

Religion in Literature and Activities of Political Parties in Palestine



Iyad Barghouti

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Prelude

Through publishing a new book for Prof. Iyad Barghouti entitled “**Religion in Literature and activities of Political parties in Palestine**”, Ramallah Center for Human Rights Study (RCHRS) takes a new significant and defiant step as part of its tireless efforts to consolidate secular political concepts, values, culture and behaviors.

In the discourse on the historical, cognitive and critical aspects of the political Islam in Palestine, the author of this book comes to one's mind at once for being an expert with distinction in this respect and a reference for scholars, particularly due to the several profound and valuable studies he has conducted in this field so far.

In his previous studies, Prof. Barghouti addressed the topic of Political Islam in Palestine by investigating the distinctive features of the principal and most effective movements in the local arena, namely the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), the Islamic Jihad Movement, and Hizbul-Tahrir (i.e., the liberation party). In addition to their inception and development in Palestine, the role of these parties in consolidating the political Islamic culture, and their persistent endeavors to Islamize the society, each in accordance with its religious vision, the author has traced their organizational and ideological origins that emanate from the Muslim Brothers movement, indicating the differences in their attitudes towards specific issues, as well

as their role in changing and reforming community, rule and resistance against the Israeli occupation.

In his new study that is entitled “Political **Secularism and the religious question**”, the topic is approached from a different angle in that it addresses the religious question in the Secular parties of Palestine, at the forefront of which is (Fatah) movement, the largest Palestinian political faction, with various intellectual and ideological approaches, and describes itself as the movement of all Palestinians. It adopted secularism in monitoring the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and also through its vision to solve the Palestinian cause through adopting the idea of a democratic state on the entire Palestinian territories in the 70s of the past century.

Nevertheless, and after the rise of (Hamas) in the first Intifada, and following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, Fatah started to become more inclined towards religion, and embodied that when it was in control of the first Legislative Council, which drafted the Basic Law of which article 4 stipulates that “Islam is the official religion in Palestine. Respect for the sanctity of all other divine religions shall be maintained, and that the Islamic law(Sharia’a) is a principal source of legislation.”

The book tackles the issue of the use of religion among the Palestine political factions that fall under the umbrella of the PLO, which has its own popular basis and leadership in the Occupied Palestinian Territories(OPT). The study examines the employment of religion, in eight other Palestinian factions and

parties, in addition to (Fatah) movement. Those parties and factions included the communist party i.e. Palestine People's Party, national or Ba'athi parties that adopted the Marxist-Leninist thought, or those that can be described as Islamic nationalists.

The book sheds light on the origin, intellectual approach and ideology of each party or movement, then traces down the intellectual and ideological transformations, and examines its religious point of view from its literature, and employment of religion in its political discourse. In this regard, the writer focuses on the parties and factions that used to adopt the Marxist-Leninist ideology, and believes that those parties and factions had a larger influence on the society when they used to adopt the ideologies they "believed" in, and that had less influence after backing down from these ideologies in an attempt to "gain the confidence" of people and to fend off "the accusation" of their being atheists.

In this context, the study critically examines the reasons for these transformations and does not skip other parties and factions but the focus here seems to be on the Popular PFLP for the Liberation of Palestine(PFLP), the Democratic PFLP for the Liberation of Palestine(DFLP), The Palestine People's Party, and FIDA party, because these two PFLPs and FIDA party emanated from the Arab Nationalist Movement which adopted the Marxist-Leninist ideology which a number of liberation movements and parties in the Arab countries have adopted, in addition to the Peoples Party which describes itself as the heir of the communist movement in Palestine.

The study seeks to give answers to the questions on the attitude of the PLO towards the future of the governance regime in Palestine, with regard to legislation and the fourth article of the Palestinian Basic Law where the opinions varied between supporters and opponents. Some strived to clear their names from this article and claimed it was for (Fatah) movement since its members in the first Legislative Council drafted the Palestinian Basic Law.

Other questions the study tried to look for answers to: the views of these parties and factions towards women rights and women representation in leadership positions, partisan edification, and the educational system and to which extent they interfere in its criticism, educational curriculum and how often they review it. And at this point, the writer states that the only party that provided a critical reading of the curriculum is Al-Tahrir party which is not included in this study.

The book reflects the immense efforts exerted by Dr. Iyad Barghouti where he conducted interviews face to face with a number of leaders in the target parties and factions of the study in order to receive answers to his questions from its primary sources. This type of research carried out by the writer requires a great amount of time and effort, and much more patience.

In his study, the writer reached results that may be shocking and harsh at the same time, the most important of which is the lack of differentiation that once was between the agendas of the PLO factions and its attitudes and visions. The agendas of those factions only slightly go beyond that of Fatah . However, some of those agendas are identical to that of Fatah regarding its vision to resolve the Palestinian conflict, or its position towards

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the political divide and struggle for power with Hamas .

A fundamental point aroused in the study, which is represented by discrepancies between the points of view of leaders of the same political party concerning some issues. This state probably occurred due to the abandonment of a number of parties to their ideologies, that led to the losing of the compass, and entering a state of “disorientation”, than due to the broadening the democratic margins within those parties.

Finally, as the earlier studies conducted by Prof. Barghouti were a platform for the study of political Islam in our country, this study is expected to be a starting point for the study of the impact of religion on the thought, attitudes and behaviors of the Palestinian secularly-affiliated parties.

Manifestations of Islamic awakening began to emerge in Palestine in the late seventies and early eighties of the last century.

Politically, such manifestations were evident in activating the role of the Muslim Brothers movement, the formation of what is known as Islamic PFLPs in the newly established Palestinian universities, in addition to the establishment of new political Islamic movements, such as Islamic Jihad in the early eighties and Hamas that emanated from the Muslim Brothers movement

by the end of 1987.

Social and cultural manifestations by contrast, were evident in the spreading of religious inclinations among Palestinians as seen in the growing numbers of bearded men and women wearing al-Hijab (headscarf), or the increase in practicing religious rituals and the emergence of institutions of a religious character including schools and kindergartens, in addition to sports and cultural clubs as well as religious educational institutions.

In the beginning, manifestations of popular religious inclinations had been the most prominent despite the emergence of the political movements. In terms of thought, the Palestinian political movements that were characterized by secularism were the most conspicuous ones in the political arena, whereas the Islamic awakening was almost restricted to popular manifestations that have in some respect transformed into a political ideological form of religious character , yet with great difficulty.

The collapse of the Soviet Union along with other socialist countries resulted in the subsidization of the socialist thought to a great extent. Albeit, it was theoretically supposed that the regression of socialism would be in favor of the bourgeoisie and its liberal thought. Reality revealed that this was relatively true in the West, but not in Palestine and the Arab region where such regression was in favor of the conservative Islamic thought represented by political Islam and its social and political implications.

The predominance of conservative Islamic thought is ascribed to the fact that secular thought and conduct (except for market freedom) in the Arab world has been embraced by the left and its social implications, rather than the weak bourgeoisie that supposedly lost its national and intellectual agenda. Therefore, the subsidization of the left in the region has resulted in the waning of leftist social thought in addition to liberal thought and conduct, in favor of political Islam and its conservative thought, particularly as the latter was constantly in opposition of the left , socialism, liberalism.

The Palestinian bourgeoisie that was supposed to embrace liberal thought was rather characterized by the absence of a national progressive agenda, and by being greatly influenced by the bourgeoisie prevalent in the Arab Gulf area where many of its pioneers held the citizenship of the Arab Gulf countries, and particularly that of Saudi Arabia. With such characteristics, the bourgeoisie in Palestine has become intellectually conservative, capable to coexist with such conservative thought, and to create its own broad-minded sphere that was distanced from the surrounding community, and therefore became in conformity with the Islamists in the economic and political tendency, thus paving the way for Islamists to formulate the community in accordance with their own views, while in turn, while the latter would provide the bourgeoisie with the opportunity to practice its liberal views basically in its own sphere and also abroad, and to manage its economic affairs in accordance with its own approach.

Compared to the doctrine historically advocated by

the Muslim Brothers in Palestine and the entire area, the newly widely-spread Salafi (Fundamentalist Islam) thought forthcoming from the Gulf area, and particularly from Saudi Arabia, is more conservative and fundamentalist. Their organizations and parties began to emerge in public as evident in the various Salafi gatherings, which came side by side with the Muslim Brothers in the “Tahrir” Square in Cairo, and that the Salafi Nour Party ranked the second-largest party after the Muslim Brothers in the latest Egyptian elections .

The profound and tremendous impact of the Salafi thought that has invaded Palestine and the whole area following the eighties of the last century (that led to the Gulfanization of Palestine to a great extent) is also evident in the Gulf satellite stations that did broadcast Salafi thought for hours daily .In addition, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were greatly influenced by Salafi thought due to their coexistence with Salafis on their own ground, namely in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, who have returned to Palestinian territories following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

The increasing impact of the Salafi thought, the semi-complete absence of liberal progressive thought and the great decline in the impact of institutions advocating progressive thought have resulted in remarkable subsidization of societal culture in favor of more conservative Islamic tendencies.

To indicate the impact of religion on the Palestinian intellectual and political life, the Ramallah Center for Human Rights Studies (RCHRS) conducted two public opinion surveys

on religious thought and the extent of its influence on the Palestinian thought and culture: the first poll was conducted in August, 2010 under the title of “Religion in Palestinian Culture”, and the second was conducted August, 2011 and was entitled “September Entitlements and the Palestinian State”

The polls revealed that:

- 78% of the respondents are constantly committed to prayers while 17% are sporadically committed, and only 6% are not committed at all.
- 77% of the respondents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip read the Koran regularly as compared to 7% who said they never read it.
- 91% of the respondents fast regularly during Ramadan while a little more than 1% do not fast at all.
- 85% consider themselves religious(fully or somewhat) as compared to 15% who regard themselves non-religious, albeit they perform religious rituals.
- Approximately 51% of the respondents deem it necessary to increase the number of religion classes at schools whereas 3% only deem them as more than what is required.
- About 52% believe that the main goal of teaching religion is to increase the degree of religiosity among students whereas 43% believe it to encourage the students to study various religious texts.
- A very high percentage(93%) of the respondents believe teaching religion at schools as being essential whereas only 5% believe it to be unnecessary.
- Two-thirds (67%) of the respondents support imposing on women to wear the Hijab (headscarf) whereas 32%

-
- oppose.
- 24% support imposing on women to wear the Niqab (veil covering the face) whereas 74% oppose .
 - With regard to the relationship between degree of religiosity and political issues, and particularly the religion and state, 70% of the respondents opposed separating religion from the state .
 - Regarding the role of Shari'a (Islamic law) in legislation, 4% of the respondents deem it necessary to exclude Shari'a from legislation as compared to 30% who believe that it must be the sole source for legislation.
 - Regarding the political parties, 24% oppose the presence of religious parties within the Palestinian political system, as compared to 49% who oppose the presence of secular parties.

In the light of the high impact of religious thought on political and ideological orientation of the Palestinians, 26% of the respondents believe that the model for the future Palestinian state is Saudi Arabia followed by Turkey (19%), then America (12%), Sweden (11%) and Iran (4%).

The fact that Saudi Arabia and Turkey ranked highest by the majority of Palestinians as models to be followed by the prospective Palestinian state is an evidence of the concentration of Palestinian ideological trends on moderate and less moderate (i.e., more fundamentalist) Islam, the former is represented by the Muslim Brothers and the official religious establishment while the latter is advocated by the arising and increasing Salafi groups. Such preference shows that prospective political and

ideological conflict would arise between these two trends whereas the impact of other political and intellectual parties is expected to be extremely marginal.

However, moderate Islam in Palestine and other Arab countries (which is an extension of the Muslim Brothers as mentioned earlier) is less moderate for accepting a secular state than that of the Turkish model represented by the Justice and Development Party in Turkey.

In his endeavor to promote for the secular state during his visit to Egypt in August, 2011, the Turkish Prime Minister was fiercely challenged by the Muslim Brothers who declared that despite the fact that their movement adopts moderate policies, they would never approve the secular state as the Turks did.

Their spokesman in Egypt, Mohammad Ghuzlan, declared that the experience of other countries including Turkey must not be reproduced or modeled. Issam Al-A'ryan, the vice-chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political arm of the Muslim Brothers movement, warned the Egyptians from the Turkey's hegemony over the region", and stated that the Arab countries were not subject to foreign agenda. In his response to Erdogan's call upon the Egyptians not to fear secularism, Aryan said: "Neither Erdogan nor others have the right to interfere in the affairs of another country or force it to follow a specific model... for we also believe that democracy and democratic values can be applied without secularism".

To the contrary to what Aryan believes, many others believe that secularism is a basic prerequisite for democracy. Barqawi,

for example, states that “to claim that a political power is democratic but not secular is a contradictory statement since democracy is an inclusive system that assures freedom for all individuals, particularly regarding their political, intellectual and social choices; a system that cannot be applied in a non-secular religious state, or in a state where citizenship is a lifestyle.”¹

These statements indicate that Islam in the Arab World represented by the Muslim Brothers is less moderate than its counterpart in Turkey, particularly regarding the nature and the form of the state. This also means that the differences in terms of ideology, political reflections and the form of the state between the moderate (Muslim Brothers) and the less moderate (Salafis) movement are not so large, and that the conflict between them seems to be political rather than ideological i.e. a conflict on who is going to rule. Moreover, Muslim Brothers may tend to offer ideological “concessions” in favor of Salafis for achieving political “gains”. The “coming” conflict between the two parties will mainly be between the pragmatism of the Muslim Brothers and the dogmatism of some Salafi movements and on who will hold power and rule.

An evident example of the competition between moderate and less moderate or that between fundamental and more fundamental Islamists is a statement entitled “Al-Azhar Statement on the Future of Egypt, which reflects the interference of Al-Azhar, the Egyptian official religious organization that is highly influenced by the Muslim Brothers, to illustrate their attitudes towards the future of Egypt in the transitional period

that followed the collapse of Mubarak's regime. It is noteworthy here to mention that the situation in Egypt can be applied to most of the Arab countries including Palestine.

Due to the growing presence of Salafis in the Egyptian street, Al-Azhar interfered in favor of the moderate Islamic as the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Prof. Dr. Ahmad El Tayeib along with a bunch of intellectuals issued a statement in favor of the Muslim Brothers and the state i.e. in favor of moderate Islam , and against the Salafis rather than being a document against secularism in Egypt.

The statement stressed the necessity to determine the governing principles that monitor the relation between Islam in a framework of a conciliatory strategy that will ensure democratic transformation and social justice, while preserving human and spiritual values and cultural heritage. These Islamic principles, that are well inculcated in the conscience and mind of scientists and intellectuals should be protected from negligence, distortion, extravagance and misinterpretation, and should form a protection from making use of them by perverted currents. It is feared that the latter may raise religious, ideological or sectarian slogans that do not conform to the constants and common interests of our nation, or deviate from the approach of moderation.

The statement of Al-Azhar emphasized the following principles:

- 1- Al-Azhar supports the establishment of a modern and democratic state according to a constitution upon which Egyptians agree, and that separates between the state

authorities and its governing legal establishments, and gives the legislation power to the people's representatives in accordance with the true Islamic aspects. Islam, whether in its legislation, culture and history, has never known the theocratic state experienced by other cultures, given that the Islamic law(Sharia'a) is the main source for legislation.

- 2- Al-Azhar embraces on democracy based on free and direct voting, which represents the modern formula to achieve the Islamic precepts of Shura (consultation).
- 3- The commitment to freedom of thought and opinion with a full respect of humans, women and children's rights, pluralism, and full respect of divine religions, and to consider citizenship as the basis of responsibility in the society.
- 4- Full respect of counter opinions, and the ethics of dialogue, in addition to avoiding labeling people as atheists or traitors, or making use of religion to agitate dissension, dispute and hostility among citizens.
- 5- The commitment to all international conventions, resolutions and achievements in conformity with the tolerant Arab and Islamic culture.

Focusing on moderation, tolerance, non-extravagance and distortion implies is a discourse addressed to the Islamists who do not believe in these values, or who interpret Islamic teachings in contradiction to the principles and values advocated by Al-Azhar, particularly some fundamentalist and Salafi organizations that have recently established their own movements. Secularists and leftists, who comprise the ideological and "traditional"

adversaries of Al-Azhar are excluded from the statement issued in the midst of the transitional period that followed the collapse of Mubarak's regime.

The official religious establishment in the Arab World, at the forefront of which is Al-Azhar, has exemplified the political and ideological attitudes of the conservative authority that has never embraces a more moderate position except when that position meets the needs of the political authority.

In addition to the aforementioned opinion polls, analysis of thought trends in Palestine shows that despite the presence of secularists as individuals, the tremendous regression in secularism is evident. This is represented by the abandonment of the traditional and secular movements of their role as popular movements leading their people towards particular modern values, in favor of raising popular mottos hoping to gain people's consent and their electoral votes.

Abandonment their role as leaders of the public made secular movements practice politics in a popular and opportunist sense, particularly after exercising elections in Palestine and the competition over votes. Such shift in roles made leaders behave in the same manner as the public and turned them into subordinates rather than leaders of their people, which explains why the forces of change that have played a major role in the so-called the Arab Spring did not include the political parties.

The popular approach of the "secularly affiliated" parties was consolidated in the light of the establishment of Hamas

movement and the growth of its power, where those parties started using religious symbols and slogans. However, and in contrary to their desire, this method has dragged them into the square of religious thought rather than pulling the carpet from under Hamas's feet.

Dominion of secular progressive thought which characterized the era of Palestinian national awakening in the seventies and eighties of the last century was even evident in the remarkable inclination of Islamic movements founded in that period including the Islamic Jihad and Hamas towards the liberation work. This was contrary to the Wahabi Salafist movements that originated in times of subsidence of national trends, and characterized by anti-national religious missionary work through being excessively concerned with discrepancy and conflict among various doctrines more than anything else.

With reference to the aforementioned opinion polls, results show that the religious thought and manifestations dominating the lives of the majority of Palestinians, both intellectually and socially, were not fully reflected on political support of Islamic movements. The low percentage of respondents (less than 20%) who describe themselves as supporters of Islamic movements refers to the pragmatism adopted by the majority of Palestinians to reconcile the demands of daily life that require a great deal of self-liberation from the constraints of ideology with their intellectual convictions.

