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## The Lost 'Arab': Gaza and the Evolving Language of the Palestinian Struggle



Image by Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona.

Language matters. Aside from its immediate impact on our perception of great political events, including war, language also defines our understanding of these events throughout history, thereby shaping our relationship with the past, the present, and the future.

As Arab leaders are mobilizing to prevent any attempt to displace the Palestinian population of war-stricken Gaza – and the occupied West Bank for that matter – I couldn't help but reflect on language: when did we stop referencing the 'Arab-Israeli conflict,' and substitute that with the 'Palestinian-Israeli conflict'?

Aside from the obvious problem that military occupations should not be described as 'conflicts' – a neutral term that creates a moral equivalence – the removal of 'Arabs' from the 'conflict' has greatly worsened matters, not only for Palestinians, but Arabs themselves.

Before we talk about these repercussions, that of swapping words and altering phrases, it is important to dig deeper: when exactly was the term ‘Arab’ removed? And equally important, why was it added in the first place?

The League of Arab States was established in March 1945, over three years before the establishment of Israel. A main cause of that newly found Arab unity was Palestine, then under British colonial ‘mandate.’ Not only did the few independent Arab states understand the centrality of Palestine to their collective security and political identities, but they perceived Palestine as the single most critical issue for all Arab nations – independent or otherwise.

That affinity grew stronger with time, and the Arab League summits always reflected the fact that Arab peoples and governments, despite conflicts, rebellions, upheavals, and divisions, were always united in a singular value: the liberation of Palestine.

The spiritual significance of Palestine grew hand in hand with its political and strategic significance to the Arabs, thus the injection of the religious component to that relationship.

The arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in August 1969 was the main catalyst behind the establishment of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) later that year. In 2011, it was renamed the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, though Palestine remained the central topic of Muslim dialogue.

Still, the ‘conflict’ remained ‘Arab,’ as Arab countries were the ones who bore the brunt of it, engaged in its wars, suffered its defeats, but also shared its moments of triumph.

The Arab military defeat in June 1967 to the Israeli army, backed by the United States and other powerful western powers, was a watershed moment. Humiliated and angry, Arab nations declared their famous “Three No’s” at the Khartoum Summit in August-September of that same year. All the ‘no’s’ centered on the idea that there will be no peace, negotiations, or recognition of Israel while Palestinians are held captive.

That strong stance, however, didn’t survive the test of time. Disunity among Arab nations rose to the surface, and such terms as Al-‘Am al-Qawmi al-‘Arabi – the Arab national security – often focused on Palestine, splintered into new conceptions surrounding the interests of nation-states.

The Camp David Accords signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979 deepened Arab divisions – and marginalized Palestine further – though, in actuality, it didn’t invent them.

It was around these times that western media, then academia, began coining new terms regarding Palestine. The ‘Arab’ was dropped, in favor of ‘Palestinian’. That simple change was earth-shattering, as Arabs, Palestinians, and people around the world began making new

associations with the political discourse pertaining to Palestine. The isolation of Palestine had thus crossed that of physical sieges and military occupation, into the realm of language.

Palestinians fought hard to win their rightful and deserved position as the guardians of their own struggle. Though the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was established at the behest of Egypt in the First Arab Summit in Cairo of 1964, Palestinians, under the leadership of Fatah's Yasser Arafat, were given the helm in 1969.

Five years later, in the Arab Summit in Rabat (1974), the PLO was collectively perceived as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," later to be granted observer status at the United Nations.

Ideally, a truly independent Palestinian leadership needed to be embraced by a collective and unified Arab position, aiding it in the difficult, and often bloody, process of liberation. Events that followed, however, attested to a far less ideal trajectory: Arab and Palestinian divisions weakened the position of both, splintering their energies, resources, and political decisions.

But history is not destined to follow the same pattern. Though historical experiences may appear to replicate themselves, the wheel of history can be channeled to move in the right direction.

Gaza, and the great injustice resulting from the destruction of the Israeli war in the Strip, is once more being a catalyst for Arab dialogue, and, if there is enough will, unity.

Though Palestinians have demonstrated that their sumud – steadfastness – is enough to repel all stratagems aimed at their very destruction, Arab nations must reclaim their position as the first line of solidarity and support for the Palestinian people, not only for the sake of Palestine itself but also for the sake of all Arab nations.

Unity is now key to recentering the just cause of Palestine, so that language may, once more, shift, injecting the 'Arab' component as a critical word in a struggle for freedom that should concern all Arab and Muslim nations, and in fact, the whole world.

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