

Title: Across the Wall. Narratives of Israel-Palestinian History

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Review

This is a very important book. The 13 contributors of the edited volume are well known Palestinian and Israeli scholars whose politics of identity impact on the historical research they are involved in (p. 5). They call for peace and reconciliation and some as Ilan Pappé and Uri Davis for a one-state solution or as the title implies with "this wall and how to tear it down." (p. 1). The editors are of the opinion that only "international pressure can force Israel to take down the physical Wall it has cut into the heart of Palestine and shame it into abolishing the system of Apartheid it enforces there." However, the physical wall is only one aspect. Pappé has on other occasions called for the De-Zionization of Israel as the only solution to the conflict since he sees in Zionism the reason for Israel's segregation policies. Therefore it is up to activist scholars "to continue working on the inside towards tearing down the ideological wall (p. 18)."

The project started in the spring of 1997 when Israeli and Palestinian academics (calling themselves PALISAD: Palestinian-Israeli Academic Dialogue) met - either in Ramallah or Jerusalem - to discuss their respective histories in the "wake of the deadlock in the so-called peace process and a common dissatisfaction with the nature of the Oslo Accords." They all believed in the necessity for "an alternative historical perspective on the conflict, one capable of bridging over the two national meta-narratives and their ethnocentric and segregationist orientations" (p.2). Thus they called for "bridging narratives" - a new emerging genre in histories of prolonged conflict. Historical reconstruction therefore becomes a "joint historiographical effort involving individuals who seek to absolve themselves from their given national and positional identities", such as colonizer versus colonized. "It entails a fresh recognition of the way history is always contextualized and, more importantly, of the way power structures seek to determine the nature of the dialogue between present and past." (p. 5). This approach is all the more needed since a common feature of Israeli academia is the link between the security establishment and academia (Dan Rabinowitz, p. 49). Thus they also differ in their approach to the "new historians" who "denied their work bore any relation to the counter narrative of Palestinian academics". On the contrary when the Israeli challengers to the official narrative met with Palestinian scholars in May 1998 in Paris they had adopted a neo-colonialist approach to the disgust of Edward Said who "threw up his arms (...) exclaiming that not only had the Israelis perpetrated the *Nakba*, they now also tried to confiscate its historiography." (p. 9) Similarly, *Peace Now* refuses to acknowledge a clash between the Israeli and Palestinian national narrative, in particular with

regard to the *Nakba*. The members of *Peace Now* divide – according to Pappé – everything that is visible – land, resources and history – into a pre-1967 period, in which ‘We, the Jews, were Right and Just’ and a post-1967-period, in which ‘You, the Palestinians, are Right and Just’ (p. 164).

The editors are also aware of some of the shortcomings of their book, namely the under representation of gender issues as only one contribution deals with it.

The scholars involved in bridging narratives met for the last time as PALISAD in March 2006 when they knew that the Wall would put an end to this form of intellectual exchange and grass root activity. They “parted with the strong sense that a continued dialogue on ‘bridging narratives’ or, for that matter, any other academic issue is a luxury while Israel’s machinery of destruction is inexorably bent on strangulating the Palestinian people in the Occupied Territories” (p. 18). The reason for publishing the “bridging narrative” after all is to show what the grass-root dialogue has been able to achieve so far and more importantly to “help foster future reconciliation between, and within, our two societies.” (p. 3) PALISAD, however, ceased to exist as an active forum as a result of the deterioration of the situation in the first decade of the twenty-first century “worse than anything we have seen before” (p. 437) – even if the scholars continue to meet individually at various venues and publish together in the hope that one day they will be able to resume their dialogue.

