

BOOK REVIEW

Researching Palestine at Birzeit: Prospects and Limits

Mafhamat Filastin al-haditha: Namadhij min al-ma'rifa al-taharruriyya [Conceptualizing modern Palestine: exemplars of liberatory knowledge]. Supervised and edited by Abdul-Rahim al-Shaikh, Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2021. 256 pp. \$10.00 paper.

Reviewed by Jamil Hilal



Abstract

This book collects contributions from seven doctoral candidates at Birzeit University, focusing on different aspects of Palestine, particularly that part occupied in 1967. Palestine as history, geography, demography, and culture presents many challenges and numerous research issues that require originality, ingenuity, and imagination in thinking, methodology, theory, and narrative. The authors demonstrate originality and imagination in methodology, theory, and narrative while taking up key themes of resistance, identity, and literature. Although the papers do not ignore the general features of the Palestinian question, this review stresses the need to guard against reducing Palestine to a portion of its geography, and its population to a part of its own original citizens. The book represents a small but important step in meeting this challenge – of particular significance to Palestinian universities and social scientists – of producing knowledge that informs and concerns all the components of the Palestinian people in their diverse socio-economic, political, and cultural environments and combating settler colonialism and apartheid.

Keywords

Researching Palestine; colonialism; resistance; schoolbooks; identity; culture.

To review a book that is a collection of seven separate papers, each authored by a social science doctoral candidate at Birzeit University, and introduced by the editor-supervisor, is not an easy task. The book is presented as a fresh perspective

on “understanding modern Palestine” using diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. All of the papers critique, in one way or another, the Zionist settler-colonial project, and some also attempt to appraise aspects of the Palestinian political scene. Each paper discusses a subject of the researcher’s own choosing, methodology, and thinking, and so each deserves to be reviewed on its own.

Editor Abdul-Rahim al-Shaikh introduces the book as the birth of a “new generation” of researchers freed from the effects of colonialism in methodology and aims, freed from giving priority to Zionist discourse, and unfettered by the practice of quoting and giving dominance to theoretical frameworks current in Western academia and its Israeli branch. He sees the papers also as being free from the dogmas that the Oslo agreements implanted in Palestinian political culture. These are commendable and valuable aspirations that need persistent effort, imagination, and ingenuity to become established as a dominant perspective or paradigm – and would benefit, no doubt, from including those Palestinian communities outside the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Indeed, the dominance of the West Bank in the majority of the papers is very clear. Viewing Zionism and its state from a settler-colonial perspective requires thinking of Palestine as it existed before 1948 and of Palestinians in their totality as those living inside historic Palestine and those living outside it. We need to resist reducing Palestinian geography, history, and demography to that of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This should be reflected, when possible, in future research and writings.

A book on “modern Palestine” also invites research on structures that create and maintain inequality in Palestinian communities (in terms of social class, gender, and other power relations). Settler colonialism and its apartheid system are certainly responsible for creating and maintaining impoverishment, repression, and other forms of violence, but this is not the whole story. Palestinian communities inside and outside Palestine are plagued with unequal distribution of life opportunities and exist in brutal capitalist societies with various systems of repression. Palestinian communities themselves are also characterized by structures that engender and maintain inequalities. Addressing these must be part of any new approach to producing knowledge and policies to counter settler colonialism.

The impact of the fragmentation of the Palestinian political field on the life of Palestinians needs to be more visible in future research. It is tempting (though the work under review does not do so) to see any form of fragmentation as part of the neoliberal outlook of individuation in confronting the all-dominant capitalist market. We would benefit from a more robust engagement, together with an in-depth analysis of Palestinian social structure and the rise of conservative and reactionary ideologies.

The Papers

The first paper, “From the Colonial Courts to the Land: The Daily Struggle over Time and Space in the Palestinian Jordan Valley” by Fairouz Salem, focuses on the interactions between the colonizer and the colonized in al-Ghwar (the Jordan Valley), which has faced continuous colonization since 1967. Most of the area is classified by

the Oslo agreements as Area C, which facilitates Israel's colonial control. Salem's research is based on ten in-depth interviews with landowners in the area and Palestinian lawyers, as well as reports by local and international organizations and the media. She pays special attention to Israel's use of legal arrangements to reinforce its control and discusses how Palestinians maneuver this system to resist this control. Salem argues that both place and time are subjected to colonization (though the concept of "colonizing time" needs elucidation) and both are turned into arenas of resistance that range from open confrontation to "negotiating" the colonization of Palestinian space and time and "bargaining" in Israeli courts.

Salem does not minimize the enormity of Israeli colonization and repression and gives many examples of attempts to create "uncertainty" in Palestinian conceptions of place and time. The huge decline in Palestinians living in al-Ghwar since Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967 demonstrates the enormous impact of settler colonialism on the area. Salem also includes examples of how Palestinians there use Israeli law and "negotiation" tactics to lessen or delay the implementation of violence against them. Yet, the limits of local resistance in facing a racist settler-colonial power are set by both the balance of resources on the ground and the vision, unity, and ingenuity of the Palestinian political movement. Localized and individual resistance, however admirable and necessary, cannot be a substitute for a sustainable prolonged resistance led by a unified political movement with a clear vision. This is absent at the present time.

