



معهد مواطن للديمقراطية وحقوق الإنسان  
Muwatn Institute for Democracy and Human Rights

**Muwatin 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**  
**“Democratisation of Palestinian Politics as a Basis for Rebuilding the National Project”**

**Hall 243 – Institute of Law Annex Building – Birzeit University**  
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**Abstracts of Presentations**

**Maha Samman**

**Palestine Between the Colonial Space and the ‘Right to Exist’**

This presentation presents an alternative analysis of the Palestinian/Israeli reality. It uses Lefebvre's writings on the importance of the concept of space to analyse political and social conditions. This analysis allows for dissecting reality to show the strengths and weaknesses of both the coloniser and the colonised. It supports the development of a strategy that promotes strengths and resolves Palestinian weaknesses, and targets points of weaknesses and counter opposes the coloniser's strengths on several fronts: internationally, regionally, locally, urbanely, and individually. The presentation seeks to put forth recommendations for constructing a Palestinian strategy based on a formation of space different from that of the colonial space to pave way for a future with social and spatial justice and to address inequalities (colonial or otherwise).

**Wasim Abu Fasha**

**Back to The Beginnings: The Representations of Palestinian National Imaginary and The Failure of its Realization**

In his poem, *In Praise of The High Shadow*, Mahmoud Darwish writes, “*How grand the idea, how small the state.*” This statement intensifies the prophecy of the subsequent displacements in the path of the Palestinian liberation struggle after the tragic exile from Beirut. The statement forces us to face the binary of the national imaginary, and the failure of its realisation starting with the PLO interim program of 1974, through the Declaration of Independence in 1988, and the subsequent establishment of the Palestinian Authority. We can claim that the major success achieved with the establishment of the PLO was its development into the national political entity able to put forward the Palestinian national project, and more importantly, that it formed the national imaginary with three elements: geography, people, and history. This is expressed in the Palestinian National Charter of 1968 and in the slogan of the organization with its three mottoes: national unity, national mobilization, and liberation.

Today, in view of the failure of the political settlement, we face the task of returning to, and solidifying, our national imaginary prior to delving into questions regarding the nature of the national project that might emanate from it. We can re-read the national project - according to both its imagined and written dimensions - through dissecting the slogan of the PLO using three analytical areas: historic bloc to re-understand national unity; Arab and international solidarity to reposition the national project within the agenda of the global struggle against hegemony; and finally, the values of liberation in order to read liberation as emancipation from relations of exploitation, racism, and colonialism.

## **Raja Khalidi**

### **Nation and Class: Generations of Palestinian Liberation**

After a century of confrontation with Zionist settler colonialism, the triumph of capitalism and unfettered marketization without justice and national rights for Palestine appears as an assured process. Through confrontation between national and class interests, material conditions are now ripe for a new generation of Palestinian liberation able to redefine the concept of liberation that takes into account the social, economic and political rights of the people; rights that have long been systematically negated.

## **Muriel Asseburg**

### **The EU and its Member States and the Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination and Israeli-Palestinian Peace**

Over the last 40 years, since the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty (that alluded to but did not solve the Palestinian question) and the European Community's 1980 Venice Declaration, Europe has been seeking ways to help advance Israeli-Palestinian peace and realize the Palestinian right to self-determination. Indeed, this policy area has been one of the few where the EU and its Member States have had a well-defined, detailed and consistent stance. The EU has also been a vanguard in shaping international language on the conflict. Still, over the last few years, while Europeans were able to score temporary success on particular issues, they have failed to halt or reverse trends on the ground, such as creeping Israeli annexation, the entrenchment of a one-state reality, and the consolidation of the intra-Palestinian split and two ever more repressive Palestinian authorities. The presentation explains why the Europeans have not been able to assume a more prominent role, which would have allowed them to realize their objectives. Beyond factors, such as the EU refraining from challenging the US administration's position as the chief mediator, EU Member States hiding behind the EU rather than being active proponents of agreed-upon stances, the lack of consensus among Europeans with regard to the direction forward, and European governments no longer considering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a foreign policy priority, it will highlight the Trump Administration's approach as well as Israeli policies that have deepened divisions among the Europeans. The presentation will also dwell on how the European approach has developed from one that sought to support Palestinian self-determination and the building of a democratic system of governance to one that subordinates the achievement of rights to first the peace process and then the stabilization of what is considered the status quo.

## **Basem Ezbidi**

### **Are Palestinian Political Elites Part of the Impasse of the Palestinian National Liberation Project?**

This presentation argues that one of the reasons behind the stagnation of the Palestinian National Project is the structural nature and ideology of the elites (leaders) controlling the decisions related to the national project. The presentation tackles these elites in two different historical moments: the phase of revolution and armed struggle before signing the Oslo Accords, and the phase of "the state" (or similar) that followed the signing of the Oslo Accords, represented by the current PA project. The presentation compares the ideological and the political structures for these elite groups in the mentioned periods to show their similarities, not only in their failure in tackling the Palestinian people's problems and translating them into tangible ones that are able to be solved, but also in their engagement in the distortion of several values and conditions that are considered necessary for the success of the national act in its liberating sense.

