BARRY RUBIN

THE TRANSFORMATION OF PALESTINIAN POLITICS

FROM REVOLUTION TO STATE-BUILDING

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1999

Printed in the United States of America

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Rubin, Barry M.
The transformation of Palestinian politics :
from revolution to state-building / Barry Rubin.
p. cm.
Includes bibilographical references (p. –) and index.
ISBN 0-674-00071-4 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. Palestinian National Authority. 2. Arab-Israeli conflict—1993– —Peace.
3. Palestinian Arabs—Politics and government. I. Title.
DS119.76.R83 1999
321.09'095695'309049—dc21 99-34447

Designed by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt

PREFACE

This book's subject is the Palestinian Authority (PA) phase of Palestinian political history, a transitional era between the revolutionary movement and the achievement of an independent state. It analyzes the PA's structure as a governmental institution; the dynamics of Palestinian state-building; the new Palestinian political elite; and the PA's relationship with foreign governments, the opposition, and its own people.

The study is part of a long-term research project on this subject. I dealt with some aspects of the pre-1948 era of Palestinian politics in an earlier book, *The Arab States and the Palestine Conflict,* while the second, 1948–1993, era of Palestinian politics I covered more comprehensively in *Revolution Until Victory? The Politics and History of the PLO.*

The focus of the current study is on post-1993 Palestinian politics, though obviously what went before remains important and influential. Since the book concentrates on the areas where the PA ruled, it deals only briefly with East Jerusalem; neither does it analyze the complex details of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and the peace process or Israeli policy and debates—subjects covered in many other studies. These are worthy topics that are indeed interconnected with this book's subject. But to include these matters, which have been written about far more extensively than the issues which preoccupy me here, would reduce the space for considering the PA's composition, history, and so on. The lack of discussion of the Jerusalem issue—as with the limited amount of space spent on several other points—is not intended in any way as a political statement on that question.

All available sources in Arabic, Hebrew, and English have been used and compared. My goal here is to seek the most accurate possible approximation of truth. My conclusions have been influenced by my research far more than the reverse.

Despite all efforts, it is often difficult to ascertain certain matters of fact that might be easily verifiable in other circumstances. The Palestinian journalist Muna Hamza-Muhaysan wrote a memorable case study on this dilemma in *Palestine Report* (September 25, 1998) about her difficult, ultimately unsuccessful quest merely to discover the population of the Bethlehem district.

There is a whole range of semantic issues that often seem to have political implications, which I wish to avoid. I do not refer to a state of Palestine, since that polity did not yet exist in fact during the transitional period led by the PA. Palestinians sometimes refer to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), which is a reasonable substitution for PA. But I use PA because that is the name in general international usage and official documents.

Some Palestinian writers refer to the PA as incorporating the Palestinian parliament (Palestinian Legislative Council, PLC). Consequently, they speak of the PA executive branch. In this book, though, for clarity, the term PA is confined to the executive branch. Again, this is not intended as a political judgment. For example, in American usage, the term "U.S. government" usually refers exclusively to the executive branch, though technically it includes Congress as well.

I favor the creation of a Palestinian state. Criticism of the PA does not imply its illegitimacy or any belief that it would be unable to govern such an entity. Similarly, positive statements about the PA are not meant to imply any apologetic intent. Understanding a situation can result only from incorporating a well-rounded analysis of complex realities. In short, sympathy does not exclude criticism and vice versa.

This book presents in detail the failures and misdeeds of the PA within the framework of the tremendous pressures and limitations it faces. It is important to document every instance of antidemocratic practices and corruption, but it is also necessary to put them in some kind of context of Palestinian political history, comparative Arab polities, other state-building experiences, or genuine alternatives. On balance, in this context, and despite very great shortcomings, the PA's successes are more impressive than its failures. This needs to be stressed because it has often been overlooked in other writings about this subject.

