



Ilan Pappé/Jamil Hilal eds., *Across The Wall. Narratives of Israeli-Palestinian History*, I. B. Tauris, London-New York 2010, 462 pp., € 56.

“Across the Wall” arose from collaboration between scholars from Israel and Palestine, seeking to arrive at a shared framework for studying the history of this tormented land. Historians from Israel/Palestine came together for dialogue on history, identity, and the meaning of the conflict. They argue for a concept of a “bridging narrative” that can accommodate incompatible national met-narratives. “Bridging narratives are usually intercalary chapters, short pieces that help connect the so-called ‘plot’ chapters”. (3) All contested issues in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are discussed.

This get-together was characterized by mutual respect for each other not like a meeting between Israeli and Palestinian historians in Paris in May 1998, in which they clashed about issues such as the equation between Zionism and colonialism and the designation of the Nakba as “ethnic cleansing”. At the forefront of this clash were Benny Morris and Itamar Rabinovitch. These Israeli historians, according to Pappé, doubted the expertise of, or the access to historical documents by, Palestinians necessary for writing their own history. This would mean that, at least in that case, only the colonizer can write the history of the colonized. The late Edward Said rebuffed vehemently this patronizing attitude by saying that not only had the “Israelis perpetrated the Nakba, they now also tried to confiscate its historiography”. (9)

The group focused only on issues of the past that haunt the present and surely affect the future. They also agreed on ditching the Western “paradigm of parity” i. e. that there are two warring parties in Palestine who each carries equal responsibility for both the outbreak of, and the solution to, the conflict. So far, this paradigm failed, because the situation on the ground is dominated by disparity and inequality between a brutal colonial regime and an oppressed, dispossessed and colonized people. And the parties do not have the same claim on the Land of Palestine.

The book contains articles by Ilan Pappé, Jamil Hilal, Moshe Zuckermann, Ehud Aviv, Dan Rabinowitz, Salim Tamari, Nur Masalha, Issam Nassar, Rema Hammami, Oren Yiftachel, Musa Budeiri, Lev Grinberg and Uri Davis. All the authors have one thing in common; they all transcend the biases inherent in national narratives, although most of the articles are critical of the Zionist narrative.

Aviv, Rabinowitz and Zuckermann try to deconstruct the hegemonic Israeli scholarly narrative of the past and present. They show early Israeli anthropological studies on Palestinians and their fabrications and manipulations embedded in the Zionist presentation of the realities in Israel and Palestine. The “cultural” views by the “Israeli Orientalist establishment” and their “adherence to certain segments of Zionism ideology and rationalization, had a profound political and intellectual impact” on the narrative, writes Rabinowitz. (68) Zuckermann exposes the instrumentalization of the Holocaust memory in Israel and concludes that “the memory of the Holocaust still remains to be *liberated* from the ideological chains of its instrumentalization”. (86)

Tamari explores the chronicles of the Palestinian community of Jerusalem in 1948 and beyond, an field of inquiry neglected by historians. For him, there is no doubt that the Zionist expelled 60 000 Palestinian Arabs from West Jerusalem according to a “central blueprint”; perhaps the best evidence of their true

erstwhile intentions is that Israel continues to refuse to allow the refugees to return; “to this day, not one Palestinian Arab refugee has been able to make it back to his or her home in West Jerusalem”. (105) Masalha expands the notion of the Nakba – the Palestinian catastrophe created by Israel – beyond 1948, well into the late 1950s. Israeli policies towards the question of the refugees are integrated into the concept of the Nakba. On the one hand, Israel denies the Nakba, on the other hand, tries to resettle the refugees in the Arab world. This liquidation of the Palestinian refugee problem, through dispersal and resettlement remained a constant Israel goal, writes the author. These Israeli “solutions” underscore “Israel’s denial of any responsibility or culpability for the creation of the refugee problem. Morally, this is of course a highly questionable position to maintain, one that the victims of the Nakba and their descendents will continue to challenge.” (154)

Pappé focuses on colonialism and Israeli nationalism and Hilal on the Palestinian nationalism. Pappé argues that before making “peace”, Pappé argues, reconciliation between the Zionist victimizer and the Palestinian victim must come first. There has to be a “national discourse” between the two because “neither Israel’s huge sophisticated weapon arsenal nor the real or imaginary fears that are brought into play will enable Israel to silence its victims and escape the justice they demand.” (176) For Hilal, Israel’s unilateral separation accompanied by a forced Bantustanization with symbolic sovereignty might lead to the “re-emergence of a Palestinian resistance movement rekindling the struggle for decades to come”. (215)

Grinberg’s outlook on Israeli democracy is rather pessimistic. It will have ended together with the so-called peace process with Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination by a religious fundamentalist. Rabin’s assassination returned Israel to a “mythological debate”. This lies at the bottom of the political crisis that has “characterized Israel ever since (...) just when it was to imagine peace and the process seemed irreversible, Rabin’s assassin targeted the democratization process and succeeded in derailing it.” (391)

Two authors see the future of the inhabitants of Israel/Palestine in a “one-state”. Uri Davis searches for an a-national or de-segregationist definition of the inhabitants of a unitary democratic state in Palestine “liberated from colonization, occupation, and Apartheid”. For 2 000 years, Palestine was part of Great Syria within the Ottoman empire till the Zionist started colonizing it. Pappé sees the only solution to the conflict just in such one entity again: “One-State Palestine, a state for all its citizens, free and sovereign, democratic and independent.” (435) Why isn’t such an idea thrilling to the political classes in Israel and Palestine? Unfortunately, the authors do not answer this question.

The book presents a detailed analysis of the central issues of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. A tiny minority of scholars got together and published their excellent findings in an appealing book. Where are the forces that can translate these farsighted ideas into practice and make them a reality? The reading could be very inspiring for everybody interested in the Middle East.

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First published: <http://between-the-lines-ludwig-watzal.blogspot.com/2011/11/across-wall.html>