

Being Palestinian¹

PALESTINIANS POSSESS MORE THAN ENOUGH CULTURE, LANGUAGE, history and ethnicity to claim the traditional rights of a nation, and thus to base their identity upon a combination of these categories. However, a people is more than a nation, as both the existential predicament of Palestinians and their unceasing struggle over generations demonstrate. How does one define the nature of this extra characteristic that identifies Palestinians as a people?

In this article I shall illustrate and explain how my own identity as a Palestinian is not based on a combination of the national characteristics that gave rise to the Palestinian people but rather on the glue which keeps us together: namely, the general will. What exactly is the general will of a people? One can define it as that which makes it cohere, gives it sense and purpose and expression. It is the basis for the creation of the social contract; it is the foundation for the theory of democracy itself. Yet it is commonly said that it is more or less impossible to discuss since it cannot be measured. It is purely metaphysical, and so indefinable. The general will is not empirical and therefore there is no clear way of analysing, surveying or classifying it. Nor is there any single or combined methodology that can capture either its performance or its essence. It is emphatically not ethnic; it is neither based on language, custom, religion, race, or on the nation; moreover, it is never static: it moves, it grows and it changes. It is both relational and unquantifiable. In his wonderful introduction to his translation of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, G. D. H. Cole explains the operation of the general will in two parts: 'The General Will is realized not whenever that is done which is best for the

¹ The author is grateful to Sudhir Hazareesingh of Balliol College, Oxford and to Marc Stears of Emmanuel College for their helpful comments.

community, but when, in addition, the community as a whole has willed the doing of it.²

In order to explain how and why I rely upon the general will rather than traditional nationalist claims for identity, it is necessary first to present the particularities and history of the Palestinian people who are largely a refugee population. Next I should explain how the general will functions within Palestinian society and crosses borders and host countries to express itself. I shall conclude with examples of why Palestinian identity is so caught up in an essential struggle to create just institutions, especially for the protection of the rights of refugees, and why the refugee issue is bound up with the dual quest for liberty and democracy which – as in most cases – are intertwined.

THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

There is a fashionable and somewhat sympathetic way of seeing the modern Palestinian predicament as a diaspora, an international business community, that is highly educated, rootless, existential and cosmopolitan: a mirror image of the Jewish Diaspora on the European continent. Such exiles will find their way easily after their final settlement in a globalized world, connecting to their community by the Internet, perhaps adding a Palestinian passport to that of the USA, UK or Jordan. This is, however, largely a false image, merely that of an elite, who managed to leave with their passports or savings, or went to the Gulf or to the USA in the 1950s and 1960s. Although it is true that Palestinians possess an abundance of talent and skills reflected in their careers as doctors, engineers, scientists, artists, architects and teachers and come from coastal towns and cities as well as the countryside, still the overwhelming character of the Palestinian people remains that of a landed people with a close bond to their homeland. Farmers and peasants are still intimately connected to the land, although for three generations they have been born in camps, often only a few kilometres from their destroyed villages and empty fields. Hundreds of thousands of them are officially excluded from certain professions in some of the countries that play host to them, and they have no hope of any future. Refugees, with no travel documents of any kind, they dream only of return to their homeland.

² J. J. Rousseau, Introduction, *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, London, Everyman Dent, 1913, p. xxxvi.

The Palestinian refugee camps were created during, and just after, the establishment of Israel over 54 years ago. These camps remain the most enigmatic facet of Palestinian life and society to those outside it. How many Palestinians are refugees? Where are they scattered? A survey recently undertaken at a Scottish university discovered that only 9 per cent of the British public were aware that the West Bank and Gaza are currently under military occupation. Yet the refugees are more central to Palestinian identity than the military occupation by Israel, since 1967, of the West Bank and Gaza, the locus of the Palestinian state. Indeed, since the original dispossession and continued displacement from their homes in 1948, the unhappy fate of the majority of Palestinians remains the core of the conflict, and is still almost entirely neglected.

