ARMED STRUGGLE AND THE
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PREFACE

An entire era ended when Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasir Arafat and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin presided over the signing of the Declaration of Principles on 13 September 1993. Their exchange of letters of recognition ended decades of mutual denial between the national communities they represented, even if the accord did not fundamentally resolve all aspects of the conflict. Many thousands had died, both combatants and civilians, since the war that led to the establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine and to the mass exodus of its Arab population in 1947–9. The Palestinian national movement was to raise the twin banners of 'total liberation' and 'armed struggle' in following years, but ultimately proved unable to liberate any part of its claimed homeland by force. The civilian uprising that erupted in 1987 initially appeared more effective in shaking Israeli control, but still the PLO finally accepted a negotiated compromise, the terms of which ran counter to virtually all the principles and aims it had espoused for so long.

How did the Palestinian national movement arrive at this outcome, and what factors determined its course over the decades? Could it have achieved more, given the severe external constraints and daunting challenges, both military and political, that it faced? How were its principal leaders and organizations able to maintain their internal control for so long, despite the glaring discrepancy between declared goals and actual achievements at each and every stage? Last but not least, what role did the armed struggle play, given the enduring emphasis it received in Palestinian discourse and strategy on the one hand, and on the other its effective abandonment in the course of the intifada and the diplomatic process that led ultimately to the 1993 accord?

This book tells the story of the Palestinian national movement between 1949 and 1993, taking the armed struggle as its main focus. The central thesis is that the armed struggle provided the political impulse and organizational dynamic in the evolution of Palestinian national identity and in the formation of parastatal institutions and a bureaucratic elite, the nucleus of government. It did so by driving mass politics and the establishment of a national 'political field', in the process enabling a new political class to form, gain recognition and legitimacy, and assert its leadership. By the same token, the armed struggle played a pivotal role in demarcating the Palestinians as a distinct actor in regional politics with a not insignificant degree of autonomy. A subsidiary thesis is that the key to the survival of the Palestinian national movement and to the attainment of at least a modicum of its objectives, was the ability to effect fundamental shifts in goals and strategy at critical stages in its evolution. These shifts took place in response to external circumstances and challenges, but they

also required parallel changes in ideology, structure, and internal politics. Here, again, it is by tracing the course of the armed struggle, both as discourse and practice, that the transformation can be highlighted most effectively.

The following account is divided into four periods—demarcated by the Arab–Israeli wars of 1948, 1967, 1973, and 1982—and is brought to its natural conclusion in the PLO–Israel accord of September 1993. An introductory section precedes each part to summarize the main international and regional trends that set the context for Palestinian politics of the period, and to touch briefly on the most salient developments in the Palestinian arena. Although it is informed by both disciplines, this pretends to be neither a political sociology nor a study of international relations, and the account does not trace systematically or in consistent detail the attitudes and fortunes of distinct Palestinian social forces, nor those of the principal regional and global powers. Rather, it offers a historical reconstruction of the evolution of Palestinian political programmes, ideological discourse, and organizational structures, as revealed by the connecting theme of armed struggle. This book will have achieved its purpose if it deserves to be described as a history.

Between States and State-Building

The voluminous literature on the Palestine conflict attests to the persistent interest and intense emotions it has generated. The reconstruction presented in this book is therefore of obvious relevance and intrinsic value, but it is also set apart from comparable studies by its distinctive framework. Essentially, this views the Palestinians as engaged almost continuously since 1948 in a historical process of state-building, with the PLO gradually emerging after 1964 as the non-territorial equivalent of a state. National liberation has been the goal of many movements in the colonial and post-colonial eras of the twentieth century, but the Palestinian case shows that the state-building dynamic does not come into operation only after independence. Rather, the search for state shapes the articulation of goals, formulation of strategies, choice of organizational structures, and conduct of internal politics through much of the preceding struggle.