The paper "The Demographic Question: Between Current Palestinian and Israeli Approaches" by Kholoud Nasser is concerned with demographic changes especially over the last two decades, which saw a declining fertility rate among Palestinians and an increasing rate among Israelis. This trend is viewed in the context of the Israeli strategy of fortifying the Jewish presence in historic Palestine from a political and ideological perspective. Israel implemented, and continues to pursue, a policy of ethnic cleansing and apartheid toward Palestinians; it has also promoted Jewish immigration to change the demographic composition in historic Palestine. However, a discussion of fertility needs to address the class and ethnic structure of the society, and systems of public support and solidarity for poor families. The Israeli state provides family assistance for every new child in order to encourage Jewish population growth but, as Nasser shows, adopts practices to restrict fertility among Palestinian women with Israeli citizenship. At the same time, Israel uses settler colonialism, siege, and wars in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to keep Palestinian population growth as low as possible. In contrast, the official Palestinian Authority (PA) perspective views high fertility rates as a challenge to the Palestinian aim of "sustainable development" and tends, therefore, to separate issues of economic development from settler colonialism, a position that Nasser rightly rejects.

Nasser also recognizes that fertility rates among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are still higher than those in Israel as a whole. Nevertheless, even if the demographic composition in historic Palestine has shifted in favor of Palestinians, the balance of material power (economic, military, diplomatic, and technological) has

not. This requires Palestinians to rebuild a unified political movement with democratic representative institutions, and to articulate a political vision that addresses the just concerns of the Palestinian people as a whole and also gives attention to the political future of Israeli Jews once they free themselves from Zionism.

Ashraf Badr's paper "Disgust as a Colonial Mechanism: Zionist Colonialism as a Model" seeks to disentangle the psychological makeup of the Zionist colonizer by showing how "disgust" has impacted the Zionist's psychological makeup, becoming a colonizing tool besides being a racist feature. Badr uses interviews with freed Palestinian captives and their families, as well as selected texts and narratives, to illustrate his argument. Zionism, Badr points out, employs Orientalist cultural explanations, depicting Palestinians as backward, to vindicate settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing and ultimately dehumanize Palestinians. The paper documents many examples of Israeli military, political, religious, and other discourses that seek to justify the mistreatment and murder of Palestinians. This disgust, Badr points out, extends even to Palestinian Arabs who serve in the Israeli army and police and to "Eastern" Jews from northern Africa and western Asia. However, the paper does not make clear why these Jews, considering this discriminatory attitude toward them, do not show less antagonism and disgust toward Palestinians.

Qasam al-Haj's paper "Curfews and Military Closures: The Arrest and Liberation of Palestinian Time-Space" is concerned with the colonial aim of controlling Palestinian "time and space," and Palestinian attempts to formulate popular resistance strategies to challenge Israeli colonization. The research relies on legal material, reports on the violations of Palestinian human rights, and reports on Palestinian resistance (individual and collective). Al-Haj argues that Israeli settler colonialism aims to hinder the existence of Palestinians under its control, using curfews, total military closure, and various other means. She asserts that Palestinian resistance has been successful in opposing these Israeli aims but, unfortunately, does not show convincingly enough how this was achieved. To demonstrate Israeli moves to control Palestinian time, al-Haj investigates the "state of exception" forced on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, using emergency laws to violate human rights of Palestinians during the second intifada beginning in 2000. Alongside these, she reads narratives employed by the resistance asserting Palestinian control over time and space.

Al-Haj notes the intensification of Israeli measures of collective punishment after the second intifada, including curfews, closures, military re-invasion, and severe restrictions on movement with multiple consequences on Palestinians' work, health, psychological and social well-being. This is undisputable, but what is less clear is al-Haj's assertion that resistance obliged Israel to change its methods of domination over Palestinian space and time. It may be the case, as the author asserts, that the "state of exception" does not guarantee success, but the fact remains that Israel has so far escaped accountability for a long and growing list of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Palestinians' struggle to liberate their time-space does not alone explain what happened and how: the two intifadas are two good examples of confrontation periods whose final outcomes cannot be fully explained by their internal dynamics.