Palestinian refugees are one of the oldest refugee groups and make up over one-third of the world's refugee population. Currently there are about five million refugees and they consist of the majority, just over two-thirds, of the Palestinian people and include refugees from the 1948 *Nakbah* war (see below) as well as the Six Day War of 1967, which created another half million Palestinian refugees. So there are several different generations and types of refugees, some living scattered in the 59 United Nations (UN) registered refugee camps throughout the West Bank and Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. However, most of the refugees whose families registered with the UN after 1948 (now 3.8 million) do not even live in the camps, and what is more, many refugees never registered with the UN at all. Others live in the rest of the Arab world, from Baghdad to Cairo; some, more recently, have moved to Europe and the USA. Many are even Israeli citizens and are living in unrecognized villages close to their razed homes inside Israel.

The creation of the refugee crisis can largely be attributed to the dramatic events which live on in the Palestinian memory as the *Nakbah* (Catastrophe): the fragmentation, devastation and total rupture of Palestinian society in 1948. The Palestinian villages in the Galilee region and elsewhere were demolished by the authorities of the new State of Israel once the original inhabitants had been driven out or had fled during the fighting. The people in this largely peasant society found themselves confined to refugee camps not far from their original homes, some within only a few kilometres, where they are until this day.

The international community at that time believed that the UN had a special responsibility to Palestinian refugees, given that their terrible predicament was created as a direct result of the UN decision to partition Palestine. Indeed, the UN resolution that dealt with the urgent refugee crisis, General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1948, has yet to be implemented as a result of Israel's intransigence. All Palestinian refugees today know the meaning of this UN resolution which deals with their fate and their rights, calling for the return to their homes of those refugees who desire it, as well as recommending compensation for them.

The UN was more successful in establishing an institution to care for the ongoing humanitarian crisis of the refugees. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) began its operations in 1950 and is still in existence today, although its mandate is limited. It does not provide anything other than minimal relief; it cannot provide representation for the refugees and it cannot offer the vital legal protection that the UN's High Commission for Refugees offers to all other refugee populations. The political organization of the camps by the popular resistance movements in the mid-1960s (Fatah, the Popular Front, the Democratic Front etc.) emerged as a result of the despair engendered by these failings – although every year the international community and the Arab States insisted on the right of refugees to return, nothing was done. Through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the Palestinian movement actually operated through a variety of means in the camps: organizing unions and hospitals, creating factories and employment in them, and coordinating and collaborating with other national liberation movements, such as the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) and the African National Congress (ANC), and international institutions and agencies.

It was in the refugee camps of Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon that the guerrilla groups were established and from these camps that they drew their membership. By 1970 these various groups had merged into the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), forming a government in exile, and establishing embassies and diplomatic relations across the world. The PLO consisted of a National Council made up of representation from the parties, unions and differing exile constituencies. Much of the regional conflict that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s was a result not just of Israel's attempt to crush the political infrastructure of the Palestinians, such as the 1982 invasion, but of the continual attempt by the Arab States to control

the Palestinian's political independence, and the destabilization it created throughout the Arab world. This erupted into battles such as in Jordan in 1970 and Lebanon in 1985 and 1986 during the so-called War of the Camps.

How does the will of a people, scattered over several countries, regions and continents, express itself with any assurance under these extreme conditions? Fourteen years ago the Palestinian leadership sought to capture in words a definition of what we were as a people that might hold us all together. The Palestinian Declaration of Independence was proclaimed on 15 November 1988 in Algiers by the Palestine National Council, our parliament-in-exile. Somehow it succeeded. It articulated and managed to reflect something of what we were, and was also an inclusive embodying idea that we could all adhere to, whoever we were or wherever we were. It reached out to communist anti-nationalists or the faithful, Marxists or conservative nationalists, refugees living in the camps of Lebanon and Jordan or exiles living in Knightsbridge, Rotterdam and Dubai. It reached out to those living under occupation or in prison, to those in a foreign country with false papers and no work permit or to those second-generation exiles holding the passport of a foreign land, but forever Palestinian at heart. It reached out to the millions under occupation and the millions more who have been living in refugee camps or outside them since 1948 or 1967; or for many of us since we were born. The declaration managed this not by claiming to be the expression of the birth of a nation, but as something much more profound; it did so as an expression of the general will of the Palestinian people. The proclamation also managed to evoke many notions of the homeland to which Palestinians themselves could relate. By 1988 the notions of Palestine that we had acquired, in the years following the violent expulsions and the dispossession and exile of 1948, had created such a multiplicity of meanings and attachments, sentiments and descriptions, that we had become 'a country of words'.³

