Hermeneutics of action in the context of social system: a study of the current Palestinian situation

Hasan Barmil

Abstract

The study aimed to identify the hermeneutics of action in the context of social system in the current Palestinian situation. The study approached the literature as a multi-dimensional phenomenon which addressed both theoretical and applied research. The study deals with two main issues. The first addresses three dimensions from a theoretical perspective: the concepts of hermeneutics, social action, and social system. The second focuses on social action movement within the Palestinian system through interpreting its various scenes. Implications of the findings and directions for future empirical research were discussed.

Key words: Hermeneutics, social system, Palestinian question, social action.

Introduction

Examining any social phenomenon within a social system requires a thorough investigation of such a phenomenon and a full comprehension of the scenes associated with its formation as well as the powers or actors affecting it. Since the Palestinian social system is part of the formations of these powers, it has produced images of balanced mobility under an umbrella of values associated with national constants which, for decades, have had temporal and spatial roots and extensions representing the Palestinian collective conscience. This was with its originality, perpetuity and compass, which has never deviated from Palestine's history, geography, and demography.

In the midst of this pure movement, social impurities have emerged and tried to mold the social system and social movement into a distorted and detrimental social image. These attempts resulted from almost entirely intended actions, planned by societal forces that are backed by institutions which have a direct impact on the Palestinian system. This situation was ruled out and somewhat unexpected by the Palestinians decades ago. Thus, this took place when the noble values related to geography and demography was in control of the behavior of the actors in this system.

Perhaps one of the most dangerous psychological outcomes associated with the current status is the emergence of hermeneutic trends in interpreting the contexts of the Palestinian social action (including its social, economic, and political dimensions). This has taken a serious turn in the interpretation process, which is represented in the deviation of the goal of this action and poor direction of the country's compass. Forces of divergence were compelled to establish a troubled and flaccid cultural norm through adopting mechanisms that promote the divergence course, objectives, and steering panel on the one hand, and through inventing social and political vocabulary in an attempt to appease the public on the other hand. To achieve this end, some media and political institutions have adopted an approach associated with the direction of this action through interpreting the values of its contents in a manner opposite to the logical paths upon which the action is based.

Hence, the present study attempts to explore this social paradox and to clarify hermeneutics of the approach and expected outcomes. It also tries to find out what might happen in case the above institutions succeeded to achieve a distorted cultural shift in the Palestinian memory— the memory which has been associated with a collective conscience that has been able to survive over the recent volatile decades and has remained defiant in the face of its opponents.

Before examining these attempts, it is necessary to present a theoretical background about the concepts of hermeneutics, social action and social system, the functional links between these concepts, the rationale behind discussing them in relation with the nature of the Palestinian action movement, or mobility, and with regards to the possible visions, perceptions, and interpretations that can be identified in the midst of this movement. It is also necessary to show how the elements that hit the trails of the Palestinian social action have produced a divided Palestinian social identity, which was mostly in favor of the elite—a situation that really threatens the pillars and noble culture of the resistance action.

An Overview of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics (interpretation) is one of the most important branches of philosophy from which sociology has driven many benefits. Since Max Weber's Theory of Social Action and his interpretive treatment to social action, emanating from Schleiermacher and Dilthey's traditional school's efforts in hermeneutics, until Hebrmas's theory about communicative rationality, science has been making use of the problems and possible solutions raised by hermeneutics (Abdallah, 2009: 24). Investigating history and development of hermeneutics

may not be an easy task and may often lead to misunderstanding and controversy. In fact, there has been on-going debate about this notion. Hermeneutics has reached a state of maturity that has greatly helped in reviving critical consciousness through a reconsideration of the method of dealing with the issues and problems of meaning in terms of receiving, handling, and using it. Hermeneutics also helped in refining critical reading. It tried to pick it up from the swamp of the impressionistic vision that had remained captive to a huge amount of emotional and introversive theoretical concepts (Jubouri, 2016: 1-3). Historically, the art of interpretation, hermeneutics, was associated with the problematic of interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts and wisdom literature. Therefore, this promoted Matthias Flacius, a Lutheran reformer, to challenge the authority of the Church and to lead a theological struggle for its freedom. He argued for the sufficiency and priority of the Scriptures in interpreting some obscure passages of sacred texts and understanding their contents independently of coercion or compulsion. Dilthey rejected the unilateral authority of text interpretation, which constitutes the basic principle of the modern theory of interpretation. In this regard, he stated that we should understand the texts as they are and not as being part of the denomination to which they belong (Zein, 1996: 21).

