



COMMENTARY | POLITICS

# Reclaiming the Palestinian Narrative

By: Jamil Hilal · January, 2013

“Whoever writes his story will inherit the land of words, and possess meaning, entirely!”

(Darwish, *Why Did you Leave the Horse Alone?*)

Where does the dominant discourse on the Palestine question stand today and what does it communicate? This is a crucial question – indeed an urgent matter of national interest – because the Palestinian people do not fully control the discourse, which is stacked against them and their rights. Worse, some Palestinians have become the most ardent followers of this dangerous discourse. The need for critical awareness of who narrates history and to what end is obvious. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the fact that Israel celebrates its establishment as Independence Day whereas in the Palestinian collective memory it is their *Nakba* (catastrophe).

The Palestinian story of dispossession, exile, occupation, and discrimination faces a systematic and concerted effort to empty it of significance and to “normalize” the situation. The dominant political literature on the Palestinian question is permeated by misrepresentations of the history, geography and identity of the Palestinian people. These misrepresentations are taken for granted in the language used by international organizations, including those of the United Nations, political leaders, and the mass media both globally as well as some official Arab media. More disturbing is the fact that they have crept into the



discourse of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the major political organizations.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to identify five major misrepresentations and the dangers they carry, and to suggest the kind of action that can and must be taken to reframe the narrative.

The first misrepresentation involves a reduction of Palestine to a fragment of its original territory by transforming it into the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, i.e. 22% of mandate Palestine. Israel has been further shrinking "Palestine" since it occupied these territories in 1967, through colonization and land annexation in East Jerusalem and the West Bank while maintaining Gaza under a stringent siege, all in violation of international law. The later political program of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) contributed to this misrepresentation by raising the possibility of accepting a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza in 1974 and formally adopting this position in 1988.

The second misrepresentation, closely tied to the first, involves an assault on Palestinian history, by setting its starting point at 1967 in much of the political and media discourse. This, wittingly or not, removed from discussion the responsibility for the historic injustice that was inflicted on the Palestinian people during the British Mandate and in 1948 and that continues to this day. It was also an attempt to expunge from the record the long history of Palestinian resistance against British colonialism and Zionist settler colonialism and for self-determination. Palestinian history began long before the Nakba of 1948. In fact, Palestinians spent most of the first half of the 20th century fighting for self-determination against British military occupation and Zionist colonization of their land. Previously, they had fought for greater autonomy from Ottoman rule.

The shrinking of the Palestinian people to those living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as they are often portrayed, is the third major misrepresentation. In fact, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza account for less than half (4.3 million) of



the total Palestinian population, estimated at 11 million by 2010. Another 1.2 million remained in their homeland in what is now Israel. The remaining Palestinians live in Jordan, where they account for over half of the Jordanian population, in Lebanon, Syria, and other Arab countries, and in the rest of the world. No solution of the Palestinian-Israel conflict will be sustainable without the acknowledgment of the right of return of these Palestinian refugees and exiles to their homeland – not just to a so-called state that might be established on parts of West Bank and Gaza Strip but also within Israel.

Indeed, Israel and its Western supporters must acknowledge and accept legal responsibility for the injustice inflicted upon the Palestinian people if genuine reconciliation is to be achieved. Although they are unlikely to do so in the near future, this is not out of the question if regional and international changes continue. At present, however, there is a real danger that Israel, which is increasingly dominated by extreme right wing political forces determined to make it a “pure” Jewish state, will seek to expel its Palestinian citizens, whether to a Palestinian entity or through other means such as withdrawing the citizenship of Israeli Palestinian advocates for equality and recognition as a national minority.

The fourth misrepresentation is the assumption that the two-state solution is a valid and viable option. In actual fact, nowhere in the 1993 – 1999 Oslo accords is there mention of the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the territories occupied in 1967. The PLO simply assumed that this would be the outcome of negotiations with Israel. However, nearly 20 years of negotiations have exposed the emptiness of those assumptions beyond shadow of a doubt. Far from agreeing to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, Israel argues for its “right” to colonize the West Bank without, as yet, annexing it to avoid undermining its so-called Jewish nature by adding the Palestinian population.