'A COUNTRY OF WORDS'

Before exploring the complexity of the 1988 declaration, it is instructive to look at the very different first proclamation of independence

³ Mahmoud Darwish, 'We Travel Like Other People', in *Victims of a Map*, trans. Adballah Udhari, London, El Saqi, 1984, p. 31.

which was issued during the war for Palestine while the catastrophe was just unfolding. Laconic and fairytale-like in its plainness, it was published on 10 January 1948 by members of the Palestinian National Council, meeting in the city of Gaza. Its telegraphic simplicity renders it almost heartbreaking in its brief, rushed inarticulacy. There was no need to describe who we were, how we were, or how we got there, what the homeland was, much less what it meant to us, or what we meant to it. On that day, in the minds of the leaders of the Arab Higher Council, there was no prescience, no revelation, nor any hint of the destiny that Palestine and its people would endure over the next 52 years. The text is hasty, the predicament conceived as a mere temporary affair. This battle would be resolved and we would go on working the land and living in our cities. We would prevail. So Palestine is simply described as bounded by four other Arab states with the Mediterranean to the west, and its people described as 'citizens' who 'will enjoy their liberties and their rights', be inspired by Palestine's 'glorious history' and 'serve human civilization'.⁴ The difference in just 40 years is extraordinary. Our perpetual 'temporary' crisis meant that language had become all-powerful in the construction of a concept of homeland. This condition was portrayed by the poet Mahmoud Darwish in *We Travel Like Other People* which he wrote shortly after the siege of Beirut in 1982. The poem begins: 'We travel like other people, but we return to nowhere', and it ends: 'We have a country of words. Speak, speak so that I can put my road on the stone of a stone./ We have a country of words. Speak, speak so we may know the end of this travel.'

The words that needed to be used in the 1988 declaration to capture the essence of the state for all Palestinians had to evoke a place that had grown not from a nation but rather from the sense of many; not from one people but from many peoples; not drawn from one religion but consciously aware of its existence as the source of many. The Declaration of the State of Palestine describes us thus: 'Nourished by an unfolding series of civilizations and cultures, finding inspiration in its spiritual and historical heritage rich in variety and kind, the Palestinian Arab people has, throughout history, continued to develop its identity in an integral unity of land

⁴ *The Declaration of Independence 1988 issued by the Palestine National Council*, Jerusalem, PASSIA (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs), 1990.

and people.' This connection to the land is fused to the notion of a homeland of peoples and is an expression of their attachment to it; but sentimental attachment to the land is not the source of Palestine's sovereignty. Nor does the source of its sovereignty reside in the struggle for it. Indeed it is not through fighting for it or sacrificing oneself to it that one 'earns' the homeland. Nor is the people created from the wound of the *Nakbah*. The homeland is there, and was already there before the war; the relationship is one of connection of the people with it – in a simple, tangible, non-abstract way, not in an imagined, nostalgic way. So the struggle is not to be a people. The state thus becomes a place of quiet and calm, of peace and compassion, which negates the need for a war to create its identity or to give one to its people: 'The call went out from Temple, Church, and Mosque that to praise the Creator, to celebrate compassion and peace, was indeed the message of Palestine.' The document expresses repeatedly a witnessing of the people's will constantly regenerated through the passage of time in different forms: 'From generation unto generation, the Palestinian people gave of itself unsparingly in the valiant battle for liberation and homeland.' It then portrays the unmistakable workings of the general will in its most visible manifestation: 'For what has been the unbroken chain of our people's rebellions except the heroic embodiment of our will for independence? And so the people was sustained in the struggle to stay, and to prevail.'⁵ It is within this very will that both the state and the people have their source and their identity.