Results also reveal the state of thought confusion

experienced by Palestinians, not only in terms of separation between concerns of daily life and political attitudes, but also in differentiating theoretical positions from practical application. For example 86% of the participants supported indiscrimination between citizens on the basis of religion, while simultaneously 75% opposed the election of a non-Muslim Palestinian as a president, and 63% objected to the idea of a woman being elected for presidency.

Similarly, 83% supported the establishment of a pluralistic democratic state that ensures public freedom regardless of religion or political affiliation, 73% supported enactment of a law that incriminates individuals who do not fast during Ramadan while 21% rejected such legislation.

These results show that the “contradiction” between religious faith and the principles of citizenship and personal freedom still dominates the mentality of many Palestinians.

In this political, socioeconomic and intellectual environment, the study attempts to investigate the attitudes and positions of the Palestinian political movements affiliated to the PLO, that describe themselves or are sometimes described as “secular”, towards issues related to religion and religious thought, particularly those positions that have impact on socioeconomic system, intellectual trend and values in general, and the political system in particular.

The study is restricted to the nine movements working under the umbrella of the PLO, whose leaders and partisans

are residents of the occupied Palestinian territories including Fatah, the PFLP for the Liberation of Palestine(PFLP), the Democratic PFLP for the Liberation of Palestine(DFLP), The Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA), the Arab Liberation PFLP, the Palestinian Liberation PFLP, the Palestinian Arab PFLP, the Popular Struggle PFLP and the Palestine People's Party.

In addition to the excluding of the Palestinian movements and organizations that were formerly part of the PLO, particularly those located in Damascus, the study also excludes the Palestinian Islamic political movements, not due to being separated from PLO (the focus of our study), but due to their adopting religious thought as their basic reference , as they declare. Accordingly, investigation of the extent to which the thought, attitudes and positions of Islamic movements are based on religious principles does not constitute a discovery or a meritorious work as it is the case in investigating the thought and attitudes of secular movements , yet reality indicates the contrary in some cases.

The Palestinian Political Movements between Religion and Politics

The Palestinian National Liberation Movement/ Fatah

It seems that the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) was established by Palestinian students studying in the Egyptian universities in the late fifties of the last century, yet its official establishment dates back to the first of January, 1965, the anniversary of the outbreak of the Palestinian contemporary armed revolution, when Fatah Fedayeen (i.e., guerilla fighters) carried out the first military operation against Israel.

Although many of the founding fathers of Fatah the most prominent of who was Yasser Arafat were known for being close to the Muslim Brothers, some of those among the avant-garde had relations with national left-wing organizations. Farouq Al-Qaddoumi, for instance was known for being affiliated to the Ba'ath (i.e., renaissance) party prior to joining the pioneers circle of Fatah.

Being widely known after the six-day war in June, 1967 that resulted in the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories as well as other regions in neighboring Arab countries, it was determined that Fatah would be a Palestinian pragmatic national movement, detached from the thought affiliation of its founders, able to accommodate all Palestinians believing in its platform that started with armed struggle as the route to liberation, and ended up with negotiations as the sole choice for peaceful

settlement with Israel.

In 1969, Fatah joined the PLO that was founded five years earlier, and its leader Yasser Arafat took over as a chairman of the PLO and so remained until his death in 2004. The PLO has been greatly overshadowed by the policies and platform of Fatah, the movement which was ranked the first in the Organization.

Regardless of the intellectual influence of the Muslim Brothers movement on the prominent Fatah leaders, or the employment of the religious discourse, particularly by Yasser Arafat, the movement, through excluding thought affiliation as a basis for classification, and its focus on armed struggle for liberation as well as its adherence to **“independency of the Palestinian Decision”** Fatah had been known as a secular movement, and had guided the PLO into this trend.

The sixth conference of Fatah that was convened in Bethlehem in 2009, was characterized by new trends vis-à-vis the national cause. However, significant documents were ratified in the five conferences that were convened by Fatah movement since its establishment and up to 1980, in which the movement evidently declared its national, political and intellectual inclinations. The documents, in which the words “Islam” and “Muslims” were never cited, have frequently stressed the close association of the Palestinian revolution to the Arab Nation, confirming that such a revolution is the vanguard of the decisive liberation battle, or that “liberation of Palestine is the route to the unification of the Arab nation. The documents also state that Palestine is part of the Arab World, and the Palestinian people are part of the Arab

Nation, and their struggle is part of its struggle. The documents referred to the international dimension of the Palestinian revolution, affirming that the Palestinian struggle is part and parcel of the world-wide struggle against Zionism, colonialism and international imperialism.

Regarding the intellectual identity of the Palestinian revolution, the secular inclination of Fatah movement, PLO and the Palestinian revolution was evident in the documents of the first five conferences, yet this trend did not last long. However, all documents issued in the first five conferences sustained two significant issues , namely: “ the liberation battle is a **religious**, humane and Arab obligation”, and “ the establishment of an Arab Palestinian democratic state where Muslims, Christians and Jews have equal rights and obligations is inevitable”. The term “**religious**” that appeared in the documents for one time only, was merely an endeavor to mobilize all powers to take part in the liberation of the occupied territories.

Fatah and the Religious Question

Among the Palestinian political “secular” movements, Fatah is evidently closest to and in reconciliation with religion. It also employs religious symbols and slogans whether in discourse or in the positions adopted by the movement in dealing with issues related to religion in a form or another. It is not easy, however, to determine whether such inclination is an ideological certainty emanating from faith in religion prevalent among the movement members and its influential leaders, or just a pragmatic employment of religion as an effective means

to attract and mobilize people to resist the Israeli occupation, or to assist the movement to easily control the Palestinian people.

According to Saleh Abdel Jawad ², the researcher in Fatah affairs, both perspectives are possible, for the inclination to employ religious symbols has depended on multiple variables, of which the intellectual background of the movement leaders in that period was prominent, particularly as the forefathers of the movement in the fifties of the last century were followers or intimate associates to political Islam, and their discourse was not greatly different than that employed by religious movements.

Except for Farouq Al-Qaddoumi, one of the movement forefathers, and a member of al-Baath party that was faraway from religious parties, many of the movement founders including Salah Khalaf “Abu Iyad” , Abu Yusuf al-Najjar, Saleem Za’noun “Abu al-Adeeb”, and Kamal U’dwan and even Yasser Arafat were members of the Muslim Brothers movement. However, Khalid al-Hassan was a member of al-Tahrir (liberation) Islamic movement.

The religious discourse predominant in the language employed in “Our Palestine”, a journal issued by Fatah movement at the time with its chief editor Khalil al-Wazir “Abu Jihad” , was comparable to the religious discourse employed by Muslim Brothers, but later turned into a national liberal discourse, particularly following the six-day war in 1967 when leftists including Majid Abu Sharar, Naji Alloush and Muneer Shafiq joined the movement and held positions in the media and information department there. Such semi-secular discourse

became apparent in the journal issued by Abu Sharar under the title of “Fatah”.

The change in the discourse was due to the change in the ideological background of the movement leaders and was an evidence of the impact of this background regarding the employment of religion, and the movement’s flexibility in dealing with religion and ideologies in general. However, such change does not provide sufficient explanation of the relation between Fatah as a national liberation movement and religion or religious discourse which has great impact on Palestinians.

Fatah, basically known as a secular movement that overshadowed the PLO and the Palestinian revolution with secular inclinations, headed the project of the secular democratic state that was put forward by PLO as a choice for the settlement of the Palestinian cause. In all phases of its existence, the movement gave precedence to national discourse- regardless of its content- over religious one, and regardless of the national content of its platform or to the level the religious discourse had reached.

However, this national inclination that distinguished Fatah by its political slogans and in dealing with the national cause has diminished following the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority, whether regarding the legislations whose issuance was supervised by Fatah members, or the conservative policies it adopted in dealing with the society and the nature of societal culture.

“Fatah” rightfully views itself as “the movement of the

public national democratic current ", and "the movement of the overwhelming majority of the Palestinian people "and "the movement of all Palestinians believing in their national affiliation and national project, and in democracy away from intransigence, intolerance and despotism" ³.

Fatah members of various positions agree unanimously on regarding "Fatah as a national liberation movement regardless of religion, race or gender" (4), "the movement of a broad spectrum of people" (5). They also believe that "the impetus for its sustainability is that it is a societal" (6) , and "a non-ideological and convenient movement"(7) that does not stipulate ideological prerequisites for its membership". For most of Fatah members, Fatah is also an inclusive national movement that included people of various thought affiliations.

Throughout its history, Fatah with its Revolutionary Council have recruited religious and non-religious members of all faiths including Jews, Christians and Muslims where Arafat emphasized a broad religious representation; a position that the movement still stands for whether "intentionally or unintentionally"**8**. In addition, the movement constantly stresses the slogan of "National Unity..... Muslims and Christians", whether rationally or irrationally, as one of its partisans declared. (9) However, the movement's constitution includes no legal texts on sectarian representation, for "albeit members of other religions should not be deprived of representation, the enactment of a text based on religious quota may enhance sectarianism." ¹⁰.

The policy of religious representation exercised by the

movement in its bylaw was also applied to the organizational structure of PLO (where its executive committee included Christians, and mainly clergymen), as well as to the municipal and Legislative Council. In addition, the Palestinian government usually includes Christian ministers, although Christians currently do not exceed 1% of the total population in the Palestinian territories.

The fact that religious and non-religious members were affiliated to Fatah movement was also evident in the Israeli jails where prisoners affiliating to the movement were divided into Marxists, religious and those of no ideological interests. However, following the year 2000, the Marxist current has diminished and apparently due to the general crisis the left wing had experienced.

The religious currents from within Fatah have branched out and formed Hamas and the Islamic Jihad movements whose members were called “the thwarted”, while Fatah became a moderate and non-ideological movement although most of its early founders belonged to the Muslim Brothers movement.”

However, Fatah is a decentralized movement, where the districts, field leaders and even individuals have freedom of movement; not only with regard to the activities they perform, but also in terms of the slogans and discourse they use.

Some believe that each member of the movement’s Central Committee has his/her own vision, and that there is some kind of Privatization¹¹ in the adopted policies to the extent that each

member expresses his/her perspective in his/her own way.

Such political "privatization" has been interpreted as floatation of the religious question where every individual has the freedom to determine whether or not to be religious.

However, consensus among Fatah members on the capaciousness of the movement, the expansion of its mass bases and diversity of the intellectual and social backgrounds of its members is coupled with consensus on its national characteristic, or at least on regarding nationalism as the predominant feature and that "Fatah is not a religious party, and religious inclinations are not a prerequisite for assuming leadership positions."¹²

Regardless of the above-mentioned opinions on the national essence of the movement, religion occupies a significant position in the movement despite the endeavor to indicate that the relation with religion is not based on religious inclinations or ideology, but due to the freedom of choice available for every member to determine whether or not to be religious. Practicing religious rituals was viewed by some members as a form of respect for society, and not an ideology. However, regardless of various explanations and justifications for the increasing religious sphere within the movement, interest in religion has become more evident in recent years. In the political platform presented to the sixth conference of Fatah movement, an item singled under the title "Our Vision of the Heavenly Religions", stipulates Palestine is the Holy Land of the heavenly religions, and Islam is the religion of the majority of the Palestinian people, as well as the official religion of the

Palestinian National Authority and the State.¹³

Accordingly, and to ease the mind of those who believe that moving more towards religion is a negative phenomenon or a form of intolerance, Fatah spokesman confirmed that the movement “complies with the separation of religion from the state and tries to create a form of harmony between religious and national inclinations.”¹⁴

The Religious sphere, albeit fluctuated in accordance with the international and regional circumstances, and local political and social situations, has been evident in the movement’s discourse since its inception. In the period of national and socialist expansion in the sixties and seventies of the last century, Fatah’s secular trend, that either did not use, or used a little number of religious symbols was evident. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the decline of the Arab national role, and the agreements signed with Israel, made the role of religion more evident. Religion has become more pronounced in the aftermath of the formation of the Political Islam movements, and the intensification of conflict over power with Hamas.

The religious dimension in the central discourse of Fatah movement is evident in two aspects: First, in the oath that the individual takes when accepted as a member in the movement: “I swear by my honor and beliefs that I will remain faithful to Palestine and that I will spare no effort in working for its liberation. I swear that I will not disclose any of the movement’s secrets or affairs..... God bears witness to what I

say” and secondly in the emphasis on the Pan- Arab and Islamic dimension of the movement. Except for these two statements included in Fatah literature, religious issues remain a form of personal affairs subject to the individual’s discretion and groups rather than being stipulated in the statute of the movement ¹⁵.

Fatah members never deny the significance of religious symbols in the daily life and the activities of the movement. In their opinion, some of the concepts (cues) such as Allah, the homeland, the martyr, and Al-Fatiha (the opening chapter of the Holy Koran) are surcharged with religious symbolism.

Some Fatah leaders do not conceal their recognition of the significance of religious symbols particularly in Yasser Arafat’s discourse. In one of his comments in this respect, Nabil Amro declared that Arafat used to “control Palestinians with a verse and Hadith (prophetic tradition)”. ⁽¹⁶⁾

But how do Fatah members explain this remarkable interest of their movement in religion at a time when the movement is looking forward to establish a “democratic state”, and “adheres to the principle of separating religion from the state”, or at least has no objection to be called a “secularly-inclined movement”?

Many reasons have pushed forward in this direction including the movement’s perception of the Palestinian people and identity, particularly as the movement was originally founded to maintain and restore this identity, as constantly declared. Other reasons are related to the Palestinian Land and the nature of the Palestinian cause, as well as the ideological

structure of the Israeli occupation that the movement endeavors to liberate the country from, as well as the inclinations of the political rivals and international policies in general.

Palestine, as the authorized spokesman of the movement declared, has a significant religious dimension in being the place where the monotheistic religions descended. In addition, Palestinians are religious people and religion forms a basic component of the Palestinian identity. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain the Palestinian national identity with all its components, which means that Fatah's national identity dictates the preservation of religion. ⁽¹⁷⁾

In addition, and due to the nature of ideological structure of the Israeli people, the Zionist movement appears as a religious movement in many of its aspects, which prompted the Palestinian national movement to imitate the Israelis in their attitudes. The belief among many Palestinians that the Israeli-Arab conflict as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a religious one and has prompted Palestinian political movements and the Palestinian society in general to move towards religion.

Since the end of the sixties and until mid-eighties when the left wing was the chief rival of Fatah movement, religion was employed by Fatah to undermine the influence of the left in the popular Palestinian circles ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Fatah has also employed religion to consolidate its relations with the Arab Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia at the time, in addition to its being influenced by the Iranian

revolution in 1978 in which Khomeini appeared for the first time as “the clerk who won” ⁽¹⁹⁾.

The “benign” conflict with the left in the seventies and eighties, which turned into violent conflict with political movements, particularly Hamas that was established in the late eighties of the last century, has become more violent following the Hamas joining the Palestinian political system immediately after its victory in the 2006 legislative elections, and in the course of the subsequent political divide in 2007, where Fatah retained control of the West Bank while Hamas ruled over the Gaza Strip.

Fatah, as a movement which has solely dominated the Palestinian national arena since its accession to PLO in 1969 and until the moment when Hamas became a partner in domination process, got used to occupying the available space wherever it occurs, particularly the national arena, as it were. Fatah was not much annoyed by Islamists prior to their joining the Palestinian political arena despite their significant presence in the Palestinian street. However as long as the Islamists were primarily concerned with the dissemination of the Islamic mission, thus leaving national affairs to “the reckless” or “the infidels”, they were not regarded of being in a position of rivals, since the real rival of Fatah at that time was the left, particularly as the leftists used to “compete with” the Fatah in the political system, in addition to the civil institutions and civil society among other spheres.

Fatah has constantly called upon the Islamists to engage in Palestinian national activities, but has discovered the depth of the “paradox” since the Islamists have decided to do so,

particularly in the period when they adopted armed struggle against Israel, for armed struggle, that Fatah had embraced and constantly promoted, was the only means that granted any Palestinian organization or movement the national legitimacy.

It is the misfortune of Fatah that the Islamists embraced armed struggle against Israeli occupation in a period where Fatah abandoned such a method in favor of negotiations and the peace process. Two expressive caricature paintings that appeared during the student elections at al-Najjah University that are still cherished. The first painting was a year prior to the Madrid negotiations, that showed Fatah Youth carrying a replica of the automatic gun (Klashinkov) on the stage whereas those of the Islamic bloc carrying the Holy Koran. The second painting that was one year after the Madrid conference showed Fatah youth carrying the Koran whereas their Hamas counterparts carrying the Klashinkov.

Being unable to compete with Hamas following its involvement in the peace process, particularly regarding the armed struggle, Fatah became more inclined towards religion as a means of competition with Hamas, which resulted in an increase of religious quantum in its discourse and conduct to the extent that some of its members claimed with reservation that “persistence in competition with Hamas in the religious sphere turns the society into a more religious community” ⁽²⁰⁾.

Such competition has simultaneously empowered other religious groups including al-Salafis in a way to “spite” Hamas, and promoted religious manifestations in the society ⁽²¹⁾.

In its inclination to control all political and social spheres, religion was an aspect that Fatah strove to dominate in order to curb the dominance of the Islamic movements, particularly Hamas. In response to a complaint by Fatah members that “mosques were full of Hamas members”, Arafat replied: “You have to do so instead of them” ⁽²²⁾. The paradox was that there was a sphere to be controlled regardless of its intellectual and political content or significance”. In this way, Fatah has occupied or endeavored to occupy all spheres including the civil society and the political arena.

It is for this impetus- i.e., the occupation of a large space- that Fatah founders decided that their movement should be a grass-rooted and non-ideological national movement for all citizens, where all Palestinians: religious or non-religious, conservatives and liberals, rightists and leftists “strive” under its wing and in accordance with its perspective in its conflict with the occupation, and with other Palestinian parties in most cases.

The abandonment of arms, particularly following the establishment of the PNA in 1994, prompted Fatah to look for alternative sources of legitimacy including the elections and excessive resort to religion in words and deeds, which enhanced the role of religion in the society and in the PNA, and induced Hamas that had previously focused on national activities as a means of competition with Fatah and other national movements to get back to religion more excessively, thus agitating the most fundamentalist, Salafi and reactionary inclinations among Hamas members.

Fatah and the Palestinian Political System

Since joining the PLO in 1969 and that Yasser Arafat headed the organization, it has become difficult to separate between Fatah and the PLO.