Based on the correlation between interpretation and the method of content analysis, it can be observed that such relations have a significant import. Psychologists and sociologists have an exercise for reading, called *Content Analysis*, and their job in this regard is to rearticulate the normal speech of people in a serious tone for a given audience by interpreting what others want to say. Such interpretations encapsulate the words of others into just a support that helps to explain their speech. Subsequently, this is an interpretation which describes ordinary people's discourse as vague speech and the hieroglyphs as clear speech. In this manner, Content Analysis grants itself the right to say to the learned what the other wanted to say. In this case, the content analyst is the only one who knows what the author of the text is trying to say (Kilani, 1999: 84).

Hermeneutical imperialism has demonstrated itself in all forms of reliability (dogmatism). The analyst had to assess a concentration of interpretations, which are represented in interpreting the interpreter's interpretation, and so on. It will not be possible to get out of the maze unless the axioms in the text are determined, the limits to this inflation are established, and the meanings involved in the text to be interpreted are decoded. This means that there is

always a theory behind the analysis format, which selects the facts, organizes them, and gives them their meanings (Kilani, 1999: 85).

Through careful reading of theological thought, one can find that the meaning of hermeneutics, both the ancient and the medieval, is subject to an ideological-canonical reading dominated by the absolute meaning and the violence of absolute exegesis under the domination of metaphysical and transcendental concepts which theorists inherited from Greece. Then it became a tool in their hands; however, they forgot about the history of this notion, hermeneutics, and considered it as an absolute notion (Kazim, 2016: 3).

However, contemporary studies have exceeded the absolute historical approach on the grounds that the text is the product of its historical reality. Therefore, the text must be understood within this dimension unless the author's intent is subject to an absolute dogmatic considerations. Contemporary hermeneutics, or interpretation, calls for hermeneutical awareness based on an endo- and exo-understanding of the text. This call constitutes the basis of our heritage at present (Kazim, 2016: 4).

Based on the discussion above, hermeneutics may be defined as the art of reading, or simply, the art of decoding, interpretation and disclosure of the meanings of texts. The approach to interpretation is basically based on the assumption that the speech has two meanings: one is overt, and the other is inward. This means that a language has two functions: one is expressive and other is symbolic which requires a search for what it stands for. Furthermore, this distinction has led in turn to the development of two major trends in interpretation: the first involves recovering the original meaning and restructuring it—a mode used in theological exegesis by the priests who are interested in working out the original meaning of the symbols in the new Testament, and the other trend is based on doubt and it includes thinkers, such as Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Weber, and others who are interested in dividing or segmenting meaning rather than synthesizing its parts, like the first trend (Kazim, 2016: 5).

Social Action and Hermeneutics

Structural Functionalism in Western sociology abound with the literature about social action that has showed its contents and systems through analytical and abstract visions based on induction sometimes, and on deduction at other times. The theoretical abstraction, inspired by Structural Functionalism pioneers, mainly Weber and Parsons, in their interpretation of the

systems of social action indicates the depth of their sociological analysis and their ability to show a rare sociological imagination in social literature.

Social action, along with its rational contents and movement within the social situation, expresses a harmony in its performance, a realism in achieving its objectives, and a balance between and within its elements. Thus, all the features which characterize social action have made it beyond the conflict factors that prevent the achievement of its objectives.

