

# Transformation of Collective Identity in Palestine

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## Abstract

This article focuses on transformation of collective identity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the 'Nakba' (catastrophe) of 1948. The article argues that Arab identity, which was dominant in Palestine during the Mandate period, continued to be dominant after the 'Nakba'. The weak Palestinian identity started to strengthen continuously among all Palestinians after the June War of 1967. In the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, Palestinian identity greatly intensified and became the strongest identity in the last two to three decades. Comparison of collective identity before and after the Oslo Agreement shows that while under the Palestinian Authority (PA), Palestinian identity remained the strongest identity, Muslim identity and clan (or hamula) identity have greatly intensified.

**Keywords** collective identity • Oslo Agreement • Palestinian nationalism • Palestinians • West Bank and Gaza Strip

## Research Problem

Unlike the relatively rich literature on collective identity of Palestinians in Israel (see, for example, Peres and Yuval-Davis, 1969; Hofman, 1982; Rouhana, 1984, 1997; Mi'ari, 1986, 1987, 1992; Smooha, 1989, 1992; Suleiman, 1999, 2002), very few studies, as far as we know, dealt with collective identity of Palestinians in other collectivities, especially those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Al-Budairi, 1995; Mi'ari, 1998, 2004; Hassassian, 2001/2; Nassar, 2001/2). These studies, dealing with collective identity of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, are primarily qualitative and lack empirical data. Only Mi'ari's studies are quantitative and are based on data collected between the years 1994 and 2001 from representative samples of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

It is well known that Palestinian Arabs' collective identity had changed from one period to another during the century. The previous studies, including Mi'ari's studies, have not dealt in depth with these changes. The present article aims to give a general picture on the transformation of collective identity of Palestinians in the last century and focuses on the following questions:

1. How had collective identity of Palestine Arabs developed in the last century, especially after the 'nakba' (catastrophe) of 1948?
2. Had collective identity changed after the formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip? Had it changed during the al-Aqsa Intifada?
3. How do Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip identify themselves today? More specifically, to what extent do they identify as Palestinian, as Arab and as Muslim or Christian? To what extent, also, do they identify with their clans and localities?

### **Methodology**

The present study is both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative side is based on reviewing some of the literature dealing with the socio-political structure of Palestinian society since the late Ottoman period until the present. This literature was helpful in understanding the transformation of collective identity until the early 1990s. While the quantitative side is based on data collected in five surveys: two surveys conducted in January and June 1994 on representative samples of Birzeit University students and three surveys conducted in 1997, 2001 and 2006 on representative samples of the adult population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Collective identity was measured in the five surveys, conducted by the author, by the following questions:

- To what extent do you feel Palestinian?
- To what extent do you feel Arab?
- To what extent do you feel Muslim or Christian?
- To what extent do you feel belonging to your clan (or 'hamula')?
- To what extent do you feel belonging to your place of residence (town, village or refugee camp)?

The first question measured Palestinian national identity, the second measured Arab national (or pan-Arab) identity, the third question measured religious identity and the last two questions measured traditional parochial (clan and local) identities. The answers to all these questions ranged in five categories: to a very little extent; to a little extent; to a moderate extent; to a great extent; and to a very great extent.

Since the respondents can identify at the same time with different groups, it is important to know the main, or the most important, group with which they identify. As such, besides the ordinal measures of collective identity, the respondents were asked 'if you were requested to define your identity in one word, what would you say?' The categories to this nominal question were Muslim or Christian, Arab, Palestinian and other.

In the last three surveys, conducted in 1997, 2001 and 2006, collective identity was also measured by questions about the extent to which the respondent is ready to sacrifice (in time, effort and money) for each of the following groups: Palestinian people, Arab nation, Muslim or Christian nation, respondent's clan ('hamula') and respondent's place of residence (town, village or refugee camp). The answers to these questions ranged in four categories: not ready; ready to some extent; ready; and much ready.

### **The Meaning of Identity**

Unlike personal identity, which consists of aspects of the self that are based on individual characteristics, such as personal traits, social (or collective or group) identity consists of those aspects of the self that are based on group memberships. Personal and social identities are inversely related: when one's focus is on oneself as a unique individual, the focus is not on oneself as a member of a group or groups, and vice versa (Stephan and Stephan, 1996). This article deals with social identity, which I prefer to call collective identity. I define collective identity as a sense of belonging to a group, or number of groups, in which membership is claimed. As such collective identity is a subjective state, and can exist at many different levels from family unit to sporting team, professional organization, political party, ethnic group, several ethnic groups forming a state or grouping of states as in the case of non-aligned nations. Although identity is a subjective state, it is generally anchored in objective features, such as territory, language, history and culture (Bostock and Smith, 2002).

