

The Palestinian Issue: Its Background and Development up to 2000

by Mohsen. M. Saleh (tr. from Arabic by Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim).
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Reviewer: Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk, Department of History and Civilization, International Islamic University Malaysia.

The French Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), was the first European statesman who proposed the idea of the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. His proposal was later adopted by the World Zionist Organization, which launched a series of systemic political and diplomatic campaigns for translating it into a political reality. The Jewish campaigns eventually culminated in the persuasion of the British government to patronize the idea of the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The immediate British response then crystallized in the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, which favoured the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.

The implementation of the Balfour Declaration generated a bitter struggle between the indigenous Palestinians and the immigrant Jews who came mainly from Russia and different parts of Europe. The scope of the struggle was gradually widened and engaged the enthusiasm of the overwhelming majority of the world's one billion Muslims, fourteen million Jews and a substantial number of the Christian populations who found themselves directly or indirectly involved in this political and religious conflict. Towards the end of the First World War, the Palestinian problem became an international issue and a most sensitive topic in world politics.

In the book under review, Mohsen M. Saleh addresses this problematic issue from historical and ideological perspectives, and systemically examines its interrelated phases and repercussions in the Muslim World and the West. He began his discussion on the grounds that the sacred land of Palestine is the land of the sincere adherents of Islam since Islam is a continuation of the *tawhidic* message of Prophets Ibrāhīm, Ishāq, Ya'qūb, Ismā'īl, Mūsā, Dāūd, Sulaymān and 'Īsā (p. 17). Therefore, the deviation of the Jews from the right path of the *tawhidic* prophets has nullified their religious claims in the sacred land of Palestine and entrusted its custodianship to the Muslims who follow the message of the Prophet Muhammad (SAS). The rationale of this hypothesis is based on the Qur'ānic *āyāt*: *Al-Baqarah* 124, 132; and *Āli-Imrān*: 67, 68.

Mohsen Saleh also challenges the historical claims of the Israelites over the land of Palestine, particularly when he argues that the Palestinians had established their lives and careers in Palestine for more than 1500 years before the rise of the Jewish state in 1000 B.C. During the four centuries (1000-586 B.C.) of the Jewish authority the Palestinians succeeded in maintaining their local autonomy because the Jews did not have a full control over the land of Palestine. After the Jewish authority faded away in 586 B.C., the administration of Palestine was placed under the control of various political forces (Assyrians, Persians, Pharaohs, Greeks and Romans) that ruled consecutively until the appearance of the Muslim forces in 636 CE. Excluding the period of the crusade wars, the Muslims had maintained their control over Palestine for more than one thousand and two hundred years (636-1917 CE.). Throughout this long span of time (1000 B.C.-1917 CE.), the Palestinians, as Mohsen Saleh argues, remained firmly rooted in their homeland, and dynamically participated in socio-political and economic livelihood until their continuous and wide spread existence was abruptly suppressed by the Israeli occupation forces in 1948 (p. 18).

After verifying the ideological and historical claims of the Palestinians over the land of Palestine, Mohsen Saleh critically assesses their reaction to the Balfour Declaration, and examines how this reaction contributed to the emergence of the Palestinian nationalist movement that led the struggle against the Jewish intruders and their British patrons who, regionally and internationally, marketed the idea of the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Thus, under the British patronage the number of the Jews in Palestine jumped from 55,000 in 1918 to 646,000 in 1948, and their landownership from 2% to 6.5% of the total land of Palestine. Accordingly, the number of the settlements increased to 292, a military force of 70,000 fighters was formed, and a network of social services was set up over the occupied territories (pp. 43-44). As the author argues, this illegal occupation had obtained its international legitimacy in November 1947, when the United Nations General Assembly issued the Resolution No. 181 which recommended the partition of Palestine into two states, one for the Arabs and the other for the Jews, and considered Jerusalem as an international area. The immediate outcome of this resolution was that the Jews, on 14 May 1948, declared the birth of the state of Israel, and subsequently expelled about 60% of the Palestinian population from their homeland (p. 45).

