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Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt Since 1948 by Oroub el-Abed

Review by: Reem Abou-El-Fadl

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This study of Palestinians in Egypt since 1948 is a useful reference work for researchers interested in the status of Palestinian refugees in the Arab world. Its strength lies in its ethnographic research, which draws on interviews with Palestinian individuals and families from both urban and rural parts of Egypt.

The author weaves statistical data and excerpts from interviews with Palestinians into a broader historical account, allowing her to highlight the experiences of individuals who were victims of the Nakba. At the outset, we are told that the interviews conducted came to under a third of the intended sample, due to the project's "redirection by *force majeure*" in July 2002 (pp. 5–9). The author has navigated the resulting problem by offering more in the way of context, to complement the empirical material.

The first three chapters provide context about the waves of Palestinian refugees arriving in Egypt, the host government's policies and public opinion, and Palestinian settlement patterns and coping strategies. In the first chapter, we learn about the Israeli policy of forced transfer of hostages at gunpoint to the Egyptian border in 1967 (p. 25). The second chapter is careful to highlight patterns of continuity, as well as change in Egyptian policy since King Faruq's rule. The third chapter presents certain features characteristic of Palestinian life in Egypt: the way the community is scattered—permanent refugee camps are not a feature—and the way in which those communities that form an exception have tended to recreate modes of social life they were forced to leave behind in Palestine. The author then discusses both the strategic and organic aspects of the social networks Palestinians have formed with Egyptians over several decades (pp. 67–72).

After presenting a broad context, the book chooses a thematic approach which in fact corresponds to an evaluation of basic rights provision for Palestinians: "the right to secure

PALESTINIANS IN EGYPT

Unprotected: Palestinians in Egypt Since 1948, by Oroub el-Abed. Beirut and Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies; Ottawa and Ontario: International Development Research Center, 2009. xxv + 245 pages. Appendix to p. 225. Bibliography to p. 245. Index to p. 253. \$14.95 paper.

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residency, the right to enter and leave the country of residence at will, the right to work, to be educated, to own property" (p. 79). Chapter four therefore details conditions for residency and the "perils of Egyptian travel documents" (p. 84), and the challenges of finding work as a Palestinian. Chapter five discusses educational opportunities, health provisions, and Palestinians' use of financial assets.

This format has its merits: the reader seeking information on particular aspects of Palestinian life in Egypt can seek out the relevant chapter and refer back to the context chapters. However, the drawback here is that these early chapters cover rather major historical events such as the Nakba of 1948, as well as the 1967 and 1973 wars in brief, selecting certain details and omitting others. Similarly, the second context chapter forces complicated trajectories of government policy into a short space: the section on President Abdel Nasser's policy does not discuss his role in the founding of the PLO and the promotion of Palestinian fighters which later appears in chapter six, "Egypt and the PLO: Politics and Privileges." The international law context is laid out in chapter seven, "Palestinian Protection under International and Regional Conventions." In this respect, reorganization of the book's chapters, or further signposting, would have helped the reader.

The discussion of methodology in Appendix 1, with its useful compact descriptions of the different Palestinian settlement locations in Egypt (pp. 197–201), could arguably have been moved to an earlier, theoretical chapter. This would have highlighted the reach of the project's fieldwork: considering the lack of official statistics on the number and location of Palestinians in Egypt, the reader comes away with a substantial image of their distribution across twenty-seven governorates. It could also have made for a stronger conceptual dimension in the book if the author had developed a theoretical apparatus to explain, as well as document, the processes affecting Palestinian refugees in Egypt.

Targeting the myth that Palestinians in contemporary Egypt are a wealthy

group, the book states its intention to focus on the poorer classes of "hidden Palestinians" (p. 5). It also thoroughly details the legal and discursive measures which the Egyptian state employed to create a hostile atmosphere for Palestinians, particularly after 1978. This is, however, accompanied by a tendency in the central chapters to pass over the phases in which most Palestinians received better treatment: "Access to health services . . . is the area where our interviewees expressed the greatest satisfaction. The section dealing with health is therefore the briefest. . ." (p. 104). Conversely, Egyptian popular attitudes are mostly discussed at nadir times in the treatment of Palestinians by the Egyptian state, with extensive quoting from anti-Palestinian media, and little from the counter-trends.

This point is not made in defense of the Egyptian state. Rather, it is to suggest that of the six decades of post-Nakba Palestinian existence in Egypt, roughly half were at the more "protected" end of the spectrum of refugee life, and yet are presented here as "Nasser-era *liberalization*." Instead, we might ask what those years tell us about the institutionalization of policy, what its legacy might be for contemporary Egyptian attitudes, and how much potential there is for change in the official treatment of Palestinians today.

The author moves from narrative to policy recommendation in the conclusion, which begins with a discussion of Palestinian identity in Egypt and of the 1948/67 generational divide. Relying upon these historical trends, the author then highlights the conflation of citizenship and basic rights in the treatment of the Palestinian community by the Egyptian state. The author argues that guaranteeing the population's rights does not necessitate repatriation or citizenship, nor has this ever been a collective Palestinian demand. The book thus ends with a policy message, built on its systematic survey of evidence. While historians and scholars of politics will ultimately treat *Unprotected* more as a source, rather than an interpretation, of data, the book will be useful to audiences involved in law and policy practice.