In most contemporary societies, collective identity is formed of several components (or sub-identities), representing several group memberships. The importance given to these components may vary from one period to another due to social and historical factors, such as state policy, social change, wars and interracial contact. Collective identity, as such, is multi-dimensional, socially constructed and varies from time to time. Similarly, collective identity of Palestinians is formed of several components representing several group memberships. Besides being Palestinian, sharing a common historical experience and struggling for independence, the Palestinians are: (1) Arab, sharing a common language, history and culture with the Arab World; (2) predominantly Muslim, with a small minority of Christians; and (3) members of narrow traditional groups, such as localities (towns, villages or refugee camps) and clans. The importance given to

these components has varied during the last century from one period to another due to social and historical factors (Mi'ari, 1998).

### **Transformation of Palestinians' Identity**

Following is a description of the transformation of collective identity of Palestinians, with focus on those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in the last century.

#### **Identity before 1948**

Palestine under the late Ottoman rule, known as 'Southern Syria', was not one administrative unit, but rather was divided between two or three administrative units (sanjacks). Most of the Muslim Arabs of Palestine, as well as those of the Ottoman Empire, identified themselves at that time as Arabs, Muslims and Ottomans (Al-Budairi, 1995; Nassar, 2001/2). While Arab identity was based on common language, history and culture, and Muslim identity on a common religion, Ottoman identity was based on a membership in the 'community of believers', that is on citizenship in the Muslim Ottoman Empire. These wide identities coexisted, of course, together with narrow local and tribal identities.

In response to the Young Turks Revolution of 1909, that brought to power a nationalist movement stressing Turkish rather than Islamic sentiment and tradition (Berger, 1964), a pan-Arab movement emerged, stressing Arab unity, based, as mentioned, on common language, history and culture (Brand, 1991). At the same time, a semi-organized Palestinian political opposition to Zionist colonization, especially to Jewish immigration and Jews' purchase of land, which began in the 1880s, was carried out primarily by the newly established Arabic newspapers (Mi'ari, 1983).

During the First World War, and primarily when the Ottoman Empire broke up at the end of that war, Arab identity overcame its two competitors, the Ottoman and the traditional Muslim identities, and gained widespread public support. Arab unity, or Palestine's unity with Syria, was considered the only way to repel the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine (Porat, 1975).

After the First World War, Palestine was separated from Syria and put under the British Mandate. The borders of mandatory Palestine were designed by the British and French colonial powers. In response to British rule between 1917 and 1948 and to the intensified Zionist settlement in Palestine, a Palestinian Arab national movement emerged, aiming to establish an independent Palestinian state, in which Muslims, Christians and Jews live with equal rights. Accompanied with this development was the gradual growth of Palestinian national identity, which is the sense of belonging to Palestine as separate from Syria (Brand, 1991).

Palestinian national movement, and Palestinian identity, during the mandate period were weakened, among Palestine's Arabs, by traditional and parochial, especially tribal, identities. The rivalries between the Husseini and Nashashibi families provide the most dramatic example of the divisive effect of these parochial identities (Nashif, 1977). As such, Arab and religious (Muslim and Christian) identities remained stronger than Palestinian identity, so that the 'neighboring Arab states, since the mid-thirties, became the decision maker regarding issues of Palestine Arabs' (Al-Budairi, 1995: 16).

### **Identity between 1948 and 1967**

Palestinian Arabs' dependence on Arab states, to oppose the Zionist danger, did not yield the results they hoped for. As a result of the Arab-Jewish war of 1948, the Arabs were defeated, and the state of Israel was established on one part of Palestine. Another part, Gaza Strip, was administered by Egypt, and a third part, the West Bank, was annexed by Jordan. By the end of the war there were about 700,000 Palestinian Arab refugees dispersed in Gaza Strip, the West Bank and in neighboring Arab countries, especially Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Today only about half of the Palestinian Arabs live in their home country. Israeli official statistics estimate that by the end of the year 2003 there were about 1,100,000 Palestinian Arabs in Israel, not including the annexed East Jerusalem (about 200,000) (Israel, 2004), and Palestinian official statistics estimate the number of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as of the first quarter of 2004, at 3,767,000 persons (2,385,000 in the West Bank and 1,382,000 in Gaza Strip) (Birzeit University, 2005).