In Chapter 2, the author concentrates on the early years of Palestinian nationalism, tracing the development of political style from petition to protest and then to full-scale military resistance. To underline this situation, he quotes the Palestinian Islamic figure, al-Ḥāj Amīn al-

Ḥusainī, who highlights that “up to 1932 we somehow had a glimpse of hope, but it soon evaporated. All our sufferings and pains were carefully orchestrated. We had no option except martyrdom” (p. 35). Mohsen Saleh argues that political problems of organization and leadership were among factors that jeopardized the efforts of the Palestinian nationalists and their supporters in the neighboring Arab countries, and eventually handicapped them from preventing the establishment of the state of Israel. But the more important reason for this failure in the 1940s was the limited resources at the disposal of the Palestinians compared with the unlimited support that the Zionists received from their British patrons, and the Jewish lobby in the United State of America in particular and the rest of the world in general.

The crucial period of Palestinian resistance, the subject of Chapters 3 and 4, began with the ‘Arab struggle against the state of Israel. During the first phase (1949-1967) of this period (1949-1987), empty slogans such as “the ‘Arab national battle” and “the ‘Arab unity is the means for liberation” became prevalent and dominated the political landscape but their political yield was not more than the catastrophic defeat of the established Arab regimes of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria - the self-appointed custodians of the Palestine cause - in the Six-Day War of June 1967 (p. 47). One of the most regrettable results of the Six-Day War, as the author argues, was that the restoration of the 1967 occupied lands became the sole visible hope that the leadership of the Palestinians could cash on. Meaning that the Palestinian Liberation Organization implicitly neglected the Palestinians’ civil and legal rights over the land usurped by the Zionists in 1948 and activated its struggle for the restoration of 23% of the total land of Palestine (p. 55).

The author assumes that this compromising mentality of the PLO leadership has led, in November 1988, to the recognition of the UN Resolution No. 181 which recommended the partition of Palestine into two, Arab and Jewish states, and to the acknowledgment of the Security Council Resolution No. 242 which dealt with the Palestinian Issue as a refugee problem. Thus, this political withdrawal has paved the way for a series of secret negotiations between the leaders of the PLO and their Zionist rivals. The outcome of these negotiations resulted in the Oslo Accord of 1992. According to Mohsen Saleh, the Oslo Accord is a trap launched to dilute the Palestinian issue, and its upshot does not meet with the expectations of the Palestinians because it overlooked various delicate issues such as the future of the sacred city of Jerusalem (which has already been declared by the Zionists as the eternal capital of their Jewish state), and that of more than five million Palestinian refugees

living in the Diaspora and inside the historical land of Palestine (pp. 72-73).

The conclusion of “the unfortunate Oslo Accord” in 1993 and the repressive policies of the Palestinian Authority against its own peoples increased the popularity of “the blessed *intifāḍah*” that started in December 1987 and continued for six years. The author investigates how the first *intifāḍah* paved the way for the outbreak of al-Aqṣā *intifāḍah* that came as a result of the provocative visit of the then leader of the Likud Party and now the Prime Minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon, to the courtyard of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā on 28 September 2000, “accompanied by 600 armed soldiers and another 3,000 to control Jerusalem and its surroundings” (p. 83). To Mohsen Saleh, *al-Aqṣā intifāḍah* has dealt a hard blow to the false peace project and normalization process with the Zionists, and emphasized that *Jihād* is the only hard option left for the liberation of the occupied territories from the hands of the Zionist invaders. Given the status of Palestine, he argues, Muslims would unite “for the sake of the battle against the common Zionist enemy” (p. 84). The author seems to have reached this conclusion from his conviction that the primary factor behind the establishment of the state of Israel was “to isolate the Asian and African wings of the Muslim world from each other, and put a final end to any future formation of a super Muslim power to replace the defeated Ottoman Caliphate” (p. 89). These remarks apparently lend some credit to Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations” thesis. Both Huntington and Mohsen Saleh agree that the Palestinian issue is one of the “fault-line wars” between the Western and Islamic civilizations. The major difference between them is that Saleh assumes that the Palestinian issue would lead to the unity of the Muslim Ummah and then the restoration of its superior position in world politics, while Huntington presupposes that this unity would lead to the clash with the Western civilization.

Overall the *Palestinian Issue* is a fine piece of work, well presented and systematically documented. It explains various phases of Palestinian nationalism, its transformation into an international issue and its bearings on global politics. It is a concise and Islamically-oriented work on the Palestinian issue, its historical background, and its ideological depth.