These bridging narratives also led some Israeli scholars such as Oren Yiftachel to rethink their own terminology (“Israel proper”). In his article on the politics of Judaizing Israel/Palestine Yiftachel argues that Israel does not comply with the basic requirements of democracy and therefore uses the term “ethnocracy” to classify the state of Israel, which embraces ethnic statehood. This means that citizens do not have equal access to state land or access to capital or mobility and are “virtually ‘trapped’ as an underclass” (p. 275). The figures are telling. The state controls 93 per cent of the area within the so-called Green Line (the borders prior to the war in 1967) whilst Palestinian citizens of Israel own only around three percent of it (p. 285). These Palestinian citizens are prevented from purchasing, leasing or using land in around 80 % of the country, which would make it illegal in democratic countries. (Hilal shows the transformation of Palestinian society when he points out that fifty years on from the *Nakba*, less than 5 % of the total Palestinian labour force are employed in agriculture, compared to no less than 50 % in 1948).

An ethnocracy as Yiftachel explains is by definition a non-democratic regime that attempts to “extend or preserve disproportional ethnic control over a contested multi-ethnic territory” (p. 276) and as a settler society democratic institutions exclude indigenous and rival minorities (p. 277). These regimes are supported by a “cultural and ideological apparatus that legitimizes and reinforces the uneven reality” (p. 277). The reason why an alternative history is so crucial in this context is the fact that an ethnocracy “constructs a historical narrative that proclaims the dominant ethno-nation as the rightful owner of the territory in question” (p. 277). Yiftachel therefore sees the revisions made in 1985 to the Basic Law of the Knesset as in the inherent nature of an ethnocracy. The law does not allow a party to run if it “rejected Israel’s definition as the state of the Jewish people” (p. 281). Democratic attempts to change the Zionist character of the state

therefore are doomed to failure. Similarly Uri Davis argues that the biological definition of Jewishness follows a racist logic. Since this has been incorporated into Israeli legislation, the “Jewish State in the political Zionist sense of the term is not and has never been a democracy in the Western liberal sense of term” (p. 400).

Yiftachel points to another important factor that undermines the democratic character: the involvement of non-citizens (e.g. Jewish organizations outside of Israel) in the decision-making in the state of Israel. He provides the reader with the example of the declaration by ultra-orthodox Australian millionaire, and major donor to religious parties, David Guttnick, that he would “work to ‘topple the Netanyahu government’ in case it decides to withdraw from Occupied Territories’ (p. 290)”. This leads Yiftachel to conclude that Israel “does not comply with the basic requirements of democracy – the existence of *ademos* (an exclusive body of citizens within given borders). For Israel to become a genuine democracy it would need to become a “*state of all its resident-citizens, and only of them*” (p. 292). However, at the moment the policies are made by a West Bank Settler and immigrant from the former Soviet Union and Yiftachel concludes by asking the question: “How can a recent immigrant to the country campaign to evacuate residents who have been on the land for several generations, since well before the state was established? How can the state lease large tracts of land to non-citizen (Jewish) organizations and continue to block its own (Arab) citizens from using it for residential purposes?” (p. 305)

Other contributors such as Nur Masalha who has published extensively on the Zionist transfer ideology prior to 1948 elaborates on Israeli settlement plans in the first decade of the State (1948-1958) when Israeli policymakers tried to engage foreign powers (France, Britain, Italy and the USA) in an effort for population exchange. Every Arab in the “Jewish State” and every Jew in an Arab state would be subject to transfer. These ‘liberal’ and ‘socialist’ Zionists saw nothing wrong with establishing a “Transfer Committee” that would leave both groups - Arab Jews and Palestinian Arabs alike – with few choices and would deny both the right to live in their own countries.

The purpose was clear: to undermine the UN resolution 194 that allowed the return of the refugees and to populate Israel with Jews – and create a cheap labour force. They concentrated their efforts on Iraq, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia and Somalia. The funding for this “population transfer” was supposed to come from Israel and rich Jews in the USA, including those who had oil business in Libya. “We arranged with an insurance company that all the [Palestinian] settlers in Libya would be given life insurance; we would pay the premium, while the company would put at our disposal an advance payment from the amounts to which the insured would be entitled in the future. The candidates for resettlement in Libya undertook to give up their claims for compensation from the government of Israel in the future” (p. 139). The Israeli leadership was therefore determined to block all possibilities of any Palestinian refugee return in the future (p. 153).

