returning to Palestine. Abu Adel fought in several battles including Bab el-Wad near Jerusalem in 1948 cutting off supplies to the Zionist militias. For refugees it is people like Abu Adel that make history, not al-Husseini.
Younger generations

The reality of the camp is conducive to the passing on of memory, our gatherings in neighbourhoods, etc. If I said, here there are some oranges, they [the older generation] would say ‘I swear the Yafa [Jaffa] oranges were better, the grapes were such and such, the trees’ ... or, ‘we never ate this food, we used to throw it to the animals to eat’. Therefore, when you were young you started to imagine the oranges as much tastier in Palestine ... as children, once the word was spoken, we drew images of the mountain, the tree, oranges ... all of the village, its fountain, the land, the horses, the courtyard where people met to exchange news. (Nader, interviewed 1996)

Following their exodus, the peasants-turned-refugees reminisced about their village: personal and political anecdotes, family experiences, land, produce, marriage, festivals, along with resistance and the dream to return. As they remembered, their children imagined what their lives would have been like had they not been expelled. Living in dilapidated tents or barracks, unpaved alleyways and poverty-stricken camps, they pieced together from the fragments of memory their ‘real’ imagined home. These stories circulated within families and in neighbourhoods. Each refugee child, imbibing the stories they heard, personalized Palestine in the form of his or her village of origin. The village of origin for the younger and educated generation is not necessarily a place of ‘abundance’, yet it is the place that restores dignity, political and legal rights, countering the humiliation of poverty and social and political marginalization in host societies. They creatively reshaped the memories transmitted by elders as the antithesis of camp life, and challenged their status as dispossessed and impoverished refugees, by invoking lands yet to be inherited, historical villages and a dignified past that countered exile.

Omissions were as significant as transmissions. The traumatic, humiliating and painful experiences of defeat experienced by the first generation, and the first years of dispossession when they were becoming refugees were generally silenced. At best, older men and women would briefly summarize or leave out these experiences. Women were usually more willing to share the hardships they faced and the strategies they adopted for coping in exile. However, the silenced experiences of suffering and humiliation sometimes reappear in children’s narratives, recalling, for example, that their parents had faced hunger and thirst, or were almost killed, or that they had to line up for hours to collect rations. On other occasions, while recording life histories, children would gather around to listen and would exclaim that they never heard of this or that episode.

For the younger generation, the experiences of ‘refugeehood’ as place, status and experience were central to their self-representations, weaving narratives of hardships with resilience and resistance. Moreover, by the early
1970s the qualitative leap in education began to bear fruit as young men and women sought work in various host countries, particularly in the Gulf. Hence, the children who began working in the 1970s were viewed as the generation that would redeem the home from its poverty and the Homeland from occupation – they occupied a high status in their communities. Thus, during the heydays of the PLO, two and in some cases three generations shared in having a history of struggle and a common objective of liberation mediated by the PLO’s secular national discourse: they were the generations of 1948 and 1967; the shared memory allowed for a discourse of national unity where liberationist themes crossed class and geopolitical boundaries.

However, the destruction of the PLO’s infrastructure in Lebanon and with it the unifying national umbrella, followed a decade later with the Oslo agreements, forced refugees in host countries to reposition themselves vis-à-vis the nation at large, the new Palestinian state project and host states. In each country refugees faced their host states without the PLO as their representative body. In Lebanon for example, the defeat of the PLO left a political and economic vacuum and its withdrawal meant that the Lebanese state had a free hand to implement repressive measures, denying refugees a wide range of political, economic and civil rights. Similarly in Jordan, refugees, most of whom hold Jordanian passports, were faced with a crisis pertaining to their political future. The perception that their leadership had abandoned their right of return raised the question of possible resettlement schemes in Jordan, and spun a debate on the loyalty of the Palestinians to the Jordanian state, on the one hand, and the collaboration of the Jordanian state in integrating refugees, on the other. Newspaper articles reminded the readers of the Zionist schemes proposing that Jordan should become the alternative Palestinian homeland, often with the effect of furthering mutual suspicion between Jordanians and Palestinians. It is also clear that the ‘peace’ process deepened the boundaries between ‘us’ – the 1948 refugees and ‘them’ – the 1967 displaced. ‘We, my daughter are still exiled, we the 1948 people they are not allowing us back, even if they allow the people of 1967, there, it is not our “country” [mish baladna, meaning not our village]’ is a sentiment that appears in the vast majority of interviews. Almost invariably all 1948 refugees interviewed emphasized that the return to a territory in the West Bank and Gaza for them is not a ‘real’ return.