As the social situation calls for such a seamless balance and stability during the formation of action and its continuous movement, it becomes necessary to clarify the ideal situation that characterizes the social action within its theoretical framework. Historical harbingers of the theory of social action are associated with the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth century. The analytical beginning can be identified with the emergence of the Social Contract Theory and the general theoretical trends that constitute a reflection of the events of this stage. It can be said that this period witnessed historical and realistic events of great importance. In addition, these events had contributed to the establishment of the intellectual beginnings of the Theory of Social Action. On top of these events in terms of impact strength comes the collapse of the Catholic Church, the liberation of scientific thinking and its interests in human reality, and then the emergence of the nation-state at the expense of the collapse of feudalism as a construction unit (Laila, 198: 15).

As the social action constitutes a mechanism of change and content in the social structure, it has been given special attention by researchers in their studies that tried to investigate it. Max Weber may be regarded as one of the most researchers who have studied this topic thoroughly. According to Weber, *action* can be defined as a visible or hidden human behavior to which the acting individual attaches subjective meaning. The behavior which is devoid of meaning does not belong to the sociological study (Kinlock, 1977: 138). In this context, Weber believes that behavior is seriated depending on the objectives, the means used, the motivation, and the desire of this behavior. In other words, Weber distinguished between behavior and social action: every action is a social behavior, but not every behavior is a social action. However, if the behavior is intended to adapt with others, then it will become a social action (Fletcher, 1972: 442).

Weber goes on to provide his intellectual vision of social action. In his opinion, sociology is an interpretative science; however, interpretation is not a liberation approach or an

explanatory tool. It is not intended to set the imagination free or disclose the experience imprisoned by the traditions; it calls for the need to describe the actors' situation in the society and pays attention to the meanings which they add to their actions (Abdullah, 2009: 26). However, it distinguishes, as mentioned above, between behavior and action, because it includes every human behavior to which the actor attaches subjective meaning to (Timachiv, 1980: 262). Weber's opinion about the concept of action is based on the concept of interaction; hence, it derives its sociability from the meaning to which actors attach (Abdulmuti, 2000: 50). The actor turns to others and directs his action towards them. No one can give importance and meaning to their action if they ignore others' expected response. Hence, Weber establishes a sociologically structural framework for the action. The objective context represented in all subjects and objective processes that create the action or represent obstacles to the achievement of its objectives is the context which encircles the movement and the path of the action. However, such issues can only be understood in the light of the subjective interpretation of the social actors. These are the product of what is called by Parsons as *laws of objective systems*. At this point, Weber brings us closer to the Communication Theory. The process of structuring the action needs some factors: the action, the actor, the context of the action, the actors to whom the action is directed, common expectations, and the goals and incentives which the actor seeks to achieve. More precisely, the action needs for a communicative position means that sociology is the science of the rules of communication. According to Weber, the actor governs himself by himself. This means that the actions which he performs come from his own choice, so he is fully responsible for his actions, which are governed by rational rules. According to Parsons, the actor recognizes the multiplicity of legitimate ways pursued by him to achieve the values which he wishes to achieve, and he directs his action towards one and single value. In this regard, Weber divides the action into four types: the traditional action (the way it has always been done), the emotional or affective-motivated action (supported by feelings), the value-oriented rational action, and the purposeful or goal oriented rational action (Abdullah, 2009: 27).

In his profound thorough structural interpretation of Weber's typology, Parsons elaborates on two types: the first is the purposeful oriented rational action, which can be called as a "mundane action" in words of Edward Said, and the other is the value-motivated rational action. In the former type, the means and conditions are important for a temporal purpose, while the actor in the latter action is obliged to strive to get the absolute values, but he is not worried about success (Abdullah, 2009: 27).