Ali Mousa's paper seeks to explicate the "Dimensions of Palestinian Identity in Autobiographies and Memoirs from Nablus (1948–1967)" based on an examination of nine autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries from Nablus during the period the West Bank was under Jordanian rule. It concludes that Palestinian identity in the West Bank distinguished itself during Jordanian rule despite the participation of some Palestinians in the Jordanian political system. Nablus in particular had a special relationship with Transjordan from the Ottoman period and its elites were influential in the political and economic life of Jordan. Mousa's study finds a diversity and a complementarity of expressions of Palestinian identity in relation to the Jordanian rule, shaped by class, gender, and age differences and by the political position of each text's author. The nine texts were all written by public or literary figures (that is, the urban middle class). The complementarity is attributed to the sharpening of the Palestinian identity by the Arab defeat of 1948, the frequent friction with Jordanian rule, and the influence of the various political ideologies dominant at the time in the Arab world. These developments, Mousa claims, influenced the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1964 and the articulation of the Palestinian National Covenant in 1968. Unfortunately, Mousa does not dwell on the factors that were crucial to the rekindling of Palestinian nationalism and patriotism, including the role played by pan-Arab nationalist regimes at the time and that of emerging Palestinian resistance groups, among other regional and international factors. Identifying the decisive factors in the formation of the new Palestinian nationalism and resistance requires further research to highlight changes experienced by Palestinians (particularly and primarily those in refugee camps) living outside historic Palestine.

The sixth paper, by Asma' al-Sharabati, "Images of Activism in Palestinian School Textbooks," examines images found in Palestinian Authority primary school textbooks produced in 2017 for the social studies curriculum in schools in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and interprets their portrayal of Palestinians, the Israeli occupation, and the Palestinian Authority. This is done with the knowledge that the Oslo accords imposed clear limitations on the PA's ability to represent Palestinians as a whole and to articulate their aspirations for freedom, self-determination, and return.

Apart from noting that the text and the pictures in the schoolbooks do not follow a specific methodology, that the pictures tended to be of low quality, and that maps do not match the texts accompanying them, the paper concludes that the pictures represent the Palestinian or the Arab self as an "other" existing outside time and space – that is, not as people with rights and real history. Palestinians appear in the photos as aggravated, distant, exiled, captive, and sad. The absence of eye contact between those appearing in the photos and the viewer (pupil) suggests to the latter that those in the photos are just "cases" for study without emotional connection. Photos of refugees or refugee camps are represented as problems that should not concern the pupil personally. Refugees are represented as subjects who suffered an injustice but are powerless. Al-Sharabati considers this compatible with how the PA perceives the refugee situation: as an issue that requires discussion and not as a cause that requires struggle. The paper also notes the tendency to show photos that have been taken from

a distance, and to display landscapes empty of people, a perspective that does not encourage pupils to be curious or interested in the places shown in the textbooks. Al-Sharabati further notes that photos of the Israeli police or security personnel are visibly clearer, endowing their subjects with a power not possessed by the viewer (pupil).

Al-Sharabati acknowledges that while images in PA schoolbooks do represent the Israeli occupation as a real problem, at the same time they tend to overexaggerate the strength of the Israeli soldier by showing him as an active agent carrying a weapon and possessing features that display determination and strength. The author also notes the exclusion of Palestinian resistance organizations and the marginalization of Palestinian activist groups. It may be true, as al-Sharabati contends, that pictures carry the political perspective of the presenter: that the PA sought to convey this image of Palestinians to highlight its project of state-building, and to promote the qualities it thinks its citizens should have. As such, the paper is instructive for educators and textbook developers.

The final paper of the book, “Post-Palestine: Palestinian Cultural Discourse and the Tragedy of Defeat” by Abd al-Jawad Omar, is the only paper (with the possible exception of Badr’s paper on colonial disgust) that addresses issues that concern Palestinians as a whole. Omar argues that the notion of resistance has undergone radical changes, both in discourse and practice, corresponding to different phases of the Palestinian revolution. The acceptance of defeat (finalized with the Oslo agreements) prompted the emergence of a culture and a discourse detached from “the possibility of realization” of the liberation of Palestine. According to Omar, the PLO’s political defeat produced a narrative and an aesthetic that recreated this defeat poetically as a tragedy. This narrative served strategic ends, allowing reconciliation with the “fact” of defeat, and presenting Israel as a rival and not an enemy. Omar frequently quotes Mahmoud Darwish, with his many references to tragedy, to draw attention to his attempts to engage in “poetic dialogue” with the enemy. However, Darwish has been viewed as a voice of resistance, the poet of Troy, as well as the poet who articulated dialogue with the enemy. As noted elsewhere, Darwish’s poetry in his later days moved to broader human issues. Though Darwish dominates the text, he is not the only literary figure quoted in the paper. But the fact remains that a very complex relationship exists between the Palestinian political field and the Palestinian cultural field (in a wider sense) exactly because of the ongoing nature of the Palestinian Nakba.

Omar’s paper is stimulating and should pave the way for investigating the complex relationship between the political and cultural fields (including the Arab and international context) that Darwish’s poetry provoked. Widening the cultural sphere to include not only literature but also visual arts and other forms of culture would reveal a more varied and complex relationship between the two fields, and would do much to uncover the cultural dynamics among Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, 1948 occupied territories and in Lebanon, Syria, the Gulf, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.

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