

Oslo: When Liberation Was Reduced to a Job and a Salary



Since the signing of the Oslo Accords, Palestinians have continued to debate the meaning of this political settlement and the limits of its gains. Recently, a new discourse has emerged on social media that reduces the agreement to the story of a Palestinian whose reward was eating “shawarma” or getting a job for his wife or son, while resistance is portrayed as a source of “calamity,” “humiliation,” and “being denied even the use of bathrooms.”

This kind of rhetoric, which turns politics into the minutiae of daily life, is not unique to the Palestinian context; it echoes similar narratives in post-colonial or post-conflict societies across the Global South, where the legitimacy of resistance or liberation is replaced by promises of consumption, employment, and services.

In South Africa, following the end of apartheid in 1994, the outcomes of the liberation project far exceeded those of the Palestinian experience. Still, Nelson Mandela’s rhetoric focused on translating the legitimacy of the new state into improving the daily lives of its citizens. In his State of the Nation Address, Mandela declared: “Our people have chosen hope over fear... and we must translate that hope into jobs, housing, electricity, and a better life for all.”

This vision materialized in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which prioritized poverty alleviation, housing, and basic services—making daily life a yardstick for political legitimacy after decades of oppression.

In Algeria, after the civil war of the 1990s, the 2005 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation provided a framework for restoring peace and stability. It emphasized national reconciliation, security, and improved living conditions while sidelining the earlier armed resistance against French colonialism.

This example illustrates how, in the aftermath of prolonged violence, authorities often shift the national liberation project into one of stability management where livelihood and security become the new standards of legitimacy, rather than resistance.

In Vietnam, the Đổi Mới reforms of the 1980s emphasized “improving people’s lives through economic openness,” while reducing the legacy of peasant and civil resistance to museum displays and educational curricula. Legitimacy came to be defined by economic growth and development, even at the expense of the comprehensive liberation project once led by local communities.

Similarly, in South Korea under Park Chung-hee’s rule in the 1970s, the “New Village Movement” emphasized rural development and economic modernization. The regime’s narrative centered on enhancing citizens’ everyday lives and economic security, using that as a means to consolidate power following Japanese colonization and internal strife.

The same logic appeared in Egypt, where Anwar Sadat framed the 1979 Camp David Accords with Israel as “peace for development.” He grounded legitimacy in promises of improved economic conditions for Egyptians, while portraying Palestinian and broader Arab resistance as obstacles to peace and prosperity.

Latin America followed suit. In Chile, Augusto Pinochet’s narrative of “national reconstruction” was paired with promises of growth and prosperity.

Resistance—past or future—was painted as the root of chaos and poverty.

Economic stability and investment became the regime’s badge of legitimacy. In Colombia, President Álvaro Uribe promoted the concept of “democratic security” as a prerequisite for investment and job creation, further embedding the narrative that any resistance is a threat to national progress.

In Libya, Omar Mukhtar who led resistance against Italian colonialism was smeared by the Italian press as a “saboteur” and “rebel,” even though he was spearheading a national liberation movement grounded in dignity and freedom.

This pattern of colonial elites casting liberation movements as threats to stability recurs across the Global South—and reemerged in the Palestinian Authority’s

post-Oslo trajectory, where bureaucratic governance and economic services became the foundation of legitimacy at the expense of the liberation project.

In this context, Frantz Fanon's critique of the "national bourgeoisie" in *The Wretched of the Earth* becomes vital. He describes it as an intermediary class that abandons the liberation struggle to become a distributor of privileges and consumer goods, reducing politics to "scrambling for crumbs" within the global system.

Fanon argued that revolutionary consciousness is born of the daily colonial experience and evolves through resistance into an awareness of dignity and liberation but this consciousness fragments when the national bourgeoisie captures power and turns struggle into a competition for material gain.

This tension is starkly visible in the Palestinian context. The symbolism of "olive oil and thyme" isn't merely poetic—it reflects a deep-seated Palestinian willingness to endure hardship for the sake of freedom and sovereignty.

This stands in contrast to the Authority's discourse, which equates legitimacy with its ability to pay salaries and offer "shawarma." Palestinian awareness of this duality has long been embedded in public culture—through songs, jokes, and popular expressions that, while simple in form, are profound in substance.

A quick comparison of Palestinian songs reveals this ideological rift. On one hand, the resistance camp continues to sing, generation after generation:

"I'll pitch a tent by the water, even if I have nothing...
We can live by selling sage and thyme
My people, hold on—why are you giving up?
The bullets keep pouring like a waterfall"

These lyrics embody the spirit of steadfastness and sacrifice—accepting material deprivation as part of the ongoing struggle against occupation. Everyday items like sage and thyme become symbols of defiance, while the last line evokes resistance as an existential force.

On the other hand, those who believe the Palestinian state already exists—requiring only a few cosmetic touches to complete—echo a different song, "Where's the Salary?" which captures the bureaucratic, authority-centric mindset:

"The grocer wants his dues,
The landlord's at the door since morning,
Demanding rent for this nest.
Where's the salary? There's none, none."

Here, politics and resistance are reduced to a purely economic matter—focused

on rent, bills, and salaries. Liberation disappears from the frame, replaced by a language of dependency and daily grievances. It's a direct reflection of the post-Oslo narrative, where the project of liberation is supplanted by job management and service delivery.

The revolutionary song maintains a political and ideological horizon, while the bureaucratic song reveals institutional failure and a reliance on economic promises rather than national or political rights. Fanon's "revolutionary social consciousness" is replaced by a middle-class, bureaucratic consciousness reliant on material stability.

The contrast is especially evident between the 2006 post-salary-crisis viral jingle—"Where's the salary? There's none, none... our 'wise' government left us broke"—and today's social media satire: "If not for Oslo, you wouldn't even be eating shawarma." Both reflect a deep rift.

Add to that former Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh's remark at the Ramallah Chamber of Commerce on September 19, 2019: "Do you want more homeland or more money?" a statement that perfectly captures the drift from a liberation project to one of economic administration.

Ironically, the very justifications used to establish the Palestinian Authority's legitimacy salaries, jobs, services, and security have now become reasons to dismantle it.

The inability to pay wages, the failure to provide security to citizens now stoned in their homes by settlers when they were once the stone-throwers of the First and Second Intifadas has exposed the Palestinian Authority as a hollow entity lacking sovereignty.

Its failure to deliver on what it once championed has fueled increasing calls for a return to direct occupation so that Palestinians can rebuild their tools of resistance, which they maintained even in deprivation, sustained by olive oil and thyme rather than shawarma.

In the end, the narratives of "shawarma" and "salary" appear pitiful and fragile, feeding off the scraps of life under ongoing occupation. Meanwhile, the resistance narrative holds a thread that stretches from thyme and dignity to freedom itself.

The Oslo Accords' gravest sin was in stripping the Palestinian peasant of his land and turning him into a debt-bound bureaucratic employee—binding the Palestinian economy to the occupation, glorifying consumption in the name of "development." Its greatest betrayal was converting the vision of total liberation into one of temporary caretaking.

And this was carried out by Palestinians themselves—those once part of the national movement who later distanced themselves from the broader public to form an elite class driven by economic self-interest. They came to embody Fanon’s national bourgeoisie. And no excuse—past or present—can justify what has unfolded in Palestine.

As the poet Ibrahim Tuqan once wrote:

“They might be forgiven if hunger compelled them...
But by God, they were never thirsty nor hungry.”

Those promoting the fantasy of a good life under Oslo are the very beneficiaries of it—the opportunistic elite fattened by wealth, whose children now shout proudly, “This country is ours!”

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