The policy of the PLO integrated with Fatah's policy where the latter has become not only a Palestinian and guerilla fighter organization that aims to liberate the Palestinian Territories from the Israeli occupation, but also a Palestinian authority whose functions included in addition to struggle, management of the affairs of Palestinians wherever they were and in every detail (i.e. work, education and health) both inside Palestinian Territories and abroad.

Following the departure of the PLO and Arafat from Beirut in 1982, and the regression that the Palestinian armed struggle against the Israeli occupation went through, Fatah became more concerned with the Palestinian territories and attempted to "occupy" positions in the civil society including associations, unions and societies which had historically been controlled by the leftists. By so doing, Fatah intended to keep hegemony over the PLO , and to present itself as a representative of Palestinians, not only morally, but through controlling various aspects of life in the Palestinian territories, that had become the most important arena in the wake of the first Palestinian Intifada, in addition to the life of Palestinians abroad, particularly in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and other countries.

Fatah has early raised the slogan of "the independent

Palestinian decision, and introduced itself as the representative and advocate of that decision. As the movement regarded liberation to be associated with representation, it had to struggle – under various conditions- with all those who posed a threat to its representation of Palestinians as a movement occupying the top of the Palestinian political hierarchy (first the PLO, and then the PNA) .

To defend its representation of Palestinians, Fatah (along with other Palestinian factions) had a dispute with the Jordanian regime, that was culminated military in what was known as “September battles” in 1970, and the departure of Palestinian factions from Jordan. On the political level, the Arab Summit conference of Rabat recognized the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. For sustaining its hegemony, conflict erupted first between Fatah and other Palestinian factions including those based in the Palestinian territories and were struggling against the Israeli occupation that had excessively attempted to create alternative Palestinian leaderships inside the Palestinian territories, such as the village leagues. In addition, Fatah became at loggerheads with other Arab regimes such as Syria, and competed with other Palestinian factions in order to dominate the various Palestinian arenas including that of the in the Palestinian territories. Finally, Fatah had a fierce struggle with Hamas following Hamas’s winning the legislative elections in 2006.

Investigation of the relationship between representation and liberation in the contemporary history of the Palestinian national movement is of a great significance. Fatah has

considered its presence on top of the Palestinian political hierarchy, as a representative movement of the Palestinian people, as the only guarantee for the sustaining the Palestinian cause and achieving victory in the future, and thus became more concerned with representation (control over people) than with liberation (control over land). However, both discourses were taken as one for a long period of time prior to the inclination of the balance of powers in favor of representation.

This shift in concerns explains why battles for representation were immeasurably more violent than battles for liberation, or why the mentality of the national liberation movement had faded away in favor of the predominance of the mentality of determining the relationship with the authority, and simultaneously shows how Oslo Accords were considered a historical and meritorious achievement, where Palestinians recognized Israel as a state on most of the Palestinian land and Israel recognized the PLO as the representative of Palestinians. According to the participants in the Oslo Accords, the Israeli recognition of the PLO is equivalent to the Palestinian recognition of Israel.

Until the time Hamas won the legislative elections and formed a respective government, Fatah remained at the forefront of the Palestinian political movements since its accession to the PLO, assumed its leadership and used various means to maintain its superiority over others, i.e. the revolutionary legitimacy prior to the arrival of the PNA, and the legitimacy of ballot boxes at a later stage.

In both cases, the revolutionary and popular legitimacy, whether prior to or after the arrival of the PNA, resorting to the religious discourse was one of the most significant means used by the movement to maintain its dominion. Prior to the PNA, religion was employed for a long time as a means to attack the leftists (Fatah's chief rival at the time) for their being non-religious. And when Hamas became Fatah's chief rival, the latter employed religion as a means of self defense and to show that Fatah too was also religious.

Fatah has constantly confirmed its advocacy of an independent democratic and pluralistic state in which devolution of power is done through free and fair elections²³. However, adherence to such a goal throughout its long experience as a leading party of the Palestinian political system was relatively due to its success in maintaining pluralism regardless of its extent or form. Yet, Fatah failed in securing a peaceful devolution of power in the wake of Hamas's legislative victory, where the Palestinian democratic experience has significantly faltered.

The PLO under the leadership of Fatah has characterized the Palestinian national movement by secularism, as evident in the slogan of the Palestinian secular state raised in the seventies of the last century, as well as in the Declaration of Independence that included explicit secular inclination in 1988. However, Fatah itself has also issued the Basic Law that carried a religious hue in a way or another. The first Legislative Council which issued the Basic Law comprised members of Fatah movement and some independents. The problem here is that the intellectual content of the event is determined by the thought background

of the attending members of Fatah, in case there is no central position binding on all members on a particular issue as it is usually the case.

To emphasize the role of individuals in resolving significant issues related to the Palestinian constitution, Atef Abu Seif declared that Fatah aspires for a “democratic state that respects all its citizens, taking into account the heritage of the Palestinian society and its components including Islam”. He also added that “Fatah will vote for religion as a principal source for legislation while debating the details , and I believe the issue would be settled in accordance with the options put forward by Fatah candidates for the Legislative Council and their religious tendencies” ⁽²⁴⁾. Such discourse confirms what is circulated among Fatah partisans and supporters in that “the movement has neither a social platform nor any perception of the community we aspire for” ⁽²⁵⁾.

Fatah partisans were the ones who drafted all the items, paragraphs and articles of the Palestinian Basic Law including the article pertaining to religion did not view this as an aspiration for a religious political system. The movement believes that it deserves the credit by establishing a Palestinian secular political system, and that legislation and the system in general should comply with intolerance, therefore it is natural for Fatah to support the clause pertaining to religion in the Palestinian Basic Law, provided that the quantity and the value of Islamic jurisprudence included in Palestinian laws drafted since the British mandate up till now cannot be disregarded. ⁽²⁶⁾

It is acknowledged that compared to the Declaration

of Independence, or the slogan of the secular democratic state raised in the seventies of the last century, the Palestinian Basic Law is a step backward, which is attributed, as Fatah members believe, to objective reasons. In comparison to the Declaration of Independence that did not include mechanisms for regulating the lives of people since it was drafted in exile and only expressed aspirations of the Palestinian people, the Basic Law had to include translatable regulations and rules, and to observe the prevalent Islamic values and culture.

The slogan of the secular state, put forward to overcome the crisis of the Jewish presence, or to ensure the rights of the Jewish minority and the return of Palestinian refugees, where the term “secularism” implies “citizenship” as a reference to which the citizens appeal. However, as the state on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is of a Muslim- majority, the slogan of the secular state was no longer valid. The slogan of “secularism” was a motto to solve a crisis while that of the “Independent state” is a liberal national slogan. ⁽²⁷⁾

Reality indicates that Fatah aspires for a Palestinian state in which the movement becomes the party in power, thus considering the ideological nature of the state of little or no significance. In practice, the movement yearns for an Arab state in terms of its model and affiliation, and for a constitution and laws following the Arab model, whereas the discourse on the Palestinian peculiarity is baseless.

Fatah and Movements of Political Islam

Rivalry between Fatah and political Islam , which in many times took the form of bloody clashes, has become more violent since the moment that Islamists joined the arena of the national struggle in the mid-eighties. Prior to that date, however, relations between the two parties may be depicted as “acceptable” rather than “good” since each party used to acknowledge the limits of the other’s turf. Fatah respected the Islamist’s occupying the religious arena whereas the Islamists respected Fatah’s occupying the national arena. However, moving from one arena to another was considered as a form of penetration that usually used to be resolved by dialogue, albeit the two parties had occasionally resorted to violence, as was the case in the Palestinian universities in the early eighties.

However as the Islamists joined the national sphere, competition with Fatah has turned into a conflict. The reason for the shift in relations between the two parties was ascribed to Fatah’s refusing to abandon its position as the representative of the Palestinian people and the national cause. However, conflict was never intellectual, but rather a struggle on arenas and representation.

Therefore the conflict between Fatah and Hamas was more evident than that between Fatah and the Islamic Jihad due to the much smaller size of the latter.

A Fatah spokesman reported that confrontation with Hamas is a “confrontation against Hamas’s dominion” and its “monopoly on truth and religion”, as well as a means “to bring the Palestinian cause to its main track”. Such declarations indicate that Hamas is in position to dominate the Palestinian

arena and “the Palestinian cause”; a position that was never occupied by the left movements whose relations with Fatah remained “acceptable” even in cases of extreme divergence between the two parties on the intellectual level.

Due to its thought that is embraced by the overwhelming majority of Palestinians, to its size that is comparable to that of Fatah, and to its regional and international expansion on both the grass-root and official levels, Hamas has become a “malignant” rival to Fatah, and had the ability able to expand and dominate. On the other hand, the left was a “benign” rival whose harm if occurred was limited and easily controllable, and thus has never been considered a real rival of Fatah due to their elite thought, their small number of partisans in addition to their regional and international isolation in the current stage, and inability to expand their control on the society and the PNA at least in the near future.

Struggle for representation between Fatah and Hamas, arising in 1987 following the breakout of the first Palestinian Intifada, has been escalating up to the moment where Hamas won the Parliamentary elections and formed the government in 2006. However, Fatah fought fiercely to defend its position and was not expected to relinquish it easily in favor of Hamas.

In its conflict with Hamas, both in the Palestinian Territories and abroad, Fatah has employed political and religious means. The political struggle became evident in the elections and the bloody clashes where the latter resulted in the political divide between the two parties (regardless of who

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-PFLP

The religious conflict included thought and the establishment. In terms of thought, Fatah's discourse has more inclined towards religion and Fatah partisans including the most prominent leaders, as we will see later, tended to depend on particular religious manifestations, of which the most conspicuous were the frequent resort to sheikhs and priests, as well as the prevalence of discourse on the Islamic dimension of the Palestinian cause.

The Islamic Conference Organization was included in the draft of Fatah's political platform, and some of Fatah's affiliated organizations started to hold contests on the memorization of verses of the Holy Koran in the boys' and girls' schools, and send winners to minor pilgrimage(Umra) to Mecca, in addition to cash rewards as was the case in Salfit district. In addition, Fatah which had formerly characterized the Palestinian national movement by secularism was encountered by slogans on the walls of al-Azhar University in Gaza refuting the allegations of its being a secular movement.

Regarding the religious establishment, Fatah attempted to "cleanse" all the organizations that were monopolized by the Islamists during the Israeli occupation and the preceding Jordanian era . Those organizations included the Ministry of Religious Endowments, alms committees, societies of memorization of the Holy Koran, and mosques and other organizations. Fatah leaders have never denied the significance

of their work in these organizations, particularly in the course of the so-called “the great confrontation” with Hamas. One of Fatah’s partisans declared “As a ruling party, Fatah recognizes the necessity to interfere in the function of the religious institutions, particularly in the course of the frantic conflict with the forces of political Islam”, and added” albeit these organizations had formerly received little or no attention, their significance has been highlighted following the agitated conflict with Hamas in 2006, particularly with regard to the alms committees and the managing of mosques”³⁰.

Interest in religious affairs has also drawn Fatah and other political movements towards religious inclinations or acceptance of religious manifestations. Atef Abu Seif summarized such inclination in declaring that “Fatah proved not to be professional in dealing with religious affairs, as Hamas and other political Islamic movements used to do, but has endeavored to reconcile civil legacy with the field conflict with Hamas, something that made it more inclined towards religion.”³¹.

Religious inclinations have evoked complaints among Fatah members who stated that “due to conflict with Hamas, we and not Hamas have turned the society into a religious one, and have simultaneously backed up the Salafis to spite Hamas with whom we have recently been in harmony, whereas the rise of the Salafis poses the real prospective danger”³²

Fatah’s Discourse

The religious track to which Fatah became more inclined to , particularly in the course of its conflict with Hamas, was

evident in Fatah's discourse. The newly published literature indicates the movement's resorting to Arab Islamic values, and all internal notes, letters and correspondences are now headed by "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful". In addition, correspondences directed to anyone starts with "Brother..... may God protect him". One the movement's partisans reported that 90% of the internal statements issued by any of the movement's branches are headed by a verse from the Holy Koran, and confirmed "rarely do we find any written materials issued by the movement not headed or concluded by a verse"³³.

However, the increase in religious quantum in Fatah's discourse is determined in accordance with the degree of religious inclinations prevalent in the location from which the discourse emanates. Fatah's discourse in Bir Zeit University, for instance, does not include the same religious quantum as that implied in the discourse at al-Najjah University in Nablus or the universities of Hebron and Gaza.

Fatah's statement in the elections conducted by the Workers' Union at Bir Zeit University was void of any religious discourse whereas it was full of religious statements in Fatah's campaigns at other universities. However, students' affiliated to Fatah at Bir Zeit University(that is more characterized by liberal thought) have a higher employment of the religious discourse during their election campaign than their counterparts at the workers' union.

Fatah's student election campaign there employs verses from the Holy Koran in an attempt to counteract Hamas and also

phrases for the sake of unity between churches and mosques .

It is not easy to determine whether the religious inclination included in Fatah's discourse is an expression of the employment of religion in the course of conflict with Hamas, or an indication of more religious inclinations among the movement's ranks. The Dean Assistant of Students' Affairs at Bir Zeit University believes that the employment of religious discourse is a catalyst for the elections. Atef Abu Seif, a Fatah leader, supports this opinion, and says that in the course of conflict with Hamas, religious discourse is merely a functional discourse, albeit religious inclinations have become prevalent among Fatah's members due to the expansion of political Islam.

Fatah and Educational Programs

Like other political" secular" movements, Fatah witnessed a decline in the quantum and content of its educational programs. Historically, Fatah was less concerned with educational programs than the leftists, and it can be said that its educational programs were limited to slogans, "It is a culture of slogans rather than a culture of platforms"³⁶. In addition, those slogans were formulated after the pattern of the motto: "Yeh, mountain, thou shall not be shaken by the winds" (i.e., we remain steadfast) raised by the late president Yasser Arafat, that aimed at mass mobilization, "without having any intellectual and pragmatic dimensions, particularly as Fatah had recognized that such slogans would be applied in their own way and in accordance with their own norms."³⁷ What distinguishes Fatah from other political secularly affiliated movements is that the regression in the latter's educational programs was

attributed to the ideological regression worldwide whereas for Fatah as a non-ideological movement, cultural recession was ascribed to various reasons yet mainly to Fatah's ascension of power following the Oslo accords.

Atef Abu Seif reported that intellectual and organizational education was systematic, particularly as it is stipulated in Fatah's bylaws, and forms part of its activities in staff development endeavors. However, the educational programs of the movement had been greatly affected by the state of conflict experienced by the movement, and thus turned into non-systematic and instantaneous and particularly when the movement has been preoccupied with the great confrontation with Hamas.³⁸

Fatah's educational programs in which religion did not occupy a certain area, aimed at conveying the national rather than the religious experience.

In most cases, the intellectual content was totally overlooked, and the educational programs were never manipulated in a way or another. The examples and training included in the educational process have usually focused on international socialism to which Fatah affiliated. In addition, the rituals of the educational process included the recital of al-Fatiha (The opening chapter of the Holy Koran) for the rest of the martyrs' souls, or a verse from the Holy Koran urging for a fight³⁹.

For Fatah, lack of interest in educational programs is ascribed to various reasons. Following the foundation of the PNA,

the movement disclaimed its educational and developmental role and referred several issues, including that of civic education to Salam Fayyad, or the civil society organizations ⁴⁰.

In addition, as many Fatah members and partisans joined the PNA, the national dimension and values have subsided in favor of personal interests and occupying positions, which resulted in the predominance of “ the ego” at the expense of culture and values. This explains why a doctor competes with the public for representing his clan in municipal elections, and an academician for voting as if s/he is illiterate ⁴¹.

Fatah and Women

Fatah, a socially conservative movement, was concerned with women’s issues from two angles: internally where women form a significant electoral stock, and externally as a response to international proposals and a means to keep up with the regional and international organizations that Fatah tries to follow their model or establish relations with them.

Fatah’s discourse on women was conservative, where its literature describes them as the second half of the society, the sisters, the wives and daughters. The topics approached in training sessions convened by Fatah organizations to the staff of women’s committee in various districts concentrate on the movement and its regulations while women’s issues- in the feminist sense are totally overlooked ⁴².

However, some of Fatah’s members believe that their movement has advanced to a great extent in this respect, that it became excessively consistent with the left wing, which pushed

the movement into conflict with the community as well as with women themselves⁴³. Najat Abu Bakr, a Fatah member of Parliament, blamed Fatah Women's movement for their position on "Marriage Act II" endorsed by the PNA, describing it as a "foundling" law that was picked up from neighboring countries" to "demean women", and demanded for a new distinguished personal status law that "stems from our national motif"⁴⁴

Abu Bakr also criticized the Ministry of Women's Affairs for the absence of a plan⁴⁵ – that if found- would revolutionize the political system, and added that Fatah women's movement still embraces "a mentality of conflict with men", where "women were not born yet to overstep male domination"⁴⁶

Fatah and Academic Education

Education has captured little attention in Fatah's agenda where interference in the development of curricula was restricted to national issues and the American-Israeli stipulations whereas the philosophical and intellectual content was neglected. In the course of conflict with Hamas, Fatah's concern with the Ministry of Education focused on occupying various position, whether the lowest or the highest, thus overlooking the development of intellectual content of education or the teaching methods that should be employed.

Even in the discussions between various Palestinian political movements prior to the formation of the National Unity government that included Hamas in addition to Fatah and other factions of the PLO, none of them appealed to hold the portfolio of the Ministry of Education. The appointment of Nasser al-

Sha'er , partisan of Hamas as the Minister of Education reflects the disinterest of various parties including Fatah in the Ministry of education, regarding it not among the core ministries to be held ,or does not merit the interest other "sovereignty- related" ministries do ".

Fatah's draft of political platform that was presented to the most recent conference discussed the educational issue, expressing concern on the decline of the educational level, and calling for respect of human rights, basic freedoms, as well as inserting the Palestinian national education in the Educational system that should be transformed into a system of national characteristics. However, the draft of the platform has disregarded the intellectual quality of education, particularly with regard to whether education should be democratic, secular or religious, which indicates that Fatah is not preoccupied in such issues, and that in case it becomes in charge of education, it will deal with it in the way it views as appropriate.

