

WELDON C. MATTHEWS

CONFRONTING AN EMPIRE, CONSTRUCTING A NATION

ARAB NATIONALISTS
AND POPULAR POLITICS
IN MANDATE PALESTINE



I.B. TAURIS

CONFRONTING AN EMPIRE,
CONSTRUCTING A NATION

*Arab Nationalists and Popular
Politics in Mandate Palestine*

Weldon C. Matthews

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2006 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

In the United States of America and Canada distributed by Palgrave
Macmillan a division of St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New
York NY 10010

Copyright © Weldon C. Matthews

The right of Weldon C. Matthews to be identified as the author of this
work has been asserted by the author in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book,
or any part thereof, may not be reproduced, stored in or introduced
into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 10: 1 84511 173 7
ISBN 13: 978 1 84511 173 1

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Typeset in Berkeley Oldstyle by Oxford Publishing Services, Oxford
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin,
Cornwall

Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations	vi
Note on Transliterations	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	
<i>Key Concepts and Historical Context</i>	9
Chapter 2	
<i>The Nationalist Youth and Veteran Nationalists</i>	44
Chapter 3	
<i>The Arab Unity Scheme and the Beginnings of Popular Mobilization</i>	75
Chapter 4	
<i>An Islamic Congress, an Arab Congress and the Istiqlal Party</i>	102
Chapter 5	
<i>Creating and Regulating the Palestinian Public Sphere</i>	135
Chapter 6	
<i>The Non-Cooperation Programme</i>	171
Chapter 7	
<i>The Demonstrations of 1933</i>	198
Chapter 8	
<i>Through the Lens of 1936</i>	233
Appendices	264
Notes	274
Bibliography	315
Index	333

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AUB	American University of Beirut
AWS	Arab Workers Society
CID	Criminal Investigation Division
CO	Colonial Office
CUP	Committee of Union and Progress
CZA	Central Zionist Archives
FO	Foreign Office
HMSO	His Majesty's Stationery Office
ISA	Israel State Archives
JNF	Jewish National Fund
PAWS	Palestine Arab Workers Society
PLDC	Palestine Land Development Company
RG	Record Group
SMC	Supreme Muslim Council
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YMMA	Young Men's Muslim Association

Note on Transliteration

In transliterating Arabic and Hebrew, I omit diacritical markings with the exception of those for the *ʿayn* and *hamza*. Otherwise, I follow the United States Library of Congress system of transliteration for Arabic words and apply the same principles to Hebrew. In cases of Arabic words that have entered English, I prefer to use the transliterated Arabic (for example *shaykh*, not *sheikh* and *amir*, not *emir*.) I follow existing convention – as much as any exists – in the formation of plurals of Arabic words. Thus, I form the plural of *waqf* as *awqaf*, but *shaykh* as *shaykhs*. I use the word ‘Druze’ as both a singular and a plural (namely, not ‘Druzes’). For classification codes of documents in the Israel State Archives, I represent the Hebrew letters *bet*, *mem*, and *pe* with the lower-case Latin letters *b*, *m*, and *p*, respectively.

I also occasionally employ the title ‘effendi’ with the first name of a personality when I mention two or more people of the same family name in close proximity. This was a customary form of address for an educated male during the period under review, and it permits me to avoid either excessively repeating a personality’s full name or referring to him by his first name. The latter alternative seems to me to be overly familiar.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the financial support of the Center for International Studies at the University of Chicago, the United States Department of Education Fulbright Program, and the Palestinian American Research Council. I am grateful to all of these institutions. I am also grateful to Professors Rashid Khalidi, Richard Chambers, and John Woods for guiding this study through its first stage as a dissertation and for suggesting how it might be developed into a book. I owe additional thanks to the staffs at the Central Zionist Archives, the Israeli State Archives, and the Public Record Office of the United Kingdom for their unreserved and highly professional help.

I benefited greatly from the comments of my colleagues at Whitman College, who read a section of this study that I presented to the history department. The companionship of the faculty and my fellow adjunct professors, John McNay, Pamela Edwards and Jim Barnhardt at Shippensburg University made a year and a half of this long project exceptionally enjoyable. I must also express my appreciation for the encouragement and advice of my colleagues at Oakland University over the last four years. Finally, my debt to my parents and my sister for the support they have always given me is greater than I will ever be able to repay, and I have dedicated this book to them.

Introduction

I have intended for this book to contribute to an explanation of how the Arabism and Arab nationalism of the late Ottoman era were transformed during the interwar period into resources for popular mobilization among Palestinian Arabs. The transformation was not a linear and unbroken process, and it cannot be assumed that in Palestine it was identical to that of other Arab lands. Thus, in this study I examine a crucial period within which Palestinians chose Arab nationalism as the basis for collective political action.

