

Notes of a Turkish Intellectual on imagining a Palestinian state: Osman Okyar and the 2nd International Symposium on Palestine, 1971

Bir Türk Aydınının Filistin devleti hayali üzerine notları: Osman Okyar ve 2. Uluslararası Filistin Sempozyumu, 1971

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Abstract

Over three-quarters of a century, the fate of the Palestinian people and a prospective Palestinian state was a prominent issue in world politics. Today, the dream for a Palestinian state lay even further as a dream than when it first became to be discussed in the 1940s. The cloth of time and conflict rested a speck of thick dust over the once a Palestinian claim for a secular democratic state founded on Palestine—today Israel, West Bank, and Gaza. This article aims to resurface the Palestinian nationalist objectives' heydays in the 1970s, when the act of imagining a state actively took place, from the perspective of a Turkish intellectual, Osman Okyar. The memoirs of Osman Okyar from the Second International Symposium for Palestine, Kuwait, in 1971 will be used to uncover how the Palestinian Liberation Movement (PLM) articulated the structure of their dream state in the 1970s. And how this dream is voiced by the movements' ideologues such as Khalid Walidi, Yusuf Sayegh, and Nabil Shaath. Okyar's detailed notes of the conference offer an alternative perspective to the long-forgotten goals of the Palestinian Revolution with his unique viewpoints on that significant moment of history that one can only get from the people who were there at the moment in time.

Keywords

Democracy, Secularism, Palestinian Nationalism, Palestinian Liberation Movement, Osman Okyar

Öz

Üç çeyrek yüzyıl boyunca Filistin halkının kaderi ve müstakbel bir Filistin devleti dünya siyasetinde öne çıkan bir konuydu. Bugün, bir Filistin devleti hayali, 1940'larda ilk kez tartışıldığı zamandan daha da ileri bir hayal olarak duruyor. Zamanın ve çatışmanın örtüsü, bir zamanlar Filistin'in Filistin'de -bugün İsrail, Batı Şeria ve Gazze'de- kurulan laik demokratik bir devlet iddiasının üzerine kalın bir toz bıraktı. Bu makale, bir Türk aydını Osman Okyar'ın perspektifinden bir devlet hayal etme eyleminin aktif olarak gerçekleştiği 1970'lerde Filistin milliyetçi hedeflerinin en parlak günlerini yeniden su yüzüne çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Osman Okyar'ın 1971'de Kuveyt'te düzenlenen İkinci Uluslararası Filistin Sempozyumu'ndan anıları, 1970'lerdeki Filistin Kurtuluş Hareketi'nin (FKH) Khalid Walidi, Yusuf Sayegh gibi en önde gelen ideologlarından bazılarının rüya devletlerinin yapısına dair tartışmalarını ortaya çıkarmak için kullanılacak. Okyar'ın konferansa ilişkin ayrıntılı notları, tarihin o önemli anına ancak o an orada bulunanlardan edinilebilecek özgün bakış açısıyla bir yaklaşım sunuyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Demokrasi, Sekülerizm, Filistin Milliyetçiliği, Filistin Kurtuluş Hareketi, Osman Okyar

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Introduction

The question of Palestine continues to impact the politics of the Middle East and Europe for more than half a century calling into question dominant understandings of nationalism, citizenship, and decolonization. The irreversible realities created by the establishment and expansion of Israel on the Palestinian territories cast serious doubts on the feasibility of a future Palestinian state that involved various plans from partition to the two-state solution.

Since the end of World War I, imperial powers, especially Britain, tried to design the British Mandate of Palestine in a way to respond to their inter-war promise—a state for the Jews and a state for the Palestinians. It presented these formulations in various official documents, such as the White Papers of the British Mandate, which refused to give Palestinians any official recognition unless they accepted British policy for a Jewish national home, bounding the realization of a Palestinian state to a Jewish one. However, from Balfour Declaration to the United Nations' approval of establishing a Jewish state in 1948, the unfolding series of events fundamentally challenged a viable and pluralistic state structure in Palestine, bringing the two claimers into a direct encounter.

Amid the shock of becoming stateless, Arab League founded the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 to keep Palestinian activism under control. However, the lack of its leadership led other nationalist branches, such as Fateh (*Harakat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Filistini*)—the Palestinian Liberation Movement (PLM)—to overpower the organization's leadership. PLM and its leadership, centralized around Yasser Arafat, emerged as the sole representative of the Palestinian cause in the early 1960s (Cobban, 1984, pp. 21-28). The movement and its leaders dreamed of their own promised nation-state in the context of a national struggle. The heydays of the debates concerning the design of a Palestinian dream state consider the development of philosophical and political currents among the Palestinians between the launch of the Palestinian Revolution in 1968 upon Fatah's finalization of its revolutionary council and its defeat in Beirut in 1982. Throughout this short-lived, turbulent, and somewhat confident period, PLM in the diaspora gained unprecedented support over its fate, embodied in the Beirut-based pseudo-state of the PLM. During the dynamic, forward-looking optimism of the revolutionary moment, the Palestinian revolution's search for a nation-state wrestled with the ongoing traumas of exile, leadership, and armed struggle against Israel. Arab sponsors of the Palestinian cause—such as Egypt, Lebanon, and Kuwait—became hubs for the intellectual debates to program the future of a Palestinian state. And that future was imagined as a “democracy.”

Placing established nationalist aims in light of the scholarly efforts of PLM's imagined state, this paper traces the intellectual debates that became instrumental in “dreaming” the prospective Palestinian state. The PLM's nationalist framework often conceptualizes Palestine in a fashion that simultaneously manifests the “horror and devastation” of its pretext and fosters multidimensional methods of anticipating its future. The latter framework marks Palestine's difference from nations that exist in a sovereign, territorialist form. Unlike most other nationalist movements, Palestinians do not “imagine” the nation as a subconscious means of belonging to a community but as a complex act of resistance, revolution, and survival.