The book is deliberately structured to show the cross-references be-

tween topics. Chapter 1 discusses the background and some key issues in the transformation of Palestinian politics, governance, and leadership. Chapter 2 examines the PLC's role, and Chapter 3 the questions of democracy and human rights. Chapter 4 considers a number of civil society institutions as well as the economy, educational system, and media. Chapter 5 looks at Fatah and more broadly at the PA political elite. Chapter 6 analyzes the opposition. Chapter 7 considers the relationship between the PA and the Arab states, including Palestinians living in those countries. Chapter 8 looks at PA views of Israel and the United States, and Chapter 9 raises a number of questions regarding the future of the PA and the transition to a state.

The transliteration system used—devised with the generous help of Dr. Ofra Bengio—aims for simplicity and consistency. The names of authors of English-language works cited in the notes, as well as the spelling of words in direct quotation from those materials, have been left unchanged even when inconsistent with that system. In some cases, people mentioned in the text have written articles in English using a different transliteration of their name. In such cases, I have used a consistent transliteration in the text but have given the spelling used in the English publication in the bibliography and notes. After the entry in the bibliography and the first appearance of the name in the text, I have put my transliteration in brackets. The main examples are Abu-Amr [Abu Amr], Shikaka [Shiqaqi], and Sourani [Surani].

I have benefited from the assistance of people too numerous to be named here, especially scores of Palestinians who have given me off-the-record interviews over many years. Special thanks are owed for the research assistance of Cameron Brown, Malaika Martin, Amir Rom, and Gilad Tsur. As always, Judy Colp Rubin has given excellent editing advice, as well as encouragement for which I am always grateful.

But if the enemy incline toward peace, do thou also incline toward peace, and trust in God.

—Koranic verse frequently cited by Yasir Arafat

Interviewer: Has the revolutionary era ended? Has the state era begun?

Yasir Arafat: The revolution will go on until an independent Palestinian state is established with Jerusalem as its capital . . . We will struggle on all fronts to prove that this land is Arab, Arab, and Arab; we will defend every particle of Palestinian soil; and we will wage the battle of building a Palestinian state as we waged the liberation and peace battle.

—Interview in *al-Wasat,* January 9–15, 1995

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THE RULERS, THE RULED, AND THE RULES

"We have transferred from a revolution to a state," exulted Ahmad Khuri (Abu Ala), speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), in defining the new era in his people's political history.[1] Yet with equal accuracy Sufyan Abu Zayida of the Palestinian Authority (PA) Planning Ministry noted the enterprise's difficulty: "We are having a hard time making the transition from an underground movement to the building of national institutions," he said. "I am very disappointed by our inability to create the basis for our future state."[2]

A remarkable transformation was indeed taking place for Palestinians after their historic 1993 agreement with Israel and the PA's establishment as interim government in the following year.[3] Under the leadership of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasir Arafat, the PA became the ruler over about 2.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Starting from scratch, it took on the tremendous burdens of maintaining stability, promoting economic development, creating social institutions, and reaching a peace agreement with Israel.

But achieving a Palestinian state proved to be a very difficult, relatively slow process for two reasons. First, the PA was still engaged in tough, complex, and lengthy negotiations with Israel over how, when, and even whether such a state might be created at all.[4] Second, Palestinians themselves were in the midst of one of the world's most difficult state-building processes, simultaneously constructing a new country's foundation and a new society's structure under tremendous pressure of time and from a seemingly endless series of turbulent events.

To succeed in negotiations, the PA had to prove its ability to fulfill its commitments to Israel. To succeed in state-building, the PA had to maintain popular support both by making steady progress toward independence and by meeting constituents' needs.

This transitional epoch between revolution and state was the era of the PA, created as a unique structure for a unique situation. The PLO and the majority of Palestinians, despite reservations and suspicions, had accepted a compromise agreement to end the long, bitter conflict with Israel. Still, a significant minority of radical Islamic and nationalist forces rejected any deal and were determined to wreck it. Within Israel, too, there was heated debate over whether peace could be achieved and what form a solution should take.