Moshe Zuckermann establishes a link between the Holocaust and the continuing dispossession of the Palestinians when he speaks of displacement of hatred. His article contributes to the growing body of literature that deals with the “nazification” of the Palestinians. Using the example of a high school student who

declared: 'Somebody has to be blamed for the Holocaust; we have to hate somebody, but we have already made our reconciliation with the Germans' (p. 79), Zuckermann sees the need to hate in the fact that Israeli society never went through any real process of grieving (*Trauerarbeit*) and has instrumentalized memory ideologically. Thus 'hatred' is a fitting manifestation of this construction of memory (p. 79). For Pappé the Holocaust also plays a crucial role. He calls for the universalization of Holocaust memory and calls upon the Palestinian side to end Holocaust denial as a way of opening the road to the mutual empathy that Edward Said talked about (p. 175).

Salim Tamari reconstructs the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Jerusalem of 1948 and shows how it had become a "cosmopolitan city" during the British Mandate, a "city of considerable social mobility and ethnic diversity, where communal conflict was kept at bay by a fair amount of mutual dependence and local solidarities" (p. 90). Tamari uses the diaries of Khalil Sakakini which are testimony to this cosmopolitan culture and which show the beginnings of shared or 'mixed' communities "where economic interdependence re-enforced social co-existence between Arab and Jews" (p. 93). Also in light of the fact that much of the living space was rented, the "ethnic divide" could not be kept up. Another factor according to Tamari was the globalization of a European life style that contributed to the "mixed" Arab-Jewish communities in middle-class neighbourhoods in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Haifa. Nevertheless Tamari warns us from idealizing the harmony between Arabs and Jews, found in the work of contemporary secular Arab historians such as 'Arif el-'Arif and Muhammad al-Amiry. In the context of the events of 1948 Tamari reminds the reader of another aspect – the looting of Arab property according to the description of a Jewish woman:

"I remember the looting in Qatamon very well. I was a first aid nurse (...). One night a soldier took me out and showed me around the neighborhood. I was stunned by the beauty of the houses. I went into one house – it was beautiful, with a piano, and carpets, and wonderful chandeliers. [...] For days you could see people walking by carrying looted goods. [...] And it was in broad daylight, so everyone could see." (p. 98)

In his article "Fear, Victimhood, Self and Other. On the Road to Reconciliation" Pappé analysis the psychological reasons for the conflict and the way out of it through a reflection on national identity in general – a recent human invention, for which the construction of the Other was essential. In the Israeli case this meant, the construction of an Israeli identity "rested on the simultaneous constitution of a Palestinian/Arab identity as its demonized Other" (p. 155). There is a further obstacle to reconciliation, namely the refusal to accept one's role as the victimizer of the Other. "Most Israeli Jews are unable or simply refuse to contemplate the possibility" (p. 161). Pappé suggests that "acknowledging the atrocities Jews committed against the people of Palestine when they created their state ought to become a vital and necessary road station in the socialization of the Jews in Israel, no less vital and necessary than the horror destinations which the Israeli Ministry of Education obliges Jewish high-school children to visit in Holocaust Europe" (p. 161). Pappé sees the obstacles for this *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) in the fact that this would mean for Israeli Jews not only to accept the loss of their own status of

victimhood but would impact on the Israeli Jewish psyche: "Israeli Jews would have to recognize that they have become the mirror image of their own worst nightmare" (p. 163). However, reconciliation can only be achieved through a healing process and part of this healing process is recognizing the other side as the victim of one's actions. He suggests the use of the model of the American psychologist Joan Fumia whose idea of face to face meeting between offenders and victim could lead to a change in the Israeli attitude as the consequences and not the dead are the focal point of the process. Apparently her model was successfully implemented in South Africa. Uri Davis also engages in confronting that fear when he points out that a Jewish child "born in the illegal settlement of Alon Moreh on the West Bank" has the same rights to live in the country of "his or her" birth as does an Arab child born in Nablus to live there (p. 403), however, on equal footing to the Arab citizen – "not to occupy and dispossess" (p. 403). Davis compares the situation in Israel/Palestine with that of South Africa and also reflects on the failure of the Palestinian leadership in comparison with the ANC. "The ANC won the battle for democracy in South Africa because it saw it to be a matter of principle that the ANC regard itself not as the representative of Black South Africans but the democratic political home for all South Africans, whites and non-whites on equal footing. The PLO lost the struggle for democracy in Palestine because to date it regards itself to be the sole legitimate representative of the Arab Palestinian people – not of all Palestinians, Arabs and non-Arabs on equal footing" (p. 404).