Digging into the past and trying to shed light on micro-moments where the act of dreaming the sovereignty took place, this paper uses the personal memoirs of Osman Okyar (b. 1917-2002) as its source. As one of Turkey's most prominent political economists and intellectuals, Okyar was personally present at the Second International Symposium on Palestine in 1971, Kuwait, where the PLM's revolutionary program and its founders imagined the future Palestinian state. Examining Okyar's notes on the conference is essential for understanding the various debates of the prominent ideologues of the Palestinian Liberation Movement from the perspective of a Turkish intellectual. The notes of Osman Okyar openly state that most of the discussions during the conference pondered around the binary concepts of secular versus religious and ethnic versus pluralistic formulations of a Palestinian state. Through the statements of these intellectuals, one can imagine a Palestinian state as articulated in persistent futurity with parameters set beyond ethnicity and religion. In considering the Palestinian state through and against its limitations, the paper explores the new modes of imagining Palestine at its liberal moment in decolonial history through the contemplation of Osman Okyar, a modern liberal himself.

Osman Okyar was invited to the conference to observe and advise by the forerunners of the Palestinian movement.¹ His views on the Turkish experience of the secular transformation of a majority Muslim country following the Turkish national struggle and establishment of the Turkish Republic carried out most importance concerning the debates on a secular Palestine. Among many contributors to the conference, Osman Okyar comments on the speeches of the four most influential ideologues of the Palestinian Liberation Movement, namely Walid Khalidi, Yusif Sayegh, Nabil Shaath, and Clovis Maksoud. To provide more context to these speeches, as referred to in Okyar's notes, the article will first present a brief bio of Osman Okyar. The following sections will unfold, first, the question of why Okyar was appointed to the symposium, and next, what were the current political developments leading to the symposium in Kuwait. After launching the contextual and historical background, the article will present Okyar's logs for each of the leading figures of the PLO and conclude with Okyar's thoughts on the conference and future of the Palestine.

A Turkish Scholar and Civil Servant

Professor Dr. Osman Okyar, born in Istanbul in 1917, was the son of Ali Fethi Okyar, one of the founding members and the second prime minister of the Republic of Turkey. Osman Okyar started his junior high education in Paris during his father's ambassadorship. Upon his family's return to Turkey, he continued schooling at Galatasaray High School, where he graduated in 1936. During those years, his father, Ali Fethi Okyar, was the ambassador to London. Already fascinated by the modern economic currents of the time and familiar with the works of the prominent British economist John Maynard Keynes, he insisted that his son Osman Okyar study economics in England (Toprak, 2014). Young

¹ According to the author's interview with Seyfi Taşhan, "Osman [Okyar] was a highly valued economist in international circles. In most cases, he was invited to these forums and conferences as an advisor. The conference in Kuwait was probably no exception" (Taşhan, S., personal communication, 02 September 2022). Seyfi Taşhan founded *The Turkish Foreign Policy Institute* (FPI) in 1974 as a private think tank where Osman Okyar was among its founding members. Okyar and Taşhan worked closely for over twenty-five years.

Okyar acted on his father's will and came to London in 1936. After studying English and Latin for a year, he was accepted to Cambridge University Kings College in 1937. There he became a student of prominent scholars like John Maynard Keynes himself. After pursuing his studies with high honors, Osman Okyar was accepted to Harvard University for his graduate studies. However, upon the emergence of the Second World War, he decided not to go. Instead, from 1941 to 1943, he held positions at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As the second World War came to an end, Okyar went back to his graduate studies. He was accepted to the Faculty of Economics at Istanbul University to pursue a doctoral degree, receiving his Ph.D. in Economics in 1947. During his doctoral study, he worked with famous Jewish-German economist Prof. Dr. Fritz Neumark, who made significant contributions to the development of education in the preparation of the income tax laws of economics in Turkey (Andic & Andic, 1981). Prof. Neumark's contribution to Okyar was indisputable. Under his supervision, Okyar progressed his studies on the Keynesian understanding of liberal economics with a doctoral thesis called "From neo-classical theory to a Keynesian theory" (Tanyeri, 1985). In the following four years, he wrote his second thesis on National Income, which earned him his associate professorship at Istanbul University in 1951.

Osman Okyar's years from 1951 can be summarized as an interrelated relationship between his academic work and civil service in various government positions. While he continued his active teaching at Istanbul University (1951-1967) and later Hacettepe University's Economics department, which he established in 1968, he served in numerous government offices such as the National Institute for Statistics, the Ministry of Development, and the Central Bank of Turkey. Over these years, Okyar was recognized as an outstanding academician and one of the most prominent economists in Turkey.

From the American University of Beirut to the Symposium on A Democratic State in Palestine

Osman Okyar's professional interest in the developments in the Middle East, especially towards the Palestinian problem during the heydays of the cold war, coincides with his appointment at the American University of Beirut Economic Research Institute (1957-58). From the late 1950s forward, the American University of Beirut (AUB) served as an incubator for political movement and resistance among its students and faculty. From its foundation as a Syrian Protestant College in 1866, a missionary initiative by the United States of America (USA), AUB has been one of the major centers for Arab nationalism and student politicization in the Levant (Antonius, 2015; Kramer, 2017).² George Antonius, the early historian of Arab nationalism, wrote in his classic work *The Arab Awakening* that "the university's influence on the Arab revival, at any rate in its earlier stage, was greater than that of any other institution" (2015, p. 43). A similar enthusiasm existed among the participants of AUB toward the Palestinians' struggle to liberate Palestine (Kramer, 2017). An independent Palestine was the pan-Arab promise in the 1970s of the so-called Arab Nationalists Movement. Inevitably, independent organizations among

2 It was a group of American missionaries who established the Syrian Protestant College in October 1866—the name was changed to the American University only in 1920.

the university students branched out of the movements, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which was founded in 1968 by two Arab nationalist figures George Habash and Hani al-Hindi, both students of the AUB (Cobban, 1984, p. 140; Khalidi R., 2007, p. 138; Kramer, 2017, p. 42).