Apart from the Palestinian Liberation Party⁴⁷, none of the parties including Fatah was interested in reviewing the curricula that were developed by the Palestinian Curricula Committee. However, Fatah was concerned with who the committee will include or be chaired by, for when it guarantees the persons working on a certain topic, it will not be much concerned with the form and content of those curricula. As Fatah was not concerned with the intellectual quality of education, so not were its satellite offices, i.e., the organizations at the site.

In addition, discussions conducted by the Teachers' Bureau of Fatah have concentrated on settlement, rotten foodstuff,

the environment and the revival of the Teachers' Union under Hamas government whereas the educational programs and process were totally disregarded⁴⁸.

The head of the Movement's Bureau of High Education reported that his office is mainly concerned with the basic technical, educational and national characteristics of the curricula, as well as whether the curriculum should include intensive materials or not. The principal goal of the office that never interferes in the nature and core of education, as the head declared, is to defend the rights of employees in accordance with laws and regulations⁴⁹.

Fatah Academicians in Palestinian universities are not concerned with the philosophical and intellectual dimensions of the educational curricula and process except in some cases. Investigation of the curricula taught at universities affiliated to Fatah (Al-Quds Open University, for example) reveals the predominant religious quantum and its impact on the "intellectual" discussions conducted in these universities, which in no time change into ideological discussions due to the absence of the norms required for the analysis of the reality of the situation.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was founded by George Habash, its first secretary-general in 1967, as an extension to the Pan-Arab Nationalist Movement, and was a result of consolidating three groups: Youth for Revenge, Heroes of the Return and the Palestinian Liberation PFLP, the latter of which was founded by Ahmed Jibril along with others in 1964. However, a year following its foundation, Jibril splintered away from the PFLP to form the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine- General Command(PFLP-GC)

Intellectually, the PFLP had been an extension of the Pan-Arab national movement before it embraced the leftist-Marxist doctrine, thus viewing itself as an integral part of the national liberation movement worldwide, that viewed Israel as a foreign body implanted by the international imperialism to curb the Arab liberation movement.

As a Marxist organization, the PFLP believed that its conflict was not only with Israel but also with what they called “the Arab reactionary forces” that form a part of the Western Imperialist Camp. Unlike Fatah, which raised the slogan of non-interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries, the PFLP believed that the Arab World is a natural dimension of the Palestinian revolution.

The PFLP does not view the Palestinian struggle as a religious one, seeing it instead a political and national revolution whose goal “creating a people’s democratic state in which Jews and Arabs will have the same rights and duties. This was conformity with the slogan raised by the PLO in the seventies of the last century, which advocates the establishment of a secular state where Muslims, Christians and Jews can live and on an equal footing.

The PFLP and the Political System

The PFLP has been the second-largest Palestinian faction after Fatah in the PLO. Regardless of the recurrent reservations about the policies of Fatah and its leaders Arafat and Mahmud Abbas, or the frequent freeze of its membership in the PLO due to its protest against those policies, the PFLP has consistently maintained its relations with the PLO, and defended the historical slogan of “ The PLO is the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people”, which was at a time adopted by the majority of Palestinians, and yet remains up till now approved by many Palestinian factions, the Arab League and the United Nations.

The PFLP has rejected the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the PLO, expressed reservation about the establishment of the PNA in 1994 immediately after the Accords, and boycotted the Legislative elections in 1995 that resulted in the establishment of the Palestine Legislative Council(PLC) and the ratification of the Palestinian Basic law, which serves as a

The Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)

nor the Islamists have participated in drafting the Palestinian “constitution” that was ratified by an overwhelming majority of Fatah members in addition to some Independents.

Article (4) of the Palestinian Basic Law includes two clauses directly related to religion, and were drafted and ratified by the PLC the overwhelming majority of whose members were Fatah affiliated- the largest secular movement in the Palestinian territories. Article (4): 1 - Stipulates that “Islam is the official religion in Palestine. Respect for the sanctity of all other divine religions shall be maintained” and Article 4:2 stipulates: “The principles of Islamic law(Shari’a) shall be a principal source of legislation.”

In its platform, the PFLP sustains the establishment of a “democratic Palestinian state” where people enjoy “the freedom of intellectual, religious and political affiliation of individuals and groups ⁽⁵¹⁾, considering the elected representatives of the people as the sole source of legislation ⁽⁵²⁾.

The term “the secular state” was not explicitly included in the platform of the PFLP, yet many of its members and partisans spoke about secularism frankly, stating that they “call for a civil society based on a modern democratic, secular basis, which means that all the laws that regulate societal affairs must be civil regulations” , and that the society should be democratic and pluralistic, in which “ citizenship” forms the fundamental

unifying factor regardless of religion, gender or color”⁽⁵³⁾.

The principle of “Islamic Shari’a shall be the principal source of legislation” was opposed by many members of the PFLP, declaring that “the project of the secular state in Palestine” implies resort to the principles of Human rights ratified by the international legitimacy.”⁽⁵⁴⁾.

In an attempt to explain some of the PFLP members opposing to having the Shari’a as the principal source of legislation, the following question was posed about including the above-mentioned clause in the basic law: “Is it for the protection of the Islamic majority in the Palestinian society?”⁵⁵, This clause seems to be in contradiction with the principle of political consensus within the framework of a civil state”, and an explicit opposition to the declaration of Independence”⁵⁶. In addition, their opposition to the said clause “is not because of disparity with religion”, but because it is inapplicable and the articles of the Basic Law, as the PFLP confirms, should be derived from the international laws and conventions some of which are already mentioned in the heavenly religions”⁵⁷.

Some PFLP members also view the Palestinian Basic Law as a step backward from the Declaration of Independence issued by the Palestinian National Council(PNC) that convened in Algeria in 1988, a declaration that was closer to secularism although the term “secularism”was not explicitly mentioned. They believe that since the Basic Law was issued in 1996, and was supposed to not only be based on the principles included in the Declaration of Independence, but to go beyond them in order

to form a step forward towards the secular inclinations implicitly advocated by the Declaration. While the Declaration confirms respect for the minorities and indiscriminate based on religion, color, gender or race, the Basic Law stipulates discrimination among social classes based on religious affiliations.⁵⁸

The slogan of “a democratic and secular state” where “Muslims, Christians and Jews” live together and on an equal footing” proposed by the PLO as a settlement for the Palestinian cause, was later replaced by the emblem of “ the Palestinian independent state” when the proposal of the two-state solution was put forward.

Abandonment of the proposal of “the secular state” that had earlier put forward raises legitimate and logic questions including the following: What does the PLO mean by the secular state? Is it an absolute political proposal to give the Israelis a peace of mind, or is it a social, intellectual and legislative tendency adopted by the PLO? Do Palestinian need secularism only if they live with Jews in one state whereas they do not need it if they happen to live alone in their own state? Why is secularism required in the historic area of Palestine, whereas on the West Bank and Gaza Strip is not ? Does the shift in attitudes include thought trends of the Palestinian decision makers, or just reflects changes of political situations that resulted in a change of slogans? Of course, such questions are raised to all factions working under the umbrella of the PLO. However as the PFLP is the second-largest faction in the PLO and the largest leftist party, it is supposed to have more inclusive discourse on this issue than others.

Discrepancy of views in responding to these questions was evident among the PFLP partisans where opinions ranged between acknowledging and criticizing the changing of slogans that was based on several factors the most significant of which is the perception of the relationship between what is national and what is democratic , particularly in the current phase of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Among the distinctive opinions on the proposal of the secular state, three main views were evident: some partisans who believe that “the slogan of the independent state raised at the present time also includes secularism”⁵⁹ while others state that “introducing this slogan was a vision on the part of the Palestinian factions towards reaching a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian cause, particularly after the Security Council’s issuing resolutions (242 and 338) rather than an internal Palestinian consensus on a particular political and thought trend”⁶⁰.

In addition, a third party reported that “ using the term secular was for only functional purposes rather than being authentic, since it forms part of the Palestinian response to the Zionist discourse”⁶¹. In their view “the secular proposal has become more urgent after the arrival of the PNA, and “there is no need to differentiate between what is against occupation and what is democratic” ⁶².

Some of the PFLP partisans courageously support the secularization of the Palestinian political system, and criticize the reservation of the Palestinian organizations in putting forward issues as secularism in the course of their conflict with political

Islam, particularly as “those organizations are in need for an evident stance in this confrontation, and secularism comprises a common ground for leftist, socialists and Pan-Arab nationalists and others....”⁶³. However, the question here is: “If Palestinians were and are still religious and had neither abandoned the PLO that was founded on a secular basis nor the secular content of the Declaration of Independence, so what has been changed now?”⁶⁴.

However, theoretical opposition to the Islamization of the Palestinian political system was not supplemented by practical steps or claims to restrict its expansion. The opinions presented by the PFLP’s partisans were no more than “appeals” for a new substitute system, particularly as the political rapprochement between the left, at the forefront of which is the PFLP and the political Islam movements in general and Hamas in particular, was sometimes interpreted as a form of overlooking some of the Islamization practices carried out by Hamas especially in the Gaza Strip where the movement has lately become the ruling party.

Some partisans of the PELP view that the Islamization imposed by Hamas in the Gaza Strip where the movement has taken over the authority, as a danger that restricts public freedoms and inflicts harm upon the society as a whole⁶⁵. In addition, individuals who have explicitly opposed such a phenomenon in the Gaza Strip have suffered because of their attitude. However, such attitudes and positions were merely individual endeavors rather than a political central position adopted by the PFLP.

The PFLP and Movements of Political Islam

Despite the ideological contradiction between the Palestinian left factions including the PFLP and movements of political Islam, the PFLP declares its “alliance with the Islamic movements struggling against the Israeli occupation”⁶⁶. Like Islamists, the PFLP opposed negotiations with the Israeli government, the Oslo Accords and the subsequent agreements between Israel and the PLO, and also the termination and condemnation of armed struggle. In addition, the PFLP along with the Islamists expressed reservation as to the establishment of the PNA and consequently boycotted the first legislative elections.

The PFLP regards some of the political Islam movements as “nationalist and anti-occupation”⁶⁷, and therefore it stands side by side with political Islam in opposition and defiance to the US settlement projects⁶⁸, yet it announced that their “relationship with the forces of political Islam is dynamic and controversial depending on the political and social contradictions of the reality”⁶⁹.

The PFLP has declared their explicit attitude towards the Islamic project in its entirety, describing it as a “project characterized by a class, political and ideological dimensions that are inconsistent with the concepts of modernity, democracy and progress , and that it generates the most totalitarian and autocratic regime that we have witnessed throughout the modern history”⁷⁰. The Islamic project is mainly based on the “return to jurisprudence and Salafism without innovation or enlightenment, a non-historical and close-minded reading of

the religious text, and not accepting the others including the leftists and the Pan-Arab nationalists parties and describing them as “ infidels” because of their democratic and secularly thought inclinations”⁷¹ .The PFLP states that the ultimate goal of political Islam is to “ eradicate the concepts of modernity, secularism, the civil society, and the Arab socialist unity.” ⁷²

Simultaneously, the PFLP that views Islam as part of the components of the Palestinian identity⁷³ declared that they would differentiate between political Islam as a political religious phenomenon and Islam as a set of beliefs, worships and cultural heritage⁷³. It also considered Islam as a component of the various components that form the Palestinian identity ⁷⁴.

The PFLP and Religion

The PFLP's position vis-à-vis religion is bifocal in that the PFLP is an anti-occupation organization and views the current phase of the Palestinian struggle as a national liberation and democratic one given that the term “democratic” was added in its most recent conference, and that the PFLP is a leftist Marxist party guided by materialism and the historic dialectic in practicing its role and in dealing with all internal issues, as well as with political and socioeconomic aspects where issues pertaining to religion are not excluded. ⁷⁵

Accordingly, the decisive factor in determining the PFLP's position towards religion is the extent to which religion plays a role in confronting the Israeli occupation or in serving Palestinians for liberation and returning to their homeland. However, some PFLP partisans concede the undemocratic

view towards religion, and they at the same time believe that “religion is an impediment for social development and should be approached in a way to guarantee respect for the democratic and progressive content of the Palestinian revolution”.⁷⁶

However, some members of the PFLP view religion from a different perspective calling for a “distinction between religion in general and religious political movements⁷⁷. Others, however, went on to scrutinize the religious question more precisely declaring that the PFLP that adheres to the humanitarian and spiritual aspects and freedom of belief “distinguishes between popular religion and social religious behavior, yet it is not in reconciliation with political Islam for the latter constitutes a social antithesis to the PFLP’s principles.⁷⁸

Compared to some members who believe that it is not the right time to discuss their position towards religion, particularly as the current stage of struggle requires mobilization of all forces for the resisting the occupation⁷⁹, others view evading the discussion of such issues under the pretext that we are a national liberation movement is a form of disregard of the complex and intricate situation endured by Palestinians.⁸⁰

On the organizational level, the PFLP does not have a quota, and does not discriminate between people who are affiliated to its bodies according to their religion i.e. Christian or Muslim or other⁸¹. Despite the fact that there some members of the PFLP are religious, yet their devotion to religion is spontaneous and instinctive rather than political⁸². The PFLP leadership does not include religious members due to its

the Palestine People's Party-PPP

ideological nature of the PFLP, and to the fact that it was founded by the secular George Habash, a descendent from a family of a Christian origin. In addition, the status and role of its members are determined by “their civil culture, attitudes towards the Israeli occupation and towards social attitudes regardless of their religious affiliations”⁸³

Due to the wave of devotion to religion that is overspreading the Arab societies in general and the Palestinian society in particular, the number of religious members within the PFLP's ranks, particularly among women, has lately increased. The conference that convened by the Union of the Working Women Committees affiliated to the PELP included a low percentage of unveiled women .⁸⁴

The official discourse of the PFLP explicitly indicates respect and appreciation of religion and occasionally introduces Marxism as an ideology that is not against religion. The PFLP is against the “employing of religion as a means to suppress freedom of thought, creativity ,scientific research and the others' freedom of opinion. It is also against transforming a religious faith into malevolent fundamentalism against other doctrines.
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The paradox for the left in general and for the PFLP in particular lies in the discrepancy, and occasionally contradiction between theory and application pertaining the issue of religion. In other

words, the problem is between the internal education on religious issues and the practical application regarding its manifestations in reality, and the contradiction among discourses expressed by the PFLP in various events regarding the same topic.

One of the partisans of the PFLP calls for the need of “introducing a transparent discourse against the Islamization of the society via adopting a democratic and secular discourse to confront the religious discourse embraced by the political Islam. He sustained that citizens should become familiar with this secular and democratic discourse and its content. He also called for intensifying the attack on the Islamic forces towards the entitlements of establishing a democratic and civil state.”⁸⁶

The same partisan criticizes the PLO and some of its factions for their utilizing a religious discourse, and describes that as a form of “functional exploitation of religion with a high degree of opportunism, in order to attain the electors’ votes, which in turn will be detrimental to the PLO’s fundamental mission. Religion in such cases, as he states, is employed within a functional framework that contradicts the desired goal”⁸⁷ Another partisan of the PFLP states that “ if religious slogans expressed by individuals rather than by the PFLP itself ⁸⁸ like when a student representative of the PFLP quoted verses from the Holy Koran during an electoral debate at Bir-Zeit University.⁸⁹

On the practical level, the PFLP has distanced itself from deeds that can be interpreted as anti-religious, which meant overlooking sometimes the measures taken by organizations

of a religious nature such as the Ministry of Awqaf(i.e. Religious Endowments) and the Supreme Judge Department or disregarding laws and regulations adopted by the PNA or some institutions pertaining to religious manifestations and personal freedoms. In addition, and like other factions, the PFLP has occasionally approved some measures of a religious nature carried out by public and quasi-public institutions, such as building mosques in some faculties at Bir Zeit University, or regarding the Islamization enforced by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, where protests against such procedures represented individual endeavors rather than being representative of the PFLP's stance in general.

In describing the leftist student bloc's discourse in the course of elections at Bir Zeit University, the Assistant Dean of Student reported that the leftists thought has been dramatically retracted, and that although the leftists do not employ religion publicly in its discourse , it occasionally employs it and in a direct way. The left also responds to the Islamists in not encroaching the "sacred" area, and approves the others' employing religion for the sake of attracting the public. However, the left's discourse in such a context has become a means to refute accusations of its being atheist⁹⁰.

The PFLP and Educational Programs

Educational programs for members of the Palestinian left, including the PFLP, has witnessed a decline due to the subsidence of Marxism following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such regression might be associated with ideological subsidence and adopting the electoral process in the Palestinian political arena

regardless of the cultural level of the public, where the elite became closer to the grass-root bases. Yet, a central educational committee affiliated to the PFLP still exists whose educational programs address numerous issues pertaining to philosophy, history, democratization and freedoms, as well as secularism, women and youth along with other topics.⁹¹

The PFLP's central magazine al-Hadaf "The Goal" is issued intermittently, and a website and a radio station that broadcasts from Gaza, in addition to a newspaper entitled "Alhaya Aljadida (The New Life)" issued in the Gaza Strip.

The term "secularism" is not explicitly mentioned in the basic documents of the PFLP, although it is known for being a secular and Marxist organization. However, secularism, religion and other topics that have impact on social and intellectual life of people are usually addressed through the mass organizations affiliated to the PFLP, such as student and women organizations, the youth union and the Palestinian Prisoners Committee, or through its media and educational programs.

The "Alhaya Aljadida" newspaper issued by the PFLP in the Gaza Strip published a lengthy study on secularism defining it as "liberation of mind from preoccupation and absolute conception, or thought from illusions and myths, as well as liberation of man from all forms of exploitation". In social terms, secularism "contributes to the emancipation and liberation of the poor and the proletariat from all forms of suffering and persecution, and thus, in essence, it is not an anti-religion philosophy insomuch as it is against religious idolatry, as well as the authority of the clergy and their interference in

people's lives"⁹²

The PFLP presents an integral vision on the secular state, particularly with regard to women and regulations⁹³, where women occupy a significant area in their literature and educational programs in addition to her quality and status.

Interest in women issues is evident in the efforts made by civil society organizations(CSO's) affiliated to the PFLP while the latter tries to convey the distinguished role and the liberal attitudes those organizations adopt regarding women issues. Article (7) of the PFLP's platform stipulates: "promotion of women's achievements in addition to their social, political and economic rights through equality and social liberation". The said article also calls upon partisans "to adopt a scientific and progressive position on women issues and adhere to it on the practical level".

