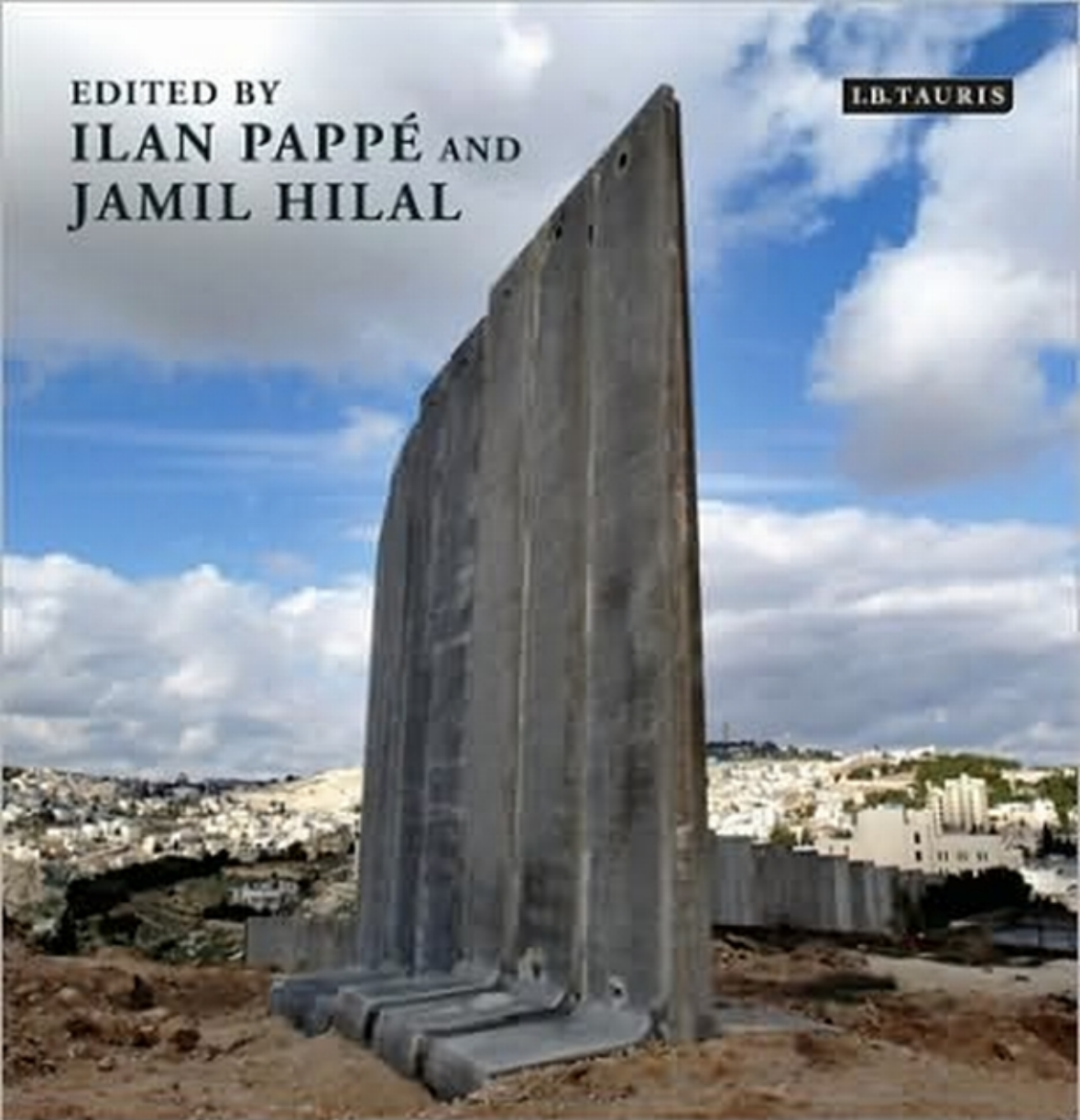


EDITED BY
**ILAN PAPPÉ AND
JAMIL HILAL**

I.B. TAURIS



ACROSS THE WALL

Narratives of Israeli–Palestinian History

Ilan Pappé is Director of the European Centre for Palestine Studies and a fellow of the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. He is also Co-director of The Exeter Centre for Ethno-Political Studies. He is the author of various books, including *The Making of the Arab–Israeli Conflict* (I.B.Tauris).

Jamil Hilal is a sociologist associated with Birzeit University and has lectured at several UK universities. He has held senior associate research fellowships at the University of Oxford and SOAS, and in 2008 he was a visiting scholar at Carnegie Middle East Center.

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PALISAD

Palestinian and Israeli Academics in Dialogue

Jamil Hilal and Ilan Pappé

Introduction

As this volume goes to the press, Israel is rapidly completing the Wall it is illegally constructing deep into the West Bank. When finished, its 670km-long serpentine route of 8m-high concrete slabs, barbed wire and guarded watchtowers will result in Israel effectively occupying over 90 per cent of historical Palestine, leaving a mere 10 per cent for the Palestinians to build their state in. This makes a mockery of all peace efforts towards a two-state solution and again shows Israel's utter disregard of international law.¹ But, of course, the Apartheid Wall is only the physical counterpart of the ideological wall Zionist settlers first introduced into Palestine when they began arriving in the 1880s. And it is with this wall and how to tear it down that the people in this volume are concerned.