These assertions require elucidation, but a disclaimer is first in order. To assert that the Palestinians have been engaged in state-building is to make neither a polemical point nor a juridical one about their status as a national entity or distinct people and their right, accordingly, to exercise self-determination, specifically in the form of an independent state. Nor is it to make a historical or empirical claim about the degree to which—at any stage in the three decades prior to the inauguration of the Palestinian Authority in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank autonomy areas in May 1994 (and even then only arguably)—the PLO actually exercised sovereignty and fulfilled the major functions attributed to the modern territorial state. Rather, at issue are the emer-

gence and maintenance of a particular set of political practices and institutional arrangements centred on the PLO; the processes through which it redefined its political relations with, and sought to co-opt, Palestinian society; and the manner of its interaction with sovereign members of the regional and international state systems. It is in this sense that the PLO can be seen as a 'statist' actor, and that the underlying logic of Palestinian national politics and organizational evolution—within which framework the armed struggle proved to be situated—since 1948 has been one of state-building.

A crucial distinction is being made here between the 'stateness' of the PLO (its actual possession of the key attributes of the state), which was severely qualified, and its statist character, which is being asserted. The distinction draws on definitions of the state in social science literature to explain what the PLO was not, and what it was. Charles Tilly summarizes the common view that an 'organization which controls the population occupying a definite territory is a state insofar as (1) it is differentiated from other organizations operating in the same territory; (2) it is autonomous; (3) it is centralized; and (4) its divisions are formally coordinated with one another'.[1] Drawing on Max Weber, Joel Migdal adds that an especially important defining function of the state is 'the ability or authority to make and implement the binding rules for all the people as well as the parameters of rule-making for other social organizations in a given territory, using force if necessary to have its way'.[2]

That the PLO lacked sovereign authority over a distinct territory and population is obvious. At no point was it able to exercise exclusive jurisdiction, that is, to monopolize rule-making and the means of coercion, over the inhabitants of a defined geographical area, even when it formed the rudiments of parallel government in the state-within-the-state it ran in Jordan in 1968–71 and Lebanon in 1972–82. The physical dispersal of the Palestinians and their subordination to the political, administrative, and economic systems of various host governments qualified the stateness of the PLO even further. Not only were its attempts to achieve social control continuously contested by rival state centres (especially Israel and Jordan), but its own development as a statist actor was ultimately contingent on the existence of a counterpart: a society with a common 'sociological space'. Palestinian society was itself in need of demarcation and articulation; the recursive element within the state–society dyad only became realizable when the 1993 Oslo Accord wedded the PLO's political framework to an identifiable social, economic, and territorial base in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The fact that the PLO's own bureaucratic elite was already drawn heavily from these areas, and that it inherited a ready governmental apparatus in the form of the Israeli-run civil administration, facilitated the transition and emphasized it as a new stage in an established process of state-building.

That said, it was precisely in terms of its political framework that the PLO was most identifiable as a statist actor, and not simply because it explicitly sought national independence and statehood as its central goal. Above all, it

conformed to a key distinguishing feature of states described by Theda Skocpol (summarizing Alexis de Tocqueville's approach), namely that 'their organizational configurations, along with their overall patterns of activity, affect political culture, encourage some kinds of group formation and collective political actions (but not others), and make possible the raising of certain political issues (but not others)'.[3] The PLO's centralizing tendencies moreover revealed, to borrow from the general discussion of the state by Gianfranco Poggi, 'how keenly, and how successfully, the protagonists of "state-building" sought to entrust the conduct of political business to a single organisation, and to distinguish that from all other entities harbouring and ordering social existence'.[4] Much like a state, the PLO was the receptacle for political legitimacy, and as a consequence it manoeuvred continually in relation to its mass constituency between the politics of control and the politics of mobilization (while adhering strictly to neither).[5]

The fact that the PLO, unlike most states, did not seek to extract financial resources from society or effect social transformations does not detract from its statist character. It was, after all, engaged in a violent nationalist struggle, and so the key internal variable was the ability of leaders, in crisis circumstances, to create and use political arrangements that could eventually solidify into stable, durable structures.[6] Furthermore (to apply a notion borrowed from political economy), the initiators of political change in the Palestinian arena were statists precisely because they were not rooted in any existing set of social or economic interests: 'the state was their chosen instrument of change, and in their vision it was to be self-perpetuating'.[7] Like the state, the PLO was thus more than a mere arena for socio-economic struggles. The insulation of its career officials from current socio-economic interests imbued its political leadership with the relative autonomy that state managers seek in order to act upon their own preferences, 'making decisions that reshape, ignore, or circumvent the preferences of even the strongest social actors'.[8]