During these highly dynamic years of the Middle East, the Palestinian national movement was emerging as a more politically organized resistance. Especially following the 1967 defeat of the pan-Arab efforts under the leadership of Egypt's Gamel Abdel Nasser against Israel, the movement pledged to a Palestinian Revolution with a somewhat unclear plan on how to achieve it (Kamrava, 2013, p. 85). The "lost years" of Palestinian nationalism (1948-1967) were defined mainly by the Palestinians' constant search for sponsors under Arab nationalism and shadowed the Palestinian state under Nasser's envisioned Arab Union (Sayigh, 2004; Kamrava, 2013). The defeat of the 1967 war burst Nasser's goals. Meanwhile, the inter-Arab efforts were not null to the PLM's initiative of resistance and revolution.

On the contrary, their disillusionment in the 1950s and 60s of a pan-Arab dream gave political respectability and national enthusiasm to the Palestinian movement, resulting in the formal recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1964 (Peretz, 1970, p. 325). However, the leadership of the newly established PLO under Ahmad al-Shukeiri failed to gain genuine political autonomy and galvanize strong popular support (Cobban, 1984; Sayigh, 2004). Following the 1967 fiasco, Palestinians were determined to replace the old-line leadership associated with al-Shukeiri (Sayigh, 2004). Accordingly, they reorganized the movement by readjusting its goals along the lines of the changing political atmosphere in the Middle East.

However, the setback of the 1967 war mobilized a third phase within the Palestinian nationalist movement, which Yezid Sayigh called "the years of revolution" (2004, p. 143). This new dynamism was the outcome of the younger generation in the diaspora that acknowledged the need for institutional reorganization and military self-assertion. The latter efforts strengthened PLM (*al-Fatah*), the most influential of the many clandestine groups that emerged among the scattered Palestinian diaspora within the PLO (Sayigh, 2004, p. 71). The quest for a new leadership reflected the transformation of the Palestinian community that had occurred during the "lost" generation. After 1948, approximately 50,000 Palestinians attended universities in the respective states where they became new residents. The new generation of Palestinians had all the attributes of a displaced minority group, including great aspirations for upward mobility, political restiveness, and a core of revolutionary-minded young men who aspired to "reestablish the homeland" (Peretz, 1970, p. 326). One of the hubs of this revolutionary movement was, no doubt, the American University of Beirut.

For the years following 1967, most of the new groups that claimed a Palestinian revolution drew inspiration from guerrilla techniques. Quickly, the two-decade synonym of the Palestinians as "refugees" was transformed into "commando warrior" (Sayigh, 2004, p. 217; Peretz, 1970). Yet, these guerilla activities discredited the Palestinian revolution with an uncertain future in international public opinion. For example, at any rate, AUB university's reputation reached its low point in the outside world. The leading cause of this loss of prestige was the students' more militant and robust support of all

things connected to the Palestinian revolution (Anderson B. S., 2008, p. 271). As a result, the so-called Palestinian revolution failed to offer a liable goal for its future and propose an alternative to its conflict with Israel.

In January 1969, Palestine National Liberation Movement (*al-Fatah*) declared officially and for the first time a political program spelling out the ultimate objective of its liberation struggle as the Palestinian Revolution. The declaration stated that from then on, they are fighting to create the “new Palestine of tomorrow,” a progressive, democratic, and nonsectarian Palestine in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews will worship, work, live peacefully and enjoy equal rights. The statement further edits the Palestinian revolution’s reach for support from all human beings who want to “fight for and live in a democratic tolerant Palestine irrespective of race, color, or religion” (al-Fatah, 1969). In that context, the symposium was a quasi-academic political exercise organized by the joint efforts of the General Union of Palestinian Students, which featured prominent politicians and intellectuals from across the Palestinian diaspora to discuss the structure of a future Palestinian state within the means of a secular democracy (Okyar, 1971; Zerkovitz, 2014). Among these academicians were colleagues of Okyar from the AUB: Yusuf Sayigh, Nabi Shaath, and Walid Khalidi.

Okyar’s notes state that the symposium was designed to discuss the Palestinian question on various fronts of secularism, leadership, and democratic state-building (Okyar, 1971). Palestinian nationalist consciousness and identity were relatively modern in their approach to the secular concept of the state. Without denying the Islamist or the Arabist dimensions of Palestinian identity outright, they tend to give precedence to the purely nationalist aspects in their formulations (Khalidi R., 2010, p.149). The Turkish experience appealed greatly to the Palestinian ideologues for imagining their state. The assertive secularism, nationalism, and republicanism of the post-1923 Turkish Republic presented itself, in its unique way, as one for defending norms of the Islamic identity and Muslim solidarity among the Muslim Middle East (Kuru, 2009, pp. 1-6; Topal, 2012).³ Within the cold war dynamics, Turkey’s practice of a secular liberal state posed as a stencil both for the Western capitalists and for the Arab socialists.⁴ Turkey’s configuration of its relationship with Islam within the lines of secular democracy was an appealing aspect of state-building for the Palestinians.⁵

General Union of Palestinian Students’ Kuwaiti office leadership, together with the Kuwaiti Graduate Society, PLO leadership, and the government of Kuwait, played a significant role in the worldwide gathering of the International Conference on Palestine on February 13, 1971 (Zerkovitz, 2014, p. 92). This was the second of the international

3 Ahmet Kuru (2009) groups different approaches to secularism as “passive secularism” as in the case of the United States and “aggressive secularism” as in the case of Turkey and France (2009, pp. 2-4). The abolishing of the caliphate, the closure of all madrasas and tariqats, and the adoption of European codes of law invested in the passive separation of religion from Turkish public discourse. However, the establishment of the *diyanet* (the Directorate of Religious Affairs) and the state project to offer an “official Islam” involved an assertive secularist approach where the state did not aim to reduce religion into an affair of the individual. Instead, it used it as a tool in the process of nation-building.