The forms of action identified by Weber are perfect patterns and a scale for measuring social actions; however, they can be handled as different levels and aspects. Ordinary social action represents the traditional level or the historical face; the emotional action represents the psychological face; the value-oriented action represents the moral side; and the rational action stands for the utilitarian aspect. Consequently, Weber's vision keeps pace with hermeneutics in terms of the fact that the doer of the action is the source of significance. Also, it is regarded as the reference whom we need to consult to understand the meaning of the action. It is also necessary to read the structure of the action within a communicative context and to construct perfect patterns for the action which we can use to measure the social action (Abdullah, 2009: 28).

Systems and Interpretation

Obviously, the notion of system is associated with Talcott Parsons, who divided the society into a group of systems, including the social system. Unlike other systems, the social system is characterized by interaction. Parsons believes that this system has a specific meaning as it involves a comprehensive network of interaction through which two or more actors are linked and each of them affects the other (Rocher, 1981:107). The interpretation emerges in the contents of the social situation which is clearly embodied in the system. The surrounding of the social action acts as the most comprehensive framework in guiding the behavior and in determining its meanings. Thus, the actor's interpretation of a given behavior may provide a reasonable impression which agrees with the function of the system. Hence, it is also in agreement with the importance of the cultural dimensions that constitute the components of the system which determine whether a certain behavior is acceptable or not. The process of interpreting an action within the social system involves a lot of hazards. Firstly, the interpretation of an action is associated with internal dimensions, so that the actor can divert the meaning towards the direction he likes and tries as much as possible not to expose himself to a suspicion that may lead him to serious consequences, especially if the actor does not have a social support (such as a clan) or a political support (such as a political party that has a social weight). Another inconvenience involved in the interpretation process appears in the context of social and political movement, which does not often have clear results. In this regard, if the doers did not have a significant status in the social system, any advancement in the actions would appear marginal. At the same time, they would witness utter silence which would almost topple the achievements made by a group of social and national elite.

Marginal actions are based on a certain amount of strength and legitimacy through which they can impose a series of programs to appease the components of the system. Therefore, the clear link between the aspects of interpretation and the structure of the system is considered as a process inherent to the movement and sustainability of the system. This does not mean delivering a verdict of acceptance or rejection of the nature of this movement. Each process of interpretation has various characteristics and mechanisms of its own. This is what the present study is going to explore regarding the movement of the Palestinian action and its interpretations in the subsequent section.

Purpose and Scope

Hence, the present study attempts to explore this social paradox and to clarify hermeneutics of the approach and expected outcomes. It also tries to find out what might happen in case the above institutions succeeded in achieving a distorted cultural shift in the Palestinian memory—the memory which has been associated with a collective conscience that has been able to survive over the recent volatile decades and has remained defiant in the face of its opponents.

Methodology and Design

This is a qualitative research study using a content analysis, and is appropriate to the exploratory nature of the research.

Findings and Discussion

The Movement of the Palestinian Action and its Interpretations

Exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. The essential sadness of the break can never be surmounted…. The achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss. —Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile" (1984).

In the above quotation, Said (1984) sums up in an interpretive vision of an all-inclusive scene showing the suffering of the Palestinian people from the first *Nakba* (catastrophe) until this moment. In the midst of this scene, appear its multiple characters and varied roles; each role has a movement and a price. This scene is associated with a long history, a hundred years,

colored with the black, a geography for which specialists have been unable to demarcate, and a theater for the title of which is Palestine. Subsequently, these roles have derived their movement from the legitimate attachment to the land and man, producing a rational action which has been able to systemize its movement in a manner which confounded its opponent. Attempts of guided interpretation to determine its course that have failed due to the fact that this action lies within the Palestinian mind, is founded on a plan held up by awareness and motivation which derive growth, originality, and anti-counterfeiting from a steadfast knowledge base that exists within the Palestinian mind. In as much the gained knowledge on achieving the goals is clear and legal, the subjectively generated plan of the action becomes more powerful and effective than the formation of behavior and we-relations.