Jamil Hilal calls for narrating Palestinian history not only in terms of defeat and humiliation or heroism and resistance (such as the Great Arab Revolt) but for incorporating the multiple events as good novelists do. "One immediately thinks of the rich and colourful variety of the Palestinian characters and events we encounter in the stories by Ghassan Kanafani, Emil Habibi" and others. Thus Hilal calls for adopting some of the insights "our writers and poets" offer us in writing Palestinian history (p. 181), Hilal like other scholars such as Rashid Khalidi also focuses on the problems of Palestinian society that led to the losses in 1948 and sees the reasons in the unfamiliarity with "modern forms of societal organization". The Palestinians lacked the "political institutions, legal and administrative frameworks or the organizational apparatus of the modern state" (p. 186). As for the elite Hilal argues that it failed to offer a "vision of the future of Palestinian society" (p. 187). The elite did "nothing to stop local and absentee landowners – people belonging to the same societal stratum! – from selling land to the Zionist movement." (p. 187) For Hilal the most damaging failure was the inability of the elite to "create a political vision that could somehow stymie the objectives of the Zionist movement and neutralize its British protector, for example by calling for a unified state in Palestine where Jews and Arabs would live side by side" (p. 187). Hilal also shows how the Arab Higher Committee acted in the "narrow interests of most of the classes it represented" and excluded the intelligentsia and the working class. The Great Arab Revolt in his view had not achieved any of its objectives when it was crushed in 1939 and the similarities to the First Intifada are striking. Nevertheless, "it is engraved in the Palestinian collective memory as a major act of defiance and resistance and elevated the Palestinian peasant to the status of heroic figure" (p. 191). Like Khalidi, Hilal points out that the Palestinians entered the 1947-48 war without a "national leadership and a political strategy and with no fighting capability to speak of" (p. 193). Contrary to Zionist/Israeli historiography who paint a picture of the weak

Israel against the powerful Arab armies, Hilal points out that the Palestinian fighting units were never more than 15,000, "including Abd al-Qader al-Husayni's Holy Jihad army and irregular armed groups in the villages. In no way did it reach the size of the Jewish Hagana forces of 35,000. By early 1948 (...) the Zionist leadership had mobilized a military force that in number and combat power exceeded all Palestinian and Arab forces put together" (Hilal, p. 197).

Rema Hammami's chapter is the only one that deals with gender, namely the representation of women in the oral history narratives of the *Nakba* and in art and films on pre-1948 urban life. She investigates why peasant women in particular have been excluded as narrators of the 1948 experience, in contrast to peasant men. It is not only an issue of gender but of class because urban middle class women actually do play a role in the production of a specific memory of 1948 (p. 236), in particular the women from Jaffa are given a voice in the newspaper commemorations of 1998 and in films (p. 260).

Nevertheless, even in the most culturally sophisticated and socially 'liberal' local Palestinian newspaper *Al-Ayyam* the absence of women's voices is obvious – even the bi-weekly insert *Kul as-Nis'a* (All Women) – never "did a special commemorative feature" (p. 242). Hammami relates the absence of women in the analysis of 1948 to the absence of women from narratives of war (p. 245). In the memorial books women mostly only appear with reference to dress and weddings – as "objects in a set anthropological ritual" (p. 251) or when a specific economic activity such as the local weaving industry in Majdal or the poultry rising activities in al-Faluja is typical for that particular village. The only exception with regard to gender is the memorial book of the village of Abu Shusheh. It has been the "site of a massacre by Zionist forces that included the killing of women, children and the elderly. Women became the central characters in the dramatic narrative of Abu Shusheh's fall because the majority of village men were absent fighting elsewhere when the attack took place. The women come to centre stage after the massacre because, during it, they were hiding with their children in caves within the village and only after Abu Shusheh was occupied for three days by the Zionist forces, was their presence discovered." (p. 251) The women at first negotiated the burial of the dead and the access to food and water but the Hagana forces "transferred" them nevertheless and two children were murdered in front of their mothers (p. 252).