The process of 'pan-Arabization' of the Arab struggle in Palestine was only intensified by the defeat of 1948 and the consequent fragmentation of the Palestinian Arab people (Porat, 1975). The fragmented Palestinian Arabs committed their cause, the liberation of Palestine, to the Arab Nationalist Movement, led by Egypt's Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s. In this period, many Palestinians joined pan-Arab organizations, of which the most prominent was the Movement of Arab Nationalists, which stressed Arab unity as the only road that could lead to victory in the struggle against Israel and colonialism in general (Baumgarten, 2005). It was not surprising, therefore, that under the dominance of pan-Arab thought in this period, Palestinian identity and Muslim identity were absent from Palestinian National Pact (al-Mithaq al-Qawmi al-Filastini) of 1964 (Abrash, 2004). As such, Arab national, or pan-Arab, identity remained salient among Palestinian Arabs during the first two decades following the 'catastrophe' (an-nakba) of 1948.

While Palestinian identity in this period remained relatively weak, it developed differently in the different segments of the Palestinian people. This identity grew up among Diaspora Palestinians as a result of the uprooting, the refugee

experience and the exclusion from the particular national identities (such as the Lebanese, the Syrian and the Kuwaiti) which were developing around them (Nassar, 2001/2). Political repression and national discrimination applied against Diaspora Palestinians, especially in Lebanon, have not succeeded in stopping the diffusion of Palestinian national consciousness. United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools, despite the fact that they were not under Palestinians' control, actually served as sites of national consciousness. Many teachers in these schools took national occasions as an opportunity to talk on Palestine and to teach their pupils national songs (Sayegh, 1983).

In Gaza Strip, administered by Egypt, Palestinian national identity also had grown up. The Egyptian government did not annex this area, referred to it as a Palestinian territory and, therefore, did not oppose (if it did not encourage) Palestinian identity. Besides, several political parties and movements were founded in Gaza Strip: Muslim Brothers, Palestinian Communist Party, Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, Movement of Arab Nationalists and Movement of Palestine Liberation (Fateh). Although some parties, especially the Muslim Brothers and the Communist Party, were repressed in certain periods, these parties gave priority in their ideologies to the Palestinian problem, mobilized the public and intensified Palestinians' political awareness (Abu Ámr, 1987). These factors may explain the dominant role which Palestinians from Gaza Strip had played in rebuilding the Palestinian political sphere, especially the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (Hilal, 2002).

As opposed to its status in the Diaspora and Gaza Strip, Palestinian identity took a longer time to take root in the West Bank, which was annexed to Jordan. The Jordanian government applied a policy of integration toward West Bank Palestinians, as reflected by giving them all citizenship rights according to the Law of Citizenship of 1954 and absorbing a big part of their labor force in military and governmental offices. On the other hand, this policy of integration was more formal and symbolic, because power positions were occupied primarily by original Jordanians, and the Government applied a policy of Jordanization toward its Palestinian citizens (Sayegh, 1983; Al-Budairi, 1995; Nassar, 2001/2; Hilal, 2002). Although no empirical studies were conducted on collective identity of West Bank Palestinians in this period, we suggest that if these Palestinians were asked about their main identity, they would answer either Jordanian or Arab.

Palestinian identity remained weak also among the Palestinians in Israel, who, as a result of the war of 1948, were frustrated because of the defeat, leaderless because Palestinian leadership left the country during the war and isolated from the Palestinian people and the Arab World as a whole. Israel's policy toward its Palestinian minority was determined by an overriding objective: to control this minority rather than to eliminate, integrate, absorb or develop it. Israel's policy of control was made up of three components: segmentation (designed

to fragment Arab minority along family and religious lines and to isolate it from Jewish majority); dependence (designed to make Arabs dependent on Jews socially, economically and politically); and cooptation (designed to co-opt potential Arab leaders by means of side payments, such as favors, privileges and special dispensations) (Lustick, 1980). As a result, the frustrated, leaderless, fragmented, isolated and repressed Palestinians in Israel tended to accept the new political reality and identify themselves as 'Israeli-Arabs' (Mi'ari, 1986, 1992).

