

# Prologue

## *Approaching a Permanent State of Emergency*

I've written this story before.

—Robert Fisk

This is a book about *the possibilities of memory*. It is rooted in the belief that thinking and talking about the past is a worthwhile enterprise, but one that is inevitably marked by uncertainty. No mere exercise in simple recollection or in repeating received ideas, an active engagement with the past is necessarily about the present and the future as well. It is about open-endedness, not self-assuredness. To approach the past in this way is to embrace what Stuart Hall calls a “politics without guarantees,” a politics that assumes that even under the most oppressive conditions, meaning can never be fixed.

This is also a book about *memories of possibility*, memories of a time when the window of opportunity for Palestinian liberation seemed to be more open than ever before. For members of the “intifada generation” (*jīl al-intifāda*), the fact that the window has appeared less open in subsequent years only enhances the power of those memories. As the title of this book suggests, they are “occupied by memory” in the most immediate way: the continuation of the Israeli occupation is a constant reminder of what they experienced, and what they were and were not able to accomplish during their youth. For the rest of us, a close look at their personal narratives, and their relationship to the present realities on the ground, provides its own unique window onto the dynamic, bustling intersection of historical and ideological forces that is the Palestinian struggle.

Like any ethnographer, I come to my research and writing with my own set of memories. When the intifada began in late 1987, I was a second-year undergraduate whose mild interest in the Middle East derived largely from slides my parents had shown me after returning from church-based trips to “the Holy Land.” Yet like many observers, including my Lebanese-Palestinian roommate and several Jewish friends who were inclined toward a critical view of the Israeli occupation, I found it impossible to ignore the television images of young Palestinians, rocks in hand, confronting Israeli soldiers in the streets of the West Bank and Gaza. The public face of this remarkable insurrection called to mind the biblical story of David and Goliath, but with a potent symbolic inversion: the Palestinian stonethrowers were both obliterating and appropriating Israel’s long-standing self-definition as a tiny, youthful nation surrounded by powerful enemies. Experiencing the intifada via television images—images that were violent, theatrical, sometimes horrific, and ultimately misleading in the sense that they hid much of the popular organizing, social upheaval, and systematic Israeli repression that were going on behind the scenes—led me to develop what I can only describe as a romantic, often envious attachment to the intifada’s young activists.<sup>1</sup>

In the relative comfort of my dorm room, I felt like a fraud, and a privileged one at that. Soon I cofounded a group devoted to promoting campus dialogue on Israel/Palestine, an action that generated significant anger at a school where support for Israel had traditionally been strong. I think some people didn’t know what to make of me, for I was neither Jewish nor Arab; my interest in the issue derived from my family’s commitment to social justice, not from any personal stake in the conflict. For those who were strongly pro-Israel, I may have been more objectionable than any of the three Palestinians on campus, and the more I learned about the history of Zionism and the Israeli occupation, the more confident I felt in playing the role of provocateur. Yet even as I began to find a public voice, and to feel that peculiar mix of adrenaline, empowerment, and self-importance that comes with being an activist during a time of crisis, I was always stopped in my tracks when I saw the latest news from the front lines of the intifada. I was organizing meetings, taking part in debates, and writing articles, but here were people my own age who were speaking to the world in a much more immediate, physical, and dangerous way. They were the “children of the stones” (*atfāl al-hijāra*), and they had my attention.

In many ways, this book is the product of a long process through which I subsequently have come to understand that the notion of heroic, youthful intifada activism I discovered during those years is not just double-edged, but multiedged in ways that reach to the core of Palestinian national identity as it is viewed by Palestinians and non-Palestinians alike. As a result, my own attempts to develop an analytical perspective on “other” people’s narratives of the intifada have necessarily involved an increasingly critical engagement with my own reasons for viewing Palestinian resistance in general, and the actions of the “intifada generation” in particular, in the ways that I have up to now. Exposure to critical theories of postmodernism, deconstruction, and discourse analysis led me to question the seductive narratives of national liberation, narratives that so often leave the hierarchical nature of liberation movements unexamined in the interest of prioritizing “the struggle.” In addition, by the time I made my third and longest trip to Palestine in 1996 as a Ph.D. candidate, I was fully aware of how the place was saturated with academic and other researchers who help to form what some have called “the Palestine industry.” Many Palestinians with whom I spoke had already been interviewed multiple times by journalists, human rights workers, and scholars.

