

The Palestinian Museum and the Peace Process

High among the corrupted currents in the world of international affairs is the myth of Palestinian history or unilateral suffering. The fallacious Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood may hold the gold standard in spinning about the story of the long past of Palestinians living in the Middle East.

Paradoxically, the absence of historical substance was unintentionally symbolized in the opening on May 18, 2016 of the Palestinian Museum with nothing in it to display. Built on the outskirts of Birzeit University on the West Bank at a reported cost of \$24 million, and employing 40 people, the plan of the Museum was to display an exhibit called "Never Part." This, intended to concentrate on the lives and personal objects such as mugs, combs, plants, of Palestinian refugees, was suspended as a result of disagreements among the members of the Board of the Museum. Though the nature of the disagreement was not stated, it almost certainly focused on the theme of the show, the concentration on Palestinian refugees.

The disagreement is not only within the Board but is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. With its political and historical overtones it presents an opportunity to reflect on the reasons for the current unwillingness of Palestinian authorities to enter into peace negotiations with Israel.

The new director of the Museum, Omar al-Qattan, explained the problem. He said "one must never underestimate the profound and decimating effect that forced exile and war have on a people , its memory, its customs, its oral history, its music, and dance, its artisanal skill base."

The Museum was initially conceived by the Welfare Association in London in 1997 as a memory of the *Nakba*, the catastrophe, which was the defeat in 1948 of the five Arab armies and Palestinians who had invaded the newly created State of Israel to destroy it, and whose defeat led to the Arab refugee problem. As a result of criticism, the Museum now presents itself as an institution that can “celebrate Palestinian culture more broadly, to reflect on the present in order to imagine a better future.”

The former director of the Museum, Jack Persekian disagreed with the original emphasis on *Nakba*, and called for the need for Palestinians to get over it. Certainly, the event can be remembered but it is time not to be tied down to this particular moment. Persekian asserted, “We do not want to remain incarcerated in a dichotomy formulation. The museum should be about confronting taboos and sanctioned (official) narratives.”

The new director of the Museum, Omar al-Qattan, himself illustrates the dilemma. A film maker, born in Lebanon to Palestinian parents, lived in Kuwait, before education at Oxford and now living in England, al-Qattan tried to explain the change in orientation of the Museum as focusing on contemporary culture that includes history. Yet the problem remains. The director says that the *Nakba*’s profoundly destructive effects continue to haunt not only Palestinians but also the rest of the region. The result of the Museum’s project focused on modern history of Palestine cannot avoid reflecting on that date.

Yet it admits it or not, the Museum has important political overtones. For the geographically dispersed Palestinians, and those subject to restrictions, the Museum can be the link between Palestinian communities throughout the world. Palestinians across the world will be able to connect and communicate with each other. To this end, the Museum plans an extensive digital audiovisual archive, a Family Album

project of hundreds of thousands of photos from Palestinian families and audios of important events.

In what is a strange statement the Museum said it will focus on the history and culture of Palestine from 1750 to the present day." This is indeed passing strange since there was no Palestine in 1750. A key current political as well as historical issue is the narrative of Palestinian history.

It can be argued that the official mention of Palestinians, that is Palestinian Arabs, began in 1964 with the founding of the PLO and the issuing of the Palestinian National Charter. Article 6 of the Charter states that "Palestinians are those Arab citizens who were living normally in Palestine up to 1947, whether they remained or were expelled." Presumably, by the PLO's own definition, all others are not Palestinians.

The correct version is that until 1948 all inhabitants of the area, whatever their religion, were Palestinians, witness the *Palestine Post*, the Palestinian brigade in World War II, and the Palestinian Philharmonic Orchestra were all Jewish in character. The PLO was founded, as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people on June 2, 1964 for the liberation of Palestine through armed struggle. Even at the beginning there is a problem. The PLO was founded in Cairo by outsiders, at the initiative of the Arab League of 7 countries. The Palestinian National Charter, article 3 reads the "The Palestinian Arab people possess the legal right to their homeland." Yet its leader Yasser Arafat was born in 1929 in Cairo.

The Museum in its historical presentation might remember a few things. It was Philip Hitti, the distinguished Arab scholar at Princeton University, who in 1946 remarked, "There is no such thing as Palestine in history, absolutely not." Compare this with the absurd invention of a tradition by PA President Mahmoud Abbas, now in the twelfth year of his four year term that "we have been planted here since the dawn of history."

There has never been a Palestinian state governed by "Palestinians" or a long Palestinian history, but rather an Arab people and Arab culture. It serves the Palestinians no purpose to claim descent from the Canaanites, the first inhabitants of the area, or the Philistines, who came from other lands such as Crete and the Aegean islands.

Wherefore Palestine? It was Roman Emperor Hadrian in 135 A.D. who ended the Judea province and renamed the area "Syria Palaestina (sic)." Jerusalem became Aelia Capitalina. It was only in 1923 that "Palestine" became a geo-political entity. The League of Nations British Mandate for Palestine, 1923-1948, called for the establishment in Palestine of a "National Home for the Jewish people." It did not mention a Palestinian people, but the "existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

The Palestinian Museum understandably is concerned with the life and culture of Palestinians. It might consider and benefit from a more ecumenical approach. It might advance understanding between Palestinians and the State of Israel by mounting an exhibition similar to that of *The Fertile Crescent*, a project curated by Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, this was an exhibition that recognized and celebrated women artists from the Middle East, including Palestinians and Israelis. A similar project by the Museum may help understanding and possibly be the basis for peaceful reconciliation.