4 Nasser’s adoption of assertive secularism similar to Turkey is one of such example (Jankowski, 2002, pp. 36-37).

5 In fact, from the 1920s on, Turkey’s support for the Palestinian cause proved itself to be practical as well as rhetorical, always in a balanced approach with Israel and the Western interests, to keep communism—within the cold war politics— at the gate (Uzer, 2017, p. 23).

conferences after the one on March 30, 1965, in Cairo. Kuwait, the conference's location, is significant and certainly requires elucidation. Kuwait was one of the central Arab states that offered support for the Palestinian cause. Since the 1967 defeat of Arab states against Israel, Kuwait has been considered one of the essential destinations by the young Palestinians who fled the territories (Cobban, 1984, pp. 10-14). Starting from the late 1950s, Kuwait welcomed Palestinian immigrants and offered them ample political freedom within the emirate's borders. This honeymoon-like relationship also manifested itself in the emirate's support of Fatah, and it is becoming one of the first Arab states to grant permission to the PLO to operate on its territory (Zelkovitz, 2014; Sayigh, 2004; Cobban, 1984). The General Union of the Palestinian Students office at the University of Kuwait was the microcosm of the Palestinian political arena. Starting in the early 1960s, it served as one of the major centers (after AUB) for the young Palestinian student organizations in the diaspora, one of which Yasser Arafat was a member himself (Cobban, 1984; Sayigh, 2004). If Beirut was PLO's gate to the West, at the time, Kuwait was the key access point of the movement to pursue its financial and political activities in the Gulf (Zelkovitz, 2014, p. 88).

The central theme announced by the symposium committee was "Towards a Democratic State in Palestine." According to Okyar's and Ido Zelkovitz's notes, the opening ceremony was attended by Kuwaiti Prime Minister Shaykh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Jabir, who delivered a speech emphasizing the emirate's commitment to the Palestinian issue (Okyar, 1971; Zelkovitz, 2014). There were about 350 delegates that attended this groundbreaking event. Among the invitees were representatives of communist parties and some Liberation movements belonging to the "Maoist or Soviet wing of the left," prominent political figures of the Arab world, many members of its universities, and lastly, independent guests from Europe and America that had taken positions in favor of the Arab cause. (Okyar, 1971, p. 2) The schedule of the first day of the congress was devoted to the history of Israel and the Zionist movement. On the second day, the politics and strategy of the Palestinian movement under current conditions were discussed. On the last day, the structure of the "great" Palestinian state that was anticipated to be established in the future on the territory of today's Israel and the Palestinian Front's means to achieve that goal were debated.

Osman Okyar's Notes on the Second International Symposium on Palestine First Day: Walid Khalidi and Zionism

According to Okyar's notes, the opening remarks of the symposium were given by Walid Khalidi, a prominent professor of political sciences at the American University of Beirut.⁶ In his speech, Khalidi intended to provide an overview of the events that led to the

6 Walid Khalidi was a prominent scholar, a diplomat and a civil servant who devoted his life to the independence of the Palestinian people. He was born in Jerusalem in 1925 into a venerable and cultured family of "jurists, scholars, political figures, and educators since before the Crusades." Khalidi worked in Jerusalem with other young Palestinians in 1945-46 in the Arab League-created Arab Office when it was attempting to put the case of Palestine before the world. The Arab League was called the "unofficial foreign and information office" of the Palestinians. In 1957 he joined the American University of Beirut's Department of Political Studies and Public Administration, where he taught political studies until 1982. During those years he was frequently abroad—as a research fellow at Princeton University (1960-61) and two years (1976-78) on leave from AUB as a fellow at Harvard University's Center for International Affairs. Subsequently (from 1979 to 1981), he spent each fall semester at Harvard as visiting professor of government. When he left AUB in

establishment of the state of Israel and the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homes and lands in a comprehensively and insightfully. First, Walid Khalidi explained how, at the end of World War I, the British government allocated the province of Palestine, which it had conquered from the Ottoman Empire to the Jews as a national home in the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

Khalidi's speech followed his introduction of Zionism as an idea that emerged in the late 19th century. Quoted from Khalidi, "Theodor Herzl, convening a congress in Zurich in 1890, was the first person to put forward the idea of establishing a Jewish state in the holy land of Palestine. As a result, the idea began to gather supporters."⁷ Following Professor Khalidi's lack of reference to the Ottoman Empire's approach to Herzl's initial efforts for a national homeland in Palestine, Okyar asked him the question at the end of his speech about his thoughts on the attitude of the Ottoman Empire towards the Zionist intervention. In response, Khalidi added that Empire's opposition to Zionism was a well-known historical fact. Khalidi continued his remarks by referring to Herzl's visit to Istanbul and Jerusalem in 1905. Upon his visit to Istanbul, Herzl was provided an audience with sultan Abdülhamid II, where he requested the sultan's approval for the facilitation of Jews immigration and purchasing land in Palestine. Khalidi clarified that to receive the sultan's assurance, Herzl had offered financial assistance to alleviate the Ottoman debts to Europe, which at the time posed a heavy burden for the Ottoman finances. However, as Khalidi continued, Abdulhamid II rejected this offer and stated that the Palestinian land would not be given to foreigners.