In the process of doing my own interviews and immersing myself in the lives of Palestinian communities—sharing tea on damp winter evenings, enduring days of curfew and violence, talking politics in taxis and coffee shops, enjoying the festive streets of Ramallah during Ramadan—I came to feel a much deeper connection with the young people who had initially grabbed my attention in 1987. Yet as I heard their stories, I kept feeling myself being pulled back into the narrative of nationalism and I wondered, did I really want to produce yet another study that simply oscillated between the twin poles of heroism and victimization? That level of cynicism, and its attendant yearning for something more meaningful than political slogans and stereotypical characterizations, led me to embrace the popular memory approach that insists on a more complex understanding of individual stories and their social significance. During the months after I returned from Palestine, my thoughts moved increasingly, and perhaps inevitably, to a series of more abstract, more “intellectual” issues: the production of social memory, the discursive construction of “youth,” the relationship between biography and history.

Current events, however, always have a way of snapping us back to attention. Throughout the completion of this book, Palestinians and

Israelis were locked in a process of what Frantz Fanon, viewing the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria, called the process of “terror, counter-terror, violence, counter-violence.” By the end of 2001, of course, the notion of “terror” was occupying a very different place in global political discourse, and long-standing Israeli attempts to tar Palestinians with the brush of “terrorism”—attempts that had been partially undermined during the years of the intifada and the “peace process”—were again receiving a sympathetic hearing from many in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Yet as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon pursued his own policy of colonial brutality under the cover of George W. Bush’s “war on terrorism,” the toll of human suffering continued to be grossly asymmetrical, with Palestinians bearing levels of violence and repression unseen even at the height of the intifada. When Sharon launched a massive assault on Palestinian communities in early 2002 (the largest Israeli military operation since the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, a war over which Sharon presided as Defense Minister), refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza were the primary targets.

That all of this was nothing new was brought home to me one morning in late February of that year, when I turned on the radio and heard that Israeli troops had entered Balata Refugee Camp, where I conducted the bulk of the research for this book. The usual metaphors and euphemisms abounded in news reports that day: the Associated Press quoted an Israeli official as saying that the invasion was part of “an ongoing operation to flush out terrorist cells,” while Sharon’s spokesman told Agence France Press that Israeli forces were “picking up terrorists with tweezers.” Ironically enough, I had spent the previous evening viewing Gillo Pontecorvo’s legendary film *The Battle of Algiers* with a group of students. As I listened to the news from Balata, it was as if Sharon had simply stepped into the boots of Mathieu, the colonel who led the French paratroopers into Algiers in an ultimately vain attempt to suppress a movement whose leaders were holed up in the old city. In the film, Mathieu casually labels his mission “Operation Champagne” as he gazes down at a billboard from his perch high above the city; four decades later, his Israeli counterparts were commandeering homes overlooking Balata and dubbing their work “Operation Colorful Journey.” Tanks had encircled Balata camp, unable to enter the narrow streets of the defiant, besieged community; were these slow-moving armored vehicles, I wondered, the Israeli equivalent of the French tank that had plodded its way around a

street corner at the end of Pontecorvo's film, a lumbering indicator that French power was being eclipsed by the logic of history? Or would Sharon's troops do to Balata what his Lebanese allies had done to the camps of Sabra and Shatila in 1982?

As the news slowly leaked out of Balata, I confirmed what I already knew to be the case: many of those who were fighting the Israelis in the camp were people I had met and interviewed, young members of the "intifada generation" who were now in their late twenties and early thirties. I had to glean information about the dead and wounded from online Palestinian sources, and as I perused the lists I saw family names—Hashash, Odeh, al-Jirmi—that I remembered from my time in Nablus. The invading Israeli soldiers, reports indicated, had done their "house-to-house" search of the camp in a particularly devastating way: fearful of being exposed in the camp's narrow alleyways, they had used a technique they called "walking through walls," methodically using explosives and special saws to cut through the walls separating one home from the next and damaging roughly five hundred dwellings in the process. The "operation" ended after three days, but the people of Balata knew better than to treat it as an endpoint. "The Israelis will not leave the camp like this," predicted one resident. "There will be a massacre here." Less than a month later, Sharon launched his all-out war against Palestinians throughout the West Bank, killing hundreds and systematically destroying the infrastructure of the nascent Palestinian state.