Where precisely is the physical locus of this homeland for Palestinians? The proclamation's answer was to give a remarkably simple definition of the State of Palestine, which then nonetheless adhered to an absolute logic, a concept that still holds equally true today: 'The State of Palestine is the state of Palestinians wherever they may be.' It is thus the expression of the general will of all Palestinians at that very moment of time; yet the majority of us were not on the land our parents came from, or where we ourselves were born. Where were we and what were we in 1988, that we could make our will known, to ourselves and to others? We were scattered throughout time and space; some of us were frozen inside these temporal and spatial spheres, but many more of us were far too mobile – slipping through borders and out of our bodies like no other people in

⁵ *The Declaration of Independence 1988*, op. cit.

recent history, dying violently in strange places, or alienated from ourselves, far away from our origins. In 1988 we said that we would recognize the State of Israel (which continued to deny our existence), and give up the claim of a State in 78 per cent of historic Palestine, so that if we wanted to return to a Palestinian State, we would only go to one small part of it. If we wanted to return to our own actual homes – the towns, farms, and villages of which we had been dispossessed – it would be under Israel's sovereignty, which we now recognized and accepted. This acceptance came about because a generation of Israelis had built a new society on our lands, inside our houses, and by then we understood that we could not impose our tolerant vision of inclusiveness; their exclusivity and their exclusion of us was all they wanted from us, after all. Yet how could we have decided such crucial things – and how did we make this will manifest so that we all recognized that this vision of the homeland had been arrived at by all of us, wherever we were?

REPRESENTING THE GENERAL WILL OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

It was through representing all the things we were that I came to learn of these highly political and complex concepts of homeland and believe in them myself. So my own rather odd notions of Palestine, which had developed whilst growing up in Beirut, Washington and Rabat were utterly altered and superseded by the years I lived and worked as a PLO official and representative in the 1970s and 1980s in Beirut, New York, Tunis, Cyprus, London and other places, and whilst travelling to the four corners of the world as a representative of a people in search of the homeland, in search of a state, in search of return. I am not sure how academics are meant to derive their notions of identity, but I know that those I hold today did not emerge through an exploration of the huge wave of literature on nationalism, identity, multiculturalism, ethnic and minority rights, political philosophy, or even modern cosmopolitanism.⁶ Instead, they

⁶ See, for example, Isaiah Berlin's powerful but predisposed view of nationalism (i.e. created from a national psychic wound) in 'The Bent Twig: On the Rise of Nationalism', in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, London, John Murray, 1990; and also his association of the general will with the most unpleasant sort of positive freedom in 'Two Concepts of Liberty', in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 34. Hannah Arendt is another example of this. In *On Revolution*, she pairs

developed through a political education acquired from experience: from being, thinking, speaking, doing – not an inarticulate essentialism of innate culture but rather a conscious, inclusive, ceaseless political action.

One of the main ways was to seek to present us accurately as a people. Through this means one ended up, in effect, learning how many things a people could actually be, of the nature of the home inside all Palestinians that connects us, as well as the home we create when we are with each other. In order to represent a people who are persistently and violently denied sovereign identity, the craft, the political art and the obligation is to portray the general will as fully as possible. One must show the rich, strange and unique nature of a people and in so doing demonstrate equally, and without fail, the universal within this: that they are a people like any other, inasmuch as they are particular, from a certain time and place, drawn from a myriad of traditions, ethnicities, religions, political ideologies and classes, and are complete and inalienable, not dissolved through their dispossession and denial. The other universal is that they come together to make decisions and to deliberate with one general will, as peoples seek to do – although only some are fortunate enough to have the place and space, the structure, democratic institutions and the law to protect them in this deliberation.

Just one of my tasks in those years was to explain the nature of our cause to those who knew very little of us or whose knowledge was so wide of the mark as to be fantastical. I met with anyone: heads of states – and representatives of them, diplomats, trade unionists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international institutions, artists, schoolchildren, constituencies, national parliaments, university unions, clubs, officials of political parties, workers, humanitarian organizations, civil servants, journalists, writers. With some of them my task was to persuade them to help, to be virtuous, to act. With all of them it was to persuade them to see us, really to see us for what we are. In this endeavour my practice was always twofold: to illustrate the plurality of notions of homeland that exist amongst Palestinians

Rousseau's name constantly with that of Robespierre, in an understanding of the general will that is bound intimately with the work of the Committee of Public Safety of France in 1793; she uses the concepts of the nation, the national interest and the general will interchangeably throughout as if they were the same thing. *On Revolution*, London, Penguin, 1990, esp. pp. 76–9.

and to show how they also come together as one; to reveal the collective and the individual dream, and also to show that we face the present reality united. I did not want simply to present my own definition, my own notion. Indeed my definition of Palestinian identity is the general will. Whenever I am amongst it, I am home.