Thus, while the two peoples' objective relationship was quickly transformed, subjective views and internal political balances underwent a far slower change. The peace process's architects had expected this result, believing that new facts would create new relationships, making transfigurations thought impossible a few years or even months earlier. Often this perspective proved accurate. Yet while everyone knew it would be a difficult endeavor, the obstacles proved even greater than expected.

The PA had far fewer assets and far more problems than other newly created states. It did not have full power over its own territory or any control over its borders. Five years after the Oslo agreement was signed, the PA ruled almost all Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza but still controlled only part of the West Bank, with Israel having a right to supervise security in most of that area. There were Israeli checkpoints that could close traffic between West Bank towns. With few natural resources and little help from Arab states, the PA was dependent on donors who were made more skeptical by reports that the PA was misusing funds. Most PA administrators lacked appropriate training and experience. The PA shouldered a heavy burden in trying to overcome a history of violence, extremist ideology, and undemocratic structures.

It was no exaggeration for Palestinian administrative expert Muhammad Dajani to write that "creating a Palestinian political system is a Sisyphean task." After all, the PA-ruled territories had a "crumbling infrastructure, high unemployment, lack of revenues and violent underground political opposition. Crippled by economic crisis, and locked in tough negotiations with Israel, which places high priorities on its security needs, the PA can hardly spare the energy to tackle this crucial problem. Nevertheless, this task is being performed and a viable political system is being created."[5]

Given this critical situation, the PA's supporters had a credible argument in urging Palestinians to put the priority on maintaining unity. State-building, they argued, would succeed only if led by a strong leader and government with full control over resources, decision making, and popular loyalty. Democracy's requirements, they insisted, might contradict those of national reconstruction.[6]

Yet the radical Palestinian opposition branded the PA's most basic policies as treasonous, directly challenging the very premise of recognition, negotiation, compromise, and peace with Israel. It claimed that a Palestinian state could be created only through violence, as well as a thorough change in the PA's strategy and leadership. The PA's more moderate critics insisted that democracy and respect for human rights must be built into the new polity from the very beginning. Not only were these values precious in their own right, they argued, but without them a state would not come into existence at all.

While the Palestinian case held many parallels to other state-building experiences, much of the process and many of the problems involved were quite distinctive. Usually countries become self-governing and formally independent at the same time. The state has clearly defined national boundaries, and with all conflicting claims at least temporarily resolved, the government can rule this national territory free of outside interference while enjoying internal legitimacy. The type of political system is already decided. The majority of the people whom the state claims as citizens live in that territory. When one of these elements is not in place, a common result is war or, at least, a crisis threatening that state's very existence.[7]

In the Palestinian case, however, none of these factors was fully resolved. The PA had come into existence and ruled a partial-state polity. The tenants were moving in while the property was still being surveyed, the purchase price and conditions of occupancy were under negotiation, the architects continued to argue over the blueprints, renovations were under way, and the buyers were still trying to raise the money.

The tasks of political construction faced by the Palestinians were thus more difficult than those confronting new states in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere in the world. For the projected state of Palestine, one might say, existence preceded essence. The outbreak of war or breakdown of the peace process would signal the abortion, not birth pangs, of a new state. Indeed, the special paradox for the PA was that a determined struggle to obtain a state had to be waged both internally and externally while it simultaneously proved its moderation and stability.