The emergence of a distinct political class and durable bureaucratic elite within the PLO framework was in itself additional evidence of state-building, despite the lack of a firm territorial base.[9] This, the institutionalization of political power, was reflected in the rapid increase in the number of people on the PLO payroll and its extension of social welfare and some collective services to its mass constituency. Through the latter means it also reinforced the inclusivist political function of the mass-based corporatist associations it formed or co-opted (in the case of pre-existing ones), such as labour and professional unions, all the while maintaining the exclusivist functions of the core bureaucratic elite. The prevalence of factionalism was another indication of statist corporatism, as it indicated the lack of ability, or interest, of different strata of the PLO elite and mass constituency to organize and act as autonomous social forces in pursuit of specific demands.[10] It was also typical of the post-colonial state, which was significant both as a major employer and as an arena for the articulation of factional conflict and power competition.[11]

The preceding suggests strong similarities between the path of political development taken by the PLO and that of a variety of Arab (and Third World) states. Building on this parallel, the recourse to a combination of traditional and modern techniques of political mobilization and institutionalization—different forms and roles of ideology, bureaucracy, mass organization, and so on—can also be seen as indicative of state-building in the Palestinian case. As in various Arab states, moreover, the availability of 'rent'—the dispensation of financial and other material resources obtained from external sources (or non-extractive ones, such as overseas commercial investments), often in the form of outright patronage—encouraged an authoritarian and populist style of political leadership in the PLO. This, too, was a function of a specific stage of state-building (and of societal modernization), that was especially likely to grow out of a revolutionary or nationalist movement.[12] Lack of territoriality remained an important impediment, but the experience of the Kuwaiti government in exile during the Iraqi occupation in 1990–1 demonstrates that although the existence of a concrete territorial base is symbolically necessary to sustain the notion of statehood, international political, strategic, and financial networks can be equally important.[13]

As the Kuwaiti analogy suggests, finally, the statist character of the PLO cannot be understood without reference to its interaction with the system of states. The latter not only offers the model of the modern territorial state and the Westphalian concept of sovereignty—both of which the PLO strove to appropriate for itself—but also provides a crucial context to help explain the structures and orientations of new state actors. As Skocpol observes in a discussion of regimes emerging from Third World social revolutions that also applies broadly to the PLO, 'these revolutions have happened in settings so penetrated by foreign influences—economic, military, and cultural—that social-revolutionary transformations have been as much about the definition of autonomous identities on the international scene as they have been about forging new political ties between indigenous revolutionaries and their mass constituents'.[14] At the same time, involvement in the system of states can increase regime autonomy from domestic actors, an advantage not lost on the PLO leadership.[15]

That the PLO should have sought international recognition with almost obsessive determination is therefore neither incongruous nor whimsical. A majority in the international community came to recognize its status as the representative national organization of the Palestinians; it enjoyed full membership in the League of Arab States, Non-Aligned Movement, and other multinational groupings of Third World states, as well as observer status at the United Nations; and around 100 states extended varying levels of recognition to the State of Palestine that it declared in November 1988. That they should have done so is partly due to Cold War politics and the peculiar historical and international legal circumstances of the Palestine conflict. But it is also reminiscent of the general position of 'quasi-states', as Robert Jackson describes them,

namely those members of the international system who enjoy juridical state-hood by virtue of obtaining formal recognition from the other, more powerful members, even when they lack the full physical and functional attributes of statehood.[16]

The importance of international recognition explains the constant PLO concern to combat any challenge, whether internal or external, to its status as *sole* legitimate representative of the Palestinians. Ironically, it also explains PLO determination to secure the loyalty of its mass constituency and the continued acceptance by opposition groups of its formal framework, even when this required it to adopt political stances or military tactics that damaged its diplomatic standing. This seeming paradox was in fact a logical consequence of the premium placed by the international community on sovereignty, since it prompted the PLO to work ceaselessly to demonstrate its effective political control, at least, over its own population. Nor, in any case, was the use of violence consistently counter-productive. After all, war-making was in itself a crucial element in state-building—whether in relation to internal actors or external ones—and instrumental in the assertion of a particular form of Palestinian nationalism.