As these goals are fraught with many global, regional and national problems, they have become the quality and the quantity of the discourse of the daily Palestinian life. They also constitute a system for a creative and a collective action represented in the resistance action. This which began more than six decades ago, remarkably increased during the eighth and ninth decade of the past century. Then, it reached its peak in the first decade of this century, deriving from the Al-Aqsa Mosque its title in this era. It was renewed in the second decade of the present century, taking knife-attacks as an approach, in addition to many other techniques and mechanisms. However, it has always remained persistent in guiding its compass towards Jerusalem.

The interpretation of this action in the light of Schutz's theory (Ritzer, 1983: 204) represents the social action in the world of the social life within the Palestinian social system. The action has converted from a concept inside the actor's mind to a social action using the rule of choice between the proposed alternatives of behavior in line with the quantity and quality of the counter-action on the part of the Zionist enemy. However, this was done along with its plans and practices against the Palestinian goals. With the continued creative collective action represented in the currently renewed uprising as a pattern of behavior vis-a-vis the counter action, new experiences and achievements are being generated. This, therefore, increases the awareness and the motivation of the actor. The creative collective action will definitely become more and more effective in aborting the Zionist plans, raise the Palestinian cause globally and regionally to become of international concern, and further the Palestinian need to search for acceptable solutions that meet with their goals and objectives.

The cognitive momentum of the Palestinian goals increases the Palestinian actor's awareness and motivation to adopt a plan that generates an action inside his mind. Hence, this in turn shapes his behavior and we-relations with other actors as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. It should be noted that the originality of the creative collective action represented in the current uprising cannot be attributed to an accidental situation or is simply due to a mere chance.