Arafat, veteran leader of both the PLO and its main group, Fatah, now also became the PA's head. His overwhelming command over policy, decisions, and appointments was the regime's dominant feature. As a Palestinian magazine put it: "Arafat is the chairman of the PLO, the president of the PA; he holds all the reins, he controls all the money, he takes all the decisions . . . and he, by and large, is the only law, whose authority is respected, established and enforced."[8]

His refusal to delegate power was so complete that PA decision making stopped when he was abroad or even away from his office for a day. The democratic institutions created remained subordinate to the chief executive. Two of Arafat's Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) critics summed up the point admirably. "Arafat is individualistic to an abnormal degree . . . he prefers to make decisions on his own," said Abd al-Jawad Salah.[9] Ziyad Abu Amr wrote, "If there is an embodiment of institutionalization, Arafat's style of leadership is the antithesis."[10]

The main problem was not that Arafat was a fearsome dictator but rather, as Salah and Abu Amr had pointed out, his anti-institutional, impulsive decision-making style. Arafat's hesitant, compromising approach was quite different from the dominating, centralizing technique of other Third World revolutionary leaders. "Every hero has his flaw," a Palestinian journalist noted. "Arafat's is indecisiveness."[11] Arafat did not have the personality of a ruthless tyrant systematically imposing his will. Rather, his style was one of ceaselessly maneuvering, balancing, and juggling factions and options.

This approach had often worked well during his more than a quarter-century as PLO leader. Perhaps there was no alternative, since Arafat had been constantly constrained in the PLO era by having to please non-Fatah groups, unruly leaders within Fatah itself, and sponsoring Arab states. As Jamal al-Surani, a PLO leader, explained this system, some might think that Arafat "issues the orders and must be obeyed." But he "is not the head. He and we are partners. We are not his employees . . . [Arafat] does not decide what is right and what is wrong on his own personal whim."[12] Arafat himself grumbled, "I am not at the Cannes Film Festival where I can choose the best movie."[13]

Spread over a dozen countries, often having limited contact with the Palestinian masses, and with no totally reliable base of support, the PLO had been a bureaucratic nightmare. Arafat could not simply give orders. He had to cajole, manipulate, and threaten to resign. In his own words: "We are the flying carpet revolution, we are treading on burning coals.

Tonight I am seeing you in Baghdad. I don't know where I will see you tomorrow."[14]

Thus, the PLO had been neither a dictatorship nor a democracy. As Hatim Abu Ghazala, a leading Gaza activist, noted, the Palestinians were "the only nation in the world that has to govern itself by consensus and not majority rule." He might equally have added that consensus also supplanted one-man rule. In this situation, the primacy on maintaining PLO unity at all costs had often given veto power to extremists and thus damaged Palestinian interests.[15]

The PA's creation, on the one hand, partly liberated Arafat to act more on his own wishes. The Oslo agreement itself had been made possible only because Arafat acted decisively and autonomously, willing even to split the PLO to seize this opportunity. In the PA era Arafat had more of a chance to make himself a dictator. Impatient with criticism, convinced that he was the only one who could lead Palestine to independence, and determined to limit dissent, Arafat could be high-handed and repressive.

But on the other hand, a real dictatorship was not his style or preference, and suited neither the PA's situation nor its limited power. If Arafat was not constrained by laws, courts, or parliament, he was certainly restricted by a need to maintain his political base, national unity, international backing, and internal peace. Moreover, Arafat's popularity showed that his decisions usually did represent what most Palestinians wanted. Arafat remained committed to pluralism and sensitive to public opinion. The way to control a diverse Palestinian political spectrum, he believed, was by avoiding confrontation and building a united front. As he had once mollified PLO factions, he now tried to co-opt the Islamic opposition, unite former exiles with indigenous people, and bridge gaps between wealthy notables and young activists.

Such a leader was not going to institute a Western-style democracy. Yet he was also less likely than most Third World leaders to foreclose the possibility of democracy by creating authoritarian institutions and a monolithic society. Since Arafat, as the Palestinian movement's "founding father" and the movement's leader for decades, had such huge legitimacy and leverage, he could afford to give more latitude to critics and opponents than might be granted by a less secure ruler.