### **Identity between 1967 and the Mid-1990s**

The failure of Arab nationalism to achieve Arab unity and liberate Palestine, as reflected by Arabs' massive defeat in the June War of 1967, strengthened Palestinian identity and taught Palestinians that they should rely on themselves in the struggle to liberate Palestine. After that war, the Movement for the liberation of Palestine (Fateh) dominated the Palestinian national movement and took over the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was established in 1964. Contrary to Arab nationalism which stressed the liberation of Palestine through Arab unity, Fateh adopted a Palestinian nationalist ideology, according to which Palestine would be liberated by Palestinian action, with Palestinian refugees taking matters into their own hands.<sup>1</sup> Fateh emphasized Palestinian, rather than Arab, identity, which it considered to be essential for liberating Palestine (Baumgarten, 2005). As such, Palestinian identity as well as pan-Arab identity, and ambiguously Muslim identity, were indicated in the Palestinian National Pact of 1968 (modified in Arabic to al-Mithaq al-Watani al-Filastini) (Abrash, 2004).

Content analysis of official Palestinian political discourse shows that the dominant expressions in the PLO political discourse between 1974 and 1993 were Palestinian national expressions, such as national unity, representation of the PLO and the independence of Palestinian decision. Pan-Arab expressions, such as Arab unity and Palestine as a part of the Arab nation, which were dominant with the establishment of the PLO in 1964, have been weakened since the early 1970s, but remained much stronger than the Islamic expressions (Irgan, 2006).

Palestinian identity was intensified in this period as a result of several external developments (that took place outside historical Palestine) and internal developments (that took place in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip). The main external developments were:

1. The October War of 1973 which, unlike previous Arab-Israeli wars, did not end with an overwhelming Israeli triumph, but rather with some kind of balance. This war destroyed the myth of the 'unconquered Israeli army', and renewed Arabs' self-confidence.

2. The wide international recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This recognition was reflected by a number of resolutions taken by the United Nations General Assembly, among which was the acceptance of the PLO as an observer-member in the United Nations in 1974.
3. Egypt's withdrawal from the circle of Arab-Israeli conflict as a result of Camp David separate peace agreement with Israel in 1978. The PLO, as well as all Palestinians, opposed this agreement.
4. Several massacres against Palestinians were committed by Arab regimes and parties, the ugliest of them were 'Sabra and Shatila' of 1982 in Lebanon.
5. Israel, especially since the late 1970s, intensified its aggression against Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The peak of this aggression was Israel's invasion of South Lebanon in 1982, and the repressive measures it applied against the Palestinians there.

These developments, together, intensified Palestinian identity, that is the feeling of belonging to the Palestinian people, among almost all Palestinians (Sayegh, 1979; Mi'ari, 1986).

Besides these external developments, several internal developments took place in the West Bank and Gaza Strip under Israeli occupation, which contributed to the increasing growth of Palestinian national identity.

### ***Israeli Policy of Control and Repression***

Since its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, Israel applied a policy aiming to control the local political, economic and social institutions, on the one hand, and to tighten Palestinians' dependence on Israel, on the other. During the first two decades of the occupation, Israel expropriated 52 percent of the land in the West Bank and 42 percent of the land in Gaza. The land has been confiscated both for 'security reasons' and for the construction of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories. Besides, Israel applied various repressive measures against the Palestinians, such as control over water resources, closing universities for long periods, strict censorship on press, curfews, collective punishments, arrests, deportation and demolition of houses (FACTS, 1988).

### ***Increase of the PLO Influence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip***

The influence of the PLO, and the various Palestinian factions forming it, intensified in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since the early 1970s. These factions worked to increase their bases among the various social strata and segments (towns, villages, refugee camps, women, youth, students, workers and other



professionals). As a result, political participation of the public increased, and new social strata, such as workers, peasants and refugees from the camps, began to have more influence on Palestinian political life (Hilal, 2002). But we have to add that the part of the lower strata in the political leadership was lower than their proportional size in society, as indicated by the fact that while, for example, the workers during the first Intifada were overrepresented among Palestinians killed and those administratively detained by occupation authorities, are less represented among Palestinians expelled, who were dominant political leaders. Middle class members, especially those of free professions and university students formed the majority of the expulsions during the first Intifada (Mi'ari, 1994).

### ***Internal National Political Elite Supported by the PLO***

During the first few years after Israeli occupation, the political elite in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was predominantly pro-Jordanian (as-Salhi, 1993), and the majority of the West Bank population identified with Jordan (Cohen, 1975). Since the early 1970s, a national political elite, supported by the PLO, was formed. This elite was reflected by the Palestinian National Front (1973), the Committee of National Guidance (1978) and the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (beginning of 1988). The political elite, representing primarily middle class and lower class families, were predominantly leftist. But since the late 1980s and the early 1990s the party membership of the elite has changed: the weight of the secular leftist parties in the elite decreased, while the weight of Fateh and the Muslim movement have increased (Mi'ari, 1996; Hilal, 2002).