## **Jeremy Wildeman**

### **Palestinian State-building Denied: The Role of Western Donors in the Oslo Peace Process and their impact on the Palestinian National Project**

Using original data from a study analysing 9 major Western donor countries/institutions that have determined the structure of Palestinian development aid, this presentation examines how their aid is structured, shedding light on the significant gap that can exist between the policies and perceptions of key donors, as distinct from the actual conditions faced by Palestinians. It then argues that this de-contextualisation has had the result of making the economic and welfare conditions of Palestinians worse. The presentation ends with a discussion of what Palestinians might do differently to reshape donor aid to meet their actual needs, under their own leadership.

## **Mandy Turner**

### **Understanding International Aid in the Absence of Palestinian Sovereignty**

International aid has played a key role in the political economy of the OPT since the signing of the Oslo Accord. In partnership with domestic actors, donors have helped to build infrastructure, social and medical services, and governing institutions. Huge amounts of funds have been given based on the rationale that there is a peace process that would soon produce a Palestinian state. Now it is crystal-clear that sovereign Palestinian statehood will not be an outcome of the current framework. The occupation has become a permanent set of arrangements and the most powerful third party actor, the United States, has abandoned the international consensus. Taking this context as its starting point, this presentation will focus on two questions. The first relates to the donors: what broader purpose is assistance to the OPT supposed to be serving given the gap between policy rhetoric and political reality? Based on interviews with aid agencies and an analysis of their practices, I will outline their attitudes towards the situation as it pertains to the continuation of aid support. The second relates to the Palestinian leadership and Palestinian civil society groups: in the absence of a move towards sovereign statehood, which type of aid policies are useful and which are harmful? Based on interviews with key Palestinian interlocutors, I will outline the different attitudes towards donor aid and what should be prioritised. The presentation will conclude by asking: is there another aid model more appropriate for “sumud” or liberation purposes, or is aid only ever going to assist the persistence of the colonial present?

## **Jehad Harb**

### **The Perception of Organized Political Forces on The Future of The National Project**

Organized political forces represent the most effective vehicle to influence national plans and political work. Thus, these forces with their effectiveness, and weaknesses or regressions define the horizons of the Palestinian national project. If efficient, they constitute the drive of the national project without discounting the regional and international factors, and the nature of international solidarity with the Palestinian people and their cause.

Internal Palestinian divisions, the most bulging of which currently is the West Bank - Gaza Strip divide resulting from the competitive conflict between Fatah and Hamas, alongside deterioration of the popular impact of organized political forces have, undoubtedly, led to the transition from ongoing confrontation to a state of permanent transitional ‘arrangements.’ Additionally, jumping to the institutionalisation of authorities, without clear governmental policies and social programs oriented at enacting change and enhancing the community’s resilience and its ability to resist, led to the weakening of resistance and its pillars such as unions, civic umbrella organisations, and popular movements. In addition, the persistent engagement with the open market system has led to drowning the Palestinians in economic anxiety rather than addressing social issues necessary for strengthening their resilience, and to the weakening of the

resistance potential that is crucial for confronting the colonial project, which hinges on the grab of Palestinian land and the replacement of its native inhabitants with colonial “settlers.”

Based on empirical data and on interviews with key interlocutors who possess first-hand knowledge of the reality of organised political forces, this intervention will present the perceptions of these forces regarding the state of the national project, and the possibility of rebuilding it.

## **Mahmoud Ziadeh**

### **Protecting the Dignity and Rights of the Poor and the Marginalised: A Criterion for the Meaning and the Future of Democracy and the National Project**

This presentation attempts to highlight the depth of the inequalities, oppression, discrimination, exploitation, and marginalisation experienced by the majority of social groups, with a focus on the poorest and most marginalised. It argues that such phenomena are a result of the absence and weakening of the principles of democracy (based on the standards of freedom and social justice) in the internal Palestinian political life by elites with political and economic power.

The presentation analyses and discusses the priorities proposed by elites to tackle the crises that are facing the national project or political system, such as ending the internal division, national unity, internal reforms, and elections. Emphasis is made on assuming secondary importance to internal conflicts. The analysis will discuss the political implications of some social movements in the refugee camps in Lebanon, Gaza, and the West Bank and attempt to understand the significance, and lessons of the second wave of Arab turmoil in Sudan and Algeria, and the yellow vests movement in France.

Finally, the presentation will challenge the mantra of the primacy of the salvation from direct colonialism, and secondarily, the salvation from the system of tyranny and the need to build a democratic system. Based on independence experiences of Arab countries, and the Palestinian experience, the presentation will examine the prospects of an uprising that preserves dignity, and promotes democracy based on standards of freedom and social justice. Such an uprising can open the way for rebuilding our national project, relying on a national unity that is based on sharing leadership, power, resources, and responsibilities amongst all groups and forces of the society, under the umbrella of a shared programme and a shared goal of salvation from the Israeli racist colonial system. We may shorten the life of direct colonialism, and close the doors of corruption and tyranny.

