The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948

Eugene L. Rogan and Avi Shlaim, eds.
Afterword by Edward W. Said.
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The events of 1948 mark the Palestinians' *nakbah* (catastrophe) and the Israelis' war of independence. The historiographies describing and analyzing these events have always been debated and contested. For instance, 1948 can be described as a founding element of Palestinian and Israeli identities respectively. A serious attempt to rewrite earlier historiography was introduced by the Israeli "new historians" in the 1980s. Based on documents and materials from recently opened Israeli archives, they set out to challenge Israel's founding myth and the lopsided description of the causes and events leading to the Palestinian refugee problem.

The volume under review moves the rewriting a step further by attempting to take a fresh look at the Arab states' and the Palestinians' involvement in the development of the 1948 war. The editors suggest that

it is possible, as well as necessary, to deconstruct the myths surrounding the Arab armies' defeat in 1948 by finding its causes in the Arab states' political situation and with each one's internal situation.

The introduction explains the need for such a rewriting process and points out that much needs to be done, especially regarding the historiography of Arab states that still draw some of their legitimacy from their historical myths, often related to the 1948 war. Similarly, the Arab states' support for the Palestinians and their cause, as well as their participation in the 1948 war (to save Palestine), are almost always presented as interdependent and an example of high moral commitment. Opening Arab archives (civil and military) of this period seems to be a dream of historians, rather than a realistic expectation, for the near future. Thus, the introduction concludes that much research in support of this critical tradition has yet to be done.

As one of the two central actors, the study focuses first on the Palestinians. In the first essay, Rashid Khalidi outlines what he sees as the "underlying causes of … failure" of the Palestinian leadership and political structure. As with all of his other writings, this essay is very well researched and written. Its central argument, however, presents the reviewer with a problem. To attest to any weakness and failure to the Palestinian leadership somehow makes it sound as if it was, in part, the Palestinians' fault that they lost their land and became refugees. It might be naive to think otherwise, but this description of cause and effect waters down historic responsibility for injustice and aggression against the indigenous population of the country called Palestine. The fact that they had a weak leadership and lacked political organization cannot justify the occupation of Palestinian land and the expulsion of large numbers of its native inhabitants. Khalidi's assessment is intended to, and may help demystify Palestinian historiography, but seems rather problematic as part of this volume.

Somewhat as a response, Benny Morris, a leading "new Israeli historian," presents his essay "Revisiting the Palestinian Exodus of 1948." It has to be said that he has done much additional research since the publication of his first works in the mid-1980s, and that although the events' general description has not changed that much, his evaluation of events and sources has changed considerably. His research has stirred an intense scholarly debate about transfer plans and the Zionist leadership's intentions toward the Palestinians before and during 1948. Morris concludes by affirming that discussions about transfer were a feature of debates among the Zionist lead-

ership, and that deliberate acts of regular and irregular Jewish forces contributed considerably to the Palestinian exodus in 1947-49.

One of the truly fascinating essays is by Laila Parsons, who writes about the Druze's relationship with the Zionist leadership. Much less is known about this topic, and her presentation draws a clear picture about the long-term cooperation between Druze and Zionists. More importantly, her research shows that the treatment of Druze communities and villages, as opposed to that of other Palestinians, points to the Zionist forces' organized expulsion strategy. She also demonstrates how historical narratives and memoirs by protagonists are shaped by present alliances and perceptions of former friends and enemies.

Avi Shlaim's chapter on "Israel and the Arab Coalition in 1948" shows that, contrary to historiographic perception, the coalition of Arab states and armies was far from being a united and organized front trying to protect Palestine. It lacked all signs of a serious coalition, such as agreeing about aims or coordinating diplomatic, political, and military efforts. Shlaim convincingly argues that Israel's leaders knew about the Arab coalition's internal divisions and conflicts and actively exploited them to win the war. In the process, he also challenges the Israeli myth of the Israeli armed forces' inferiority in terms of numbers and equipment, and shows that, when combined with the Arab coalition's inner divisions, the Arabs' defeat could not be seen as a big surprise.

The following four essays address the roles of different Arab states. Eugene L. Rogan analyzes Jordan's role before and during 1948, and the persistence of an official Jordanian historiography insisting on Jordan's heroic attempts to defend and save Palestine from the Zionists while denying Jordan's own territorial interests and strategic alliances or negotiations with the Zionists and later Israel. He explores official Jordanian historiographic sources and their changing approval or disapproval at different times after 1948. Charles Tripp analyzes Iraq's role and shows how internal Iraqi politics and imbalances directly affected its participation. He also points out that there has been (and probably still is) a striking difference between Iraqi political rhetoric and material politics (i.e., political actions and the accompanying speeches and expressions).

Fawaz A. Gerges shows how, in a similar way, Egypt's decisions and actions were related to its internal situation and that its leadership had to deal with the pressure "from the street" while trying not to engage too much in military action. Defeated more than once, the Egyptian regime resorted to oppressing voices from many walks of Egyptian society and blaming the

defeat (as all Arab states seem to have done) on the other Arab states. Joshua Landis' essay on Syria revolves around the argument that Syria was less concerned about the Zionists and their territorial gain, or the Palestinians for that matter, but had a keen interest in preventing Jordan from becoming the strongest regional power. Syrian actions and decisions during the war centered on containing and countering Jordanian actions and decisions where possible.

It should be mentioned that the only major participant in the 1948 war missing from this volume is Lebanon. The editors point out in their introduction that, possibly because of Lebanon's fragile situation until today, no historian has set out to rewrite the Lebanese history of the war.

In his afterword, Edward Said calls for rewriting both Palestinian and Israeli historiographies, joined by others in the region, as a means to facilitate dialogue and coexistence. He hopes for communication between scholars on both sides, which is necessary to understanding the "Other" in the conflict, and to ultimately produce a new synthesized paradigm of historiography. In a somewhat surprising conclusion, he insists that such developments are only possible as part of a process of secularization, because "secularization requires demystification, it requires courage, it requires an irrevocably critical attitude towards self, society, and other. But it also requires a narrative of emancipation and enlightenment for all, not just for one's own community."

This volume presents important and original scholarship on the 1948 war and attempts to move the disputes about its historiography from ideological into more productive terrains. It succeeds in bringing together historians from different backgrounds and demonstrates their ability to communicate and jointly challenge historical myths. In terms of style and language, as well as content, it is intended for an interested and somewhat informed audience. It is more appropriate for scholars who are already familiar with recent debates about the history of this war, and thus can appreciate where and how the contributors present new and different arguments. These concise chapters are interesting both as independent pieces of research as well as parts of the book's framework. They offer much historical detail without distracting the reader from the main argument.

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