Khalidi's speech introduced the audience to the dominant debate of the Conference's first day, which was dedicated to Zionism, and the Zionist state. Okyar's notes further summarize Khalid's view of the Zionists, who lost their hope in the Ottoman Empire, and approached the British government during the First World War with the hope of securing a homeland. As a result of the Zionists' efforts, the British government promised in 1917, under the Balfour Declaration, that a national home for the Jews would be created in Palestine. But, on the other hand, the British government had promised Sharif Hussein and the Arabs who rebelled against the Turks in 1916 that the lands inhabited by the Arabs in the Ottoman Empire would be given to the Arabs. For the latter reason, the Balfour Declaration included an additional clause ensuring that the rights of the local people would be reserved under the future Jewish state. This was nothing more than the British making two promises that could not be reconciled.

After the victory of the Allies in 1918, Palestine was given neither to the Jews nor the Arabs; instead, it was directly attached to the British mandate. The population of Palestine in 1922 was 750,000, of which 590,000 were Muslims, 83,000 were Jews, and 71,000 were Christians. The Palestinian Arabs did not welcome the establishment of the British mandate in their homeland and the declaration of a future Jewish state as defined by Balfour principles. Under the mandate, Palestinians responded to this duplicity, for the

1982 he settled permanently in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he was senior research fellow at Harvard's Center for Middle East Studies until his retirement in 1997 (Fischbach, 2022).

Please also see <https://www.aub.edu.lb/doctorates/recipients/Pages/khalidi.aspx> for the additional biography of Walid Khalidi.

7 It is important to note here that the congress was actually convened in 1897, in Basel. I assume that Okyar muddled the dates up while reorganizing his personal notes from these meetings.

British turning a blind eye to the extending Jewish immigration with bloody revolts. The 1936 Arab revolt forced the British to change their policy considering Jewish immigration and limit the land sales to the Jews. The British policy change did not have the predicted effect on the flux of the Jews from Europe. Thus, the proportion of Jews in the total population had increased from 12% in 1922 to 17% in 1931 and 31% by 1948. Meanwhile, the tightened British policies over the Jews and the mandate regime's shifting tendency for the Arab cause received a fierce Jewish backlash. The Jewish militias [Irgun], which became more organized over time, started to attack the British forces as the [Second World] war came to an end.

Caught between the two fires, the British had no choice but to refer the matter to the United Nations in 1947. This time, the Jews searched for the support of the United States. The decision to partition and establish the state of Israel came out with 33 votes in favor, 10 against, and 10 in favor of the United Nations. Right after the UN voting, clashes started between Arabs and Jews in Palestine. In the face of Jewish atrocities, most of the Arab population fled to neighboring countries out of fear. Subsequently, the Arabs were defeated in the war, and the Jews expanded the land allocated to them by the UN's plan, annexing Jaffa and the part outside the walls of Jerusalem's old city. After the fighting halted in 1949, Israel controlled 78 percent of mandatory Palestine, compared with the 55 percent allotted under the United Nations partition plan. The number of Palestinians who fled the territories at the time was around 750,000—those who became refugees settled in neighboring countries such as Jordan, Gaza, and Lebanon. The UN initiated a support commission to guide the newly emerged Palestinian diaspora. As a result, after 20 years, refugees formed today's Palestine Liberation Front, or more accurately, various resistance fronts, to obtain their usurped rights. And they became the central element and follower of today's Arab-Israeli conflict.

Second Day: Yusuf Sayegh and the Leadership

According to Okyar, the second day's agenda was set with Yusuf Sayegh's opening remarks, which raised the question of effective leadership for the Palestinian Revolution.⁸ Yusuf Sayegh, a professor of Economics at the American University of Beirut and a member of the Palestine Liberation Council, explained the politics and strategy of the Palestine Front under [the day's] conditions. He underlined that the Palestinian Resistance Movements emerged in a more active stage only following the defeat of the six-day war of 1967. According to Sayegh, upon the failure of the Arab armies, the Arab states faced two options: the first possibility was officially continuing to reject Israel's existence as an independent state by continuing the path they had taken until now, in other words, by not signing peace with Israel. The second option was to make an agreement by recognizing

8 Yusuf Sayegh (1916-2004) was a Palestinian and Arab nationalist, and one of the most influential exponents of Palestinian and Arab planning and development. He entered the national scene just after World War II as the primary organizer of a fund to raise money through taxes and tolls to buy up land threatened by Jewish purchase. Then, after a brief period as an Israeli prisoner of war (1948-1949), he took Syrian nationality, moved to Beirut. Upon he obtained a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University, he joined the American University in Beirut. His growing reputation as a development economist also led him onto a number of international and Arab commissions, including the beginnings of his long association with the Kuwait Fund. Like many Palestinian professionals, was soon drawn back into national politics, becoming a member of the Palestinian National Council in 1966 and one of its chief economic planners after 1967, signaled by his role in the establishment of the Planning Center in Beirut (Owen, 2004, p. 3).

Israel's 1967 borders or borders in proximity to them. In any case, Sayegh brought up the various propositions in discussion for establishing a new Palestinian state within the boundaries of Gaza and the region west of the Jordan River.

