

The Transformation of the Palestinian  
Cause to a National Cause  
(*qadīya waṭaniya*) in 1921

# Bonner Islamstudien

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# 1. Introduction

## Subject of Study

In 1921, the “Palestinian national cause” (*al-qaḍīya al-waṭaniya al-filasṭīnīya*)<sup>1</sup> was already articulated and advocated before the world as “a matter of life or death”.<sup>2</sup> During that year, the young Palestinian national movement presented their cause to the world for the first time and demanded the independence (*istiqlāl*) of an Arab Palestine from the mandate powers and before the newly founded League of Nations. This micro study traces the political arguments, language and political strategies applied to advocate the Palestinian narrative as a legitimate national cause. By this, it follows major transformations in early Palestinian nationalism at a key moment and just before the young national movement adopted a boycott strategy towards the British Mandate government. Focusing on local agents of that narrative, these issues are explored through local Arab Palestinian press publications – the Jaffan periodical *Filasṭīn*, the Haifa-based newspaper *Al-Karmil* and the Damascene magazin *Alif-Bāʾ*<sup>3</sup> – and political correspondence of the movement’s leading actors: the Muslim-Christian Association (*al-ḡamʿīya al-islāmīya al-masīḥīya*) which was the most powerful organization in post-war Palestine and maintained branches throughout the country, and the Arab Palestinian Executive Committee (*al-laḡna at-tanfīḍīya al-ʿarabiya al-filasṭīnī*) – in short, the Arab Executive – which was elected at the third Palestinian Congress in December 1920 as a representative (*mumattila*) of the Palestinian people (*aš-šaʿb al-filasṭīnī*) before the mandate government and played a significant actor in the construction of early Palestinian nationalism; however, it is today hardly remembered as such.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Filasṭīn*, 12 April 1921: 8–375/1/1–3. Note that articles from newspapers and magazines will be cited in the following format: name of newspaper, date: number of issue/number of page/number of column on the page (from right to left).

<sup>2</sup> From a letter by a Palestinian exile residing in Egypt, in *Filasṭīn*, 19 April 1921: 10–377/1/1–3.

<sup>3</sup> See *Alif Bāʾ*, 20 March 1921: 169/2/3–4; and *Filasṭīn*, 12 April 1921: 8–375/2/4–3/1. Officially, it was called the Arab Executive Committee of the Arab Palestinian Muslim Christian Congress in Palestine (*al-laḡna at-tanfīḍīya li-l-muʿtamar al-ʿarabi al-filasṭīnī*

In April 1921, the head of the Arab Executive, Mūsā Kāzīm al-Ḥusaynī, claimed in a speech to the deputies of the Muslim-Christian Association of Jaffa that the “nation’s voice” (*kalimat aš-ša‘b*) had now united and was reaching out to the European institutions. He declared that the moment had come where “now, the world knows that an Arab Palestinian nation exists and a Palestinian question about which one cannot remain silent about anymore.”<sup>4</sup> It is to be highlighted that it was hardly three years after the British conquest and the fall of Ottoman rule in Palestine (1918), that a consistent national narrative had been readily constructed by the Arabs of Palestine, and was forwarded to institutions in the West. Being ignored by the British Mandate regime as representative of Arab Palestinian interests, the Arab Executive established in June 1921 the so-called Palestinian Delegation (*al-wafd al-filasṭīnī*) – here referred to as the “Wafd” – which is today almost completely forgotten in academic research and in Palestinian collective memory as well.<sup>5</sup> As the first delegation that had ever been sent abroad to defend Palestinian interests, the Wafd was established as a propaganda tool to convince the Western public opinion. Being authorized by the Arab Executive to “speak for all the Muslims and Christians of Palestine”,<sup>6</sup> it was to demand Palestinian national rights “in all parts of the civilized world”.<sup>7</sup> As such, the Wafd’s agenda was to convince the audiences in Europe and America of the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause, and in specific, “to wake up the British public opinion” (*an yūqiz ar-ra’y al-‘amm al-briṭānī*);<sup>8</sup> with the ultimate goal to reach the “annulment of the Balfour Declaration” (*ilgā’ wa’d Balfūr*) which was the crucial point of conflict over the future of Palestine.<sup>9</sup> In it, the British Crown had promised the Zionist Federation in 1917 to support a Jewish “national home’ in Palestine. When the British submitted the legal draft of Mandate regulations for Palestine to the League of Nations in 1921, it was a key moment

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*al-islāmī al-masīḥī fi Filasṭīn*). In the press, it appeared as the Executive Committee or simply the *lağna*, and in English texts as the Arab Executive.

<sup>4</sup> “*Hunāka ša‘ban ‘arabiyan filasṭīniyan wa-qaḍīya filasṭīniya lā yumkin as-sukūt ‘anhā.*” Ḥusaynī in a speech to Jaffan delegates. *Filasṭīn*, 2 April 1921: 5–372/2/3–4.1.

<sup>5</sup> In English correspondence, it called the ‘Palestine Arab Delegation’. In the local press, it was just the ‘Wafd’.