The people *to* whom I spoke about our cause came from all walks of life and I saw them in the different capacities that my work demanded: officially, secretly, publicly, informally, accidentally – but the people of whom I spoke were all the same. This was because they were all in exactly the same predicament by virtue of being Palestinian. Palestinians, no matter where they were, no matter what they were doing, found themselves (and still do) living in the same mysterious and acute situation and they also saw themselves quite clearly like this. Furthermore, they all saw the same answer to their predicament, without question, when the lack of a homeland would make itself apparent. So I could see the corporeal contours and the tangible character of the general will, the will that is said to be so invisible. It manifested itself to me through various manners and means, constant in its presence; the familiar; home. As Nicias told his fellow Athenians on Syracuse during the Peloponnesian war, the city is inside the people: ‘It is men who make the city, and not walls nor ships, empy of men.’⁷

In the years from late 1987 there was the *intifada*, as palpable an expression of the general will of a people as one could find in modern times.⁸ The daily uprising against military occupation lasted for over three years. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were beaten and imprisoned, and thousands shot for throwing stones at the occupying army. Working under siege and curfews and through the popular committees, unions, underground leadership and political parties, the people expressed the will to be independent, self-governing, sovereign. However, as Rousseau noted in *The Social Contract*, this will cannot be partial. In a chapter entitled ‘That Sovereignty is Indivisible’ he writes: ‘Sovereignty, for the same reason

⁷ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Blanco and Roberts, London, W. W. Norton, 1998, Book 7, ch. 77, s. 7.

⁸ There was a series of popular general strikes and insurrections and rebellions by Palestinians throughout the twentieth century, especially in the 1920s and 1930s when under British rule.

that makes it inalienable, is indivisible; for the will is either general⁹ or it is not; it is the will either of the body of the people, or only of a part of it.¹⁰ Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, whilst having refugee camps from 1948 within that part of the land, were not the majority of the people, they were only a part of it. The majority of the people had been dispossessed and were living outside Palestine in other refugee camps and in exile. So how was the general will made manifest? Throughout the 1970s and 1980s I saw manifestations of the general will through a variety of roles and means, constant, manifold, present. The normal democratic structures that pertain to a landed people were not there, but we knew, if we did our jobs well, what the will of the people was to the most precise and detailed degree on every issue of substance that had to do with our way forward: a future settlement, a minimal justice. There were hundreds of popular committees, associations, political parties, newspapers, journals, charities, schools, camp leaders, university teachers and trade union members. There was our parliament in exile; there were other exiled associations and communities. Each weighed in to add its share to the whole; each was a part of the living creature that was the general will. The close link between Palestinians inside and outside the homeland created a homeland in itself. The bond which held us together as a people was palpable and quite easy for someone like me to see, witness as I was to the crescendo of constant traffic: phone calls and faxes, underground networks, private and public meetings, political platforms that united all parties, children's letters, appeals, multiple travel documents, petitions, armed resistance in the camps and throughout invasions and sieges, the thousand inventive and creative ways that a people asserts and expresses itself, and binds one to another, even whilst heavy with the intolerable weight of landlessness.

So in order to represent this sovereign will with fairness as we were obliged to do, from 1991 to 1993 at the talks in Washington, our delegation tried to negotiate for a democratic structure that would represent us – elections for Palestinians outside as well as inside at