Till the day, the Palestinian Council's policy had been towards not accepting peace with Israel, rejecting the establishment of a small-scale Palestinian state around Israel, abolishment the State of Israel, and establishing a new state where Jews, Muslims, and Christians will live together. This alternative, which means continuing the war with Israel, was not widely accepted by other Arab states, especially Egypt. According to Sayegh, Egyptians seemed inclined to recognize Israel's existence and live together if certain circumstances were met. They expressed their softer tendencies during the ongoing congressional deliberations. Articulating the opinion of the Palestinian Council, Dr. Yusuf Sayegh admitted that the liberation movement had a difficult time following 1967, especially after the clashes with the Jordanian government and PLO's subsequent banishment from Jordan. Yet, despite the latter blow of the PLO in Jordan, the legal victimization of the Palestinians caused by the implementation of the Balfour Declaration, the British mandate, and finally, the United Nations resolutions on the creation of Israel remained intact. In Okyar's notes, Sayegh stated that Israel has usurped and violated the basic rights of the Palestinians and that they [PLO] will fight until the rights are fully restored.

Dr. Yusuf Sayegh pointed out that they [PLM] knew the struggle to achieve a sovereign Palestinian state would be long and arduous. However, the most fundamental thing to succeed was the belief that their cause was realistic and viable and needed to be rooted among the larger masses. He also added that the movement could achieve its ultimate aim unless larger groups adopt this belief, like the Arab people in general. However, the impression Osman Okyar obtained from the presentations and behind-the-door talks during the congress was that the central leadership of the PLO was weak as of the day of the conference and that the movement was in desperate need of a leading and unifying leader.

Okyar's perception of Dr. Sayegh's speech was rather pessimistic. Sayegh's constant bringing up the fundamental importance of the masses to achieve the Palestinian cause and the necessity of the awakening of these masses' consciousness seemed relatively distant reality. A social and cultural awakening that would acknowledge the nationalist rights of the Palestinian people required movements that would lead to profound changes in the core of the Arab people— innovations that will transform the social, cultural, and psychological attitudes of the Arabs. Dr. Sayegh added that the duration of such changes might last up to two generations, as the Jews have waited for a long time, and so could the Arabs. The financial conditions in the Arab world to achieve success, in the long run were present; however, when it comes to social and spiritual conditions, they would inevitably emerge sooner or later.

Dr. Sayegh's speech most certainly moved Okyar. In his notes, he referred to his sentiments as how, while listening to Sayegh, his mind inevitably reminded of Turkey's War of Independence and how remarkable it was for Turkey to come out as a secular liberal country despite the disastrous and devastating state the Turkish people were in after the First World War and its dire financial conditions. But, for Okyar, this could not

be succeeded without a leader with a strong will and a clear and realistic determination of the cause. Undoubtedly, Atatürk convinced his close friends of the correctness and reality of the national struggle and awakened the national consciousness to adopt the reason.

In some similar ways, at this stage of their struggle, Okyar clarified that the Palestinians were also looking for a leader who would express their cause precisely, clearly, and realistic way. As in any national struggle, it was of utmost importance to point out the reason for mobilizing the energies that do not fit the conditions of domestic and world politics. And only a good leader could achieve such means. No matter how righteous and humanitarian it seems to be on the side of the Palestinians, these abstract justifications are not enough to recognize the cause. A leader is needed for the struggle. And for Okyar and Sayegh, the question of finding it remained to time.

Third Day: Nabil Shaath and A Secular Democratic State

The third day of the congress was sealed with the discussion of the founding philosophy of the future Palestinian state. Dr. Nabil Shaath⁹, another prominent scholar and lecturer from AUB, took the lead in describing the program and goals of the Palestine Liberation movement concerning the matter. In his address, Shaath stated that the Palestinian movement aimed to establish a secular state that recognized equality for all its citizens regardless of their religion rather than a state solely based on religion. For the PLM and the Palestinian people, the intention was not to drive out the 2.5 million Jews living in Israel on that day and throw them into the sea after their victory over Israel or compel them to peace. Instead, what PLM desired was to create a state in which Arabs and Jews would live together, where all religions, whether Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, would be freely practiced, and where citizens would not be treated differently because of their religion. To Okyar, this whole approach within itself was the Palestinians' will to show the world that they were ahead of Israel—in terms of democracy, pluralism, and citizenship—by comparing their humanist and tolerant state with the state of Israel, where its Jewish people were privileged citizens and the Palestinian Arabs are considered second-class.

Thus, Shaath added, in the program of the Palestine Liberation Front, PLM envisages the establishment of a democratic state in which every citizen would have equal rights within the principles of secularism. According to Okyar, Nabil Shaath's speech sparked a debate, especially on the issue of a secular state in a Muslim-dominated Arab society. Speaking on behalf of one of the Christian organizations, a French delegate, Monsieur Montaron, raised his concern by stating that the Palestinians were behind in explaining their programs to the world for public opinion. He urged them to make their case clear and conclusive, and to convince congress and the public of their program's sincerity.

9 Nabil Shaath is a highly educated, western-style Palestinian politician, with close ties to Yasser Arafat, Israel and the United States. He has been said to be "the real power behind (Arafat's) throne." Received his BA in Alexandria, Egypt and Ph.D. Wharton School of Economics, University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Shaath returned to Cairo from the United States in 1965. In 1969, he went to Lebanon to teach at the American University in Beirut. He joined PLO in 1970 and served as an adviser to Fatah from 1971. Dr. Shaath became the head of the PLO Planning Centre 1971-1981. He is credited as being the founder of the "Democratic State" approach. In 1974, Dr. Shaath accompanied Arafat in the first PLO delegation to the United Nations and headed the first Palestinian delegation to the UN. He serves as chair of Palestinian National Council political committee. In March 1990, Shaath was appointed to Fatah-Central Committee. Shaath was a member of the Madrid delegation and played a leading role in the Oslo process. Shaath wrote a Palestinian draft Declaration of Principles for the Oslo agreement. (Source: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/nabil-shaath>)

Returning to the debate on secularism, Monsieur [George] Montaron¹⁰ added that religion and state are firmly connected in all Arab countries of the day. And that there were hesitations about whether it would be possible for an Arab society or even any Muslim community to secularize in the face of their rooted religious traditions. He said that even if Arabs or Palestinians only would agree to the principle of secularity, it would highly be doubtful that Jews would want to live in a secular state that would likely remain under Arab domination. Okyar's notes indicate that Montaron asked Dr. Shaath if putting the concept of a secular Palestinian state in their program was a means for propaganda or/and whether they were genuinely sincere about it. (Which seemed a pretty triggering question even for Okyar himself).

