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Sherene Seikaly

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ABSTRACT

Journal of Palestine Studies coeditor Sherene Seikaly introduces a cluster of essays by Sreemati Mitter, Alex Winder, Charles W. Anderson, and Haneen Naamneh that examines Palestinian “history from below.” The focus of these essays is on the everyday losses endured and the community-based forms of resistance enacted by ordinary Palestinians. Seikaly explains how, through the struggle against financial dispossession, the journey into insurgent law, broad-based collective civil disobedience, and Arab futurity in Jerusalem, these four essays make space for new understandings in the way we narrate Palestine, its history, and its people.

KEYWORDS

Palestine; resistance; history from below; Arab Jerusalem; dispossession; Nakba

WHAT CAN A “HISTORY FROM BELOW” reveal about the past, present, and future of Palestine? This was the question that animated a panel at the 2020 Middle East Studies Association conference and now graces these pages in the form of this essay cluster. Uncovering new spaces, places, and experiences, the scholars gathered here provide invaluable lessons about time, abolition, and resistance. Sreemati Mitter takes us on a journey through the vicissitudes of people’s struggles to recover confiscated bank accounts, bonds, and investments. Alex Winder leads us down a path whose slower pace of change approximates the temporality of endurance. Charles W. Anderson unfolds the power of restlessness, one that continues to imbue Palestinian rebels and everyday people with a will to create new social collectives and political strategies. Haneen Naamneh builds a temporal portal, taking us through and within the space-time of the Nakba.

Working with dispersed and fragmented sources that reveal the intersections of financialization and dispossession, Mitter reflects on the struggles of orphans, widows, doctors, merchants, and pensioners to show how British and Israeli colonization robbed Palestinians of their financial property. These “ordinary and powerless” Palestinians have fallen out of our historical narrations; they do not belong to the elites or the peasantry that receive the lion’s share of our attention. Their losses were modest, but tragic nevertheless. Time and again, Palestinians were forced to address their demands for restitution to the very structures that dispossessed them. Mitter overturns the presumed neutrality, efficiency, legality, and scientific impartiality of the rules and norms of finance. She shows how savings, investments, and bonds are a primary and forgotten terrain of Palestinian dispossession.

Winder’s contribution places the Great Revolt (1936–39) in conversation with the First Intifada (1987–91) to illuminate the practices and concepts of rebel justice, abolition, and indigeneity. In both uprisings, Palestinian rebels defied and circumvented colonial criminal and civil legal systems, using customary law (*urf*) and communal reconciliation (*sulh*) to resolve disputes. Here, Winder de-emphasizes the national dimension, reckons with the

violence of insurgency and counterinsurgency, and reveals shared notions of honor and redemption as well as aspirations to a more egalitarian social order. These alternative systems of collective organization and communal justice are rich historical sites with which to think about the current abolitionist and Indigenous movements' momentum.

Anderson charts a geography of collective, nonviolent resistance in 1938, as Palestinians resisted the escalating brutality of British counterinsurgency and Revisionist Zionist assaults. Hunger strikes and civil disobedience rocked the country, as the people of Baysan, Haifa, Acre, Tulkarm, Nablus, Hebron, Jaffa, and Jerusalem collectively and innovatively rose up to challenge a gamut of British tactics that included mass incarceration, the use of civilians as human shields, and direct shelling. These unseen, granular, civilian struggles and forgotten mass mobilizations overturn colonial and nationalist historiographies that position the Palestinian public as docile, silent, apolitical, and coerced into supporting the Great Revolt. Anderson reveals instead that a Gramscian "war of position" was taking place that emphasized a steady, grinding contest for political power. The popular drive for self-determination and freedom gave birth to tactical innovation as well as to new patterns of sociability and mobilization. Racialized domination, Anderson shows, is inherently unstable. Palestine is not simply a laboratory of colonial repression. It is a laboratory of decolonial promise, strategy, and vision.

Naamneh moves our angle of historical vision from below to *within* Arab Jerusalem in the period 1948–67. Tracing the hopes, pathways, and everyday happenings of this overshadowed period, she reflects on how ordinary Jerusalemites survived and transgressed catastrophe. By taking seriously their visions of the past as a right and of a future that is united and self-determined, Naamneh disrupts 1948 as a clean rupture. Jerusalemites shaped a futurity through projects that sought to expand basic infrastructure and public spaces. Indeed, only a decade after the Nakba, Ruhi al-Khatib, the last Arab mayor of Jerusalem offered his constituents a thirty-year plan for a future that included a reunified city, a university, and women's participation in municipal elections both as voters and candidates. By exploring these visions, Naamneh challenges the Palestinian future as always already failed, unachievable, or impossible. She constructs a portal of return to a time suspended and ongoing.

Together these pieces shatter long-held attachments to how we understand and narrate Palestine, its history, and its people. Through the struggle against financial dispossession, the journey into insurgent law, broad-based collective civil disobedience, and the time of an Arab Jerusalem that has not yet passed, Mitter, Winder, Anderson, and Naamneh provide invaluable lessons on the historic and ongoing struggle for freedom in Palestine. It is a place that produces theory through, despite, and across catastrophe.