Between Nations and Nationalism

Nationalism is a term commonly associated with anti-colonial struggles, but its meaning in the Palestinian context bears examination. Of the various definitions, that of Ernest Gellner is the most apt in this context: 'Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.'[17] The national unit, or nation, has also been conceived in various ways, but Jan Penrose offers the most useful explanation for the present purpose. It is 'the product of three elements: a distinctive group of people, the territory which they occupy, and the bonding over time (of historical experience) which melds people and land into a "natural" whole. It is through the idea that distinctive groups of people exist that the concept of the nation builds directly on the assumption that culture as a particular way of life is essential.'[18]

The assumption of distinctiveness is implicit in much of the Israeli and Palestinian historiography that analyses Palestinian nationalism. The one tends to refute its existence in certain periods and to suggest that it is primarily a reaction to the emergence of Zionism and the State of Israel; it therefore does not stem from a 'real', that is pre-existing, nation or from intrinsic historical processes, but rather is historically 'artificial'. The other affirms the existence of Palestinian nationalism as an autonomous phenomenon and traces its roots to earlier periods; the biblical roots of Jewish nationalism are moreover now confronted with a 'Can'anite' myth of Palestinian origin.[19] However, both views contain an underlying polemical purpose, which is based on twin as-

sumptions: first, that the division of humankind into national entities is 'natural', and second, that claims to the right of self-determination are validated only by the ability to demonstrate early self-awareness and identification as a nation. Neither the purpose nor the assumptions are shared here. Nationalism is not seen to be unilinear, inevitable, or irreversible even though it is most likely to appear as a political force or ideological trend in situations of conflict involving distinct communities. Rather, it remains a fragmented and contingent phenomenon: it draws on historical and cultural specificities, but these are not undying, essential characteristics, and their significance can be properly understood only in terms of specific conjunctions of social, economic, political, and institutional factors.[20]

Seen this way, to speak of Palestinian *nationalism* is problematic on a number of counts. Strictly speaking, the collective political reaction of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine to the succession of major events that have affected them since the turn of the century might be termed patriotism—the attachment to *patria* and resistance to the imposition of alien political control (that is, by people who are culturally distinct) and commonly translated in present-day (Mashriqi) Arabic as *wataniyya* (from *watan,* homeland)—rather than nationalism. The fact that Palestine had not previously existed as a sovereign or autonomous political entity weakened the tendency to express such resistance in terms of social or cultural commonality among local inhabitants, and led to a greater emphasis on the common territorial component, suggesting that their movement was akin to what Ernest Dawn has described as 'regional patriotism'.[21] Palestinians have moreover stressed their commonality, rather than distinctiveness, of culture with neighbouring Arab societies, with which they share language, religion, social custom, and family ties.

At the same time, Palestinian patriotism has acquired additional dimensions as a result of its striving for separate statehood. Collective memories, perceptions of common injustice, and the sense of belonging to a particular territory provided a basis for turning a latent collectivity into a community, and set Palestinians apart from other Arabs, with whom language, religion, and culture were shared.[22] As such their patriotism evolved into a form of ethnicity as they strove to redefine themselves after 1948 in particular, and revealed some of the features of 'proto-nationalism' following the rise of the PLO after 1967, to use Eric Hobsbawm's term for the 'feelings of collective belonging which already existed and which could operate, as it were, potentially on the macro-political scale which could fit in with modern states and nations'.[23] This involved some mixture of elements and types, however, as different regions of pre-1948 Arab Palestine and different resident and refugee communities of Palestinian Arabs afterwards experienced significant variations in the material conditions of their existence. Palestinian responses to the direct encounter, first with Zionism and the *yishuv* up to 1948 and then with Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip after 1967, came closer to a recognizable form of ethno-nationalism, whereas the political evolution of the PLO in Arab exile should more properly