Today, the majority of Palestinians who lived in pre-1948 Palestine have passed away; thus many children have not been exposed to the direct reminiscences of elders. Transmission of memory has become second- and third-hand for most children, and television, replacing the stories of parents and grandparents, a public source of news on Palestine, a medium that keeps them connected with the events within Palestine, but robs them of the personal transmission.

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38 For example, in his newspaper article, Hattar warns of the Israeli plans that aim at integrating Palestinians in Jordan and turning the latter into the ‘alternative homeland’ for Palestinians: ‘[but] Jordan will not become Palestine and the Palestinian will not become Jordanian as long as Israel is on our land’ (see Hatter 1995, my translation from Arabic).
Yet, belonging to Palestine as land and history, and the ‘dream’ of return, does not necessarily hinge on generational or geographical distance; at least these are not the only factors that come into play in the way memory moves across time and space. Memory and by implication identity are political arenas and can be sparked by important structural shifts, or major events such as the Intifada, which can rekindle private memory and move it back into public space. Memory can be silenced, but cannot be erased from circulating, even if only in the personal and private domains. In the Palestinian case, the two uprisings in the West Bank and Gaza, sparked in 1987 and again in 2000, represent catalysts which stirred new hope and engaged younger generations in their search for the past and future. The Intifada had particular resonance for the younger generations living outside Palestine, mainly because children and youth were visible actors in the uprising. Furthermore, there are strong kinship ties between many refugees in the West Bank and Gaza with refugees in Jordan, which brought the Intifada yet closer to home.

Another element that differentiated the younger generations of today from their elders is that the former no longer believe their return is imminent. The older generation had considered investment in real estate or improvement on the infrastructure of camps as paramount to acquiescing to permanent resettlement in host countries. The younger generations, however, differentiate between their political and legal rights, on the one hand, and socio-economic mobility, on the other.

This shift in strategic thinking among refugees has led some to believe that the younger generations have ‘adapted’ and have come to realize that the return is impossible; however, my research shows that the political quest of refugees to return is more complex than economic indicators of ‘adaptation’. As Nader, a refugee in his thirties expressed it, ‘we have passed on to our children what our parents told us about Palestine, but we also told them of our struggle as refugees, how we were able to carve a political identity, while studying and working to make a living’ (interviewed in 1996).

**The political spaces and geographical places for future solutions**

We the people of 1948 they forgot about our cause, we have nothing to gain from it [Oslo]… they are asking for [negotiating] the 1967 people so they can return and establish a government for them there. May God grant them their wishes. As for us we do not want war or anything, we just want our land that we left in 1948, one cannot forget it… This generation [younger] why did you leave Palestine? We tell them we were forced to leave, there was war, death and honour, we left involuntarily… they tell us you are no good… so we reply, let us see what your
generations will do. As for us, we did everything we could, but you have grown now, you became aware that you have land, a grove, olive trees, etc. let us see what you will do. (Abu Basil, interviewed 996) 39

Since Oslo, multiple references and forms of social and political organization emerged replacing the unifying PLO structure. These include Islamic institutions, many of them providing much needed social services to refugees, while publicly expressing a stance of resistance against ‘Western’ and Israeli policies aimed at liquidating the refugee problem. Yet, in all cases, refugees were critically examining the past, pointing to failures and schisms and ‘de-heroizing’ the PLO and its past. The criticisms pertained to PNA policies, but they also spoke of patriarchal authority, lack of social freedom, the failure of the Arab regimes, religiosity, etc., and the need to ‘clean our house first’. Despite the often cynical remarks, bitterness and political depression, the ‘dream of return’ lived on and refugees sought to revive it for the sake of the nation.

But what is more important in my mind is the question of responsibility. I think it should be in the consciousness and conscience of every Israeli that his state obliterated the Arab life of pre-1948. That Jaffa was formerly an Arab city from which the Arabs were expelled. And I think Israelis should be aware that their presence in many places in the country entails the loss of a Palestinian family, the demolition of a house, the destruction of a village. In my mind, it is your duty to find out about it. And act in consequence, in the Kantian sense. Many Israelis resist this because they think the consequence would be to leave. Not at all. As I told you, I’m against that. That is the last thing I want to do is to perpetuate this process by which one distortion leads to another. (Said 2001: 451)

It is rather a historical irony that, contrary to other decolonization cases in the ‘Third World’, the processes that aimed at the establishment of the Palestinian ‘state’ did not represent the crowning of the national liberation struggle; on the contrary, half the nation feared permanent exile. The PA’s emergence raised serious questions pertaining to issues of citizenship and representation of the scattered Palestinian population. Certainly, Jordan, where the majority is of Palestinian origin, would be reluctant to allow a neighbouring Palestinian state to extend its sovereignty to the Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship. While the PLO theoretically remains a representative body for all Palestinians, it has lost its power to lobby and negotiate on behalf of all Palestinians, whether it will regain such power will hinge on the new generation.