- 1 In the ruling it published on 9 July 2004, the International Court of Justice in The Hague stated: 'Israel is under an obligation to terminate its breaches of international law; it is under an obligation to cease forthwith the works of construction of the Wall being built in Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around Jerusalem, to dismantle forthwith the structure therein situated, and to repeal or render ineffective forthwith all legislative and regulatory acts relating thereto.' That the Wall runs more than twice the length of the 315km-long 'Green Line' (the June 1967 border) further points up the hypocrisy of the 'security' argument Israel puts forward as the reason for erecting it.

In the spring of 1997 a number of Palestinian and Israeli academics met to discuss the possibility of together studying and researching the history of Israel and Palestine. What prompted us was a shared sense of urgency in the wake of the deadlock in the so-called peace process and a common dissatisfaction with the nature of the Oslo Accords. At the time, we all felt that the whole process would at best result in workable political and military arrangements but could never lead to any genuine national and cultural reconciliation. But more important perhaps than the *political* solidarity enveloping our group was the strong common *academic* ground that brought us together. All of us shared the belief that what was needed was an alternative historical perspective on the conflict, one capable of bridging over the two national meta-narratives and their ethnocentric and segregationist orientations. These meta-narratives, rather than bringing the two sides together, spelled the defeat of all chances for reconciliation between our two peoples.

We called ourselves PALISAD, Palestinian-Israeli Academic Dialogue, and began meeting on a monthly basis in either Ramallah or Jerusalem. Each time one of us, with Palestinians and Israelis alternating, would present a paper for discussion on subjects of immediate concern and benefit to both sides. This quickly produced an intriguing dialogue about the connection between national narratives, historical research and collective identities. Looking in Gramscian terms at the 'unity of the historical process' of which we are part helped us steer away from the nationalist dichotomy we had been brought up with. Where this proved impossible we set out to deconstruct the two conflicting meta-narratives and re-write them as two less antagonistic perspectives that, instead of inevitably leading to confrontation, could offer a potential basis for co-operation. There were, of course, other attempts at creating a dialogue between the two nations in the wake of the Oslo Accords, some even quite popular. But none of these adopted the critical view on national identity our group embraced as one of its central tenets, though we never severed ourselves completely from the national perspectives so dominant in both societies.

Naturally, a wide range of general theoretical subjects came up for discussion, especially on historiography and nationalism, but topics of an outspokenly concrete nature were equally central, such as '1948',

the Israeli occupation, Palestinian democracy, and so on. With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that our joint efforts did not produce the overarching meta-narrative we wanted to come up with. But we are in fact no longer convinced that that is necessary. Our dialogue produced something more valuable: a dynamic and dialectical bridging narrative that, by accentuating areas of agreement and highlighting gaps of dissent, has succeeded in pulling together our different points of view and opening up vistas towards a common future. The process we are engaged in is a volatile one and needs to be nurtured not just for the sake of academic dialogue, but to help foster future reconciliation between, and within, our two societies. In the following pages we will briefly seek to conceptualize this bridging narrative that we have been building and outline how it cements together the articles that make up this volume.

Bridging Narratives

The scholarly literature provides little by way of theoretical references to the concept of ‘bridging narratives’; it shows up mainly in the analyses of fictional plots. Bridging narratives are usually intercalary chapters, short pieces that help connect the so-called ‘plot’ chapters. In Classical Greek plays they are the sections where a narrator, in the form of the chorus, helps bridge over parts of the drama’s action. This narrator appears as an omniscient presence guiding the audience through the dialogues and events on and, even more, off stage. Our PALISAD group in a way functions as such a narrator in the reconstruction of the historical plot for which we are pleading—a version of past events that bears significant relevance for our present reality and creates common space for the future. At the same time, the authors who make up this volume, much like our group as a whole, seek to build a bridge not only between the two antagonistic national meta-narratives, but also between their own position and the national narrative that happens to be ‘theirs’. This became clearer as we moved on, making the dialectical process incremental as well. What follows is an outline of the various stages we covered and of how they are reflected in the structure of the volume.

The concept of bridging narratives as we employ it extends beyond the historian's 'presence' in the emplotment of the historical narrative. It calls for our intrusion in the orientation of the reconstruction we have undertaken to be more blunt. And, of course, the very idea of bringing together academics interested in past history for the sake of the present and propelled by a vision of the future is by itself actively 'interventionist'.

As no clear conceptualization presents itself, we need at least a working definition, one that can serve not only the case study of Palestine presented here, but hopefully also historiographical efforts within other nations at war or societies torn by historical conflicts in our contemporary world. A bridging narrative thus becomes a conscious historiographical effort undertaken by historians in societies wrought by long internal and/or external conflicts, to create a transitional structure spanning narratives and historiographies that are antagonistic. Embarked upon in this spirit, such a historiographical enterprise becomes part and parcel of the overall reconciliation effort that is to bring an end to the conflict. It also means that what inspires their navigation in the plots of the past is the historians' inner drive to have some impact on the events of the present. Together with a good sense of historiographical contextualism, this requires our active 'presence' through the critical approach we adopt towards hegemonic ideologies. In this volume Israelis and Palestinians are doing exactly that as they choose to deconstruct the national narratives of the past and challenge the common interpretation of the present.

This recognition, that the contemporary political reality we live in has to be present in our scholarly work, entails a 'soft relativist' approach to writing history within a context of national conflict. 'Soft relativist', because the sea of facts exposed to the historians' eyes will be absorbed in as wide a spectrum as possible. While, much as in any positivist historical enterprise, empirical evidence will be gathered, the emplotment of the mass of evidence brought out into the open no longer strives to be the 'neutral', 'objective' business positivists claim to be involved in, particularly not when we are dealing with a conflict that continues to rage on while we, partisan historians, are trying to write its history.