The PFLP considers that its attitudes towards women stem from promoting democratic trends in the Palestinian society and liberating women from persecution . Therefore, the PFLP is at loggerheads with the Islamists regarding such issues⁹⁴.

However, both external supporters and partisans of the PFLP criticize it for not turning its theoretical positions discussed in educational programs, particularly those pertaining to women, religion, secularism and education into practical application, which prompted some of its partisans to declare: "We are preoccupied with politics rather than with social programs"⁹⁵

Despite frequent confirmation of the “necessity to liberate education from religious constraints and metaphysics”⁹⁶, neither the PFLP nor any other secular movement was concerned with education in Palestine.

Except for the protest against some aspects pertaining to a novel by Ghassan Kanafani ⁹⁷, the PFLP neither supported the Palestinian educational curricula produced by the Curricula Committee, nor demanded for any changes, modifications or additions. “ Hizbul-Tahrir(the Islamic Palestinian Liberation party) was the only party that explicitly expressed its position and demands pertaining to the curricula.

Compared to Fatah and the left whose partisans never protested against religious issues included in the curricula ⁹⁸, the Hizbul-Tahrir issued a book on their view on the Palestinian curricula accusing them to be in contradiction with religion and secularism. The Party’s partisans protested and refrained from sending their children to schools until some changes be made in the curricula.

The DFLP is currently headed by its Secretary General Nayef Hawatmeh who along with Yasser Abd Rabbo and others broke away from the mother organization the PFLP following the adopting of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine by the left wing of the PFLP and that of the Pan Arab national movement .

The DFLP has become well known as being a strong supporter of the interim national program to solve the Palestinian issue that was adopted by all the factions forming the PLO following the 1973 war. The Program issued the slogan of “Return, self-determination, and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority”, that was later developed to: “Return, self-determination and the establishment of an independent Palestinian n state under the leadership of the PLO, as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people”. The latter slogan was adopted as a national and interim program by the Palestine National Council(PNC), and later by the Arab Summit Conference that convened in Rabat in 1974.

The DFLP and the Political System

The DFLP has been a major constituent of the PLO since the early beginnings and a member of the PLO’s Executive Committee, Central Council and of the PNC. The DFLP is represented by one seat in the Palestine Legislative Council(PNC). Its fierce support of Fatah was evident when took a strong position

against Hamas during the latest political divide in the Palestinian political system.

The DFLP opposed the Oslo Accord that was signed between Israel and the PLO, and boycotted the first legislative elections in 1995. Yet, many of its partisans returned back to the Palestinian territories immediately after the said Accord. In the 2006 Legislative elections, the DFLP formed a joint slate with Palestine Democratic Union (FIDA), and the People's Party under the name "Badeel" and later participated in the National Unity government formed by Hamas and other factions.

The DFLP's boycotting the 1995 legislative elections and that its partisans were not represented in the first PLC prevented it from participating in the drafting of the Palestinian Basic Law that stipulated that "Islam is the official religion in Palestine, and the principles of Islamic Shari's shall be a principal source of legislation".

Like other leftist and secular factions, the DFLP did not oppose the presence of the above-mentioned texts in the Basic Law. However, the DFLP partisans have unequivocal views on the article pertaining to religion. According to one of the young partisans of the DFLP, "the Palestinian legislator committed a terrible mistake in ratifying the article pertaining religion and Shari'a in the Basic Law, since this represent a regression from the Declaration of Independence, and is also considered "a discriminative act that should be eliminated"⁹⁹.

In addition, the National Charter and the Declaration

of Independence approved by the PLO were characterized by secularism whereas the Basic Law, as one of the DFLP's leader stated, is regarded a step forward. He added: "The National liberation movement dictates the separation of religion from the state, which if not applied, would create more flaccidity in drafting the statute"¹⁰⁰.

The DFLP leadership is aware of the fact that the Basic Law represents a regression from the Declaration of Independence, particularly with regard to the religious issue. In a meeting between a DFLP and His Excellency Bishop Muneeb Younan, the latter called for re-drafting the Palestinian Constitution to guarantee the civil rights of the Palestinians, whereas the secretary general deputy, Abu Leila, sustained the DFLP's adherence to the Declaration of Independence ¹⁰¹.

In commenting on the article pertaining to religion in the Basic Law, Hisham Abu Ghosh declared that inclusion of religious articles, deemed unnecessary, and was an imitation of the Egyptian Constitution, and that the Palestinian legislator adopted the amendments introduced by President Sadat for special considerations. Abu Ghosh also stated that Palestinian secular forces were held responsible for not combating this important issue, and that they were not aware of its repercussions on the liberation process. He also criticized the lack of public mobilization regarding the discussion raised on the law ¹⁰².

Like their left comrades, partisans of the of the DFLP blamed both Fatah and the left in their failure in encountering this topic and the increasing religious tendencies of the PNA

The Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA)

inclined more towards Islamization when the Islamists have become the main opposition party.

Hisham Abu Ghosh believes that cooperation with the Islamists is inevitable due to the need for mobilizing all energies required for liberation. However, the thought regression on the part of the left especially regarding religion initiated as a result of the engagement of Islamic movements in the national struggle and the diversion of the nationalists and the leftists from modernization¹⁰⁴ that started with the inception of the first Intifada in 1987.

The religious issue has become more evident for Fatah following the foundation of the PNA, particularly as the movement was in a dire need of legitimacy, of which religion is a principal source.

The leftists acknowledge the paradox they encounter in approaching the religious issue. There is an inclination of the Palestinian parties towards Islamization, and adaptation with the religious expansion¹⁰⁵. This is attributed to the thought compromise and concessions, divergence from the ideological clarity that historically enlightened the way for the left, as well as strategic concessions in favor of tactical and interim schemes. The left parties “initiate negotiations within themselves with the illusion that they negotiate Hamas , then act in accordance with

a created imaginary position”¹⁰⁶

The DFLP and Religion

Although the secretary general of the DFLP comes from a Christian family, religious affiliations are neither a basic element in the hierarchical organization, nor a factor in determining the relations of members with the party which included those who come from Muslim and Christian families even in leadership positions throughout its history. There is no quota for Christians or others, and the presence of Christians in the leadership positions is taken for granted¹⁰⁷ due to the principles stipulated in the platform that defines the DFLP as “a leftist movement guided by scientific secularism as a method for the liberation of the social reality, and as a guide to induce social change”¹⁰⁸.

Accordingly, the DFLP partisans consider themselves “advocates of the democratic and civil state, and believe that secularism brings benefits to all segments and classes of the Palestinian society. The separation of religion from politics does not imply eradication of religion from the society, but rather serves as part of the measures and procedures for the regulation of community relations, that is to guarantee freedom of belief.”¹⁰⁹

Abu Ghosh also advocates “the distinction between religion and religious movements, calling for the non-politicization of religion or the religionization of politics, stating that mistaking religion for politics impair both of them.

Saleh Abu Nasser, on the other hand, believes that religion is “a special and heavenly doctrine that regulates the relationship between man and God and should be respected.

Religion is also an objective phenomenon belonging to the social consciousness of people” and adds “Islamists are our adversaries on the ground, but not in heaven”.¹¹⁰

To avoid encounters with the community whose members reject non-religious thought¹¹¹, Majida al-Masri confirms that the DFLP tends to keep away from religion , particularly as religion is not part of the leftists doctrine. In addition, there is no controversy among partisans on this topic or otherwise is deemed as a form of redicalism¹¹².

The paradox, Abu Nasser believes, is not related to the religion itself, but in how to employ it, for it is employed in some cases, particularly in the course of the national liberation stage as a stimulator, yet it can also be utilized in social struggle, thus employing the religious slogan as a means is absolutely rejected.¹¹³

However, religion as a means is employed by both religious and what they introduce themselves as secular parties; a phenomenon that can be attributed to the prerequisite required to conform with the general situation that is characterized by religion¹¹⁴, or to the attempt on the part of secular parties to refute the accusation of their being “infidel”, or to introduce themselves as not being “anti-religious” or “atheist” movements¹¹⁵.

The DFLP and Educational Programs

Like other left-wing parties and factions, the DFLP was concerned with educational programs, particularly with regard to history, where its leaders still publish studies on contemporary Palestinian political thought and secularism.

However, the interest in educational programs in general has considerably declined in recent years, as was the case with other factions. Some of the DFLP partisans acknowledge the fact that educational programs are much more implemented abroad than in Palestine¹¹⁶. Others, however, state that “There is still systematic educational programs on the secularization of the society and democratization”¹¹⁷. Differences in opinions show that the educational process implemented by the DFLP, as well as other parties, is not centralized, and a large margin is left for local organizations to manage.

Religion is not included in the DFLP’s educational programs despite the perception of the seriousness of the conservative thought wave related to religion, where “the responsibility of those who believe in modernity in their confrontation with Salafi trends increases”¹¹⁸, and that “declaring thought identity becomes inevitable, while being cautious in dealing with religious issues is sometimes deemed to be unjustified”¹¹⁹

Concerned individuals believe that due to the regression on the part of the political parties, a growing number of Palestinians became more inclined towards religion, where “religious inclinations have become the predominant characteristic of the society”¹²⁰. However, and contrary to what they believe, the shift in the left parties’ ideologies will prove counterproductive and will make them lose the respect of people¹²¹.

Women issues become the most conspicuous ones when tied to the religious and conservative thought. Partisans of the DFLP view themselves as belonging to a modern and progressive organization that embraces the principle of non-discrimination between men and women, where its hierarchical structure, from the top to the bottom, includes members of both , as it also respects having both women with head cover and those without it. However, the high percentage of women among the PFLP's ranks who wear the head cover is looked at by the DFLP as dealt with as a "folk custom" rather than a "thought identity" ¹²².

Substantial women struggle is usually carried out by women organizations affiliated to the left in general and to the DFLP in particular, while most often women in high ranking positions complain lack of sufficient support from mother parties especially when a confrontation with religious thought is direly needed. This was evident in the women's attempt to develop legislation on equality between men and women, particularly with regard to the Personal Status Law. Rima Nazzal declares that "The failure of the left to respond appropriately to the virtual Parliament is deemed to be equivalent to a crime against women...The said Parliament that scared the leftists and the rightists alike was deemed to be a security rather than a social issue." ¹²³

Palestinian leftist parties abundantly discuss women issues, and measures are taken to promote women's participation in leadership positions as well as in the Palestinian political system in general. However, there is little attention

paid to secularism as a prerequisite for equality between the two genders as well as among all segments of the society. This lack of attention is not because of lack of awareness among the leftists that equality cannot be fulfilled except in a secular state, but due to their being aware that emphasis on equality without mentioning the secularization of the state is less troublesome, given the potential reactions of the conservative forces.

As for the position of the DFLP on education, it is well acknowledged that education is disregarded by the DFLP¹²⁵ despite the conviction of its partisans of the necessity to secularize education taking into account the non-overlap between religion and science so that the latter would not lose its feature of research and inquiry¹²⁶. Such negligence is attributed to “the state of harmony with religious expansion where endeavors to confront this current are no more than individual initiatives to secularize the curricula”¹²⁷

Lack of interest in education and other societal issues is not interpreted as lack of appreciation of education on the part of the left, or as issues to be deferred to the post-liberation period, but that the left often views these issues as irrelevant to their fundamental activities which are in one way or another focused on major political, or occasionally major theoretical issues.

The Palestine People's Party is the heir of the Palestinian Communist Party that had been founded early in the last century. Indeed, the West Bank Communists joined the Jordanian Communist Party in the aftermath of seizing the major part of Palestine in 1948. In Gaza Strip, a separate Palestinian Communist Party was established, whereas the Palestinian Communists in Israel joined the Israeli Communist Party.

The Palestinian Communist Party was renamed, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, to the Palestine People's Party whose first secretary-general was Bashir Barghouti. It is now headed by its current secretary-general Bassam Salhi, and is represented in the PLO Executive Committee by Hanna Amira.

Despite abandoning the Marxism-Leninism doctrine and democratic centralism, the PPP announced its adherence to the dialectical approach, and still views itself as a leftist-socialist party.

Contrary to other Palestinian parties and factions, the backbone structure of the party was founded in the Palestinian territories. The Party was an advocate of the Oslo Accords, and participated in the first Palestinian government formed by Yasser Arafat following his return to homeland and the establishment of the of the Palestinian National Authority(PNA).

The PPP and the Political System in Palestine

The PPP declared that they struggle for a modern secular and state based on full separation between religion and the state ⁽¹²⁸⁾. A member of the political bureau reported that his party “aspires for a secular and democratic state, and not for a religious Emirate” ⁽¹²⁹⁾. A member of the Central Committee also confirms that the party has a transparent position on the nature of the political system that should focus on democracy, peaceful devolution of power, separating state from religion, and guarantee freedom of opinion and expression as well as freedom of belief ⁽¹³⁰⁾.

Some of the Party partisans believe that abandoning the secular state is ascribed to imperialist and historic conspiracy against the Palestinian issue. Prior to the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948, some Palestinian forces at the forefront of which was the National Liberation League (the Communists) called for a settlement for the Palestinian cause based on the establishing of a secular and democratic state for all its citizens. Yet, this proposal failed due to a conspiracy that was machinated by the British Mandate, the Zionist movement and the Arab reactionary forces, and as a means to impose a fait accompli on Palestinians. Subsequently, the proposal of establishing “an independent Palestinian state within the borders of 1967 was put forward and became acceptable by the international community ⁽¹³¹⁾.

The proposal of “a secular and democratic state” was viewed by other partisans from a different angle, believing that such a proposal was associated with highlighting the Palestinian

cause in the international circles. Accordingly, the main motivation for the Palestinian decision-makers was to get Israel embarrassed , particularly as the slogan raised was that the Jews would become citizens within the state. ⁽¹³²⁾

Nevertheless, the call for establishing a secular and democratic state was abandoned following the PLO's involvement in settlement projects that required the approval of the influential forces. Such abandonment was evident in the slogan of the Independent State, as well as in the Palestinian Basic Law that illustrated the nature of the Palestinian state, particularly with regard to legislation, and the document of "National Accord" document that did not discuss the identity of the state in order to avoid dispute. However, as soon as the state is established, dispute on its nature will arise between the Political Islam forces and the PLO factions.¹³³

The partisans of the PPP hold a positive view of the Declaration of Principles despite the differences in opinions on its relevance to the Palestinian Basic Law. Some people, do not see a contradiction between the statements included in the Declaration (that confirm public rights and freedoms of men and women, and non-discrimination on grounds of race, religion, color , or gender, as well as the protection of human rights and freedoms, in addition to political pluralism which preserves religious and political beliefs and human dignity), and those of the Basic Law that stipulates: " Islam is the official religion in Palestine, and the principles of Shari'a as the principal source of legislation".

In support of the Palestinian Basic Law, a leader of the PPP stated that this Law “draws its strength from the will of the Palestinian people who are the source of power. The Law must reflect the nature of the Palestinian society that constitutes part of the Arab nation that has its own civilization and history. Therefore such affiliations cannot be disregarded, and Islam as a source of legislation taking into account the multiple pros included in Islam as a civilization and trends towards advancement”¹³⁴.

“Our party respected the Basic Law”, stated another leader, “But we at the same time called for some amendments so that it conform to human rights, particularly regarding the Personal Status Law”¹³⁵. A third leader who views the Basic Law as an indicator of abandoning the Declaration of Independence, justified such a step by declaring that the Basic Law is an “instrument for the regulating the people’s lives, and that it could not ignore the nature of the society, and that Islam as a source of legislation had to be included in the basic law”¹³⁶

The PPP and Political Islam

Despite the enormous thought differences and the history that was overloaded with thought confrontations that turned into physical violence for several times, the secretary-general of the People’s Party described the relations with Hamas in the Gaza Strip and abroad as good, where meetings were conducted between the two parties at the highest levels regardless of the reservation on the part of Fatah on such meetings.¹³⁷

The reason for intercommunication with Hamas is the

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articles of the Basic Law. Consequently, the PPP did not concur to the exclusion of Hamas from legitimacy during the PLO's Central Council meeting.

The PPP sustained cooperation with Hamas after the latter's victory in the legislative elections and forming a government, and exerted utmost efforts to break the blockade imposed on that government on the grounds that it was the representative of Palestinian People. The PPP has also tried to facilitate conducting meetings between Hamas and the concerned parties.

Opposing the seizing of power by armed force, the PPP stood against the political and the "coup d'état" that was carried out by Hamas against the National Unity government that was headed by Hamas itself.

Although the PPP held Hamas responsible for the political divide, it denounced the subsequent violations of human rights and illegal behaviors that included arrests, firing from jobs and revoking passports, and constantly called for reconciliation based on the referential articles of the Basic Law.

According to the PPP , the Polarization that resulted in the political divide has lost the argument, so there is a need to speed up agreement on the constitution of the State of Palestine

based on the Declaration of independence, for this “reaffirms the internal and external contract for the state”. The PPP inspired for a Constitution that would be based on consensus rather than reflecting the position of a certain party.

As for the Article that stipulate: “Islam is the official religion in Palestine”, the PPP believes that as long as the Islamic Shari’a is not deemed to be the sole source of religion , the article would be acceptable and would not form any “paradox”. The most significant issue here is that the Constitution must guarantee freedom of creed, equality between citizens and commitment to modern conventions.¹³⁸

The PPP and Religion

Although the PPP partisans consider their party as an “heir” of the Communist Party, and despite the abandoning of Marxism-Leninism , they declare that “their party respect freedom of creed for its being a “private individual affair”. In its struggle, the Party embraces the principle of “non-discrimination between men and women on the ground of religion, doctrine or race”¹³⁹.

A member of the PPP’s politburo confirms that “the PPP does not antagonize religion as a doctrine but rather its employment by political Islam” 140. In addition, membership in the PPP is not contingent on religion since the membership itself guarantees non-discrimination on the ground of gender, color or religious belief”141. Indeed, the Party is more transparent than others in its position against the employment of religion for political or electoral purposes”¹⁴².