### ***Civil Society Organizations***

Besides the PLO factions, who worked underground in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, various non-governmental and mass organizations, especially of students, women, workers and youth, were formed. The most important of these organizations were the student organizations, representing a large stratum of students studying in the newly established Palestinian universities: Birzeit, Najah, Bethlehem, Hebron and Jerusalem in the West Bank, and the Islamic University and al-Azhar in Gaza Strip. In 1993–4 the total number of students in these universities was about 20,000 (Mi'ari, 1996). The big majority of the student population came from peasants, refugees and lower class families. The student organizations led the political struggle against Israeli occupation in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. They organized strikes, demonstrations and other forms of protest in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the universities, especially Birzeit University, were held political and cultural gatherings, attended by thousands of youth from various schools, universities and mass organizations (Taraki, 1990).

These developments contributed to continuous and increasing growth of Palestinian national identity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. While no empirical studies were conducted on collective identity in these areas until the early 1990s, the explosion of the First Intifada in December 1987 against Israeli occupation indicates high political awareness and increased Palestinian feeling. Empirical data collected in the early 1990s indicate that Palestinian identity became stronger than Muslim and Arab identities. In a Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies (Norway) (FAFO) living conditions survey, conducted in 1992 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and in response to the question 'For whom would you be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice', the most frequent answer was 'sacrifice for the family', followed, in order, by sacrifice for the Palestinian people, Muslim nation and lastly for the Arab nation (Heiberg and Ovensen, 1992). Another survey, conducted in 1994 by the author on a representative sample of Birzeit University students, showed that the most frequent identity was Palestinian national identity, followed, in order, by local identity (of place of residence), Arab national identity, religious identity and lastly clan (or tribal) identity (Mi'ari, 1998).

Many studies have shown that Palestinian identity has intensified since the mid-1970s also among Palestinians in Israel (e.g. Rouhana, 1984; Mi'ari, 1987, 1992; Smooha, 1989). Besides the external developments, mentioned earlier, several internal developments, that took place among Palestinians in Israel, intensified Palestinian identity. Among these developments were: the continuation of Israeli policy of Arab land expropriation, the transformation of Arab farmers into semi-skilled or unskilled workers in Jewish cities, the appearance of a wide stratum of educated Arabs formed primarily of university graduates and students and the formation of several country-wide Arab organizations such as the Committee of the Heads of Arab Local Councils (1974), the Committee for the Defense of Arab Lands (1975) and the Higher Pursuing Committee of the Arabs in Israel (1987).

### **Identity under the Palestinian Authority (PA)**

In September 1993, an agreement of 'Declaration of Principles' (DOP) was signed between the Government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to set up a transitional self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This agreement was followed by the establishment of a Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 on parts of these territories. From that time until the al-Aqsa Intifada and Israeli reoccupation of the PA areas in 2001, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, called Palestine, were undergoing a state formation process. Although the Palestinians were only in partial control of parts of the occupied territories,<sup>2</sup> and despite the fact that the territories' international status remained unsettled and contested, a Palestinian state apparatus was formed.

This quasi-state established a presidency, a government, an elected parliament (Palestinian Legislative Council, PLC), courts and several security organizations (Amundsen and Ezbidi, 2002).

Content analysis of political discourse of the PA, dominated by Fateh until the last Palestinian elections held in January 2006, reveals that the Palestinian national dimension remained very strong, the Islamic dimension remained very weak and the pan-Arab dimension nearly disappeared from that discourse (Irgan, 2006).

Comparison of data collected prior the establishment of the PA (in 1994) and data collected under the PA (in 1997, 2001 and 2006)<sup>3</sup> shows the following.

### ***Dominance of Palestinian Identity***

Palestinian national identity continued to be the strongest identity under the PA in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As Table 1 shows, the percentages of respondents who felt, much or very much, they were Palestinian in the various surveys are higher than all other percentages, such as those who felt they were Arab and those who felt they were Muslim or Christian (91 percent of the respondents in 1997, 96 percent in 2001 and 91 percent in 2006 felt, much or very much, they were Palestinian). Also Table 2 shows that the percentages of the respondents in the various surveys who were ready to make sacrifice for the Palestinian people are a little bit higher than those who were ready to make sacrifice for the Muslim nation and for place of residence, and are clearly higher than those who were ready to make sacrifice for the Arab nation and those for their clans (or hamulas).