I relate this story not only to give some sense of the place that is home to the Palestinians I interviewed, but also to underscore a larger point about my own relationship to "the question of Palestine." Since 1987 I have gradually come to see the situation in Palestine not—in the manner of the mainstream U.S. media—as a series of "rounds of violence," but rather as violence itself, as something akin to what Walter Benjamin had in mind when he wrote the following passage just months before he took his own life in 1940 while trying to flee from Nazi-occupied France to Spain:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. . . . The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the

beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

The “untenable” notion of history that Benjamin is critiquing here is closely linked with the idea of Progress, and as he suggests, belief in Progress is very difficult to reconcile with the knowledge of what the first four decades of the twentieth century brought to Europe—or, to extend his analysis, with the knowledge of what has subsequently happened in Rwanda, Cambodia, Palestine, Lebanon, Guatemala, Bosnia, and a host of other locations across the globe. The Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman began a thoughtful meditation on the September 11, 2001 tragedy with the words, “I have been through this before.” And indeed he had, for it was on the same day in 1973 that a U.S.-backed coup ushered in a horrific period of military dictatorship in his country. How many others can bear similar witness to the horrors that have marked the age of Progress?

In keeping with Benjamin’s fundamental insight, I begin from the premise that for Palestinians living under Israeli domination, life is in a permanent state of emergency (Swedenburg 1995b; Taussig 1992). Researchers working in Palestine have traditionally had a difficult time grappling with the nature of this permanence, choosing often to pursue work that is framed, at least implicitly, by the more optimistic, teleological narratives of state building, national liberation, and the “peace process.” This is hardly surprising, for as Edward Said has so doggedly and eloquently pointed out, the Palestinian struggle for liberation from Israeli colonial domination is one of the great moral causes of our time. Like many others, I have chosen to take a position on this issue, for I believe that a permanent state of emergency requires a permanent ethical commitment to “speak truth to power.” At times this imperative carries with it the need for a careful documentation of Israeli repression with an eye to making the details of this repression public.

At the same time, I believe that one can do this kind of work without putting one’s faith blindly in the promises of nationalism; otherwise one runs the risk of mistaking the seizure of state power for the actual practice of liberation. As examples such as Algeria and Mozambique show so clearly, the “emergency” simply takes on different forms after independence. Taking the lessons of this history seriously, then, means recognizing the depth of the crisis we are facing and thus resisting the temptation to provide the sort of “solutions” that “Middle East experts” often toss about so blithely.

### *Organization of the Book*

The diversity of methodological and analytical frameworks that informs the following chapters reflects the particular challenges and possibilities of a project that cannot be tackled effectively without an approach that is at once historical, sociological, and attentive to the need for critical cultural analysis. In chapter 1 I sketch the intellectual architecture of the book, as well as providing a brief introduction to Balata Refugee Camp and the interviews I conducted there.

In chapter 2 I critically examine the discursive field through which young Palestinians were invested with powerful political, social, and cultural meaning during the intifada. Drawing on the work of David Spurr, I discuss six “rhetorical modes” (heroism, victimization, guilt, potential, testimonial, and empowerment) that run throughout numerous discourses on generation, providing a flexible and varied repertoire for representing the relationship between young people and the nation. Rather than attempting to connect particular modes with particular types of narrators in a mechanistic fashion, I conduct my analysis with an eye to the fact that the same repertoire is, in fact, available to individuals and groups whose political positions may exist in tension, even outright antagonism, with one another. Given the tendency of these various modes to turn up in so many different discursive practices, the materials on which I draw in this chapter are necessarily eclectic, including poems and songs, popular legends, political leaflets and declarations, human rights reports, soldiers’ narratives, journalistic and scholarly accounts, legal discourses, even paid advertisements.