When discussing the obligations of the PPP on the internal level, respect of religious freedoms and religious belief is always sustained. The PPP also sustains the preservation and the protection of the holy places that belong to all religions, the separation of religion from the state, in addition to enactment of laws that guarantee freedom of creed for all individuals.¹⁴³

The PPP has devoted special significance to the city of Jerusalem, and called for the “formation of a committee to defend the Arab identity of the city, to protect Christian and Muslim holy places from Zionist and racial attacks, and to stop excavations at the bottom of the Haram al-Sharif. They also called for maintaining, protecting and restoring the religious and holy places besides the cultural landmarks of the city.”¹⁴⁴

Simultaneously, the PPP does not express satisfaction with the dissemination of religious thought as an ideology in the Palestinian society, and its repercussions on the practices of the PNA in this context. According to the party’s partisans, religious trends and the Palestinian liberation movement are inversely proportional i.e. “the rise of the religious current is a direct consequence of the failure of the national current”, given that this phase of struggle is more national and that we should not allow our struggle with Israel be transformed from its being a national struggle to a religious one.¹⁴⁵

A member of the PPP politburo , Haidar Awadallah, believes that Fatah played a significant role in pushing further the society towards religious thought. The absence of ideology

on the latter's part made it render social or religious "bribes" so that it stays in power. Therefore, Fatah was unable to characterize the society with its perspective for it had no vision to develop the society. Mr. Awadallah added that by Fatah's heading towards religion, particularly in the course of the conflict with Hamas, it has considerably contributed to "the obliteration of the secular accumulation" developed by other parties given that Fatah comprises the main force in enacting laws¹⁴⁶.

The conflict between Fatah and Hamas has created a state of competition in establishing a religious "sphere" that has occupied more space than ever before, to an extent that some analysts view the disruption of the Palestine Legislative Council's(PLC) in the aftermath of the political divide as an advantage, for the latter would have enacted more laws of a religious character had it remained functioning.¹⁴⁷

In their discourse on the factors that led to the predominance of the religious inclinations over the political and social domains, representatives of the PPP blame both Fatah and the Palestinian left, despite the fact that the latter is aware of the extent to which religion is exploited by political Islam as a means in confronting national and leftist forces¹⁴⁸.

According to Awadallah, the Palestinian left has lost its literary influence in the Palestinian society especially in traditional places like the universities. This can be ascribed to the fact that they were squeezed between what was tactical and what was strategic in dealing with religion. An evident example is the virtual Parliament that convened in Gaza as a means to

promote women's status in the basic Law, yet the leftists were among the most hesitant forces in supporting such a trend on the pretext of avoiding conflict with Hamas. However, and under the pretext that the phase is that of "national liberation" deals were made in favor of the Islamic movement whose dominance has been promoted. Another example is the 2006 PLC elections in which none of the political parties dared to introduce itself as secular, which made Awadallah wonder how the PPP would develop if it did not get indulged into such concepts. Accordingly, he concluded that "unless we embark on a non-violent intellectual and political battle of a high caliber, we will not be able to achieve anything."¹⁴⁹

The fact that the current phase is a "national liberation" one does not dictate on national and religious forces to form an alliance. Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is of a national character, the religious forces played a crucial role in turning it into a religious one. The religious slogans raised by Hamas, that has recognized the significance of engagement in national concerns, form a heavy burden on the national struggle rather than a source of support.¹⁵⁰

The PPP and Educational Programs and the Society

All along, there has been a high interest in educational programs among the Palestinian leftists, namely the communists. Yet, the crisis of the left on both local and international levels, and the Communist party's transforming to the Palestine People's Party (PPP) as well as their digressing from Marxism-Leninism towards thought openness have negatively affected educational programs held by the PPP but to varying degrees among the

different organizations affiliated to the PPP.

According to one of the Party's partisans, educational programs were a basic component for the left, and was a basic prerequisite for mobilization and struggle. However, such programs have become non-systematic for Palestinian factions including the PPP, and thought is now confined to the elite and education became the concern of the old generation.

In addition to the educational programs conducted by affiliated student organizations on issues related to the PPP's platform, Marxism and training on dialogue, Fouad Nassar Center is in charge of publishing some studies and publications that constitute the principal educational materials that attract the interest of concerned partisans.

Regarding issues pertaining to religion, and although the secular trends in the party's educational programs, a Student Union member reported, that religion is not discussed especially within student organizations that include members of different religions¹⁵². The student bloc affiliated to the Party, known as (The Student Union) is among the least inclined towards employing religion and religious symbols in its electoral discourse¹⁵³.

Compared to the past, educational programs within left organizations including the PPP, as one of its partisans clarifies are currently absent. While emphasis now is on communiqués and on the platform, secularism and enlightenment and cultural tools are ignored. In addition, the employment of religious

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In its literature , the PPP calls for safeguarding the Palestinian national culture and consolidation of freedom of opinion and discourse¹⁵⁵. Some of the Party's leaders blame Fatah for employing religion along with Hamas, while perceiving the cultural backgrounds of both Fatah and Hamas partisans as very similar¹⁵⁶.

The PPP's literature reflects interest in education for being a significant subsidiary of social upbringing and development. In this respect, the PPP called for the development of the Palestinian educational curriculum and transforming education from the rote learning to the research and rational oriented one, in addition to the deepening the democratic content in it. It called also for legislations that guarantee academic freedoms¹owever, the PPP discussed neither the quantum of religious thought included in the curriculum, nor the historical dominion of religious men over the educational process in Palestine was discussed.

Moreover, the left in general and the PPP in particular never objected to any of the topics included in the curriculum. The most provoking thing here is that none of the left or national parties demanded the portfolio of the Ministry of Education in the days of the so-called the National Unity Government in which Hamas participated side by side with several factions affiliated to the PLO. As far as they were concerned, competition

was for m portfolios that had to do with sovereignty, and that the portfolio of education did not fall in that category.

As for women, the PPP's political platform states that it strives for equality between men and women while recognizing the fact that women are deprived from equality, justice and social rights, and called for the development of the Personal Status Laws. In addition, the PPP ratified women's representation in its factional organization at a percentage of at least 25% ¹⁵⁸.

As a matter of fact, the student bloc affiliated to the PPP at Bir Zeit university was once headed by a female student, yet neither this bloc nor other blocs affiliated to other left parties discussed the quality of education since their main concern was on politics rather than on social issues ¹⁵⁹.

The Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA) is a political party founded by Yassir Abed Rabbo who was at the time the Deputy Secretary-General of the democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine-DFLP.

The Party was formed after dissenting from the DFLP in the aftermath of the organizational, thought and political discord that took place at the DFLP Central Committee meeting that convened in Algeria during the period February 15 - March 3 of 1990 to discuss the organizational and political requisites dictated by the first Palestinian Intifida. FIDA was first named "The DFLP- Renewal and Democracy then changed to the Palestinian Democratic Union-FIDA in its constituent congress that convened in Amman in 1991.

Saleh Ra'fat succeeded Abd Rabbo as a secretary-general following a dispute on the latter's position as a secretary-general of FIDA and its representative in the PLO's Executive Committee at the same time. However, in the Party's third and last congress, Zahira Kamal was elected as a secretary-general and Saleh Ra'fat became her deputy and the Party's representative in the PLO's Executive Committee.

FIDA is one of the Palestinian factions working under the umbrella of the PLO, and is in close relation with Fatah and

FIDA presents itself as a political party that holds a democratic national project, and struggles for a Palestinian state that guarantees political and factional pluralism, as well as freedoms of association, expression and assembly. It declares that it is a popular and political democratic organization for all Palestinians regardless of their thought attitudes and beliefs **160**.

FIDA declares that, in its analysis of the reality, it is based on the scientific dialectical method guided by socialist thought, enlightened by thought legacy and the heritage of human and progressive thought, in addition to its being open to the intellectual trends that advocate democratic values, liberation, equality and social justice ¹⁶¹.

However, FIDA introduces itself as a party of “values and thought program” rather than a philosophical and ideological party, thus calling the Palestinian forces to determine thought premises that make the Party’s national democratic project as its focus, and as an alternative to the left’s traditional ideological trend¹⁶².

To clarify the difference between its past and present in terms of thought , FIDA disclaimed ideology and introduced itself as a “progressive and secular party that aims at building a democratic secular and civil society that advocates the separation of religion from the state, preserve and respect

individual rights and freedom of worship, and transcending over sectarian, doctrinal, tribal and regional loyalties. FIDA also aims at guaranteeing positive neutrality of the state towards religions, sects and doctrines in accordance with the slogan raised in the modern Arab history: “ Religion is for God and the homeland for all”¹⁶⁴.

FIDA and the Political System

FIDA does explicitly expresses aspiration to create “a democratic and secular political system in Palestine, and calls for the sovereignty of secularism in regulating political life, in its capacity as a principal component of democracy in the modern world. According to FIDA, real democracy will not prevail unless it implies separation of religion from the state, and imposing constraints on the interference of the state in the affairs of the civil society”¹⁶⁵. FIDA also hopes that dialogue will result in the integration of democratic progressive forces within the framework of a “democratic secular progressive party”¹⁶⁶.

Accordingly, FIDA calls upon the Palestinian government to “build a secular and civil society characterized by pluralism, and capable of achieving independence, separating religion from the state, in addition to protecting and respecting individual rights and freedom of worship.”¹⁶⁷ However, due to absolute compliance with the PLO’s resolutions, FIDA endeavors, in rare cases of conflict as it is evident on secular, to interpret its inclinations in a way to be compatible with the PLO’s policies or vice versa.

FIDA believes that in the Declaration of Independence issued

by the Palestine National Council (PNC) on November 15, 1988 the PLO has determined the nature of the Palestinian political structure as a parliamentary, democratic and secular system¹⁶⁸. But at the same time, , one of FIDA leaders Mahmud Rawaka, finds no problem in adopting “the enlightened portion of the religious texts”¹⁶⁹.

The shift from the slogan of “the Palestinian secular state” raised by the PLO in the seventies of the last century to that of “the Palestinian Independent state” , according to Rawaka, is insignificant and “includes no contradiction”, particularly as the Palestinian state is “the goal of the Palestinian national struggle in which the democratic and secular forces take part”¹⁷⁰

In order to avoid any confrontation with the PLO, FIDA does not hold negative attitudes towards the ratification of religious Articles in the Basic Law, believing that it does not form an abandonment of the Declaration of Independence and views no contradiction between what is said about the secular inclinations included in the Declaration of Independence and the adoption of Islam as an official religion in Palestine, or as a principal source of legislation as stated in the Basic Law ¹⁷¹.

FIDA and Religion

FIDA sustains its respect for democracy, freedoms of opinion, expression and creed, and declares that “FIDA is not an anti-religion faction, but respects all constituents of cultural legacy, and advocates an open religion that respects human rights”¹⁷¹. In addition, secularism advocated by the FIDA is not an atheist one, but taking into account that the Palestinian

society includes various religions and sects, thus secularism means “respect for religion and freedom of worship”. Therefore, FIDA calls for “liberation of religion from exploitation exercised by the ruling political movements as a cover for its oppression and policies that serve particular social classes and categories”¹⁷³

Support of secularism does not originate from an anti-religion position, but a way to protect religion from exploitation, and out of the token that democracy will be incomplete unless it becomes inherent to secularism, where combination of religion with politics may result in fragmentation of the society instead of contributing in the building of community institutions based on democracy.¹⁷⁴

Attitudes towards religion and secularism have repercussions on FIDA's structure, where many of the party's members and leaders come from Christian and Muslim families, and is open to all citizens “regardless of gender, color, religion or philosophical conviction”¹⁷⁵. In addition it has invalidated all ideological prerequisites for its membership, thus declaring itself as a party of programs, values and thought rather than an ideological one¹⁷⁶.

FIDA does not have a quota based on religious considerations for high ranking positions, and the presence of Christians in leadership positions is taken for granted ¹⁷⁷ rather than being in accordance to a certain rule and regulation, since FIDA as a democratic and secular party elects its leaders freely, and without a bias to particular categories to represent it in non-democratic ways. ¹⁷⁸

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religious and extremist movements for they are grass-rooted not only in Palestine but also in other Arab countries, and that those movements “introduce themselves as opponents of the current regimes”¹⁷⁹. However its attitudes and policies towards those movements have varied from time to time regardless of the thought constants that the FIDA holds against them.

In the course of confrontation with the Israeli occupation especially during the second Intifada that took place in the late nineties of last century, FIDA called the Islamic movement “to get engaged in joint efforts and to enhance national unity”¹⁸⁰, and warned of the perils resulting from the confrontation between the PNA and political Islam that may lead to the undermining “the bases of the civil society”.¹⁸¹

However, the negative attitudes held by FIDA towards political Islam in general, and Hamas in particular, are ascribed to intellectual and political reasons. According to FIDA, Hamas that views Islam as its reference is a wing of the Muslim Brothers movement, where Ismail Haniyeh describes his government as a divine regime. Nizar Rayyan, a Hamas leader killed during the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip in 1982 declared that “infidelity and secularism should be eradicated from the Gaza Strip”¹⁸²

FIDA views the religious reference of Hamas as significant as its political stances, and that it attempts to control

authority and change its structure. In this respect, FIDA confirms that Hamas “ insists on establishing a religious authority in the Gaza Strip based on (fanatic) Salafi thought, and attempts to Islamize the society under the pretext of enforcing the Islamic Shari’a on all aspects of life including the social, cultural and media ones . In addition, they exercise a discriminative policy against women and impose on female students at schools and universities as well as on female lawyers the Islamic dress i.e. al-Hijab (headscarf) and al-Jilbab (Islamic gown). They also try to chase women and prevent them from going to certain places where they can meet with men and smoke the hubble-bubble or sit next to men in public transportation. In the name of the frozen PLC , Hamas has enacted laws to promote discrimination against women, impose restrictions on the NGO’s work in the Gaza Strip , and to pave the way for establishing an inclusive and despotic authority similar to Taliban’s in Afghanistan. 183

On the political level, FIDA believes that the dilemma with Hamas stems from the profound differences between the platform of the PLO and affiliated factions and that of the Muslim Brothers of which Hamas is considered as its extension in Palestine ¹⁸⁴.

FIDA is part of the PLO and strongly supports all its policies views it as the “ sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people wherever they are , and the supreme political reference for the Palestinian people and for the PNA and that it is in charge of achieving the national project. This perspective on the part of FIDA is always there regardless of the controversies that may take place among the various factions affiliated to the PLO , or whatever failure the internal structure

of those factions it undergoes.”¹⁸⁵.

FIDA's attitude toward the PLO explains its positions on the conflict between Fatah and Hamas that culminated in vertical and geographical divide in the Palestinian political system, where the West Bank became under the control of Fatah and the Gaza Strip under that of Hamas.

FIDA totally sided with Fatah and President Abu Mazen , and declared its support for all resolutions taken by the Executive Committee of the PLO, and for the decrees issued by the President pertaining to deposition of the then Prime Minister Ismail Haneyeh, a Hamas leader, as well as those pertaining to the announcement of the state of emergency and the formation of a new government headed by Salam Fayyad, viewing them as legitimate resolutions that “aim at safeguarding the supreme national interests of the Palestinian people, as well as maintaining the unity of the PNA in both parts: the Gaza Strip and the West Bank”¹⁸⁶.

According to FIDA, Hamas tried through its coup d'état against the authority in 2007 to seize power and change its structure. Therefore, Hamas started to “dismantle security and civil apparatuses of the PNA and re-build them in Palestine and in accordance to their religious perspective”.¹⁸⁷.

According to FIDA, Hamas is held responsible for the persistent divide and the failure of all reconciliation endeavors, while attributing Hamas's “refusal of reconciliation” to its external relations, particularly its relations with the International

Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brothers that deprived Egypt from having the honor to sponsor the Palestinian-Palestinian dialogue and achieve reconciliation. The said bureau also insists on establishing religious authority in the Gaza Strip according to the Muslim Brothers' perspective. Moreover, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt have insisted on playing the Gaza card and the siege imposed on the Strip as a means of incitement against the Egyptian ruling party in the course of conflict that is taking place between the Muslim Brothers and the Egyptian leadership

¹⁸⁸.

According to FIDA, the relationship between Hamas and Iran was among the factors that prevented it from signing the reconciliation and using it as a bargaining chip with the USA and Israel¹⁸⁹.

It seems that this discourse on the part of FIDA was delivered prior to January 25 revolution that overthrew President Mubarak, and that the Party's bias to the PLO as well as to President Abbas and his government in the West Bank made it exclusively criticize Hamas and the Muslim Brothers in Egypt to a degree that it appeared sympathetic to President Mubarak and the ruling national party at the time.

Because of the aforementioned attitudes towards the role and nature of Hamas, FIDA calls for challenging the former and political Islam in general, and blames Fatah's corruption and the left's failure in the confrontation, for the success of the Islamic movement in the most recent PLC elections.

Conclusion

social and moral premises, thus rejecting the presence of the other's opinion" ¹⁹⁰.

In addition, FIDA partisans deem it necessary to make explicit critic to the political thought advocated by contemporary religious fanaticism due to its being substantially a terrestrial thought , thus calling for fighting radicalism and religious intolerance that "endeavor to ignore and suppress the fact that the Palestinian society is a multi-religious and multi-sectarian one and forms the civilized model in its struggle against the Zionist Israel¹⁹¹. Accordingly, FIDA concludes that the best way to confront political Islam is to make the democratic and national project as much appealing as possible¹⁹².

FIDA and the Educational Programs

FIDA's literature enormously discusses the role of educational programs and the need for paying more attention to the educational programs that should be instilled in the Palestinian society by secular forces. The platform states that the Party encourages "the dissemination of democratic and progressive thought in the Palestinian Territories, as well as safeguarding the national culture, the history of Palestinian national struggle, in addition to resisting the Zionist thought"¹⁹³.

In its discussion on "the strategy of the cultural sector

for the years 2011-2013, FIDA's Central Committee emphasized the need for adopting "an Arab national, humane, democratic, creative and revived culture" that respects and protects intellectual, political, religious and aesthetic pluralism, in addition to being open to other cultures"¹⁹⁴.

A particular space is devoted for the discourse on youth enlightenment through the Democratic Youth Union for the purpose of "founding a youth movement....to form a principal element in national liberation for the sake of putting an end for the occupation... as well as a powerful supporter of advancement, social and democratic change in addition to political, cultural technical and sport development. Moreover, educational programs should enhance dissemination of the culture of voluntary work, the spirit of love and fraternity, as well as tolerance and acceptance of the other's opinion in the Palestinian society in order to promote democracy... and fight the prevalent Salafi reactionary thought"¹⁹⁵.

