



The Mercy Seminar 2025, Term III.3

Opening Comments

In the reading for tonight, Mahmood Darwish states that the Palestinians have made a transformative offer to Israel and the world. In the place of forty years of resistance to Israel and rejection to their claim to a homeland and state in Palestine, the PLO now recognizes the legitimate existence of the Jewish state of Israel, and seeks to create its own state in the West Bank and Gaza, on the basis of United Nations Resolution 181, which was the same resolution to which Israel appealed in their Scroll of Independence in 1948. As Darwish says in his speech on the anniversary of the Nakba:

The transition from the historical memory of Palestine as a homeland to the collective endeavor to establish Palestine as a geo-political state on part of historical Palestine, signals a painful and difficult transformation in the political discourse as well as in the national ethos of the Palestinian people. While it demands recognition as a conciliatory compromise of historical magnitude, it must not be misconstrued as self-negation or weakness. Rather, it demands an immediate and unequivocal recognition of our legitimacy and right to sovereignty as a nation among equals. The vision, courage and moral magnanimity of the victim reaching out to the oppressor must not be met with further rejection, denial and victimization.

The PLO, in its Palestinian Declaration of Independence of 1988, acknowledged the legitimacy of the Jewish State without Israel having first recognized Palestine as a legitimate state on its own account. Israel still has not recognized the State of Palestine, and neither has the United States. So Darwish is understandably concerned that the Palestinian offer of peaceful co-existence with Israel not be treated with “further rejection, denial, and victimization.”

In order to appreciate how radical the turn is in the 1988 Declaration of Independence, it is good to turn to the Palestinian National Charter, passed by the Palestinian National Council in 1964 and 1968. This Charter, which marks the creation of the PLO, directly calls for the elimination of Israel from the whole of British Mandate Palestine.

Article 9: Armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine. This is the overall strategy, not merely a tactical phase. The Palestinian Arab people assert their absolute determination and firm resolution to continue their armed struggle and to work for an armed popular revolution for the liberation of their country and their return to it. They also assert their right to normal life in Palestine and to exercise their right to self-determination and sovereignty over it.

Article 10: Commando action constitutes the nucleus of the Palestinian popular liberation war.
Article 15: The liberation of Palestine, from an Arab viewpoint, is a national (qawmi) duty and it attempts to repel the Zionist and imperialist aggression against the Arab homeland, and aims at the elimination of Zionism in Palestine. Absolute responsibility for this falls upon the Arab nation - peoples and governments - with the Arab people of Palestine in the vanguard. Accordingly, the Arab nation must mobilize all its military, human, moral, and spiritual capabilities to participate actively with the Palestinian people in the liberation of Palestine.

As we know, the Arab countries tried to liberate Palestine in the 1967 war, and were decisively defeated in six days. However, the PLO never stopped using commando action in resistance and opposition to the existence of Israel, first from bases in Jordan, and then from bases in Lebanon. In contrast of the Declaration of Independence, and Charter explicitly denies the legitimacy of UN Resolution 181, which Israel used to legitimate its existence, and which the Palestinians will use in 1988 to legitimate their state.

Article 19: The partition of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of the state of Israel are entirely illegal, regardless of the passage of time, because they were contrary to the will of the Palestinian people and to their natural right in their homeland, and inconsistent with the principles embodied in the Charter of the United Nations, particularly the right to self-determination.

The Charter goes on to deny the legitimacy of Jewish claims to the land of Israel based on the Jewish presence on the land since the time of Abraham, through to the exile imposed on the Jews by Rome in 70 CE.

Claims of historical or religious ties of Jews with Palestine are incompatible with the facts of history and the true conception of what constitutes statehood. Judaism, being a religion, is not an independent nationality. Nor do Jews constitute a single nation with an identity of its own; they are citizens of the states to which they belong.

Zionism is described as an illegal and illegitimate movement which is a major source of oppression in the world. Hence eradicating Zionism and eradicating Israel are the twin goals of the PLO in 1964.

Article 22: Zionism is a political movement organically associated with international imperialism and antagonistic to all action for liberation and to progressive movements in the world. It is racist and fanatic in its nature, aggressive, expansionist, and colonial in its aims, and fascist in its methods. Israel is the instrument of the Zionist movement, and geographical base for world imperialism placed strategically in the midst of the Arab homeland to combat the hopes of the Arab nation for liberation, unity, and progress. Israel is a constant source of threat vis-a-vis peace in the Middle East and the whole world. Since the liberation of Palestine will destroy the Zionist and imperialist presence and will contribute to the establishment of peace in the Middle East, the

Palestinian people look for the support of all the progressive and peaceful forces and urge them all, irrespective of their affiliations and beliefs, to offer the Palestinian people all aid and support in their just struggle for the liberation of their homeland.