While Palestinian identity continued to be the strongest identity, it lost some of its dominance under the PA, as a result of the strengthening of other identities, especially the Muslim identity. As such, the gap in strength between Palestinian identity and Muslim identity has decreased, as will be shown in the following item.

**Table 1**  
**Collective identity of adult population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in certain years**  
**(percentages of respondents who said they 'feel much' or 'feel very much' belonging**  
**to various groups)<sup>a</sup>**

	January 1994	June 1994	Oct 1997	Jul–Aug 2001	April 2006
Feels Palestinian	92.0	89.2	92.9	96.1	92.4
Feels Arab	63.3	63.9	86.9	89.5	80.6
Feels Muslim or Christian	55.8	53.5	78.3	91.9	88.1
Feels belonging to residence	71.2	71.4	84.8	92.5	87.9
Feels belonging to hamula	47.1	44.2	72.2	82.4	78.4

Note: <sup>a</sup> The rest of the respondents answered 'to a moderate extent' or 'to a little extent' or 'to a very little extent'.

### *Strengthening of Muslim Identity*

While Palestinian identity continued to be very strong in the West Bank and Gaza Strip under the PA, Muslim identity has highly been strengthened, especially during the al-Aqsa Intifada. The respondents who identified as Muslim or Christian increased from 54–56 percent in 1994 to 78 percent in 1997, 92 percent in 2001 and 88 percent in 2006 (see Table 1). Also the percentages of the respondents in the three surveys conducted under the PA who were ready to make sacrifice for their religious group are very close to those who were ready to make sacrifice for the Palestinian people (see Table 2).

Muslim identity, as perceived the main identity, has also intensified. In response to the question ‘If you were asked to define your identity in one word what would you answer?’ the percentage of respondents who answered ‘Muslim’ has highly increased under the PA (see Table 3). While in 1994 Palestinian identity, as the main identity, was clearly dominant, under the PA it lost some of its dominance in favor of Muslim identity. Palestinians under the PA became nearly polarized between those who consider themselves primarily as Palestinian and those who consider themselves primarily as Muslim, although

**Table 2**  
**Readiness of adult population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to make sacrifice for several belonging groups in certain years (percentages of respondents who said ‘ready’ or ‘much ready’)<sup>a</sup>**

	1997	2001	2006
Clan (hamula)	72.6	82.3	80.2
Place of residence (town, village or camp)	83.1	90.0	84.6
Religious group (Muslim or Christian nation)	80.6	90.5	86.0
Palestinian people	87.6	92.3	88.4
Arab nation	62.8	59.9	56.2

Note: <sup>a</sup> The rest of the respondents answered ‘not ready’ or ‘ready to some extent’.

**Table 3**  
**Main collective identity of adult population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in certain years**

Identity <sup>a</sup>	January 1994	June 1994	Oct 1997	Jul–Aug 2001	April 2006
Muslim or Christian	21.6	16.5	47.0	38.1	42.9
Arab	11.5	13.4	6.7	4.5	6.6
Palestinian	66.9	70.1	46.3	57.4	50.5
Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	208	224	1328	1415	1442

Note: <sup>a</sup> Category ‘other’ (4%–5%) was excluded.

this polarization has been weakened during the al-Aqsa Intifada in favor of Palestinian identity (the percentages of respondents who identified primarily as Palestinian and those who identified primarily as Muslim changed from 46 percent versus 47 percent in 1997 to 57 percent versus 38 percent in 2001 and 51 percent versus 43 percent in 2006). The intensification of Palestinian identity as the main identity during the al-Aqsa Intifada could be explained by the fact that the Intifada is better described as a national struggle, rather than a religious struggle, for independence.

The strengthening of Muslim identity was primarily caused by the increasing popularity of the Islamic movement spearheaded by Hamas (Hassassian, 2001–2), which was founded in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with the start of the first Intifada in December 1987.<sup>4</sup> The pact of Hamas, and that of Islamic Jihad, emphasized Muslim identity alone, and ignored Palestinian identity even on the level of slogans and flag. Palestine according to them is a pure Islamic wakf (endowment), which after liberation will be part of the Muslim state (Abrash, 2004). The increasing popularity of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, accompanied by the strengthening of Muslim identity, primarily occurred as a result of the following factors.