Figure 1. Illustration of the actor and social action in balanced social situations within social life
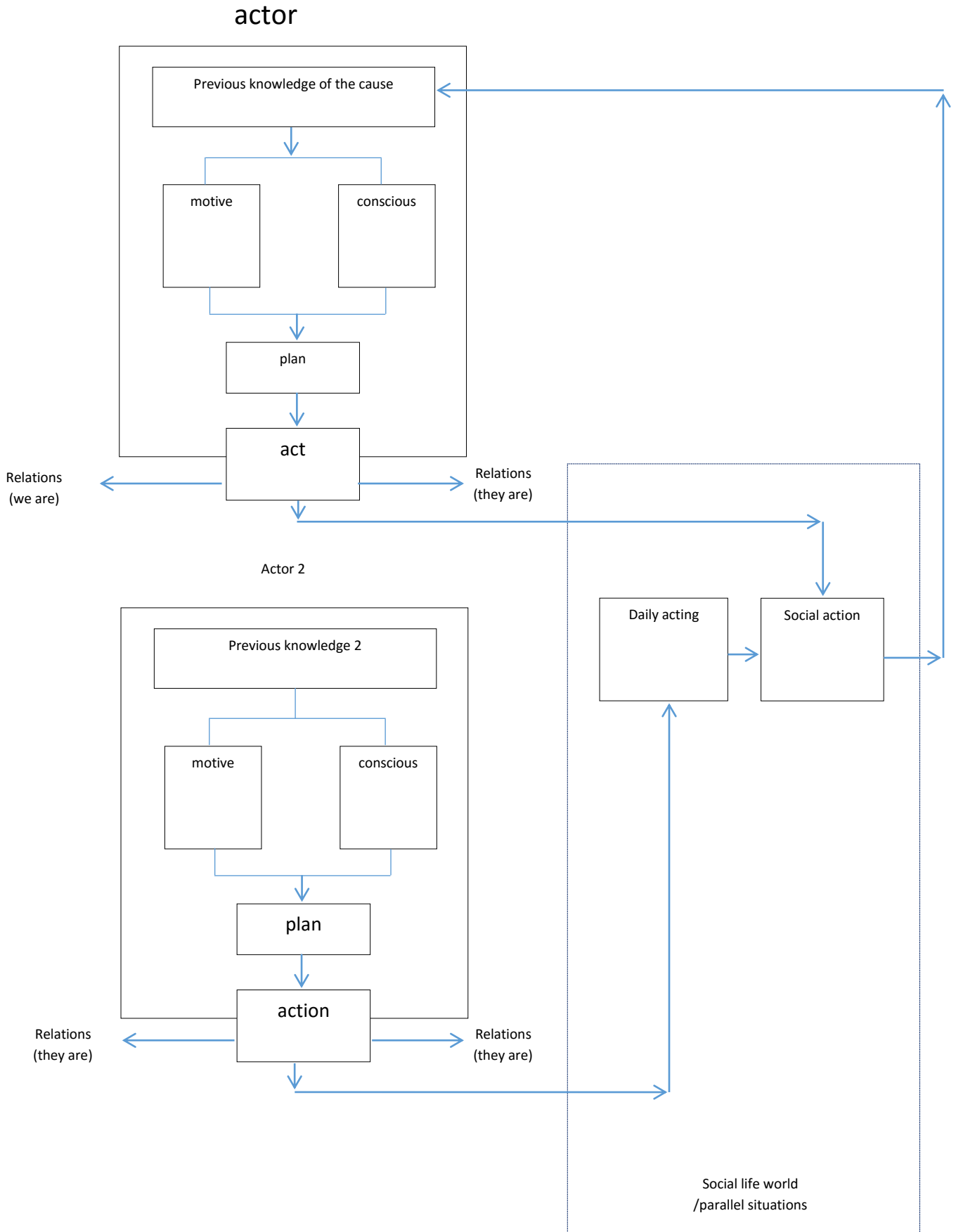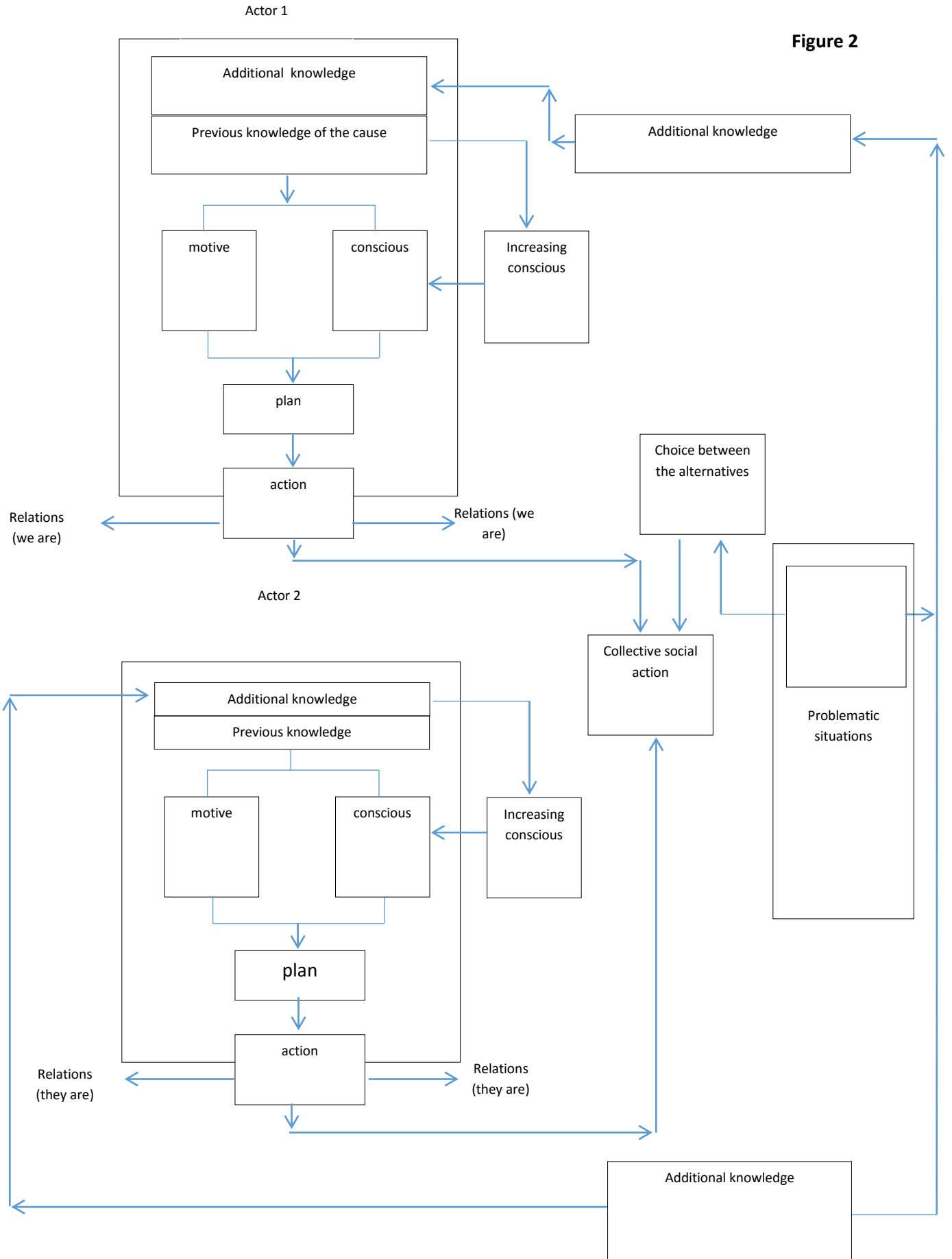
Figure 2