Hence we can see why Darwish calls attention to the radical way that the PLO is reaching out to Israel and the global community. Rejecting the use of terror and violence, the Declaration declares that the State of Palestine will be “a peace-loving State, in adherence to the principles of peaceful co-existence,” including especially peaceful co-existence with the State of Israel. And the Declaration of 1988 appeals to the very UN resolution which was categorically rejected in 1964 to establish its legitimacy, which simultaneously establishes the legitimacy of the State of Israel.

Despite the historical injustice inflicted on the Palestinian Arab people resulting in their dispersion and depriving them of their right to self-determination, following upon U.N. General Assembly Resolution 181 (1947), which partitioned Palestine into two states, one Arab, one Jewish, yet it is this Resolution that still provides those conditions of international legitimacy that ensure the right of the Palestinian Arab people to sovereignty.

Given the radical nature of this turn-about by the PLO, one can understand why Israel and the United States were not convinced by the sincerity of the Declaration’s offer of peaceful coexistence. Hence Yassar Arafat clarified the position of the PLO in the following way:

In Stockholm, Arafat and a PLO delegation announced they accepted "the existence of Israel as a state in the region". Arafat stated that "The PNC [Palestine National Council] accepted two states, a Palestinian state and a Jewish state, Israel. Is that clear enough?"

The problem is that the PLO voted to revoke the articles in their Charter which I cited above, but they did not have the sufficient votes to make those changes official. However, the PLO, and subsequently the Palestinian Authority, have acted in ways consistent with the Declaration and the unofficially amended Charter.

One of the interesting dynamics to note in the Declaration is the way it creates a narrative that competes with, and in some sense eliminates, the narrative used by Israel to justify the declaration of the State of Israel. This is why I appended the Scroll of Independence to tonight’s readings. The parallels are truly uncanny. Here is how the Scroll begins:

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here, their spiritual, religious, and national identity was formed. Here, they achieved independence and created a culture of national and universal significance. Here, they wrote and gave the Bible to the world. Exiled from Palestine, the Jewish people remained faithful to it in all the countries of their dispersion, never ceasing to pray and hope for their return and the restoration of their national freedom. Impelled

by this historic association, Jews strove throughout the centuries to go back to the land of their fathers and regain their Statehood.

Here is how the Declaration of Independence begins:

Palestine, the land of the three monotheistic faiths, is where the Palestinian Arab people was born, on which it grew, developed and excelled. Thus the Palestinian Arab people ensured for itself an everlasting union between itself, its land, and its history. Resolute throughout that history, the Palestinian Arab people forged its national identity, rising even to unimagined levels in its defense, as invasion, the design of others, and the appeal special to Palestine's ancient and luminous place on the eminence where powers and civilizations are joined. All this intervened thereby to deprive the people of its political independence. Yet the undying connection between Palestine and its people secured for the land its character, and for the people its national genius.

The same land which gave birth to the Jewish people is said to have given birth to the Palestinian Arab people. As the Jews through the ages longed to return to their land, to which they were deeply committed, to establish their own sovereign state in the land, the Palestinian Arab people have a deep relationship with the land which leads them to long for their own sovereign state. "In Palestine and on its perimeters, in exile distant and near, the Palestinian Arab people never faltered and never abandoned its conviction in its rights of Return and independence." Most significantly, as the Scroll claims that "the State of Israel will be open to the immigration of Jews from all countries of their dispersion," the Declaration also insists that the rights of the Palestinian Arab people include "the right of Return, the right to independence, the right to sovereignty over territory and homeland." Darwish, in his commemoration of the Nakba, makes it clear how central the right of return is to the Palestinian cause. The PLO has "obtained recognition from the international community for the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and the right of return as anchors to secure us against the gales of loss and denial. Above all, Jerusalem, more than a right, is the soul of our being and the essence of harmony."

There is much to discuss in these documents, so I will conclude my comments with one final observation. You likely noticed that Darwish repeatedly rails against the myth and the lie of Zionism, which is found in the phrase, "A land without a people for a people without a land." Contrary to his claim, this phrase was never used by Theodor Herzl, and only appeared briefly in one Zionist Congress. It was first formulated by Christian Zionists in the nineteenth century, but the Jewish Zionists never thought that Mandate Palestine was empty of people. However, this may be beside the point, for the reason Darwish focuses on this phrase has to do with the way he thinks that Israel denies the existence of the Palestinians as a people and a nation like that of the Jews, and the way Israel uses its own story to eclipse and silence the story of the Palestinians. One of the major objectives of this Mercy Seminar is to make sure that both narratives get heard, and that both are taken seriously. I remember reading one Palestinian author who said that the main thing that Palestinians want is for Israeli Jews to take the Palestinian testimony to the trauma of the Nakba as seriously as they take their own narrative of the

suffering of exile culminating in the Holocaust. As Darwish says, “We have refused to adopt their distorted version of our history and we remain advocates and witnesses of the authentic narrative of Palestinian endurance and the will to live.”