However, FIDA acknowledges the significant deficiency that all democratic forces go through in moving from theory to application. The party blames the leftists for their negligence of internal staff development, and lack of interest in developing and training young and feminine leaderships"¹⁹⁶.

The negligence of educational programs has escalated since FIDA and other left parties have abandoned their previous ideological positions. As education seems to be inseparable from ideologies, and because of renouncing ideologies, motives for

factional education have diminished and educational programs have become pro forma to a great extent, and issues pertaining to religion and secularism in particular have been ignored, in addition to overlooking or permitting the employment of some religious symbols in some electoral occasions as a form of regression in facing of religious thought¹⁹⁷.

FIDA and Academic Education

FIDA is the most concerned party with education, and that is evident in its literature , which included all issues pertaining to education, whether through discourse on the right to education, its philosophy and quality as well as the teaching methods that should be followed, in addition to viewing education as a general national cause that should be discussed by all Palestinian forces.

In addition to development and secularization of education in Palestine, as well as Palestinization and secularization of educational curricula, FIDA called for setting an educational policy that complies with the inclusive needs of the society including encouragement of scientific research¹⁹⁸. FIDA considers that “ fighting fanaticism and antagonism of democracy and freedom of thought can be carried out through dissemination of scientific knowledge and educational programs that are based on science and rationalism”¹⁹⁹

The report of the Central Committee presented to the Party’s general congress confirmed the necessity for carrying out an extensive reform process in all stages of the educational system as well as its secularization through separating education from

religion²⁰⁰. In addition, education quality related to enlightened scientific vision and the connection between education and democracy should be focused.

In its interest in culture in general, FIDA believes that it should be a national humanitarian culture characterized by flexibility, creativity and pluralism in form and content, and should keep away from stagnation and close-mindedness to form a basis for an educational philosophy from the first grades up to university²⁰¹. However, according to the Party, education in Palestine still suffers from a multitude of problems even following the preparation of new Palestinian curricula. "In scrutinizing the textbooks of basic education, it becomes evident that they were prepared in a strongly-conservative, anti-enlightenment spirit²⁰².

FIDA views Palestinian teaching methods as unacceptable due to being dependent on rote learning and memorization rather than on critical and analytic thinking. FIDA rejects separating between male and female students in primary and high school, particularly as there are no motives for such a policy in the twenty-first century. "General education policies applied in schools in general, particularly in extracurricular activities including art education, music, vocational education, and physical education and school trips among others still adhere to the policy of separation"²⁰³.

However, all topics included in FIDA's documents and literature on educational issues were not applied on the

practical level in a way to exert pressure on officials for the application of theoretical proposals. Moreover, the Palestinian Curricula Committee did not receive any request from “secular” parties including FIDA on the curriculum, nor did the Council of Ministers, which includes members from “secular” parties, discuss the core and philosophy of education upon the request of any party.

FIDA and Women

Being a party that “believes in women’s right to political and social participation, and assumption of leadership positions in the PNA204, FIDA’s attitudes towards women is evident all through its literature, where it confirms its firm commitment in defending women’s interests and equality of rights²⁰⁵.

In this respect, FIDA declares its endeavor to “build a Palestinian society in which social justice and equality among all citizens including men and women will prevail. It calls for the “enactment of laws that ensure equality, particularly with regard to rights and towards putting an end for the discrimination against women within the family, at work and at community institutions. FIDA also calls for enacting a modern liberal Civil Status Law for safeguarding the rights of the family and maternity”²⁰⁶, in addition to a modern Personal Status Law that invalidate all forms of discrimination against women , that will be based on full equality between men and women.

According to FIDA, the current Personal Status Law sustains discrimination against women and “sustains the traditional culture based on Salafi religious concepts that are antagonist to women”. The said law along with other laws pertaining to the daily life of people are in contradiction with the Declaration of Independence. Therefore, those laws as well as the Salafi reactionary thought premises that “endeavors to promote discrimination against women should be firmly challenged”.

FIDA’s critique is not only limited to the laws relevant to the

“Personal Status Law” but rather to other Palestinian parties that are deemed to be mostly “masculine”, provided that representation of women in leadership positions is either “symbolic” or almost missing.

Compared to other parties, FIDA has taken a step forward regarding the representation of women via its ratifying the principle of “divided equality”.

The election of a woman as FIDA’s secretary-general in the most recent congress has prompted a wave of critique among some of the partisans for they took it as a big leap that incompatible with the Party’s reality²⁰⁸.

The Palestinian Popular Struggle Front-PPSF was founded immediately after the six-day war in 1967 and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Its early founders were Arab Nationalists, Ba'athists, and some Communists, the most prominent were Bahjat Abu Gharbiyah, Subhi Ghosheh, Samir Ghosheh, and Major Khalid who was killed by Israeli air raids in the Salt area in Jordan.

Dr. Ahmed Majdalani, who became the secretary-general of the PPSF following the death of Samir Ghosheh who held this position since 1971 and until his death in 2009, is the representative of the PPSF to the PLO. Today, Majdalani serves as the Minister of Labor for the PNA headed by Salam Fayyad.

It should be noted that following the signing of the Oslo Accords with Israel, the PPSF was split into two parts: the first part that was headed by Khalid Abd al-Majid al-Qasam who opposed the Oslo Accords from his exile in Syria, whereas the leadership that is officially represented in PLO agreed on the Oslo Accords and entered the Palestinian territories.

The PPSF and the Political System

The Literature of the PPSF as a whole includes a discourse on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and also on a civil modern state, in addition to the need

for the endorsement of modern democratic laws that will protect political pluralism, respect thought and partisan pluralism (209), consolidate a base for a civil society in accordance with the principles of democracy, equality and justice, in addition to the preservation of public freedoms, human rights and freedom of trade union organization ⁽²¹⁰⁾.

A member of the Politburo of the PPSF, Mahmoud Abu al-Zuq, believes that because of the Israeli occupation, Palestinians should give precedence to national over social concerns. He confirms that the slogan of "Palestine, a state for all its citizens" should be raised if they aspire to establish a democratic society. ²¹¹

Awni Abu Ghosh, also a member of the Politburo, illustrates that the PPSF is extensively concerned with the political system that should be based on three principles: separation of powers, pluralism, democracy and peaceful devolution of power, as well as inclusive economic, social and cultural development²¹².

According to the PPSF, secular inclinations have prevailed among its members since its inception by virtue of the nature of its constituent forces²¹³. Most often, the PPSF partisans try to introduce it as a leftist faction, albeit its secretary-general states: "He is not inclined to wear the leftist cloak"²¹⁴.

However, the PPSF's attitudes towards the Palestinian Basic Law reveal evident pragmatism. In commenting on the articles stipulating Islam as the official religion in Palestine,

and that the Islamic Shari'a should be the principal source of legislation, one of the PPSF's partisans states: "I can't definitely say that these articles mean an abandonment of the Declaration of Independence whose articles contain a high degree of liberalism and a democratic society away from any particular dispositions or religious ideological tendencies". He adds, "these articles do not imply the abandoning of the Declaration of Independence, but rather a form of harmony with the changes in international policies that had their repercussions on Arab and international political parties"²¹⁵

As for the Basic Law, the PPSF aspires for replacing the statement that says that Islam is "the principal source of legislation" by the statement that says that Islam is "one of the sources of legislation" since the latter is more expressive of the reality of the multi- religious society in Palestine, and more appropriate for maintaining sectarian, social and political balances, and for preventing a sedition from happening ²¹⁶.

It seems that the PPSF sees no contradiction between having a little mention of religion in the Basic Law and the political token that sustains political concept that states that : "the global changes no longer permit any society to legislate civil laws based on religion . And religious sources are required only if they emanate from a religious ideology for the sake of guiding a society with a variety of various affiliations and inclinations. ²¹⁷.

However, some of the PPSF's partisans believe that the Palestinian political system in general has witnessed regression

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identity, nor did it address the Arabs or Palestinians insomuch as a reaction to the American-Israeli allegation that the Arabs were seeking to throw Jews in the sea²¹⁹.

The PPSF and Religion

Despite the fact that the term “secularism” is rarely stated in its literature, the PPSF introduces itself as a secular organization and excessively concerned with the separation of powers, as well as the separation of religion from the state. However, while the PPSF views itself as highly transparent in sustaining secularism, other movements did not tackle this topic as transparent which put them in a real dilemma²²⁰.

Despite the fact that religious symbols are not employed in its discourse, the PPSF acknowledges the relative increase in religious people among its partisans, and that they employ religious symbols in their formal discourse. In addition, while the PPSF makes thought pluralism, human rights and anti-racism as its main point of focus²²¹, it recognizes the increase in employing religious slogans by numerous political movements because of the societal structure. However, and due to the enormous legacy of religious traditions, it views religious inclinations as natural and that religion can be employed in the course of our struggle with the occupation based on a national consensus. Yet, the danger lies in employing religion by political Islam in the internal battle²²².

As far as the PPSF is concerned , religious affiliation has nothing to do with membership, nor has quota for religion since it has both Muslims and Christians in its different ranks.

The PPSF and Political Islam

The PPSF views that the momentum the political Islam has gained since the eighties of the last century is ascribed to objective reasons. It sees Hamas as a key component of the social and political motif of the Palestinian society. Contradiction with the political Islam, at the forefront of which is Hamas, is quite evident in the PFLP's literature, and is attributed to differences in thought premises of the two parties as well as to other political reasons.

The Arab and Palestinian political Islam was incapable of bringing up a political platform to solve the internal and external problems of the Arabs and Palestinians, and under the current Arab regimes it became at loggerheads with Western, and particularly the American interests and influence ²²³. In addition, the historic model of Islamic regimes indicate that they will encounter a multiple of obstacles in the coming years²²⁴.

The PPSF held Hamas responsible for the Palestinian political divide that took place in 2007, which resulted in the separation of the West Bank from the Gaza Strip in the wake of the conflict between Fatah and Hamas over power, describing such thing as a coup d'état against legitimacy²²⁵,

In this political divide, the PPSF tried to distinguish

between two issues: First, Hamas should have been given the opportunity of legislating and enacting laws after winning the majority of seats in the PLC. Secondly, the coup d'état executed by Hamas and its seizing power in the Gaza Strip provided that the PPSF believes in peaceful devolution of power and opposes the settling of disputes via violence and military force²²⁶.

The PPSF holds the view that part of Hamas's popularity was due to its being outcast by the PLO, particularly after its success in the latest Legislative elections, and as a result of the siege imposed on it by Israel, the West and by some Arab countries. However, the PPSF believes that Hamas's acquiescence to regional agenda has a negative impact on the Palestinian cause, and therefore reconciliation with Hamas will not be an easy task, and settling the issue of the political divide has become a far-reaching goal due to the various connections Hamas has with other parties and because of the new conditions in the Arab region²²⁷.

Eventually, the PPSF ascribes the thought and political development of political Islam in Palestine to various reasons, the most conspicuous of which is the regression that took part on the left and the national faction's role in challenging political Islam on both the thought and political levels. According to the secretary-general of the PPSF: "The level in which the national factions tackled the progressive character of the state implied a great deal of cowardice, for national factions do not dare criticize the conduct of the religious current. He adds, such cowardice is an act of "opportunism on the part of the national factions "²²⁸.

The PPSF and Educational Programs

Educational programs still occupy a space in the PPSF's list of priorities, where they are being executed directly by its partisans or through its grass-root organizations as it is the case with the Workers' Struggle Bloc and the Students' Struggle Bloc. The topics discussed in such programs include the PPSF's literature, the Palestinian cause in general and the civil society.

Educational programs, and especially those concerned with youth and their role in the society, are implemented via holding workshops or joint symposia with the CSO's in an attempt to empower them and help build their capacity²²⁹.

Students in particular and youth in general are usually trained on dialogue and intellectual pluralism, while education for workers helps to "inculcate in their mind the culture of patriotism, democracy, freedom, social justice, collective spirit, and to discard egoism and individualism²³⁰.

However, according to PPSF activists, the executed educational programs are still below standard. The secretary-general of the PPSF criticized the left in general for highlighting political platforms while neglecting the cultural vision of the society in its entirety²³¹.

In addition to the youth and workers, women seem to somehow attract the attention of the PPSF, although the PPSF is less concerned with women issues and women are less represented in high ranking positions than in other factions of

the left.

According to Abu Gosh, academic education “is higher on the priority list than women”. The PPSF has presented several memoranda to the PNA institutions calling for “ the modernization of curricula and keeping pace with recent developments in this respect”²³³.

The Students’ Struggle Bloc demanded “ for the developing of the educational process so that it will cope with our national agenda ”²³. It also called for “combating the negative dimensions of the inherited traditions that prevent the Palestinian society from developing towards building a civil society”²³⁵.

The secretary-general of the PPSF apparently advocates “a comprehensive revision of Palestinian educational curricula due to their being indulged into fundamentalism”²³⁶.

This faction that embraced the nationalist thought and armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine was founded in 1968 by the partisans of the Iraqi Ba'ath party in Palestine as a response to the founding of the "al-Sa'iqa" faction, a Palestinian affiliate of the Syrian Ba'ath party that had been founded a few months earlier. Abd el-Wahab al-Kiyali, was the first secretary-general of the ALF and was succeeded by the agronomist Abdel-Raheem Ahmad who was succeeded by Raqad Salem after his death. Salem was arrested by Israel in 2002 and released in 2007 along with many other Palestinian prisoners upon signing an agreement with the PNA. However, the ALF representative to the PLO's Executive Committee is Mahmoud Ismail.

Being part of the Iraqi-based Ba'ath socialist party, the word "president" mentioned by the secretary general of the ALF usually referred to the late Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. The ALF is the Palestinian satellite of the Iraqi Ba'ath party that has branches not only in Palestine but rather throughout the entire Arab world. The ALF adopts a broad vision that goes beyond the Palestinian territories towards "the establishment of an Arab democratic society²³⁷".

The ALF and the Political System

Due to its affiliation to the PLO, the ALF has representatives to the PLO's Executive Committee and Central

Council, as well as to the Palestinian National Council(PLC). As an ally to the PNA and President Abu Mazen, the ALF has sided with Fatah in its conflict with Hamas, particularly following the political divide that resulted in the establishment of Ramallah and Gaza governments respectively. However, siding with Fatah as the ALF declares, does not imply a full break up of relations with the factions of the political Islam since the ALF is willing to work with Islamic movements while recognizing that “nobody can ignore the presence of a group of people in the Palestinian arena²³⁸”.

The ALF views the struggle in the Palestinian Territories as “secular”²³⁹, despite their support to the Palestinian Basic Law and the Articles pertaining to religion and unlike many national and left factions that opposed any mention of religion in the said law. The ALF supported the articles that state that Islam is the formal religion in Palestine and the Islamic Shari’a should be the principal source of legislation. The secretary-general Rakad Salem sees no problem in mentioning the Islamic Shari’a in the basic law 240. Ibrahim al-Za’anin, a member of the Politburo declared that “ Islam should be a principal source of the Palestinian legislation yet in accordance with modern perspectives”²⁴¹.

However, the Secretary-General stated that the slogan of “the secular state” raised by the PLO in the past was in essence a political motto and void of any thought content, and was accordingly relinquished due to the changes that took place in the political conditions and not because of thought changes on the part of the PLO ²⁴².

The ALF, Religion, Pan-Arab Nationalism and Educational Programs

In order to conform with the inclination of the Iraqi Ba'ath party, the ALF has inclined towards religion to the extent of integrating Arabism with religion, albeit the ALF views itself a secular faction and the fact that its Secretary-General declared his opposition to the employing of religion in politics, or utilizing it by the authority. He sustained : "Religion is for God and Politics is a daily business."²⁴³

According to the ALF, religion is the spirit of Arabism and one of its basic characteristics where "Arabism without religion is a form without content". The Secretary-General states: " We as Pan-Arab nationalists, we cannot separate religion from Arabism" for the Arabs have delivered the message of Islam²⁴⁴. Therefore, the ALF sees no contradiction between Islam and nationalism , and this was behind integrating Islam with the ALF ²⁴⁵.

The Secretary-General quoted Michael A'flaq who delivered a lecture at Damascus University in 1943 and was entitled "In the Memory of the Arab Messenger of God" and stated that "Mohammad was for all Arabs, let all Arabs then be Mohammad" . It seems that the ALF confounds religion with history and even coincides between them very frequently. In explaining the relationship with Islam, the Secretary-General stated: "We are not without history or civilization", and proceeded to express the ALF passive attitude towards Marxism regarding it as an antithesis to religion where he said: "we are not a nation without history to embrace Marxism or any other doctrine, and Omar Ibn al-Khattab is two hundred times more important than

Marx and Lenin combined”, and “As an Arab, I am not a man of no ancestry”²⁴⁶.

However, the ALF officials endeavor to demonstrate that their understanding of Islam is a modern one and conforms to the spirit of the era” since “the Islamic Shari’a cannot be applied in its entirety, where it is unnecessary to apply the Islamic Law literally²⁴⁷, but we are in need to evoke the spirit of Islam”²⁴⁸.

An example of evoking the spirit of Islam, the Secretary-General reported that a punishment can be replaced but not cancelled, and that he opposed the stoning of an adulterer for example. A member of the Politburo, Ibrahim al-Za’anin supported the opinion of replacing the punishment of stoning for example by that of shooting since “all issues should be addressed via civilized perspectives ” ²⁴⁹.

In practice and with regard to the organizational structure, the ALF recruits both Muslims and Christians in its ranks, where “ we view Christians as an essential part of the Arab-Palestinian motif”²⁵⁰, and some of them assume leadership positions. In practice, religious people were highly appreciated and “were usually consulted in case a problem arose while distributing President Saddam Hussain’s generous donation”²⁵¹. In response to the PNA’s employment of religious manifestations in the Media, the Secretary-General replied: “All rulers are like this”²⁵².

In general, the ALF is a conservative organization and particularly to personal status issues. Despite the participation

of women in the organization where they assume high ranking positions in some cases, the ALF does not try to “challenge the Inheritance Law”. The ALF opposes polygamy yet for religious considerations and particularly according to the Koranic verse that states: “If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with women, then only one”.

Upon organizational disputes that escalated following the death of the secretary-general Abd-el-Rahim Ahmad in 1991, and the political controversies that culminated in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, many members and partisans of the Arab Liberation Front-ALF that was founded by the Iraqi Ba'ath party in 1968 splintered to establish what is now known as the Palestinian Arab Front-PAF .