Owing to its timing and approach, the recently renewed action of resistance may have confused the Zionist security establishment. All organs of this establishment failed to predict the temporal and spatial compass of this event. In fact, some leaders of this establishment called those who carry out such actions as *wolves* owing to their failure to predict or know the date or place of their attacks. The wolf's strength and power have their deep-rooted position in the literature of struggle and resistance. This is clearly noticeable in the logo of the Chechen resistance and its national anthem (*We were born at night when the she-wolf whelped*).

In spite of this flow in its movement, strength and power, the action has been subjected to a systematic attack that tried to curb and terminate it. The attackers have tried hard to provide a very poor interpretation of this action. However, their interpretation was associated with the interests of a political elite that has a vision based on maintaining the status quo. They have even recruited all the means available to siege this action and provided interpretations and justifications associated with protecting people and their property and the inequality of this action with its opponent – all these developments have led to the in-fighting within the Palestinians themselves.

Furthermore, the Palestinian national self has experienced a collapse when its representatives have become unable to achieve practical steps to serve their cause. Continuous free-of-charge sacrifices may create a submissive awareness. As a result, convictions will gradually start to change and patriotism to disappear. With the repetition of the same situation, the national self will definitely suffer a serious setback. Is it obligatory that each Palestinian has to suffer a setback in one way or another? When people have been prosecuted for a long time, and their rights have been robbed, then their natural response should be resistance and struggle. This is the case of those aspiring for freedom, independence, and justice on a land that has been stolen from its owners by force. Nevertheless, the risk would stay if popular anger went off its normal track in a form of spontaneous uprisings because such uprisings may cause damages to people, and this should not apply to current movement of action (Amad News APP, 2016: 1-4).

There is no doubt that the state of division between the two parts of the homeland has contributed to the occurrence of such uprisings. It seems that some Palestinians have found, in such uprisings, a chance to achieve their goals by shaping an unsystematic action that weakens the role of the resistance action. In fact, it attempted to finish it off. This is due to

the interpretations of the Palestinian political discourse, which have been associated with two dimensions: the concluded agreements with the Zionist entity represented by the Oslo Convention and the status of the movement produced by the resistance action. Both of these dimensions do not meet at all. Consequently, new Palestinian voices and trends have emerged and adopted a framework for the management of the conflict. The aim is to formulate a social system with the help of a generation who embraced and defended the vision of this elite. It was either because this generation felt that it was their duty to do so, or because they adopted an ideology of a certain political faction or organization. The new situation has compelled the Palestinians to reformulate names and concepts that were part of the national values of the Palestinian system.