Arafat felt it his unique duty and sole ability to create a state and set it on firm foundations. Most Palestinians agreed, as even his opponents acknowledged. It was hard for anyone to compete with what Ziyad Abu

Amr, a pro-democracy advocate and frequent critic, called Arafat's "dominant and charismatic personality . . . and the multiple sources of legitimacy he enjoys in exercising his individualistic style of leadership. Many people argue that the more difficult the Palestinian situation becomes, the more the Palestinians need him, despite all the problems they have with his leadership."[16]

Equally, Arafat himself embodied the complex nature of PA politics. Despite the establishment of governmental structures resembling a state, Palestinian fortunes were now tied to Arafat's decisions and character more than ever. As if to make up for all those years he had spent trying to direct the anarchic PLO, Arafat closely managed every PA decision and appointment. He could do this more easily than other Middle East leaders because his domain was smaller and his sphere of control more limited than that of a fully independent state's leader. Still, as Abu Zayida noted sadly: "Arafat busies himself with small details, which he should not be handling. He should not be issuing building permits for another house or floor. He should not be holding meetings with all and sundry. He is having a bad influence on the behavior of his ministers. He constantly interferes with their work and the work of the senior bureaucracy."[17]

The relationship between Khuri and Arafat illustrated both the Palestinian leader's high-handedness and his tolerance. Long director of the PLO economic department, Khuri was elected to the Fatah Central Committee in 1989 and became chief Palestinian negotiator for the 1993 Oslo agreement with Israel. When the PA was established, Arafat appointed him economics and trade minister in May 1994. But Khuri resigned that post in September 1994 to protest Arafat's policies, then also quit his job as chief of the ill-fated Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Rehabilitation (PECDAR), which was supposed to—but never did—control incoming aid funds.[18]

Despite their clashes, Arafat put Khuri on the Fatah ticket for the January 1996 elections, and he proved the biggest vote-getter in East Jerusalem. Two months later, the PLC's first session elected Khuri as the parliament's speaker. In that job he continued to criticize Arafat and PA policies while fighting for a strong parliament to balance the leader's power. Yet after all this, Arafat still included Khuri in his highest councils and even used him as a negotiator with Israel.

The proposed Palestinian constitution—passed by the PLC but never ratified—named the PLC speaker as Arafat's interim successor if any-

thing should happen to him. This made Khuri in theory, though not in practice, the number two Palestinian leader. Khuri's multiple, seemingly conflicting roles illustrated the incongruities of Palestinian politics. He was both member of the new political elite and its resolute opponent; an aristocrat turned revolutionary, then architect of a negotiated peace; and a loyal PLO and Fatah man battling the esteemed leader of both groups.

Such contradictory situations were built in to the dramatic turn of events which had transformed the revolutionary movement into a government, with Arafat's leadership an indispensable element of continuity. The PA existed as a result of the 1993 Israel-PLO agreement and the process set in motion by it and subsequent accords. In turn, that outcome capped a long, slow, difficult evolution for Palestinian politics toward something dramatically new, often totally contradicting fervent beliefs and cherished practices held during the preceding half-century. A mere list of key changes shows how complex a transformation took place as the PLO moved:

• From a revolutionary movement toward a state trying to meet the needs of 2.5 million citizens. The PLO had always engaged in a wide range of welfare, economic, diplomatic, and other activities. But its motive power had been armed, radical guerrilla groups that fought Israel and sometimes one another. Now the PA had to become an administrative body, building roads, collecting garbage, and running huge education and health systems.

• From a loose coalition of independent groups to a government needing to impose some discipline and monopolize certain services and functions. Arafat had never made a serious effort to impose his will on a PLO splintered by ideologies, fiefdoms, and loyalties to different Arab states. He often conceded veto power over PLO policy to the most militant. While this pattern continued in the new era in the form of Arafat's pluralist style, the PA needed to reduce that anarchy. Indeed, it had to do so in order to survive and make progress in building a state.