⁹ Rousseau adds in a note here 'To be general, a will need not always be unanimous; but every vote must be counted: any formal exclusion destroys generality'. J.-J. Rousseau, *Le Contrat Social, Oeuvres Complètes*, Gagnebin and Raymond (eds), Paris, Pléiade, 1959–95, vol. iii, p. 369.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

the same time. We offered the Israelis and Americans models of Western Sahara or Namibia as precedents and countless examples of how the will of a people that was spread across borders could be united in an even momentary infrastructure, in order for Palestinians to participate in the creation of their own governance, and build basic laws that would be fair. As is known, the implementation of these principles was denied us. One could even say that the obvious aim was to sever this link between the people inside and those outside, the link which holds us all together. In 1995, elections were held in the West Bank and Gaza only, the European Union pouring millions into democratization processes, election campaigning, transparency, and all the other means traditionally used to try to capture and reflect the general will of a people. Yet all the while half of the people were excluded. The majority, inside and outside occupied Palestine, was silent about the suspension of its sovereignty, although it was understood and witnessed. 'This is not to say that the commands of leaders may not be taken for general wills as long as the sovereign is free to oppose them and does not do so. In such a case the people's consent has to be presumed from universal silence.'¹¹ The people had been informed that it was merely a temporary affair, that it would become a final status issue of the peace talks and therefore that it would be addressed soon.

However, what happens when a people places its sovereignty in the hands of its leadership, whose own hands are then tied, so that all becomes lost in the darkness? What happens when the leaders are to all intents and purposes removed from the majority of the people and no longer find themselves virtuously embedded deep within the body politic? The people eventually takes its force back, for this is sovereign, even while honouring the predicament of their leaders, respecting them and understanding their plight, good intentions, sincere attempts and the relentless forces facing them. For authority is only lent and only for as long as the leadership can find a way to represent it: 'sovereignty, since it is nothing less than the exercise of the general will, can never be alienated, and that the Sovereign, who is nothing but a collective being, can only be represented by himself: the power indeed may be transmitted, but not the will'.¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 368.

REDISCOVERING THE GENERAL WILL

In the first half of 2000, some few months before the current *intifada* began, a British Commission of Inquiry was established by a group of cross-party Members of Parliament, representing the parliamentary Middle East Councils. The aim was to inquire into the situation of the Palestinian refugees. To those initiating the inquiry, the portrayal of the nature of the refugees' predicament had been warped through the long evolution of the Oslo peace process. The refugees had become a 'final status issue' of negotiations, a mere variable amongst the many other intractable issues such as water, or conflated with a line on a map, such as the topic of 'borders' that still had to be resolved. It appeared that their political agency was being removed from them, stolen from them, and that they had been reduced in perception to the category of a desperate and unfortunate humanitarian plight, turned into numbers, into statistics. They were no longer a people, with the rights of belonging that accrues to all peoples. They had become, quite simply, a massive problem for the negotiators then attempting to resolve the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel.

The aim of the Commission was to ask the refugees how they saw the implementation of their legal right to return and their views of the homeland. The Commission travelled to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, wherever Palestinian refugees were to be found, and talked to many hundreds of individuals, representatives of popular committees of the refugee camps and from as wide a spectrum as they could manage. The beauty of the report was that the bulk of it was oral evidence, verbatim testimony, by those excluded from the majority of narratives of Palestinian exile.¹³ These testimonies have now been faithfully transcribed into both English and Arabic versions.¹⁴ The Commission promised to translate and keep

¹³ As Salim Tamari points out in 'Bourgeois Nostalgia and Exilic Narratives', in Robin and Strath (eds), *Homelands: Poetic Power and the Politics of Space*, Brussels, P. I. E., 2003, p. 76. '[n]evertheless the absence of the voice of average people from these private histories and biographies is indeed an astonishing void. It is the task of new researchers to provide this voice with the forum and appropriate tools (such as oral histories) so that it can be restored and articulate its own experience'.

¹⁴ The Commission's Report contains a preface by Professor Richard Falk who was part of the three-person United Nations Commission on Human Rights sent to the region during the *intifada* in the spring of 2001 (see the UN's human rights report at

the evidence intact, and not truncate the narratives or take them out of context.¹⁵ These pieces of evidence are not the histories of the dispossession itself (which are often referred to by those who participated in the Commission's work) but more simply the political will today of ordinary refugees who have been excluded from the decision-making process of recent years.

