

BOOK REVIEWS

Mustafa Kabha. *The Palestinian People: Seeking Sovereignty and State*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014. 398 pages. Hardcover \$68.50

Reviewed by Alaa Tartir

It is commonly known that dissenters do not often write history. However, it is crucial to remember that those who dissent can and do build the power to change the course of history imposed by the powerful. In the case of Palestinian history, reclaiming the Palestinian narrative and how to do so is a significant task among historians and scholars to ensure that the Palestinians will not be written out of history. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once wrote, “Whoever writes his story will inherit the land of words, and possess meaning, entirely!” This is particularly relevant in the case of the Palestinian *Nakba*/The War of 1948. The “war of narratives” remains a major feature around the so-called Palestinian–Israeli conflict and an additional source of contestation.

The recently published book by Dr Mustafa Kabha, *The Palestinian People: Seeking Sovereignty and State*, consists of 15 chapters covering the history of the Palestinian people from the revolt of 1936–39 until today in the era of the Arab uprisings. This book is a revised, expanded, and updated version of *The Palestinians: A People Dispersed* published in Hebrew in 2010. Dr Kabha who is the head of the Department of History, Philosophy, and Judaism at the Open University of Israel, argues that the history of the Palestinian people in the twentieth century was shaped by three triangles: the external triangle (the superpowers, the Arab countries, and the state of Israel), the national identity triangle (the pan-regional Arab dimension, the national-Palestinian dimension, and the political-Islamic dimension), and the social and intrinsic triangle (the veteran traditional family-base elite, the intellectual middle class, and the working-class groups).

The book starts with narrating the history of the 1936 Palestinian revolt. Then, it moves to discuss the historical trajectories of the major milestones in the Palestinian history and struggle. This includes the Palestinian *Nakba* and *Naksa*, the confrontation with Jordan, the establishment of “Fatahland,” the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the struggle in Lebanon and the move to

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Tunisia, and finally the first *intifada*, the Oslo Peace Accords, the split between Fatah and Hamas, and the Palestinians and the Arab Spring.

After distinguishing between four stages in the history of the 1936-39 Palestinian revolt, the author argues that despite the revolt's "ultimate failure and the damage it caused notwithstanding, its legacy, symbols, and slogans have remained a cornerstone of Palestinian national rhetoric to this very day" (21). Between 1939 and 1945, the author centered the narrative around Mufti Haj Amin al-Huasyni's current place of residence. In the aftermath of the Second World War, and in contrast to the understanding that Palestinians were the victims of contriving elements, Dr Kabha argues that between 1945 and 1948, the "Palestinian society attempted to recover by renewing processes that had been halted by the revolt and that harbored potential for revitalization and development" (40). Chapter 3 discusses these processes and also the involvement of organizations that aspired to help the Palestinian national movement to recover. In the same chapter, the author argues that the Palestinian society at that time witnessed two "basic transformations" at the socio-economic and cultural dimensions: urbanization and construction of public economic-financial institutions, and rallying in preparations for the anticipated confrontation with the Zionist groups.

On the eve of the 1948 *Nakba*, as argued in Chapter 4, the Liberation Army and volunteer forces had been defeated, the Palestinian Jihad Army was on the verge of collapse, and the Palestinian civil front and the entire society were in advanced stages of disintegration (110). Following the discussion about the stages of the *Nakba*, Dr Kabha discusses the *Nakba* in the Palestinian historiography and argues that the process of forming a scientific, historical Palestinian narrative is still in development. He argues that this narrative "may indeed have begun shedding its desire to commemorate the 'victim' while renouncing the conspiracy theory and the inclination to lay all responsibility and blame on others" (134).

In Chapter 5 (From *Nakba* to *Naksa*: 1948-67), issues related to the Palestinian fragmentation, the Jordanian rule over the West Bank, the Egyptian rule over Gaza Strip, and the Palestinian refugees in the diaspora, are discussed. These are followed by a discussion about the self-efficacy rehabilitation efforts and attempts in the aftermath of the *Nakba*. The discussion is carried out through the presentation of the different political organizations and activities in historical Palestine, and end by a discussion about the establishment of Fatah.

Moving towards the end of the book, the short chapter about the "The Struggle between Fatah and Hamas" adds very little to the scholarly work, while the very short chapter (5 pages including three long quotations) about the Oslo Accords fails to address the raised question by the author: "The Oslo Accords: Leading Where?" This chapter mainly presents infamous views of a handful of intellectual elite and political leaders. In the last chapter about "The Palestinians and the Arab Spring,"

the author concludes that if Palestinians want to join the tide of uprisings and emulate their peers in the Arab world, then they need to “redesign the Palestinian political regime” (357). To do so, the author suggests the need for the existence of a “single strong leadership, united operations, and first-rate forces in the field” (358). The solution, according to the author, “may well be the liberal formula of a civil state,” in order to reach a “plausible and promising way of advancing toward a modern, healthy and strong society” (358).

However, this chapter is problematic at both the recommendation and content levels. The prescription provided for the “solution” is not rooted in the analysis but rather anecdotal. The concepts of “redesigning political regime,” “liberal formula,” and “modern, healthy and strong society” are left undefined and unpacked in a problematic way and they masked the reality of the Israeli colonial enterprise in the Palestinian land. The chapter contains lengthy quotations (almost half of the chapter is in quotes). At the content level, the author tries to cover many dimensions in a few pages, which resulted in the absence of any analytical depth. Strikingly, the different and multiple youth movements that emerged in Palestine in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings were completely dismissed and left out of the discussion.

From a critical perspective, covering the period from 1936 till 2013 meant that the historical narrative was rather sketchy and generic in a few parts of the book. Other than the two chapters about the Palestinian *Nakba* and *Naksa*, the remaining 13 chapters are considerably shorter and vary in quality and originality. It would have been easier and more accessible for the reader had the author provided a brief summary about each chapter in the introductory part of the book. Additionally, a brief conclusion at the end of each chapter would have helped the reader in connecting the historical events and trajectories. While the author utilized some archival material, there is over-reliance on earlier publications. At times, the reader—particularly the scholar in the field—will be very familiar with the book’s narrative. The book lacks a central argument that the analysis maneuvers around, but never reaches. While the book’s title is catchy, it does not necessarily reflect its content. The book is more about the leadership and less about the people, and it is more about the historical trajectories of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and less about the state and sovereignty.

However, there is no doubt that the book takes the reader on a journey of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and freedom that remains unpleasant. This journey is featured by defeats and losses, despite the persistent struggle and resistance against the Israeli settler-colonial enterprise and military occupation. The book is very informative and provides the reader with a wealth of knowledge about a complex history since the 1936 Great Palestinian Revolt until today in the era of the Arab uprisings.

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