The remainder of the book focuses on popular memories of the intifada as articulated primarily by young people in Balata camp. Chapter 3 examines the stories of Isam Abu-Hawila and his mother, Imm Ghassan. Isam remembers the intifada as a time of activism and imprisonment (he was jailed for two years) and a time when social relations were drastically, if temporarily, altered. He also describes it as a time of failed romance, recalling how political events defeated his own attempt to get married during the uprising. Now he speaks of his generation as suffering from a “return to adolescence” as its members struggle to deal with the gulf between their political experience and their emotional immaturity. Imm Ghassan tells a life story organized around a series of tragedies that have taken away her father, her husband, and one of her sons, Nizam, who was an intifada “martyr.” Her memories of the intifada,

however, are dominated by her own active efforts to defend her sons and all the young men of the camp, and by her determination to maintain her family in the face of economic uncertainty and Israeli repression. Both Isam and Imm Ghassan tell the story of Nizam's death in terms of personal tragedy, but also in a way that emphasizes their commitment to "regenerating" their family by keeping his memory alive. All their stories, I suggest, tell us something important about the complicated relationship between family and nation, and about the subtle ways in which Palestinians come to grips with the receding of the future that their nationalist movement has always promised them.

Memories that suggest processes of political awakening, empowerment, and the disruption of generational hierarchies are the subject of chapters 4 and 5. Here I pay particular attention to the "spatialization" of memory, that is, to the ways in which young people's remembrances of the intifada are closely connected with particular sites where political resistance intersected with struggles over generational authority. In stories rooted in the home environment, for example, the existence of parental authority appears as a limiting factor on the ability of young people to act; hence we find numerous references to passive interactions with soldiers in the home (e.g., in stories of midnight arrests), to parents who forced their children to stay inside, and to children who found ways to sneak out or keep their political activities secret from their parents. By contrast, stories rooted in three other sites—prison, school, and the streets—indicate that through their activities in these spaces, young people succeeded in effecting important redefinitions of generational identity such that biological age came to matter less than one's ability to take on political responsibility. Consequently, these stories are often built on images of generational inversion, with young activists taking the initiative in their interactions with a variety of adults ranging from teachers to prison authorities.

Chapter 6 explores the overdetermination of memory by immediate events and concerns that surrounded the articulation of memory in the interviews. Following the intifada, the beginning of the "peace process," and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), young people remained bound to one another by the powerful memory of political events witnessed and experienced during their youth; yet their gradual transition into adulthood, occurring in the midst of a national transition from mass mobilization to political negotiation, had left them increasingly fragmented as a generation, with some working for the PA, others

returning to school, and still others living uncomfortably as “spectators” who are both unemployed and politically disillusioned. The process of remembering the intifada and assessing its long-term impact, I suggest, generated significant political contradictions both within individuals and between members of the *jil al-intifāda*, contradictions which these young people were attempting to work through on a narrative level. Most importantly, their general descriptions of the intifada indicate the operation of powerful “moral chronologies,” in which later political and social developments are negatively contrasted with the early period of the uprising, which is remembered as a time of optimism, democratic resistance, and pure motives.

As this brief overview indicates, the issue of generation is an evolving and dynamic one in the Palestinian context, subject not only to the workings of memory, but also to an ever-shifting matrix of social forces operating under changing conditions of possibility. With this in mind, I conclude the book with some reflections on key post-intifada developments that have combined to create the present crisis in Palestine. These include deep flaws in the Oslo agreements and the “peace process,” contradictions in the relationship between the PA and the “intifada generation,” the outbreak of a second intifada in 2000, and the increasingly rightward drift of Israeli and U.S. policy since 2000. These events have demonstrated not only the continuing ability of Palestinians living under occupation to “re-generate” (in both the biological and ideological sense) their struggle for liberation, but also the continuing inability of Palestinians to control the terms through which dominant opinion in Israel and the United States—the two nations whose alliance exerts the most direct control over their lives—discursively constructs that struggle. As I complete this manuscript, Palestinians are facing two simultaneous threats that work hand in hand: a threat to their national existence through unprecedented Israeli state violence; and a threat of symbolic erasure through the post-September 11 reformulation of Palestinian resistance as “terrorism.” There is perhaps no greater illustration of the “permanent state of emergency” I have described here than the coincidence of these two threats.