Within the oral accounts, these testimonies surrounding individuals' understanding of the right of return, one can discover all of the Palestinian identity, as well as Palestine itself, encapsulated in the will to simply remain a people. So when I hear or read these aspirations of belonging, I too am at home. I identify with those like Muhammad Nusayrat, who speaks of how he sees our will lasting forever:

We believe in a comprehensive and just solution which will enable the Palestinian people to regain their stolen rights, so we can contribute to human civilisation as we used to do. I disagree with my colleagues that old Palestinians love and remember Palestine the most. The truth is that the new generation of Palestinians are not weaker but rather stronger than the older generation in their love and desire for Palestine.

When Adnan Shahada speaks of the manner in which Palestinian *fellaheen* who are now refugees feel a direct tangible attachment to the land, it is the very same that I heard every day in the camps of Tal al Za'ater, Sabra, Shatila, Rachidiyeh in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s.

For some of you, or for European logic in general, it is difficult to understand why some people have this strong attachment to a certain place. In Western culture, people move from one country to another, where they settle down and live their life. However, the homeland has a great significance for us. It means belonging, self-esteem and history for the generations who live in that part of the earth . . . I would like to remind you that the right of

www.un.org.unispal), and was also part of the international legal team in the summer of 1982 (Sean MacBride International Commission of Inquiry into the Israeli Invasion of 1982). Although the report has sections which provide analysis, historical and legal contexts, general themes, experts' evidence, and several key recommendations by the British Commission of Parliamentarians, the bulk of the report (some 250 of its 315 pages) is the submitted oral and written evidence by refugees themselves. *Right to Return: Joint Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Palestinian Refugees*, 2nd edn, London, Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Middle East Councils, March 2001.

¹⁵ During the Commission's trip to the region many refugees and members of NGOs representing refugees' welfare mentioned, in particular, the recent Atkinson Report which they all felt misrepresented their views.

return is an essential human value and not only a Palestinian political issue. It is also the issue of belonging. Thank you.¹⁶

When I hear Amal Jado say that the refugee camp will never be tolerable, that it is unbearable, this is also my feeling. I do not live in a camp, but whilst other Palestinians still live in them, it is exactly as if I do too. She said:

I am a refugee from Aida refugee camp, a member of the local committee there. I just want to reinforce the right of return for women . . . I was raised in the refugee camp. The camp has never been my home and it never will be. I will never accept it as my home. It is a fact that I want to reinforce here. My home is the homeland that I have never seen . . .¹⁷

Ziyad Sarafandi sees the will of the Palestinian struggle for a state as what sustains him in his life, as I do:

There was an international plan to transform the Palestinian people into a nation of refugees . . . we resisted the powers that sought to destroy our identity. This was done with a great deal of sacrifice, whether through the fierce fighting in Jordan and Lebanon, or in Palestine through the *Intifada*. It was all done to confirm that we are a people who have rights that we adhere to. We resist.¹⁸

I see the general will as a living body, and as such, Palestine means something to us, just as we mean something to it. Palestine itself has created something inside me, exactly as Amni Jibril could see its creation inside her students in the refugee camps of Lebanon: 'I am also a teacher. I hear from my children how Palestine is in their hearts and they ask many questions about their villages. It is something Palestine has created in them.'¹⁹

My idea of returning to Palestine is not one of violence and destruction, or exclusion of the other in order to be myself. My vision is just exactly like the one Haifa Jamal spoke of when she said: 'We will not repeat the mistake of the Israelis and make our existence in our land dependent upon the non-existence of the people who are already living here. Israelis thought that their existence on the soil of Palestine meant the non-existence of the other. We do not consider this so. We do not wish to tell them to leave'.²⁰ I see the

¹⁶ Adnan Shahada, from Yasur, *Right to Return*, op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁷ Amal Jado, originally from Al-Maliha (Jerusalem), *Right to Return*, op. cit., p. 84.

¹⁸ Ziyad Sarafandi, originally from Yibna, *Right to Return*, op. cit., p. 112.

¹⁹ Amnah Jibril, originally from Haifa, *Right to Return*, op. cit., p. 276.