## **Ali Muhanna**

### **The Decline in The Role of Trade Unionism in Palestine: Causes and Prospects Within the Framework of the National Project Renewal**

Labour and professional unions and other civic formations (including women organisations) serve as the autonomous nerve of the Palestinian society in spite of the occupation. These organisations entrenched democratic practices in the Palestinian society and constituted a central avenue for the patriotic movement. But, it started deteriorating and splintering after the emergence of the Palestinian Authority instead of serving as a vehicle of accountability for the nascent authority and its policies. The social and political might of these organisations became negligible compared to what they were in the two decades preceding the first Intifada and during it. Civic formations sustained blows from all sides. The Israeli authorities worked hard on their suppression. Then the donors worked on professionalising them to the extent that made them service providers, then the Palestinian Authority endeavoured to control them, then they became a victim of the division, and later a victim of shrinking foreign aid.

The national project does not succeed not straighten up without societal representation, and with mass activism and popular participation. Political parties (even if they were not weak) are not a substitute for popular organisations, and the authority (any authority) cannot represent the broad

masses without popular organisations. So, is there a perspective to revive popular organisations, and what are the conditions of bringing life back to them? This is what this presentation hopes to tackle.

## **Ashraf Y. Suliman**

### **Lessons from South Africa**

The intervention indulges in a reflection on the socio-economic challenges experienced by the Palestinians in the recent past. Drawing parallels with South Africa, the presentation will discuss the repercussions of the taking up of positions in government and parliament in 1994 by the leaders of organized labour and civil society. It will argue that: (a) organized labour and civil society organisations went to “sleep” with the belief that the democratic dispensation will deliver on the “promised land”, and (b) the civil society organisations as well as organized labour became weak by the absence of their activist leadership who joined the “government of national unity”. The trappings of government and senior positions in state-owned enterprises had serious consequences and implications for advancing the national democratic revolution. Similarly, the notion that a peaceful and negotiated settlement will deliver a just and independent Palestinian state remains elusive.

## **Nour Odeh**

### **Shifting International Alliances and New Opportunities for the Palestinian Cause**

In light of the growing forces of the right-wing movements and the national and religious chauvinism around the world, there has been an unprecedented amount of global solidarity with the Palestinian cause among progressive parties, civil society, and human rights activists. In light of the intense conflict between the rightest and the leftist movements, their position on Palestine has become one of the most important barometers for integrity, credibility, and progressiveness for political figures in Europe and the United States. This is an unprecedented shift in the dynamics of dealing with the Palestinian issue. The presentation analyses the possible opportunities for solidarity and joint action in favour of the Palestinian cause and discusses how to build upon the new reality in preparation for the post-Trump period.

## **Reem Bahdi**

### **Replacing Charity with Solidarity is Replacing ‘the Master's Tools’**

Development aid furthers the colonial condition in Palestine by displacing international law and institutions as the main mechanism through which Northern states engage with Palestine, perpetuating an image of Palestinians as a people in need of technical assistance rather than liberation, and institutionalizing Northern control over Palestinian priorities and decision-making. By re-configuring themselves and their relationship to Palestine through the lens of development aid rather than international law, states can imagine themselves as charitable actors that have extended generosity to Palestinians rather than High Contracting Parties that owe duties to a nation under occupation. After taking stock of these circumstances, this presentation explores the meaning, mechanisms, and potential of international solidarity as a potential response.

## **Jamil Hilal**

### **On Articulating a More Perceptive Understanding of the Palestinian Question**

The presentation suggests that the ways of articulating a perceptive understanding of the Palestinian questions lies in the diagnosis of the factors and the processes that have affected and left their mark on the political, social, and cultural journey of the Palestinian people in the context of the transformations of the Palestinian, Arab, regional, and international situations. The

presentation addresses the tasks and measures that should be undertaken by the Palestinian political movements to restore the importance of the Palestinian question.

## **Sam Bahour**

### **Concrete Steps Toward Reforming the Palestinian Political System to Cope with the Growing Threats to the National Liberation Project**

The Palestinian political system is in a dire situation. Ever since the Oslo Peace Accords were signed, the PLO found itself drowning in the quagmire of bilateral negotiations with a negotiating partner intent on not reaching a deal and unable to fathom the idea of a Palestinian state emerging on the ground. In the meantime, Israel used every day to create more facts on the ground toward making its military occupation a permanent reality. Rejuvenating the Palestinian political system is the only way forward. This intervention will attempt to provide a roadmap to this effect.

## **Aida Touma - Suleiman**

### **On (the Absence of) the Perspective of the Formation of an Anti-Colonial Trend in the Israeli Community**

Colonialism hinges on co-opting its society with colonial benefits for a while and utilises the external enemy and the existential threat mantra, the mythology of sublime divine missions, and other well-known tools utilised in colonial societies for long times. However, these mythologies transform into internal racism and fascism eventually, as there are no limits to colonial greed, neither a possibility to sustain its internal homogeneity. The intervention discusses the factors that prohibit the emergence of an anti-colonial camp inside the Israeli society, although its seeds, and objective conditions exist, and expressed by the escalation of fascist practices in Israel, but these same practices hinder the crystallisation of an organised anti-colonial camp although its representatives exist.