Relatedly, the Oslo peace process initiated a transmutation of the meaning of ‘land’ and ‘return’, whereby for the PA the struggle aimed at state-building with a focus on territorial boundaries and state institutions. Concurrently,
the concept of self-determination has been presented as meaning the establishment of a state that would subsume in its fruition the right of return, i.e. repatriation would no longer mean a return to original *land*, because, theoretically at least, refugees can ‘return’ to the *territory* of a Palestinian state.

The right of return of Palestinian refugees is not a nostalgic dream; rather it carries with it a liberationist agenda, as it potentially counters and challenges the ethno-religious basis of Zionism. Thus, decolonization, the right of return and de-Zionization are inseparable processes. In an article on demographic nationalisms, Tamari points out that both Zionism and Palestinian nationalism have invoked demography as a weapon, for the former to maintain a Jewish majority and for the latter as the ‘weapon of the weak’. While some Palestinians believe that the Israelis can be overwhelmed by high rates of fertility, Tamari rightly observes that Arabs are already the majority of the Israeli citizens, if we include the Mizrahi population or the Arab Jews, even though since the establishment of Israel most of them identify with right-wing Israeli parties. The author further explains that the Mizrahi cultural background as Arabs has been systematically subjected to ‘de-Arabization’ by dominant Ashkenazi culture, which so far has failed to wipe out their ‘oriental features’ (Tamari 2005). Thus, a project that deconstructs the idea of the ‘Jewish state’ is inevitably liberating also for Arab Jews with cultural affinities and histories in the Arab world, a historical legacy generally suppressed in Zionist historiography.40

The actual modalities and mechanisms to accommodate the right of return are complicated, but not impossible to achieve. Abu Sitta (1999) had argued that there are vast areas of land belonging to demolished villages that are uninhabited. In other words, Palestinian rights do not and should not generate another calamity and a counter-process of Jewish displacement. Perhaps, in the future, countries such as South Africa or the Balkans would provide models upon which one may draw lessons pertaining to institutional mechanisms and arrangements on matters pertaining to repatriation, compensation, restitution (particularly land claims) and reconciliation.

As such, the Palestinian objective of liberation, which incorporates the right of return as a matter of right and free choice provides for a vision of a solution that is inclusive and informed by universal principles that contrast with Zionism’s exclusivism. The repercussions of Zionism have been disastrous to Palestinians and Arabs in the region, but also to Israeli citizens whose lives have been shaped by a military state or, as someone wrote, an ‘army with a state’ that since its inception has been preoccupied with military superiority fortifying the bastions of Zionist colonial outposts and settlements.

It would be presumptuous to elaborate on how the right of return would be implemented in practice at a time when Israel has not even acknowledged

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40 On the Zionist attempts to de-Arabize Jewish history in the Arab world by imposing an ethnocentric European version, see Shohat (1992).
its responsibilities as having produced the refugee problem. However, what is certain is that this process requires a genuine will to create a democratic society, where one group, no matter how defined, does not seek to dominate or oppress another.

Inasmuch as the debate on the two-state and one-state solution continues, attention to the participation of all Palestinians, and primarily the refugees, in political decisions pertaining to the future of the nation has resurfaced as vital in seeking alternatives to the impasse. Subjecting the right of return to metamorphosis by the political and intellectual elite, so that it reappears in Palestinian official discourse as ‘unrealistic’, will generate a crisis for the nation and the state simultaneously. The ‘mini-state’, which evolved since the 1970s as a declared transition to the democratic state, has turned to be the Palestinian ‘maxi-state’ – the permanent solution, threatening with further fragmentation and political instability. Similarly, the Israeli state and society must confront the past and take responsibility for the displacement and dispossession of the Palestinians. Otherwise, Israeli society will become a permanently fortified military camp, a prisoner of its own making against demographic and democratic forces and processes that military might and segregation walls might be incapable of halting. Finally, it remains to be seen whether Hamas will reposition the refugee issue as central to the Palestinian national struggle.

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