The Israeli leadership continues to muddy the waters by suggesting that Palestinians can have their own state on what remains of the Palestinian land



occupied in 1967 after it has appropriated as much of it as it can. But even assuming that a Palestinian entity would be allowed to emerge, it would be devoid of any sovereignty or socio-economic sustainability and would be disjointed both within the West Bank and between the West Bank and a Gaza Strip that is already facing enormous problems and is projected to be uninhabitable if current trends continue.

It should be noted that, with the establishment of the PA on parts of the West Bank and Gaza, the marginalization of the PLO as the institution representative of all Palestinians within mandate Palestine and in their Diasporas (shatat) has been amongst the most damaging results of the Oslo Accords.

Finally, the myth of development under occupation constitutes the fifth major misrepresentation. The PA mistook myth for reality as soon as it was established in 1994 partly because it believed that it would transition from limited self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to an independent state. The past 20 years have amply demonstrated the impossibility of development under settler-colonial military occupation, as manifested by control of natural resources, borders and movement, physical and political fragmentation through the Separation Wall and bypass roads, and arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, among other things. Instead the PA has become dependent on foreign aid and Israeli decisions, and made the occupation the cheapest in history as PA president Mahmoud Abbas put it.

As can be seen from the above analysis, these five misrepresentations have endangered the Palestinian national project and the very existence of the Palestinians as a people. To counteract these dangers, the Palestinian people and their supporters in the Arab and international solidarity movement must *first and foremost* beware the use of a discourse that conflates "the Palestinian people" with the residents of the West Bank and Gaza or that uses "Palestine" to denote the territories occupied in 1967 until and unless a sovereign Palestinian state is established and the right of return is acknowledged and fulfilled.



Rather, proponents of Palestinian rights should promote a discourse that:

- Reasserts the Nakba as one of the major focal points of the Palestinian narrative. Any attempts to suppress or gloss over it deny the historic injustice dealt the Palestinians and can only perpetuate the conflict.
- Insists on the right of return as the central component of the right to self-determination, whether this is carried within two sovereign states of Israel and Palestine should that prove possible without infringing on the rights of all Palestinians or in one democratic (unitary or bi-national) state in all of mandate Palestine. The discourse should also guard against any Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, or international attempt to compromise this right.
- Makes clear that the historic compromise of sharing – on a democratic and equal basis – Palestine with Israeli Jews, is dependent on Israel's acknowledgement of the Palestinian right to self-determination, their right of return, as well as Israel's abandonment of its colonial and racist policies. In this context, it is important to support the global movement for the campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel to pressurize it to comply with international law and Palestinian rights.
- Situates the PLO/PA move for member state status at the UN within a comprehensive strategy in the struggle for Palestinians for self-determination that also encompasses the right of return, and acknowledges the rights of the Palestinians in Israel to equal citizenship as well as a national minority. The insurmountable obstacles that Israel has erected in the face of a sovereign Palestinian state should make it easier to transform the struggle into one for a democratic state in all of mandate Palestine.
- Promotes the reunification of the Palestinian national movement as a national liberation movement with a unified strategy that weaves together the aspiration of the three major components of the Palestinian people: of



Palestinians in Israel for equality and acknowledgement of their rights as a national minority; by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to end settler-colonial military occupation and siege; and of the Palestinians in the Diasporas to return to their homeland and to be able, meanwhile, to exercise civic rights in the countries of refuge. The three components together constitute the overall struggle for self-determination.

The popular uprisings in the Arab world are paving the way for a new Middle East that is significantly different from the old: A Middle East that is more prepared to reject United States and European domination. The emerging political elites of Arab states may be more assertive of their political and economic independence and more attentive to national public opinion, which is clearly supportive of Palestinian rights.

In order to fight against the attempts to write the Palestinians out of history, as well as to take advantage of the new opportunities ushered in by the Arab uprisings and the ongoing changes at the international level, one of the most urgent tasks facing the Palestinian people is to take hold of the way their story is narrated and reclaim their collective narrative.

*This commentary is adapted from a longer presentation in October 2012 at the University of Milan that was reprinted in full at <http://www.palestine-studies.org/column/details.aspx?t=1&id=152>*



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