<sup>6</sup> “*Fa-l-wafd yatakallam bi-lisān mağmū‘ al-muslimin wa-n-naṣarā min ahālī Filasṭīn.*” *Al-Karmil*, 17 September 1921: 8–748/1/1–4.

<sup>7</sup> In *Al-Karmil*, 18 June 1921; compare with Porath 1974: 139.

<sup>8</sup> *Al-Karmil*, 04 October 1921: 8–753/1/1–3.

<sup>9</sup> *Filasṭīn*, 15 October 1921: 56–423/2/1–3.



for the Palestinians, realizing that the Balfour Declaration was about to become the official premise over Palestine, if confirmed as such by the international community.<sup>10</sup>

Through opinion articles published in *Filasṭīn*, *Alif Bāʿ*, *Al-Karmil* and correspondence of the Muslim-Christian Association and the Arab Executive, edited in Zuʿaytir’s “National Documents” (1979), this study will demonstrate that, by 1921, the Palestinians had constructed a consistent national narrative that contained a set of arguments, coming along with termini and political meanings that were systematically applied to present the Palestinian as a legitimate national cause, and tailored to fit the liberalist ideology in the diplomatic jargon of the Western powers during the years after World War I. Since the analysis reveals that the key arguments of that narrative were shared by all actors investigated, it can be said that this narrative defined a mutual frame for an overarching Palestinian national discourse that was approved by the different local agents investigated, and that it also made sense to the Arab majority in Palestine.

In 1921, this national narrative was set out to the world with great self-confidence and enthusiasm. Besides a pool of political associations, local Arab newspapers presented themselves as defenders of the national cause in Palestine and described it as a “holy cause” (*qaḍīya muqaddasa*).<sup>11</sup> At the forefront were *al-Karmil* and *Filasṭīn*, whose editor, ʿIsā al-ʿIsā, editor declared that: “it has become our duty as journalists to pursue our national peaceful jihad for our Palestinian cause.”<sup>12</sup> Abroad, the first Palestinian delegation, modelled on the Egyptian Wafd as the leading force of the early Egyptian national movement, presented the national demands to the League of Nations, declaring that the Palestinians wanted “self-rule without another nationalism competing with them in the country for (their) interests and rights”.<sup>13</sup> And despite of disagreements that existed *within* the national movement over leadership roles and specific political strategies, it should be highlighted here that there was consensus among the various

<sup>10</sup> On the different interpretations and entanglements regarding that, see chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Qaḍīyatihā al-muqaddasa*, in *Filasṭīn*, 13 July 1921: 29–396/1/1–3.

<sup>12</sup> “*Fa-qaḍ aṣbaḥ min wağibinā aṣ-ṣahhāfi ... mutāʿabat ġihādunā al-waṭani as-silmi fi qaḍīyatiniā*.” *Filasṭīn*, 14 May 1921: 14–381/1/1–2.

<sup>13</sup> “*Al-ḥukm aḍ-ḍāti bidūn an yakūn li-qawmiya uḥrā šarāka maʿhum tuzāhimuhum fi l-bilād wa-mašālihuhum wa-ḥuqūquhum*.” Mūsā Kāzim in a speech to the “honoured nation” (*al-umma al-karīma*). *Filasṭīn*, 13 July 1921: 29–396/3/1–2.

political actors in Palestine about the arguments and ideological components of the *qaḍīya waṭaniya*, as presented in this study.

## State of the Art

A lot has been written on the emergence of early Palestinian nationalism as a particular movement; and the most important works are those written by Yehoshua Porath, Muhammad Muslih and Rashid al-Khalidi. The most comprehensive research on the emergence of Palestinian nationalism is Yehoshua Porath's ground-breaking work (1974, 1977). He explains the developments of Palestinian nationalism over roughly two decades from 1918 to 1939, focusing on Arab–British relations and using a wide range of British, Zionist and Arab sources. Porath unravels the strategies of the Mandate regime, the Colonial Office and a range of Pan-Arab political organizations such as the local branches of the Literary Forum (*al-muntadā al-adabī*) and the Arab Club (*an-nādī al-‘arabī*) but also militant, secret organizations, and he also uncovers their internal conflicts. Muhammad Muslih (1988) concisely presents the beginnings of the Palestinian national movement in the milieu of Arab nationalism while focusing on urban notables during the transformation period of the “older” to the “younger” politicians, during the years of the Young Turks era (1908–1914), the war and up to the beginning of the British Mandate (1914–1920). He focuses on the activities of the Arab nationalist organizations, such as al-Fatat, the Literary Forum and the Arab Club as the main political actors in Palestine during the ‘eclipse of the Pan-Syrian dream, 1918–1920’, he concisely treats the rise of different branches of the Muslim-Christian Association in the country, and ends with the establishment of the Arab Executive as marking the ascendance of a distinct Palestinian nationalism in 1920. Finally, Rashid al-Khalidi's significant work on Palestinian identity (1997) defined the years between 1917 and 1923 as the critical point during which politically aware Palestinians developed a strong sense of national identity, especially in 1922–1923.<sup>14</sup> However, Khalidi presents the exist-

<sup>14</sup> See chapter 7 on the “critical years” of 1917–1923, in Khalidi 1997: 145f., and Khalidi 1977: 149.