The leadership of the ALF in Baghdad decided and without referring to the leadership in other countries(Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, the occupied Palestinian territories and elsewhere)²⁵⁴, to withdraw from the PLO in a protest against Oslo Accords. In his address to the Central Council of the PLO that convened in Tunisia on October 12, 1993, the present secretary-general of the PAF , Mr. Jamil Shihada stated : “ we will continue working under the umbrella of the PLO side by side with Palestinian national factions, while expressing reservation regarding the Oslo Accords like the other factions that expressed the same stance against the said accords ²⁵⁵ .

Since then, this group started its activities under the name of the Arab Liberation Front (ALF)-Interim Command, and most of its leaders returned to the Palestinian territories whereas the leadership of the ALF that was stationed in Baghdad refused to return home , yet they backed down on their decision at a later

stage. As a result of financial and political pressures exerted by the PLO's leadership on the nascent faction, and after a multiple of meetings between its leaders and the PLO, and the many conferences convened by the leaders of this nascent faction in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and abroad, they decided in the congress that was held in Gaza in 1997 to adopt the name of the Palestinian Arab Front-PAF and started to exercise its role in the PLO institutions once again.

PAF and the Political System

PAF introduces itself as a "Palestinian national organization that complies with the Pan-Arab national and democratic thought, guided by what is positive in the universal thought heritage and the long experience of struggle on the part of the national liberation forces for the sake of achieving liberty, independence and democracy"²⁵⁶. In conformity with its Ba'athi roots, PAF considers the Palestinian people as part of the Arab nation²⁵⁷.

Being affiliated to the PLO, PAF participates in the meetings of the PLO's Executive Committee, the Central Council and the National Council. It is also part of the PNA and believes in the principle of separation among the legislative, executive and judicial powers²⁵⁸.

Regardless of its non-membership in the Palestinian Legislative Council that ratified the Basic Law and codified the relationship between authority and Islam, PAF is concerned with the texts related to these issues, albeit its interest was restricted to personal and sometimes contradictory interpretative judgments,

rather than a central and unified position.

The secretary-general, Jamil Shihadeh who views his party as a “secular faction, declares: “We objected to the article stipulating Islam as the sole and principal source of legislation since it contradicts the reality of the multi-religious Palestinian society where Arabism is the basis and Islam is one of its subsidiaries²⁵⁹. However, a member of the Politburo, Salah Abu Rukbeh views Islam a principal component of the Palestinian culture that it should be the principal, but not the sole, source of legislation²⁶⁰.

PAF and Religion

The statute of PAF acknowledges its respect for religious freedom not only for its members but also for all Palestinian citizens, and emphasizes the establishment of a secular state for all its citizens ²⁶¹. It also stipulates the establishment of a civil society that guarantees absolute freedom of opinion and belief for all Palestinians²⁶².

Intellectually, the PAF interprets the Pan-Arab Nationalist thought that it adopts on the basis of interdependence between Arabism and Islam²⁶³, therefore it views no intellectual contradiction with Hamas. With regard to the organizational structure, on the other hand, PAF has Muslims and Christians among its ranks, and according to the conditions of membership, every Arab and Palestinian is eligible to join the PAF as of the age of eighteen without discrimination based on gender, color or religion.

PAF leaders view no contradiction between its “secular inclinations” and the emergence of religious symbols in its

discourse and literature. However, membership stipulates an oath that starts with: "I swear by Almighty God, my honor and beliefs", and ends with "God bears witness to what I say"²⁶⁵.

Despite warnings not to guide the society towards that form of religiosity²⁶⁶, PAF declared its attitudes towards political Islam affirming that controversy with Hamas is not intellectual. This seems natural in the light of the positions adopted by the Iraqi Ba'ath Party in recent years, in which it made rapprochement with Islam. However, the relationship with Hamas has witnessed ups and downs as it was the case between Hamas and the PLO. In addition, PAF has explicitly declared its support to the PNA, and even portrayed "the legitimacy of President Mahmoud Abbas" as that which reflects the Palestinian legitimacy as a whole, while affirming its conclusive rejection of any infringement of that legitimacy²⁶⁷.

The relationship with Hamas, was described as "good and distinguished during the Al-Aqsa Intifada"²⁶⁸, yet it has witnessed considerable decline following the Palestinian divide between Fatah and Hamas.

It was evident that the thought rapprochement between the PAF and Hamas did not bridge the political gap between the two parties. PAF on its part held Hamas responsible for the divide and called it "not to stick to its platform", and to relinquish realities materialized on the ground since its military coup d'état²⁶⁹. PAF also called upon Hamas "to restore the status quo prior to the coup so that to maintain the unity of the nation"²⁷⁰.

PAF called upon all parties (and particularly Hamas) to go for dialogue, and demanded for the developing and reinvigorating the PLO and its affiliate organizations as well as laws and legislations that , its being the representative of Palestinians inside the Palestinian Territories and abroad, in a way to secure the participation of Palestinians all over the world²⁷¹.

PAF and Educational Programs

PAF presents itself as a highly conservative faction , and particularly with regard to cultural and intellectual issues. PAF announces its adoption of “educational programs consistent with authentic Arab traditions and customs that aim at combating corruption and crime”²⁷² Similarly, PAF strives to “sustain equality between men and women”, and to “ensure women’s rights in divorce and “in accordance with the Law”. It aspires for a modern “Personal Status Law” while adhering to traditions and customs.

One can notice a sort of “inconsistency” in PAF’s attitudes between the desire to protect women’s rights and adhering to laws that deprived women of their rights in various positions. However, PAF is explicitly in favor of equality between men and women when it comes to other issues pertaining to women like education, economic and political rights, health and social insurance , independency of women movement and women’s role in PAF’s ranking positions. As for education, PAF has called for “ adopting a national liberal curriculum for all stages”²⁷³ and further delved in more details when called for reduction of tuition , opening of new schools and new specialties, as well

as “academic inviolability and neutrality of universities away from political disputes”²⁷⁴. However, the relationship between education and religion was totally overlooked by PAF.

According to the secretary-general, not fulfilling the slogans and not meeting the demands raised by PAF is attributed to “misestimating”, “misunderstanding” or “lack of potentials”. In addition, PAF believes that it is sufficient to put forward a platform and agenda while it is the obligation of the authority to implement the agenda on the ground²⁷⁵.

The Palestine Liberation Front-PLF, was originally founded by some Palestinian personalities including Shafiq al-Hout, Misbah al-Budeiri, Othman Haddad and Ahmad Jibril in 1959, then merged with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-PFLP before that some individuals joined Ahmad Jibril who splintered from the PFLP and founded the PFLP-General Command.

In 1976, some individuals deserted the PFLP-General Command under the leadership of Tal’at Ya’coub , who became the secretary general of the newly founded Palestine Liberation Front-PLF and had Abu Abbas as his deputy.

In 1984, the PLF splintered again into three factions:

- a. A faction headed by Abdel Fatah Ghanim, who sided with Fatah al-Intifida that broke away from Fatah movement under the leadership of Abu Mousa, before his returning to the Palestinian Territories to form the “Mithaq” (Convention) Party.
- b. A faction headed by Ta’lat Ya’coub who settled in Damascus and in Lebanon until his death in 1988 during the Palestine National Council-PNC meeting in Algeria. He was succeeded by Abu Nidal al-Ashqar as the secretary-General and had Ali Isaac as a member of the PLO Executive Committee.
- c. A faction headed by Abu Abbas who left Lebanon to Tunis and then to Baghdad where he died in American jails. Abu Abbas was succeeded by Omar Shibly who then died after a short period of time. The latter was succeeded by Wasel Abu Yusuf, the present secretary-general of the PLF.

The PLF and the Political System

Guided by the thought of the proletariat, 276 the PLF presents itself as “a national, democratic and revolutionary faction ” and until “the liberation of land and man” ²⁷⁷

The PLF plans not to convene its congress in order to avoid adopting policies that it is not obliged to adopt under the current circumstances that the Palestinian cause is going through ²⁷⁸.

Despite the fact that the PLF , which is part of the PLO and the PNA, has sided with Fatah, the president of the PNA and with the government in Ramallah, it has actively contributed towards the termination of the political divide between Fatah and Hamas.

The PLF does not explicitly declare its secular tendencies , neither is the term secularism mentioned in its literature, yet some of its leaders explicitly advocate the separation between religion and the state ²⁷⁹

The PLF has courageously admitted that it had ignored the PLO's abandoning the slogan of "The Palestinian Secular State" which was adopted in the seventies of the last century, along with the legislation of the articles stipulating Islam as the official religion of the state and as the principal source for legislation. The argument for this ignorance was that the PLF was not represented in the Palestine Legislative Council -PLC at the time²⁸⁰.

Therefore, the PLF deserves a credit for such frankness where its Secretary-General views no reason for fabricating excuses for overlooking issues that that they never thought of given the modest capabilities and the various problems the PLF went through, and that it was all along preoccupied with political and organizational issues rather the ideology of people or the PNA.

The PLF and Religion

Membership of the PLF is not based on religious

affiliations, where it includes religious and non-religious Muslims and Christians. Although the PLF considers itself as a leftist organization, religion is practiced by members of its governing bodies who consider Islam “the religion of the innate character”²⁸¹

The PLF acknowledges the popularity of Islamic political forces²⁸², yet believes that Palestinian traditions are incompatible with the Islamization of the society. Accordingly, it called upon the government to secure personal and collective freedoms, and opposed endeavors initiated by Hamas government in the Gaza Strip to impose Islam through which al- Hijab(headcover) was imposed on women and personal freedoms were restricted ²⁸³.

The PLF and Educational Programs

The PLF staff development program discusses national and political issues such as the history of the Palestinian cause, the PLO, the contemporary Palestinian revolution in addition to intellectual issues dealing basically with Socialist thought²⁸⁴.

The PLF believes in full equality between men and women, where women are involved in many leadership positions. For example women comprise almost 70% of its partisans in Jericho ²⁸⁵, and great efforts have been made to ensure the participation of women in the Legislative Council, the municipalities and the Local Governance offices²⁸⁶.

As for academic education, the national aspect pertaining to the interfering of the Israelis in this regard has received much attention, where the PLF opposed the Israeli endeavors to impose

the Israeli narrative in teaching history and the Palestinian cause.

Partisans of the PLF are concerned with the technical aspect of academic education, such as the shortage in the number of schools and the crammed curricula. However, the thought dimension of academic education did not receive any attention, as the PLF regards this dimension as not a priority while declaring: “These issues have been referred to the PNA since we are preoccupied with politics”.²⁸⁷

It is natural that the PLO and its factions were not required to be concerned with intellectual and ideological aspects and trends of Palestinians due to predominance of political aspects and national struggle. However, the PLO was a leader of the Palestinian struggle and comprised the so-called Palestinian virtual entity that was supposed to be concerned with education, health, media, culture, and all aspects of the social and economic life of Palestinians in addition to the national struggle. Therefore, it became “legitimate” and “necessary” to investigate the PLO’s approach vis-à-vis intellectual issues as well as religious inclinations that have been recently inculcated in the minds of people in the last few decades. This religious trend has overshadowed not only the society and its institutions but rather the political parties including those that constantly declare their “mundane” and secular inclinations.

Inclinations of the PLO’s factions, at the forefront of which is Fatah, towards a political settlement and the abandoning of armed struggle that coincided with the termination of the “ideological era”, that affected some Palestinian left factions, and ended up with the establishment of the PNA in the Palestinian territories to manage, in addition to its political tasks, the daily life of Palestinians there. Therefore, it has become imperative for the PNA and affiliated factions to be held accountable for their political and national platforms, in addition to their democratic

platforms of which culture and religious thought constitute its core.

Since the moment the Palestinian national project has transformed from liberation of the land into the establishment of a state, a discussion was stirred up regarding the programs which the potential state is going to adopt. In addition, civil society organizations(CSO's) started to push forward towards democracy. Consequently, highlighting national liberation while overlooking the daily life of people on the part of the PNA, has become as form of fundamentalism and ignoring reality. Therefore , tackling the issues of secularism and religion in a direct manner has become imperative and substantial following Hamas victory in the Legislative Council elections, and was escalated after the political divide in the Palestinian political system between Fatah and Hamas, and the separation that took place between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Indeed, the religious expansion is truly not a Palestinian phenomenon, but rather a regional and a universal one, as was evident in the Arab Spring.

However, this phenomenon has become more present in Palestine where the religious ideology dominated all aspects of life. The formation of the PNA was an indicator of not only a change that took place on the Palestinian political system and political national inclinations, but also a radical change on values, where the culture of corruption on one hand, and religious manifestations on the other hand prevailed.

With respect to values and culture, the PNA concerns were confined to the seizing of power as well as to the internal political conflict, where national and moral concerns in the public sector decline in favor of the necessities and gains. Relations between the authority and the society at the moral and national levels were disrupted , and the society became either an arena for investment in terms of the political conflict, or a place for tax collection for the interest of the PNA, whereas the PNA has become in the eyes of the society an employer in the best case scenario.

However, the PNA has entitled religious institutions, including the political Islam, to handle intellectual, moral and educational aspects of the Palestinian society, in a way that seemed that there was a contract between the PNA and religion, in which the former would seize power and the latter control the society. This was reflected on a decline of the modern thought, disruption of the relationship between politics and thought, an abandoning of educational strategies including the relationship with Islam on the part of the political “national” parties , and almost a full lack of factions’ awareness of the needs of the society.

When shifting the discussion from the PNA’s attitudes towards religion to the discussion on the attitudes of the parties constituting the PNA and the PLO and their relationship with the PNA itself and the public , and particularly when it comes to religion, one may notice a great concern regarding the daily political actions. In addition, there is a high level of awareness on the part of those parties towards the PNA at the expense of that pertaining to the public, and that they express almost

similar attitudes towards the religious issue.

Currently, Palestinian political parties and factions are characterized by similar attitudes in a way that they become sometimes fully coincident . What distinguished those parties from one another in the past, was their different ideologies and attitudes as to whether or not they would adopt people’s armed struggle against the Israeli occupation . Yet, after relinquishing ideology and armed struggle made all parties similar , which made it more difficult for an individual to join any of them.

The period that followed the signing of the Oslo Accords with Israel has witnessed a waning of the mentality of national liberation , and the dominance of the mentality of relations of the PNA. When the political parties became public, they were able to participate in elections, and they transformed from being an elite and leaders of the public, to those of a grass-root parties, and became basically concerned with satisfying the public mood and gaining electoral votes. Such attitude became even seasonal and away from sensing the concerns and aspirations of the public.

One may notice that the “national” or “secular” Palestinian political are deeply indulged into the details of the daily political action, and ways of how to attaining more power and gains, or maintain the acquired ones. Therefore, it is extremely difficult for those movements to have a distinct platforms pertaining to daily life of people, and if there happens to be any of such platforms, it will remain theoretical and only in the literature . Verily, one may find good writers in those

parties, yet the implementation on the ground is another issue.

Religious belief or affiliation is not a prerequisite for membership at Palestinian non-religious political parties and factions, and almost all of them have partisans and supporters from different religions. However, those parties have little concern of religious issues or thought, be they in the Basic Law or in the curricula, or in what prevails in the public sphere. In addition, those parties have no strategy regarding religion, and that the Islamization that is taking place in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is not much of their concern, and if happens to be any, it will be an individual attitude on the part of some partisans rather than it reflects a certain attitude of the parties themselves.

Religious context has been intensified in the Palestinian “secular” discourse as of the 1980s and was increased during the political divide between Fatah and Hamas, particularly as religiosity have become part of the conflict between the two parties, either as a means of self-defense against accusations of infidelity sometimes, or to gain the public’s sympathy that will be requisite electoral stock.

The events that occurred in the Palestinian territories following Hamas victory in the 2006 legislative elections, and the subsequent political divide that resulted in the separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as the arrival of the Islamic opposition to power with high momentum in Tunisia, Egypt and may be in other countries, stimulated Palestinian secular parties to only express some political reactions and

that they did not extend to the prevailing thought structure. And if this reaction happens to provoke the thought structure of those parties, the latter will not try to encounter the increasing religious trend but rather to further conform to it out of their believing that “reshuffling” the cards is the best approach at this stage.

As mentioned earlier, there is much in common among the Palestinian secular parties vis-à-vis religion. Yet, the difference between Fatah and left movements in this respect is highly significant .

Although Fatah can be regarded as a secular movement, it was never a non-religious one, given the fact that it has religious and non-religious partisans and even occupying high ranking positions , and that its discourse always included religious symbols. Because of its containment nature, Fatah has at an earlier stage sought to recruit the religious “Jihadi’s”(i.e. Islamist fighters) who existed in the “Sheikh’s” camps in Jordan during the seventies of the last century, or through the so-called al-Jihad brigades organization that it has adopted. Fatah represented by Yasser Arafat was keen to include Muslim, Christian and Samaritan clergy in high ranking positions including the PLO’s Executive Committee, the Palestinian National Council(PNC) and the Palestine Legislative Council(PLC).

Fatah presents itself as the movement of the Palestinian people as it is the case, it has all along been concerned to considerably become a grass-root movement, and thus was keen to become a conservative one. Fatah is willing to control

and rule the Palestinian people and society as they are, without even thinking of the possibility of influencing them in any form, under the pretext of taking into account the nature of the society, of which religion constitutes one of its most significant components.

Through its incomparable pragmatism, Fatah found out that it had to act as a conservative movement in the Palestinian territories since this achieves its goal of internal control, and as a liberal movement in the international arena to become a member of the international Socialism for example, and to be acceptable by the international community. The reality indicates that the Fatah deals with others the way that appears appropriate to them, so that it becomes most influential.

Fatah's position vis-à-vis religion dictates on it to play conservative at the internal level. This position is manifested by their seeking a 'conservative' constitution, similar to those of the Arab countries, curricula characterized by a religious nature , and conduct and media with a religious character. However, the religious character of Fatah intensifies as the conflict with the Islamists becomes more fierce. Therefore , thought played no role in Fatah's choices and political alliances.

In addition, Fatah smartly introduces itself to its allies as a pragmatic movement where it allied with the former Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia at the same time. However, it was viewed by its adversaries as an opportunist movement and suffering from a thought superficiality and vacuum as well as from a social confusion, where it attempts to represent all social