### **The Worsening of Socioeconomic Conditions**

In a survey conducted by the author on a representative sample from the adult population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1997, 41 percent of the respondents assessed that their family economic status has worsened under PA rule, 49 percent assessed that their economic status has not changed and only 10 percent assessed that their economic status has improved. The socioeconomic status has worsened more during the al-Aqsa Intifada. Official statistics have shown that unemployment rates in 2004 have reached 29.2 percent in Gaza Strip and 23.8 percent in the West Bank (Birzeit University, 2005). The worsening socioeconomic conditions decreased the popularity of the PA, and increased the popularity of the Islamic movement and, thus, intensified Muslim identity.

### **The Failure of the Political Peace Process**

The failure of the political peace process was reflected by the explosion of the al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, Israel's reoccupation of Palestinian areas, termed 'A' and controlled by the PA, the stopping of peace negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis and Israel's division of the West Bank and Gaza Strip into several closed areas, or cantons. These areas lack geographical continuity as a result of Israel's building the annexation wall and spreading out dozens of military check points. The failure of the political peace process, accompanied by geographical fragmentation of Palestinian Territories, Israeli

repressive measures (such as killings, arrests, closures, curfews) and internal political disorder (primarily weapon disorder), decreased the popularity of the PA<sup>5</sup> and increased the popularity of the Islamic movement and, thus, intensified Muslim identity.

### **Reports of Corruption within the PA**

Reports of corruption within the PA, published in recent years, stressed the existence of favoritism, misuse of funds, faulty and no effective administration, weak accountability and transparency, security disorder and lawlessness in Palestinian areas. The PA was further undermined by the eruption of several corruption scandals, involving Palestinian key leaders and figures (Kayyali, 1998; Amundsen and Ezbidi, 2002; Abu Nima, 2004; Palestine Facts, 2006).<sup>6</sup> Documented reports, prepared by investigation committees, appointed by Palestinian legislative Council, accused few ministers in corruption. In addition, popular allegations and rumors about corruption in the PA were spreading. On the other hand, Yasser Arafat did not react as requested to these reports and rumors, and the ministers accused of corruption remained in their positions. This situation deepened the gap between the PA and the public, and increased the popularity of Hamas.

### ***Strengthening of Parochial Identities***

Other traditional identities, especially clan (or 'hamula') identity, have also strengthened under the PA, and strengthened more during the al-Aqsa Intifada. The percentages of the respondents who felt belonging to their clans increased from 44–47 percent in 1994 to 72 percent in 1997, 82 percent in 2001 and 78 percent in 2006 (see Table 1). Also readiness to make sacrifice for the clan is relatively high under the PA, and this readiness has increased during the al-Aqsa Intifada (see Table 2).

The above factors (the worsening of socioeconomic conditions, the failure of the political peace process, accompanied by the fragmentation of Palestinian Territories, and reports of corruption within the PA) strengthened also traditional parochial identities, such as local and clan identities. The Palestine Human Development Report of 2004 refers to the role played by traditional social institutions, such as the tribal councils and the tribal judiciary system, in preserving Palestinian society. Although traditional social institutions do not always ensure justice for marginalized social groups, such as women, children and the poor, and rarely address the core factors that create social problems, these institutions provided acceptable solutions for some of the difficulties faced by society, communicated among different sectors of Palestinian society,

and provided social solidarity, tribal justice and assistance to needy families. Traditional institutions also slow the processes of geographic fragmentation and social disintegration brought on by Israeli occupation (Birzeit University, 2005).

Traditional parochial identities were also strengthened by the following two factors.

### **The Weakening of Palestinian Parties**

The weakening of Palestinian parties, especially the leftist parties, under the PA was reflected by the decline of their activities, the absence of their political programs and the decrease of their popularity. Among the factors that led to this phenomenon, called the 'crisis of Palestinian parties', were the collapse of the Communist bloc, especially the Soviet Union, the transformation of the PLO from dogmatism to political pragmatism and the intensive concern of Palestinian parties, especially the opposition parties, in matters of civil society rather than in political issues (al-Malki, 1999). There is no doubt that the PA has also marginalized political parties as a result of their exclusion from peace negotiations with Israel. The weakening of political parties, as wide national organizations, usually strengthens traditional, local and clan groupings.