Throughout the period of the Palestinian armed struggle, the word *Israel*, along with its derivatives, was referred to as *Zionism (Şahyouniyyah), Zionists (Şahaynah), Zionist entity* (*al-kayan as-Sahyūnī*), and *Zionist enemy* (*al-adu as-Sahyūnī*). These words were widely used in the Palestinian political discourse as pejorative words or phrases, with the connotation of *a racist, illegal, and colonial entity.* However, they were gradually replaced with the word Israel (*Isrā'īl* in Arabic) in the Palestinian political discourse, especially after the PLO had left Lebanon in 1982 and peaceful negotiations with the Zionist entity had been impending. The Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement in 1977 had paved the way for this change. As a result, the word *Israel* was getting more and more popular. When the word *Israel* was used first in the Palestinian political discourse, it was accompanied with the word *occupation*. Then the word *occupation* disappeared, and the Palestinian political discourse started using the word *Israel* only.

After Zionism had been removed from the UN list of racist movements in 1992, the word *Zionism*, along with its derivatives, disappeared from the Palestinian discourse. This word was not used even when the Zionist entity committed the massacres against the Palestinians at the beginning of Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000 and turned away the agreements with the Palestinians. During that time, the Palestinian political discourse needed to escalate. Nevertheless, the word *Zionism* was never used to describe or replace the word *Israel* in the Palestinian media discourse. Instead, words with negative connotative meanings accompanied the word *Israel* or any of its derivatives: Israeli blockade, Israeli aggression, Israeli obstacles, Israeli invasion, etc. There is no doubt that the Oslo Convention has paved the way for the word *Israel* to replace the phrase *Zionist entity*. Consequently, words with

relatively positive connotations have been used with the word Israel, such as participation, coordination, and cooperation despite the fact that this entity has consistently practiced prevarication and deception. It has often refused to honor the agreements or carry out its obligations. Thus, this has driven the Palestinians into a state of conflict between two positions. On one hand, the Palestinians are required to adhere to the general framework of the Oslo Convention, while on the other hand, there is a stalemate in the implementation of the signed agreements (Dardouna, 2014: 224-226).

Conclusion and Recommendation

It can be concluded that the Palestinian action has been associated with a symbolic dimension, which is mixed with a noble culture that has been linked to facts which are deep-rooted in history. It has remained steadfast in the face of its opponent, endured the conflict with a ferocious foe, and produced a collective conscience unparalleled in the history of popular movements. This action has also been associated with a scenario which could interpret its multiple scenes in a manner that has awakened the sense of commitment and which belongs to the components of the Palestinian character for over more than six decades. They have experienced pride, pain, and honor shaped by a freedom fighter's gun, drawn by an artist's paintbrush, and edited by an educated man who has been sitting on the throne of literature and history. This action has been a poem composed by a poet filled with pain and hope, and a song whose words have been inspired by the peasant's *Mijana* and *Ataba* songs. These songs are, however, mixed with the redness of the land and the beauty of trees. In addition, they have transformed cells and prisons to oases of hope and freedom. According to Sayegh (1983), we are Palestinians; we were Palestinians; we are still Palestinians; we will stay like this for ever; we will return to Palestine sooner or later. The interpretation of the action requires an objective analytical vision, based on the interpretation of the Palestinian political discourse with the action placed at the center of the Palestinian history and geography. Therefore, there is no doubt that its mechanics of analysis and sociological unity vary in terms of their aims and frameworks. However, its [the action's] compass must be linked to Palestine and nothing except Palestine. Consequently, based on this vision, the present study recommends that hermeneutic, or interpretive, and analytical studies related to the Palestinian movement, or mobility, along with its instrument, the action, and its framework, the system, should not deviate from the sanctity of this movement. It also

recommends that such future related studies should be based on right and not reality. This is because right is constant and reality is changing.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Hasan Barmil, PhD. Sociology (Political Sociology), Associate Professor, Al-Quds Open University, Bethlehem, Palestine. hbarmil@qou.edu