²⁰ Haifa Jamal, originally from Shafa Amr (Haifa) *Right to Return*, op. cit., p. 21.

possibilities just exactly as does Ibrahim Abu Hashash who has been living every day of his life in a shelter in a camp for 52 years: 'We do not mind to live with our Jewish neighbours, side by side. We were asked: if there was a settlement which was built on a Palestinian village, what would you like to do with it? The answer is simple, we will live side by side with the Israelis.'²¹ Like Ahmad Salah in Lebanon, I still have such a strange feeling after all this time of still not being able to get close to the homeland, and yet it is now so near. He explained:

An older person came from Palestine to the border and said to me, 'I am your uncle'. We signalled to each other across the border. But I had a very strange feeling because I couldn't get close to him, to embrace him. We couldn't get close, there was wire and soldiers between us. It is also the same when you see your homeland and you can't reach it, because they put barbed wire in front of you.'²²

My identity is drawn from all these notions and, through the Commission's Report last year, one can see they exist as unambiguously today as they did in 1988. More important, however, the right of return represents a collective will, the force and power of a people. It is even more the heart of my identity and home. It is a constant presence and the filaments that attach it through time and space are greater yet more intimate than the sense of a particular place. As Rousseau declared in his opening to the *Discourse on Origins of Inequality*, the homeland he prefers is the one where 'love of one's country meant a love of its fellow-citizens rather than a love for the land'.²³

CONCLUSION

In one of the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry's Report, it notes that the European Union has spent much time, energy and money on mechanisms of the general will (elections and so forth) in the West Bank and Gaza in the mid-1990s as part of the Oslo peace process. It therefore recommends that the EU should

²¹ Ismail Abu Hashash, originally from Iraq el-Manshiya, *Right to Return*, op. cit., p. 44.

²² Ahmad Salah, originally from Nahaf (Acre), *Right to Return*, op. cit., p. 267.

²³ J. J. Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, op. cit., p. 112.

now go on to help recreate various mechanisms of the general will for all the Palestinians who are outside, in exile, in refugee camps, from Latin America to Amman, so that they can restore the associational life that has been destroyed by war for generations.²⁴ These mechanisms would not be to show who represents the people – everyone knows that their representative is the PLO; all refugees and exiles say it without question or hesitation. The mechanisms are, rather, to help the PLO to represent them properly, to give them the same ability as all other governments, to feel the people's will around them, so that they can understand it and serve it. Nor do the refugees want surveys or opinion polls concerning these rights.²⁵ The only way democracy works is through embodying the living relationship between a people and its government, and ensuring that the organic and associational structures are in place to let the people participate and make its will known. When these links are severed, as has happened through war, it becomes much more difficult and dangerous for the political will of a people to be seen but the will itself has not disappeared, as a recent British Parliamentary Report, for example, has shown. Furthermore, Palestinians have always found a way to make their will known, generation after generation, constant, manifold, ever present. I have used Rousseau's *Social Contract* throughout this essay to illustrate a reading of the general will that seems to me illustrated in the endeavours of the Palestinian people to achieve a state and the right to return, and because it captures the understanding I have of my own identity, my own sense of homeland. Indeed I use it because of Rousseau's sensitive and (it seems to me) perfect understanding of the general will, as well as for his elegant portrayal of its workings and mechanisms. I conclude this article on my understanding of identity, however, with another author's definition, that of the philosopher Denis Diderot, who was Rousseau's contemporary. It captures the essence of the homeland that I have

²⁴ *Right to Return*, op. cit., pp. 49–57.

²⁵ As Amna Ghanayam, of the Shu'fat Women's Centre said 'Holding a referendum about this right [of return] is an insult to the Palestinian people because it questions their loyalty to their homeland. Every Palestinian dreams of return. I have been asked "Return or Jerusalem?" This question, as far as I am concerned is the same as "which one of your eyes do you want to knock out, the left or the right?'" Amnah Ghanayem, originally from Tal al Rish (Jaffa), *Right to Return*, op. cit., p. 83.

had the good fortune to grow up in. ‘The general will is, in each individual, a pure act of the understanding, which reasons in the silence of the passions about what a man can demand of his fellow-man and about what his fellow-man has the right to demand of him.’²⁶

²⁶ Denis Diderot, ‘Le Droit Naturel’, in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Metiers*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1950, vol. i, p. 58. See also, in English, John Mason and Robert Wokler (eds), Denis Diderot, *Political Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 20–1. This same formulation was actually used by Rousseau to describe the General Will in the first draft of the *Social Contract*, known as the Geneva Manuscript.