



PALESTINIAN POLITICS AFTER ARAFAT

A Failed National Movement

AS'AD GHANEM

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Preface

This book represents an attempt to understand the situation of the Palestinians and their national movement at the start of the twenty-first century. This has been a period of reversals and change; it is different in essence from earlier periods of Palestinian history since the Palestinian Nakba. I shall focus on the period which began following the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), with special attention to the period following the second intifada against Israeli occupation (October 2000).

It was after Oslo that the seeds of the present period, which has brought the Palestinian national movement to the verge of failure, were planted. This period is characterized by the transition of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from support of a comprehensive solution to the Palestinian problem to pursuit of partial solutions, and by the failure of the Palestinian national movement to achieve even one of its national aspirations. Equally, Yasser Arafat's tightened control over the Palestinian national movement and the spread of corruption under his leadership led to the figurative bankruptcy of the PNA and the PLO. Finally, the PLO's gradual decline in the domestic and international arenas and the rise of Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement) as an alternative to it provided the foundation for Hamas's ascent to power in 2006.

Israel strongly condemned the sweeping victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections that were held on January 25, 2006, and declared that it would not negotiate with any Hamas-led government. The Hamas victory gave the Israeli government another excuse not to negotiate directly with the legitimately elected Palestinian government and to continue with its unilateral efforts to destroy the Palestinian movement for independence and to prevent the establishment of a sovereign state alongside Israel. At the same time, the immediate reaction by the supporters of the Palestinian liberation movement (Fateh), made it clear that Palestinian politics had reached a moment of crisis.

I will argue that the crisis among the Palestinians is so severe that the street fighting and confrontations covered by the media scarcely scratch its surface. The problem runs so deep that the Palestinians have actually lost the ability to function efficiently, internally or externally, as a single national group. The existential crisis that currently afflicts the Palestinians and their national movement is no accident. It is, in fact, a direct result of historical processes that intensified after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in 1994, and erupted into the public sphere in the post-Arafat era.

Following an introduction that provides historical and theoretical background, chapters 2 and 3 explain the Israeli post-Oslo policies toward the Palestinians and their relevance to the Palestinian national movement's failure in the post-Arafat era. Chapters 4 and 5 analyze two aspects of an Arafat regime in the PNA that contributed to the failure of the Palestinian national movement: the Arafat-controlled system and the spread of corruption under Arafat rule. Chapter 6 explains and analyzes the lack of authoritative leadership following Arafat's death in 2004 as a source of failure, and chapters 7 and 8 analyze and explain the rise of Hamas as an alternative to the PLO and the open conflict between its supporters and supporters of the PLO.

The crisis in the Palestinian national movement is linked to its choice of Arafat and the PLO to guide Palestinian affairs. Freeing themselves from the crisis will require new thinking by the Palestinians about all of the options available to them in their internal affairs and in their relations with Israel, the West, and the Arab world. As things currently stand, it is hard to envision the various factions and currents in the Palestinian national movement taking a consensual and logical step in this direction, and therefore it is improbable that it can extricate itself from the crisis.

Over the last two years research assistants helped me gather my data and classify it. I would like to thank all of them, especially Aziz Kayed, Mohanad Mostafa, Alex Bailsky, and Rola Sirhan, and to thank the many people who gave of their precious time and allowed me to interview them. I also thank Katie Hesketh and Dina Fattom, who edited my draft and gave me very useful recommendations for the improvement of the text.

Introduction

Theoretical Framework and Historical Background

The post-Oslo era in Israeli-Palestinian politics has been a period of reversals and change for the Palestinian national movement. This period is different in essence from earlier periods of Palestinian history for two primary reasons. First, the changes observed during this period are taking place within the context of a geographical shift in the center of gravity from the Palestinian diasporas to the “Palestinian center”: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Palestinian center emerged as a focal point over the years, especially during the first intifada, which began in the late 1980s. Second, all the events which have taken place during the post-Oslo period were shaped by the complex interaction with Israel, both the heightened attempt to reach an agreement and the intensification of violence. We shall focus on the period which began with the start of the second intifada (October 2000), although the origins of the period can be traced back much earlier, to the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in 1994 or to the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister of Israel in 1996. Indeed, the steps taken by Netanyahu’s government to dismantle the Oslo process and halt the implementation of United Nations resolutions 242 and 338, which formed the basis of the mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), were accompanied by an outline plan for the Palestinian state. In the view of the Israeli right, this plan accepted the existence

of the Palestinians without allowing them full self-determination, while at the same time pushing for their autonomy and management of their own affairs in some kind of quasi-state.

What happened during the following decade to the Palestinians in general, and to their national movement in particular, led to the internal and external failure of the latter. Internally, this failure was manifested in the disintegration of the regional and international status of the Palestinian national movement. Concomitantly, the efforts to establish a Palestinian state and resolve the conflict reached a dead end because of the deep internal schism that developed, which is incompatible with national unity.

This situation has diverse causes. One is that the agreements with Israel did not lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state, and another can be traced to the irresolution of the demands advanced by the Palestinian national movement since its reorganization in the 1960s. Internally, governmental malpractice and the spread of corruption under Yasser Arafat, together with the lack of consensus over the leadership after his death—which was followed by the outbreak of a harsh struggle among the Palestinians—led to an internal breakdown, which was reflected in the decline of the PLO's reputation in the international arena, particularly in Europe and the Arab world.

Thus, the situation in which the Palestinian national movement found itself at the dawn of the new millennium is significant for all those interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and for the Palestinians themselves. It raises a theoretical issue which can be linked to the decline of national movements in general. Much has been written in the literature on ethnicity and nationalism about the paths followed by groups of people from the pre-national to the national condition; much research and thought has been devoted to the factors that shape or encourage this trajectory. This book, however, is concerned with the inverse process: the decline or collapse of national movements. In this chapter I want to identify the symptoms of the disintegration of national movements and the diverse factors that create such situations. The collapse of the Arab national movement constructed by Jamal Abdel Nasser, the schism and internal rifts within the Kurdish national movement, the civil war in Lebanon in the 1970s, the civil war in Iraq that followed the American occupation in 2003, and the disintegration of several national movements in the Balkans in the 1990s are all cases that can destabilize the argument that national conditions are deterministic and follow a linear development. They provide examples of national movements that have disintegrated and failed, as a result of both external and internal causes.