Hammami has shown how the "peasant male's attachment to the land transforms him into a central symbol of its loss, it is the silenced peasant woman who remains outside of history and modernity (p. 255)". These peasant women are "never narrators of the nation – rather, various narratives of it are inscribed on their body" (p. 260).

Musa Budeiri, uses the theorist of the anti-colonial struggle, Franz Fanon, to analyse the experience of national liberation in the Palestinian case. Fanon has argued that the colonial masters did not "hesitate to resort to violence in order to defend their interests. It was only when the downtrodden, the exploited and the oppressed took up arms to defend themselves and to assume control of what was rightfully theirs, that the civilized world shook in horror at the unspeakable violence being committed, and which cast doubts on the validity and sanctity of their claims (p. 311)". Budeiri reflects on the inability of the Palestinians to

develop a democratic process and points to the fact that for them the age of colonialism has not come to an end. He also opposes the revisionist efforts by some academics such as Maoz and Kaufman that there had been a democratic process and argues that on the contrary “nothing in the historical record gives substance to such claims” (p. 315). Instead the traditional elite controlled the political organizations in the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, Budeiri also reflects on the significance of democracy and asks crucial questions as to what a process of democratization is actually supposed to achieve: “Is the aim to allow those with vested interests to make their voices heard? Or is the aim perhaps to give weight to the voice of the silent majority? Will it allow for the redressing of a balance of power which is so markedly tilted in favour of Israel?” (p. 350).

Lev Grinberg shows why the three bullets that killed Prime Minister Rabin succeeded in derailing the peace process. The military officials who are involved in the country’s politics and determine its future under the guise of “security” issues have no interest in peace, defined borders and a democratic state ruled by law as it would jeopardize their privileges. Also for the religious right “democracy does not constitute a fundamental value in the eyes of these people, who argue that there is a higher authority than the state” (p. 369). According to Grinberg Rabin succeeded in creating a new “we” – Israelis and Palestinians striving for peace - and a new “they” (Muslims and Jews who wanted the continuation of the conflict). Rabin’s success in building new political identities was according to Grinberg the reason for his assassination. “This was a strategic political decision that was born out by an accurate analysis of the process by people who deliberately wanted to derail it: as Rabin had constructed new identities whose legitimacy was based on his personal authority, he himself had to go.” (p. 380) His death meant the end of the peace process and the end of democratization because they are “inseparable” (p. 390). The “two polarized mythological camps [the right and the left] sprang back into life” (p. 369).

With regard to the orthodox camp it is also worth pointing out that orthodox Jews do not speak with one voice. Uri Davis shows that one part of Orthodox Judaism (Neturei Karta) regards Zionism to be “the worst expression of Jewish religious apostasy” (p. 401). Similar to Pappé, Davis sees the solution to the conflict in a separation of religion from state, a demand made by the late orthodox Jewish professor Y. Leibowitz already in 1959, but unlike Leibowitz (for whom the state has no religious significance and who sees Zionism as an expression of being fed up by being ruled by non-Jews) Davis calls for a post-Colonial, anti-national, hence anti-Zionist solution.

In his concluding reflections Ilan Pappé is optimistic that both sides begin to accept that the One-State Palestine is the “only game in town” (p. 431). He bases his argument on four global and local processes that are at play at the moment such as the change in Western public opinion, the growing resentment of Israel’s policies amongst Muslims and Arabs in the Third World and also the desire from below for de-segregated spaces of co-existence even if it is only a “drop in the ocean of segregation ordained from above.” (p. 435). But Pappé is hopeful that together with the other processes “these small cocoons may yet develop into, first, a refuge for people who want to live differently from the inhuman reality around them and then also into a model for a future one-state Palestine, a state for all its citizens, free and sovereign, democratic and independent” (p. 435).