It is specifically Arab nationalism that concerns us here, and it is therefore useful to state what may well be obvious: the expression 'Arab nationalism' has meant different things to different people at the same time and across time. Some observers have equated it with pan-Arabism and set it against territorial nationalisms like Palestinian Arab nationalism.¹ A scholar has also claimed that the territorial and pan-Arab varieties exist as 'parallel nationalisms ... without the one detracting from the force or the incidence of the other, representing two enfolded horizons of polity'.² However, the relationship between pan-Arab nationalism and regional nationalism has never been static. Under some circumstances one has reinforced the other, while in different circumstances they have represented competing conceptions of identity.³ This proposition recognizes the frequently observed fact that identity – collective and individual – is inherently contingent. Concepts of identity, whether expressed through kinship, citizenship, or religious and national identity, are generated, chosen and manipulated in specific historical circumstances. As Dale Eickelman explains, 'These forms do not exist as objects that can be torn from social and cultural contexts by anthropologists for recording and classification into typologies.'⁴

The manner in which elements of collective identity can at various times and for various individuals either compete or mutually reinforce one another, and the conditions under which those elements come to be understood as 'national' are major themes of the present

study. The vehicle I have chosen to pursue these themes is the Arab Istiqlal (Independence) Party. It was at once a Palestinian, pan-Syrian, and pan-Arab political party. It was also the first Arab party in Palestine to attempt mass, public organization. Its appearance in 1932 thus constituted a watershed both in the expression of political identity by Palestinian Arabs and in the associational life of their society. No less significantly, the party's activities marked a critical weakening of the variety of politics commonly referred to as 'the politics of notables' – one characterized by the secretive dealings of an Arab elite that viewed itself as a mediating leadership standing between the state and its subjects.⁵ The Istiqlal Party cultivated the corps of activists who employed public opinion to push the Palestinian Arab notable leadership towards confrontation with the British government, not only in protest against British sponsorship of the Jewish national home, but also in the demand for an independent nation-state.

On one level, the development of an indigenous national movement in Palestine may not seem to be something that needs to be explained. It was no anomaly. National movements and nation-states have become the norm on a global level since the First World War, but the issue of the origins and spread of Palestinian Arab nationalism is entangled in the polemics of a rivalry with Zionism, a competing national movement in the same land. The two movements, their internal factions and their partisans deploy representations of history in the contemporary pursuit of political ends. On another level, such constructions of history are typical of nationalism as a modern phenomenon. Indeed, nationalism's recent character inspires many of its observers to see it as an artifice fabricated to advance or mask ulterior ends. Contrasting the newness of nationalism against the nationalists' claims for the ancient origins of their nations, Eric Hobsbawm asserts that 'the national phenomenon cannot be adequately investigated without careful attention to the "invention of tradition".'⁶

This matter underlines the fact that Arab nationalism was articulated on a mass level only during a period of European governance. Prior to this, it was confined almost totally to small associations of bureaucratic-technical elites and military officers during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. For all appearances, most people of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire had regarded themselves as its subjects and, increasingly, its citizens. The ideology of state was Ottomanism, a doctrine that approached secular nationalism in its

assertion of equal rights for all subjects of the sultan and in its conception of a homeland and popular sovereignty. Although no creed by this name was posited until the nineteenth century, Ottomanism drew heavily from classical Ottoman Islamic symbolism, and it preserved Islam as the state religion.⁷

Why, then, did Arab nationalism emerge as a movement of mass appeal after the disappearance of the empire? Although some scholars have explained this as a default choice, it must be observed that such an explanation offers no compelling reason why Arabs under European domination could not have chosen to demand their independence in the name of a reconstituted Islamic empire. Were there specific circumstances that led people to choose Arabism as the basis of political community? This provokes a further question: under what circumstances do people find it in their interests to define themselves as nations generally? This is the central question of the book, and the virtue of a study of the Arab Istiqlal Party in Palestine lies in answering this question. To observe the emergence of the Istiqlal Party as the first true nationalist political party in Palestine is also to watch people make choices about the basis of their political association.

A study of the Istiqlal Party is particularly suited to addressing these questions because members of the party's leadership committee had been Ottoman officials or military officers. The same was true of the larger circle of Istiqlalists of Greater Syria with whom the Palestinians associated. Many of the larger group had belonged to secret, prewar Arabist societies and participated in the Arab revolt against the empire. Their careers as activists thus lasted from the Ottoman period to the time of emerging mass Arab nationalism, and they saw themselves as activists in a new era of popular politics. The party and its activities thus exemplified what Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly have termed innovative contentious politics, by which new institutions and modes of political advocacy are developed to make demands on the government.⁸ More prosaically, the Istiqlal Party was of signal importance in developing the repertoires of protest that made possible the 1936 Palestinian Arab general strike.

This investigation of the Istiqlal Party and its significance for Palestinian Arab nationalism is divided into eight chapters. In Chapter 1 I provide historical background to the period under review and explain the central concepts employed in the subsequent chapters. Specifi-