

# The Palestinian Left and Its Decline

Francesco Saverio Leopardi

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Loyal Opposition

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*To Benedetta.*

## PREFACE

This book deals with the history of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) during its declining phase, namely between the 1982 PLO eviction from Lebanon and the crystallisation of the Hamas-Fatah split in 2007. Being historically the main Marxist force within the Palestinian national movement, the PFLP's marginalisation process affected the condition of the whole Palestinian Left. The entire leftist camp, notwithstanding its chronic fragmentation, described itself as alternative to Fatah domination, and later also to Hamas' rise, thus the specificities and factors behind the PFLP's decline did not leave the other organisations untouched.

The supposedly alternative that the Palestinian Left embodied had nonetheless to face significant contradictions that would emerge in full strength after the shocking changes which 1982 brought to the PLO paradigms of action. Claiming to represent an alternative, a counterhegemonic political project that rivalled Fatah's strategy for liberation came to be increasingly at odds with the PFLP and the Palestinian Left's unquestioned loyalty to the Fatah-dominated PLO. Such "loyal opposition" ultimately entailed the relinquishment of all counterhegemonic role, undermining the *raison d'être* of a revolutionary Left that, notably in the PFLP's case, still nominally adhered to the creation of a socialist, democratic state all over the land of historic Palestine. This book examines the PFLP's political agency to unveil how such relinquishment happened and to illustrate what dynamics and behaviours it produced. This meant constructing the PFLP's process of decline as the result of inefficient policy

making rather than the mechanic result of fateful, external events such as the collapse of “Existing Socialism”. A focused analysis of the PFLP and the Palestinian Left’s marginalisation is long overdue, and this book aims at starting to make up such shortcoming of Palestinian political historiography. This kind of perspectives on Palestinian politics are all the more urgent as the Palestinian national movement continues to experience an unresolvable crisis that has deprived its main actors of much of their political legitimacy. The absence of a credible Palestinian Left is thus part and parcel of the current political paralysis in a time of unprecedented attacks to Palestinian self-determination on both a local and a global scale.

Historians and political scientists working on the contemporary Palestinian national movement might find this book beneficial, but I hope that the ideas and concepts that it developed will be interesting to academics and students focusing on the whole Middle East and North Africa and beyond. This volume contributes to the wider discussion on how leftist national liberation movements handled their relations with nationalism and, more specifically, on how they acted within a political arena dominated by nationalist forces and discourses. Moreover, in light of its chronology, this book also addresses the issue of leftist radical renewal in a post-Soviet world. That is why, after a detailed analysis of the PFLP’s trajectory, a separate chapter features a parallel analysis of two leftist movements that faced similar challenges: the Egyptian communist movement and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party.

I took the first steps in the research behind this volume almost a decade ago, during my final year as a master’s student at the Department of Asian and North African Studies in the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. During those times, I was fortunate enough to find in Massimiliano Trentin a supportive supervisor who wisely guided me in the first elaborations of my ideas. Ever since, Massimiliano became a colleague and a friend with whom collaboration continues fruitfully and if this book has seen the light it is also thanks to his constant professional and personal support. The time spent in Palestine has been crucial in the ideation of this book for obvious reasons. My stays in Ramallah and Bir Zeit would have not been so enriching without the presence and friendship of Nicola and Farah. They opened to me not only the doors of their Ramallah home, but also those of the local academic community. I am thankful to their Palestinian family for helping me to reach out to veterans of Palestinian politics whose insights have been extremely important to my research. I also thank particularly Nicola for sharing his experience with me throughout the last eight years.

My doctoral studies at the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies in the University of Edinburgh were a central step in the development of the ideas and analyses that became the core of this book. My gratitude goes to Anthony Gorman, my PhD first supervisor, for the time spent discussing the subject of my research and for his precious advices. I am also thankful to Thomas Pierret whose stimulating comments helped me to improve my look on the history of the Palestinian Left. In Edinburgh I met many people who deserve acknowledgement for their support, but I would like to mention in particular two of them: Sarah, for her uncommon encouragement and for her constant help, and Abla, who assisted me several times in the process of collecting important information.

Beirut, and specifically the library of the Institute for Palestine Studies, has been the main location of my archival research. The librarians' helpfulness allowed me to retrieve the material I needed in a friendly and professional environment. I am also grateful to the Council for British Research in the Levant for providing a travel grant which was essential in ensuring the success of my fieldwork in the Lebanese capital. Lebanon is the place of some of my dearest memories and for this I am grateful to Oriol and Ilaria: they allowed me in their home and treated me like family. I would like to thank all those people who accepted to talk to me about their political experience within the Palestinian national movement. I cannot name them here, but they had a fundamental role in the creation of this book. It is my sympathy towards the Palestinians' rightful quest for liberation and self-determination that led me to become interested in the history of their national movement. I hope that the honest efforts behind this book honour the lives and struggle of all those who fought and still fight for justice in Palestine and Israel.

I am thankful to my parents for their unquestioned trust in my ideas and aspirations, their support has always been a priceless certainty. This book is dedicated to Benedetta, to whom goes my most profound gratitude for her strengthening presence, for filling my life with meaning and for inspiring me to be a better man.

Verona, Italy  
26 February 2020

Francesco Saverio Leopardi

## Note on Transliteration

Arabic words are transliterated following the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Diacritics have not been employed with the exception of ʾ for *hamza* (vocal suspension) and ʿ for ʿayn (guttural consonant). Arabic and foreign names have been transliterated according to their most common version in British English.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

AMB	Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades
ANM	Arab Nationalists Movement
APF	Alliance of Palestinian Forces
BDS	Boycott Divestment and Sanctions
CPE	Communist Party of Egypt
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DA	Democratic Alliance
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
DG	Democratic Gathering
DoP	Declaration of Principles
ECP	Egyptian Communist Party
EMNL	Egyptian Movement for National Liberation
FPR	Forces of Popular Resistance
GFTU	General Federation of Trade Unions
GUPW	General Union of Palestinian Women
Hadetu	al-Haraka al-Dimuqratiyya li-l-Taharrur al-Watani (Democratic Movement for National Liberation)
Hamas	Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya (Islamic Resistance Movement)
JCP	Jordanian Communist Party
JRA	Japanese Red Army
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
LF	Lebanese Forces
LNDF	Lebanese National Democratic Front
LNM	Lebanese National Movement
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
NA	National Alliance

NFLP	National Front for the Liberation of Palestine
NGC	National Guidance Committee
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NIHC	National and Islamic Higher Committee for the Follow-Up of the Intifada
NSF	National Salvation Front
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territories
PCC	Palestine Central Council
PCP	Palestine Communist Party
PF-GC	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PLF	Palestinian Liberation Front
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
PNC	Palestine National Council
PNF	Palestinian National Front
PNGO	Palestinian NGOs Network
PNI	Palestinian National Initiative
PNO	Popular Nasserist Organisation
PNSF	Palestine National Salvation Front
PPP	Palestine People's Party
PPSF	Palestinian Popular Struggle Front
PSP	Progressive Socialist Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PYD	Democratic Union Party
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SCP	Syrian Communist Party
SLA	South Lebanese Army
UAR	United Arab Republic
UECP	Unified Egyptian Communist Party
UN	United Nations
UNLU	Unified National Leadership of the Uprising
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UPWC	Union of Palestinian Women's Committees
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WPCP	Workers and Peasants' Communist Party
WYM	Workers' Youth Movement