• From dependence on violence, which often meant striking at Israeli civilians, to responsibility for stopping Palestinian terrorism against Israel. The goal of total war aimed at eliminating Israel had been replaced by that of negotiating toward peace and coexistence. After 1993 there were virtually no armed attacks on Israelis by Fatah members or PA supporters. People who had believed their whole lives that no compro-

mise was possible and almost any tactic was acceptable against a totally evil enemy were now cooperating with those whom they blamed for all their problems and sufferings.

• From the dream of total victory—a Palestinian state encompassing everything between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean—to a new goal of creating a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with its capital in East Jerusalem.

• From dispersed exile to restoration in its claimed homeland, reuniting a people scattered for almost a half-century. While the PLO had won support from the vast majority of West Bank and Gaza residents, its leadership and policy had always come from people who, in 1948, fled areas now part of Israel to many different countries. Returning PLO cadres were a small minority among local people whose leaders also had to be integrated and interests taken into account.

• From viewing the United States as a chief enemy which was inevitably anti-Palestinian to becoming a virtual American client. The PLO had seen itself as part of a world struggle against Western imperialism, allied with the USSR and seeking to expel U.S. influence from the region. Now Arafat visited Washington, shook hands with members of Congress, and depended on Western donations mobilized by the United States. The situation's irony was embodied by the résumé of a senior PA official handling U.S. aid at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation which listed his "educational experience" as "explosives engineer."[19]

• From relying on Arab countries and Pan-Arab nationalist ideology to implementing a separate Palestinian nation-state nationalism. While Palestinians still believed in Arab solidarity, they now explicitly embarked on building their own small independent state, rather than trying to add one province to an Arab realm stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf. Moreover, their expectations were constantly disappointed by the limited help or aid received from their "brothers" in the Arab states.

• From expecting to create a utopian society that would be a shining model of Islam, socialism, democracy, and rapid development to facing the unpleasant realities of slow progress, limited resources, and accommodation with an imperfect situation.[20] So long as building a Palestinian state was just an idea, it was possible to imagine that all problems would be solved and all dreams fulfilled. Now no one could avoid confronting the reality of the nation's small size, poverty, and relative weak-

ness, as well as the human elements of corruption, incompetence, and greed in the Palestinian movement.

Each Palestinian individual, institution, and group was located at a different point on this evolutionary progression between the old and new situations. If the shock entailed by such shifts contradicting the movement's entire history were compressed into two sentences, these might be what Arafat told the 1996 session of the Palestine National Council (PNC, the PLO's parliament): "All revolutions end in agreements. Do you think you can get everything you want?"

The interminable time span, emotional pain, and political difficulties needed for persuading Palestinians to alter their national program proved that this was not easily or spuriously done. How had this transformation taken place at all?[21]

First, the PLO's new circumstances were a result of its own long-term experiences and maturation, as well as pressure from external forces and new opportunities. A key factor in this mutation was the PLO's failure over thirty years to progress in its goal of destroying Israel. The PLO had tried a wide range of methods, including goading Arab states into war and seeking an Arab hero to defeat Israel for them; promoting revolution in the Middle East, international terrorism, guerrilla war, and strikes against Israeli civilians; and aligning with the USSR to subvert Western influence in the Middle East. Nothing worked, and the Palestinians' strategic position had worsened over time.

While the PLO suffered defeat and even lost ground on achieving its goal, the organization did succeed in keeping the Palestine question alive, winning hegemony among Palestinians, building their morale, intensifying their struggle, and gaining some international support. Yet the PLO's ability to respond successfully to those experiences had been constrained by the demands of Palestinian public opinion, ideological assumptions, threats from radical groups and regimes, a powerful belief in ultimate total victory, inability to comprehend Israel's strength, and many other factors.

In the end, most of the PLO leadership had to conclude that any solution or even material gains required a compromise diplomatic settlement with Israel. As the veteran PLO leader Hani al-Hasan candidly admitted in 1989, "It took us a hell of a long time to come unambiguously to terms with reality."[22]

A second factor in this process was the PLO's worsening circum-