

The Palestinian National Project

A political Review for a New Beginning

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Focused Studies



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Abstract

The “Palestinian national project” is amidst an aggravated crisis that has become intractable. Its components- Palestinian people, political leadership, political establishments and parties, institutional structures and many other powers on-the-ground, today, have differing views of what constitutes a national project, its concept, targets and its tools. This in turn has created a dilemma for the future of the Palestinian issue. As a result, the Middle East Studies Center (MESC) has prepared a study to assist and urge the main players to reconstitute a new national project on a durable basis and in a new spirit.

The study delves into the different aspects of what would constitute a national project, the history of its main stages and the changes witnessed in the Palestinian issue over the past decades. Focus is laid on the challenges facing national rejuvenation and the views of each political player regarding the present impasse over the ways of achieving national Palestinian interests. Practical ideas are offered to lay down a national Palestinian plan that would include all actors. Scenarios are outlined encompassing Palestinian, regional and international factors. And finally, recommendations are offered to reconstruct a Palestinian national project.

The Palestinian national project is defined as the collective action aimed at ending Israeli occupation, restoring the land to its rightful owners and the right of return of displaced refugees and settling them on their usurped lands. A procedural definition of this can also include all that is agreed upon through tools, institutions and objectives adopted by the Palestinian national movement to create a

framework to liberate the Palestinian territories and for people to return to their lands.

The national project first took shape with the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964. Then the organization aimed at liberating all of Palestine through armed struggle.

With this in mind, the study evaluates the changes of the components of the national project, through objectives, institutions and mechanisms of action. The project focus revolved around two principle objectives: liberation of all Palestinian lands and return of all refugees. However, in 1974 an “interim program” was drawn up. It called for the setting up of a national authority on any Palestinian territory liberated. Thus began the change of lowering objectives and willingness of the PLO to accept “authority” and “state” on any part of Palestine. This shift was consolidated in the 1988 Algeria Declaration with the institutions and structure of the PLO slowly becoming diluted and eventually stopped playing its role altogether in favor of what became known as the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). Initially also, the Palestinian National Charter stipulated that “the armed struggle is the only road to liberation.” This slowly changed with many viewing the charter as “the main road to liberation,” along with other political means. This was changed altogether when the PNA was established and armed struggle abandoned in favor of peaceful popular resistance.

The study looks into the current challenges facing the Palestinian national project. Palestinian factions within and outside the PLO became against the new political settlement, achieved through the Oslo Accords and lead to the creation of the PNA whose officials later became constrained by regional and international actors, Israel and its continued occupation

and by donor countries. All these worked against Palestinian national aspirations. According to the study, there are big differences among the Palestinians that may act against the national project and put the future of the entire venture in jeopardy.

To create an all-inclusive Palestinian national project, the study outlines a number of fundamentals by Palestinian factions relating to objectives, tools, references, principals and a framework for action. These must be followed collectively and through individual struggles and through the use of all means including the employment of different methods of resistance; adopting political, media-wise, legal and humanitarian strategies as different means of struggle; consolidating national unity among Palestinian factions; reviving the PLO and its institutions; mobilizing and framing national capabilities to serve the national struggle; protecting basic national rights; and utilizing the Arab and Muslim capabilities to support the Palestinian issue.

This study focuses on the higher Palestinian interests that need to be accomplished by the national project and which currently still relates to ending all forms of occupation, achieving national unity, building a free, fully-sovereign Palestinian state and demanding the return of refugees expelled from their homes.

There are four scenarios for the future of the Palestinian national project: First, continuing failure and crisis of the national project, leaving it in the doldrums and limbo; second, the agreement of Palestinian factions on a single national project to achieve the national objectives and goals, in the initial period and on strategic terms and long-term basis; third, the dictation of a single national project vision by one party at the expense of others because of their decline;

fourth, withering away of the national project due to the consequences of a regional settlement. Each of the above is detailed in terms of the required conditions and likely results.

Based on these scenarios, the study outlines three options for the Palestinians as a whole and for each of their factions: firstly, internal pressures on the major factions –especially Fateh and Hamas– to carry out previous reconciliation agreements; secondly, each faction sticking to its own stand, regarding political settlement and/or armed popular resistance to end the occupation; thirdly, a Palestinian referendum on the available options or on a national project proposal.

In the light of the prevailing historical and political analysis of the Palestinian national project, the study shows option 1 to be the most feasible for the Palestinian factions and their leaders. Option 2 provides only a partial solution, which may not continue as it is hard to apply on-the-ground. Option 3 may overcome obstacles but needs two conditions: acceptance by international and Arab powers and diaspora Palestinians and agreement by the factions to adopt, support and agree to commit to the outcome of the referendum.

The study then provides recommendations: There should be the launching of a broad cross-national dialogue to achieve common visions and objectives; build a national vision based on the Palestinian historical narrative and national rights; achieve reconciliation while respecting various national views and methods; work to develop effective options for the completion of the national project; rebuild and restructure the higher national aims of the Palestinian people according to agreed-upon broad interests, including that of the PLO, PNA and other present and future relevant institutions; construct an institutional framework to secure the role of Palestinians in the diaspora and territories occupied in 1948 to support the

struggle option; put an end to the policy of reliance on regional or international powers to pressure other fellow Palestinians and stop the chances of intervention that aim to deepen the rift between them; “refocus” the Palestinian issue as one of the bigger and need-to-be settled issues and concerns on the Arab, Islamic, regional and international levels; and restore the strategic depth of the Palestinian cause and struggle.