Dr. Shaat's answer was somewhat elusive to this question, saying that the issue was complicated and needed to be given more thought. However, another Palestinian delegate, Dr. Clovis Maksoud¹¹, intervened in the debate, trying to answer the French delegate's question. He admitted that the understanding of equality and secularism was lacking in Arab countries of the day and that hesitantly differentiating attitudes were present in practice. However, Maksoud stated that the secularism and secularization goals adopted by the Palestine Liberation Front constituted humanitarian and advanced hopes on the face of Israel that would never cease to insist on the principles of differentiation as a religiously defined state. Reminding that the essence of Zionism is to prioritize the Jewish race above all other beings, to despise non-Jews, and even to hate them, Palestinians were ahead of Israel, at least in terms of their targeted aim for a pluralistic state.

Okyar indicated in his logs that Dr. Maksoud expressed his belief that the principle of secularism, as asserted only by the Palestinians, would gradually become one of the main aspirations of Arab nationalism, in the broader sense, to be embraced by other Arabs as well in the long run. However, Okyar also implied that the symposium lacked to achieve definite results out of the debates, a more definitive program of the PLM. While the participants of the panel were arguing PLM's aim to establish a democratic secular state, the movement's leaders, in their remarks, were constantly singling out the revolution without establishing the principles of its end goal. For Okyar, who identified himself often with the Western world's modern liberal understanding, the claim of the PLM's leading figures seemed rather "populist."¹² Their argument was often shaped as propaganda against capitalism, and how, together with the world's other Liberation movements, to denigrate the dark forces of imperialism. These round and vague slogans

10 George Montaron (1921-1994) is a militant journalist, resistant, left-wing Christian. He is known for his fights against torture, for freedom of the press, decolonization, for the defense of the Kanak, Palestinian and Sahrawi peoples. He was the director of the Left-wing Catholic weekly *Témoignage Chrétien*. He was a devoted supporter of the Palestinian Arabs. Along with a number of *Témoignage Chrétien*'s staff like famous Abbé Pierre, the apostle of the "homeless" after World War I, Montaron participated in an International Christian Conference on Palestine, held in Beirut in May 1971. The meeting provided the occasion for a vast deployment of anti-Israel slogans, embellished by specious theological postulates based on new kind of biblical exegesis which denies Jews any right to the land of Israel (Mendel, 1971).

11 Dr. Clovis Maksoud (Lebanon, 1926 - 2016) is professional diplomat appointed the first time to the Arab League, in order to establish the Arab League mission in New Delhi on February 4th, 1961. Maksoud was the Chief Representative of the League of Arab States in India from 1961 to 1966 before becoming the League's Special Envoy to the United States in 1974 (Maksoud, 1997).

12 Okyar mentions that the participants from the PLM constantly blamed world capitalism and imperialism as the partners in crime of the Zionism.

that were constantly put forward “did not make sense, and created a perception where the Palestinians seemed to be caught up in a Maoist-Communist world order,” a view that Okyar highly opposed (Okyar, 1971, p. 8). Okyar also added that the leaders’ lack of vision for the founding principles of a secular state damaged the Palestinian cause by representing the PLM’s aim not only to defeat Israel, but also to defeat the entire Western world, and “to establish a communist or Maoist order instead” (p. 8). This general perception created by the PLM’s leadership positioned the movement as a threat to the Western World, overriding its real cause of an appropriate state for the Palestinian people. Therefore, “unless the PLM determines its cause in a precise, reasonable and realistic way, and gets rid of the contradictions and illusions, it would not be able to come out from the depression and disintegration it is in that day” (Okyar, 1971, p. 9).

Okyar (p. 9) attests that there was no consensus among the Arab delegates at the symposium on the policies to be followed toward Israel. The behavior of the Egyptian diplomats proved that Egypt had an evident need for peace with Israel. Meanwhile, Palestinian spokespeople insisted on a combat policy until the end—without defining what that end is. Among the other Arab nations, Jordan was condemned for expelling PLO and the more radical PFLP from Jordan for attempting to topple Jordanian King Hussein and seize control of the country.

Final Day: Osman Okyar’s Remarks on Secular State

According to Okyar’s minutes, the morning session of the last day was reserved for delegates of various nationalities who wanted to deliver their opinion on the so far discussed matters. Okyar was among those delegates. Okyar first thanked the organizing committee and made his remarks concerning the importance of the symposium for the future of Palestine and for Palestinians who were expelled from their homeland. Then, he underlined the significance of PLM for being the sole representative to express the feelings of helplessness, hostility, and rebellion against injustice that the Palestinian people have accumulated for nearly 50 years. Including himself, Okyar stated that, clearly, for those who did not share the Palestinian experience personally, it was not proper to advise on the policy and strategy matters of the PLM. Therefore, the most he could offer was to participate in and observe the negotiations concerning the movement’s goals and provide his opinion.

Still, since the idea of a secular state that the Palestinians put forward constituted a revolutionary innovation within the context of Muslim Arab populations, Okyar thought it would be appropriate to ask a question about its formulation to further invest in the debates concerning a secular Palestinian state. The question he raised was: “Is it possible for an Islamic society or state to loosen the tight bond between the state and religion, which comes from the past and which is at the root of the religion of Islam, and to separate them, to accept the principle of equal treatment of all faiths and tolerance of different beliefs?” For Okyar, Turkey was the only state in history with an Islamic past that has experienced such a challenge in this regard. Shortly after the establishment of the Republic, Turkey entered the path of secularism by changing the constitution. The clause that acknowledged Islam as the state’s official religion was abolished. Instead, laws adopted from the West replaced the religious codes. In addition, the education branched under the clergy was abolished and replaced by the civilian one.

