

Palestinian Identity

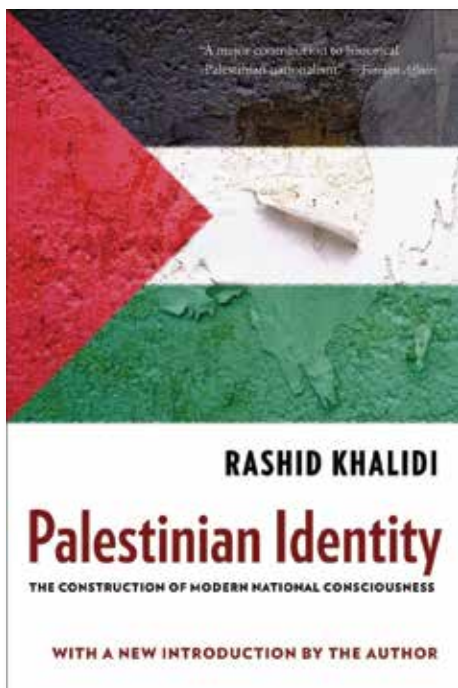
The Construction of Modern National Consciousness

By Rashid Khalidi

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310 pages, \$30.00.

Reviewed by Mahmoud Muna, *The Educational Bookshop, Jerusalem*



The discussion on Palestinian identity is as problematic as any other work on identity; it requires an inclusive understanding that goes beyond political motivation, accommodates the aspects of nationalism, and considers the diverse social, economic, and cultural elements that contribute to the formation of identity. Khalidi debunks the Israeli nationalist claim that Palestinians had no sense of shared, collective identity before 1948. He demonstrates as mistaken the frequently applied, insulting notion of an “invented people” that is reflected in the prevailing custom of Israeli spokespersons to speak of “Arabs” when referring to Palestinians. He asserts that it is imperative to consider the context of Palestinian identity development and explains that nationalism in its modern outlook did not take hold in the Middle East until the early- to mid-twentieth century, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and beginning with the independence of Egypt in 1922, Iraq in 1932, Lebanon in 1943, and Jordan and Syria in 1946.

Khalidi demonstrates how Palestinian national consciousness began to take clear shape just before World War I and further developed during the British Mandate, a period in which the Arab population used “overlapping identities” by expressing loyalties to districts, villages, clans, and families. Such expression stood in contrast to the alternative notion of inclusion in a Greater Syria or an Islam-affiliated identity. Using relevant literature in Arabic and Hebrew, among other resources, Khalidi emphasizes how Palestinian identity was the first to demonstrate substantive Palestinian nationalism in the early Mandate period, arguing that “local patriotism could not yet be described as nation-state nationalism.”

Khalidi’s approach to analyzing the historical construction of identity and nationalism in Palestine is in line with the enlightening work of theorist Benedict Anderson, who coined the term “imagined communities.” Khalidi confirms that Palestinian identity had enjoyed being substantially fluid because much of it was woven from multiple “narratives,” based on family or individual experiences. Indeed, while Palestinian identity and nationalism developed organically, early Zionist action assisted in shaping aspects of it – but Palestinian nationalism is far too complex to be merely an anti-Zionist reaction.

This book is masterfully researched, thought-provoking, and enlightening. The second edition was updated in 2010 to capture recent developments in this fluid identity and to analyze emerging new layers influenced by the failure of the so-called peace process, the second Intifada, and the increasing nationalism and Islamization of the Arab world. The late Edward Said commented: “Extremely readable and gripping, this book is a remarkable achievement of the historian’s art.”

Rashid Ismail Khalidi is a Palestinian American historian of the Middle East, the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University, and director of the Middle East Institute of Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs. He received his BA from Yale University and his DPhil from Oxford University in 1974. An important and active Palestinian academic, he has published numerous books and articles, including *Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* and *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*. He served as an adviser to the Palestinian delegation in the Madrid and Washington negotiations.