### **PA Support of Clan Structure**

As a neo-patriarchal regime (Schulz, 2002), circling around Yasser Arafat (until his death in 2004), the PA strengthened traditional local groupings. This role was reflected by the PA support of traditional clan representatives, called 'mukhtars', the establishment of a 'Committee of Clan Affairs' connected to the president's office, and the policy of appointments based, primarily, on party and family considerations (Hilal, 1998; Afeefa, 2005). The appointment of governmental elite members (such as ministers, deputy ministers and the heads of public institutions) required, besides political loyalty, the fulfillment of more than one of the following requirements: leading position in the ruling party, academic qualification and a remarkable family or regional position (Hilal, 2002). The policy of appointments was described as a 'spoils system' (Sayegh, 2001), according to which governmental offices, perceived as spoils, are occupied primarily by members from the ruling party (Fateh). A survey conducted on university graduates has shown that the big majority of the respondents believe that the most important factors in appointments are favoritism, family belonging and party membership (Abu Hilal, 1997). The PA has marginalized political parties, as we have indicated, on the one hand, and strengthened traditional (local and clan) groupings, on the other. It seems that it was easier for the PA to get clans' loyalties than parties' loyalties, in return for some minor privileges and economic incentives (such as payments and relative appointments).

## Conclusion

In this article we tried to clarify the transformation of collective identity among Palestinian Arabs in the last century, with focus on those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We have shown that Arab identity, which was dominant during the mandate period, continued to be dominant after the 'Nakba' (catastrophe) of 1948. The weak Palestinian identity started to strengthen continuously among all Palestinians after the June War of 1967. In the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinian identity greatly intensified and became the strongest identity in the last two to three decades. Besides several external developments, that took place outside the West Bank and Gaza Strip, such as the widespread international recognition of Palestinian right to self-determination and Arabs' massacres against Palestinians, several internal developments, that took place inside the West Bank and Gaza Strip, contributed to the dominance of Palestinian national identity. Among these internal developments are: the repressive policy applied by Israeli occupation; the increase of the PLO influence in the occupied Palestinian Territories; the growth of an internal national elite supported by the PLO; and the formation of several civil society organizations.

Comparison of collective identity before and after the Oslo Agreement shows that while under the PA Palestinian identity remained the strongest identity, Muslim identity has greatly intensified, primarily as a result of the increasing popularity of Hamas. The worsening of socioeconomic conditions, the failure of the political peace process and the issue of corruption within the PA have all contributed to the increasing popularity of Hamas and to the intensification of Muslim identity. Other traditional (especially clan) identities have also intensified, as a result of the previous factors as well as of other factors, such as the weakening of Palestinian parties and PA support of clan structure.

While, at present, all identities (Palestinian, religious, Arab, clan and local) are strong, Palestinian identity remains the strongest. If people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are asked to define their identity in one word, the biggest part of them answers 'Palestinian' (51 percent in 2006) and another big part, although smaller (43 percent in 2006), answers 'Muslim' or 'Christian'. In other words, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are nearly polarized between those who consider themselves primarily as Palestinian and those who consider themselves primarily as Muslim or Christian. Palestinians who consider themselves primarily as Arab form only a minor percentage (7 percent in 2006). The failure of the pan-Arab movement in the late 1960s, followed by the strengthening of Palestinian nationalism and later by the Palestinian Islamic movement, may explain this finding.



## Notes

1. Until 1988 Fateh called for liberating Palestine through armed struggle. At the meeting of the Palestine National Council (PNC) held in Algiers in 1988 Fateh adopted a new approach: the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel through diplomatic means.
2. According to the Oslo accords, the Palestinian Authority was designed to have control over both security-related and civilian issues in Palestinian urban areas (referred to as 'Area A') and only civilian control over Palestinian rural areas ('Area B'). The remainder of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (including Israeli settlements, the Jordan Valley region and bypass roads between Palestinian communities) were to remain under exclusive Israeli control ('Area C').
3. Despite the difference in the population studied prior and under the PA (Birzeit University students versus West Bank and Gaza Strip adult population), we assess the comparison is possible due to the fact that no significant differences in collective identity were found between students and total population in the surveys conducted under the PA.
4. Contrary to 'Arab unity' proposed by the Arab national movement and 'Palestinian nationalism' proposed by Fateh as the road to Palestine, Hamas proposed 'Islam as the solution and the alternative' and called for total liberation of Palestine through struggle (jihad).
5. Decreasing popularity of the PA was reflected by the public's low trust in the PNA institutions, such as police, courts and ministers and low satisfaction about the PA performance in various fields, such as in providing security, order and general services (Mi'ari, 2003).
6. Among these corruption scandals there was one involving the former prime minister, Ahmad Queia. A cement company, owned by his family, was selling cement to Israeli settlements and for the construction of the Separation Wall. Another corruption scandal talked about money transfers (\$11.5 million) from Swiss banks to private accounts in France owned by Suha Arafat, the wife of former president, Yasser Arafat (Abu Nima, 2004).

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