“Was the secularist movement successfully carried out for nearly 50 years? In other words, has it erased the reactionary/separationist tendencies in Turkey? Removed dogmatism and brought intellectual and scientific life closer to the level of modern Western states?” Unfortunately, these questions for Okyar remained to be answered, and to defend such strong claims would be an exaggeration within the limits of this symposium. Establishing a secular state was not just a simple matter of form and law. In his opinion, as he noted, secularism does not mean being hostile to religion or rejecting religion, as is sometimes thought and practiced.

On the contrary, secularism nurtured respect and tolerance for all religions by keeping religious influences at a bay of politics, science, and world affairs. Thus, secularism was a change of attitude and mentality rather than a change of shape. At least, this was, in Okyar’s words, “what Atatürk desired” (1971, p. 9). In this regard, Okyar adds, “one cannot claim that [the Republic of Turkey] had fully realized the desired transformation. But one can say that [Turkey] was moving in that direction in form and content” (p. 9) .

Okyar continued his address by adding that although transforming a religiously defined society was complex, Turkey’s experience showed that an Islamic society could move towards secularism. For that reason, the secularist goal adopted by the Palestinian movement was not an imaginary one hanging in the air. More so, the will to move towards secularism represented a genuinely revolutionary change for the Arab societies of the Middle East. During the conference, many references recognized the Palestinian cause involved the need for radical social and cultural change in the Arab masses. Maybe, the secret lay in adopting the idea of secularism by the Arab world. “As a Turk,” [Okyar] “wholeheartedly applauded the Arab nationalist movements that accepted secularism as the principal factor of their future state.”

It was somewhat inevitable for the conference, which gathered together during the most turbulent and depressive period of the Palestinian movement and the Arab world in general, to be predominated by the short-term political conflicts that overshadow the region.

Conclusion

The period between the end of the Great War in 1918 and the establishment of Israel in 1948 was an era of tremendous importance for ex-Ottoman Palestine and the Middle East, one whose consequences still echo today. These decades transformed the nations and created new countries with exogenously built states. An overt European rule of the region drew and redrew national boundaries and gave rise to new power formulations.

The Arab-Israel conflict is the product of an underlying Palestine question, which denotes the half-century struggle of the indigenous Palestinian population against Jewish nationalism. Jewish nationalism and the search for a Jewish homeland converged from Europe in the 19th century upon the Arab-inhabited territories eventually established Israel in 1948. However, the intrusion caused by Israel’s emergence as a solely Jewish state undermined the existence of its pre-existing Arab population. The series of wars launched by the surrounding Arab states in 1948, 1967, and 1973 was their response to the fatal injuries inflicted by Zionism upon Palestine and its native Arab population in

creating and expanding Israel. Therefore, the Palestine problem continues to be the origin and cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and for a long time, it was the key to its solution.

The Second International Symposium on Palestine, organized by the General Union of Palestinian Students and Kuwait Graduate Society on 13-17 February 1971, is one such effort for a solution. The conference brought together the leading intellectuals of the Palestinian Liberation Movement that emerged in 1964 under the auspices of Arab states, mainly Egypt, to examine the realization of an imagined secular democratic state in Palestine where the displacement of the Jews or the segregation of the Palestinian diaspora and the creation of an exclusively racist or religious state in Palestine—be it Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—was unacceptable and unfeasible.

Osman Okyar, an eminent Turkish scholar and intellectual, was invited by the symposium committee to observe and advise the debate concerning the formulation of a democratic secular Palestinian state. His notes concerning the meeting present insight into the discussions carried by the significant ideologues of the Palestinian Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 70s concerning the transformation of Israel and the occupied territories under a single democratic Palestinian state.

Upon his attendance at the conference, Okyar prepared detailed notes of the event where he explained the discussed program of the PLM and the prospect and principles of the future Palestinian state. During the discussions, Okyar was asked to present Turkey's approach to the current PLM statements concerning the design of a democratic and secular Palestine. The principle of secularism held the utmost importance for Okyar and, thus, for Turkey when a Palestinian state was considered.

There is no clear evidence why Okyar kept such a detailed note of the conference or with which specific appointment he attended the symposium. But evidently, he believed that the issues addressed at the meeting were far most important to the future of the Middle East and the question of Palestine. Okyar's statement divulges his intention to inform the Turkish reader about the emerging ideological currents in the Arab world on secularism and the considerations of a secular Palestinian state along with its leadership. Okyar reminding of the distant relations between Turkey and the Arab states since the end of World War I, he stresses how the peculiar political conjuncture following the late 1960s led Turkey to reconsider its position in the Arab-Israeli conflict because of its geographical proximity to the region and the political-ideological aspects of the issue. For Okyar, the uniqueness of his presence at the conference could be considered the changing political role of Turkey in Middle Eastern affairs.

For Okyar, an educated western liberal himself, the PLM's revolutionary idea for a democratic, nonsectarian, secular Palestinian state lacked clarity and elaboration and more so an effective leadership that would guide the movement. Yet, he was impressed with the PLM's efforts to "dream" of a secular state. Okyar believes that some Arab states, especially Egypt, find it very difficult to accept the proposed goal of the PLM of dissolving Israel into one single Palestinian democracy. However, the Palestinian revolution was determined to fight for it. A nonsectarian Palestine was the ultimate long-term goal of liberation as long as the dream state was concerned.

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