

THE
ISRAEL/PALESTINE
QUESTION



REWRITING • HISTORIES



EDITED BY ILAN PAPPÉ

THE ISRAEL/PALESTINE QUESTION

The Israel/Palestine Question assimilates diverse interpretations of the origins of the Middle East conflict with emphasis on the fight for Palestine and its religious and political roots. Drawing largely on scholarly debates in Israel during the last two decades, which have become known as 'historical revisionism', the collection presents the most recent developments in the historiography of the Arab–Israeli conflict and a critical reassessment of Israel's past. The volume commences with an overview of Palestinian history and the origins of modern Palestine, and includes essays on the early Zionist settlement, Mandatory Palestine, the 1948 war, international influences on the conflict and the Intifada.

Ilan Pappé is Professor at Haifa University, Israel. His previous books include *Britain and the Arab–Israeli Conflict* (1988), *The Making of the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1947–51* (1994) and *A History of Modern Palestine and Israel* (forthcoming).

Rewriting Histories focuses on historical themes where standard conclusions are facing a major challenge. Each book presents 8 to 10 papers (edited and annotated where necessary) at the forefront of current research and interpretation, offering students an accessible way to engage with contemporary debates.

Series editor **Jack R. Censer** is Professor of History at George Mason University.

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Few fields can claim to be more energized than the study of the Arab–Israeli conflict. For decades after the founding of Israel, scholars associated with the fledgling state wrote works that defended its every aspect. For example, such historians claimed that Arab states encouraged Palestinians to evacuate the contested areas in 1948. Thus, in these versions, the Arabs caused the refugee problem. This volume focuses on the tremendous outpouring of recent studies that reinterpret the history of this struggle by depicting the Palestinians' perspective in a far more supportive light. Arguing that they have consulted the archives much more carefully, these scholars have shown, among many other findings, that efforts at solidarity among Arab and Israeli workers went awry because of limits on both sides. Likewise, the 1948 exodus relates significantly to Israeli policy. Throughout this work, responsibility is more equally shared, and the Palestinians receive more direct attention. Indeed, this volume collects a series of essays with which any serious student of the period will have to grapple before making conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

New historiographical orientations in the research on the Palestine Question

Ilan Pappé

This reader focuses on the history of the Palestine Question which is at the heart of the Arab–Israel conflict. This collection wishes to present, to students and experts alike, some of the most recent developments in the conflict’s historiography. In doing that, this collection does not cover every aspect or historical chapter in the history of the conflict. Its mode of selection is contemporary and fed by the current and most recent areas of scholarly interest. It includes only works which have challenged previous conceptions and paradigms in the historiographical enterprise. As such, the collection does not represent a balanced view of the old and new scholarly interest in the conflict’s history; it rather stresses the new at the expense of the old. It should be seen as a summary of a phase in the conflict’s historiography – a phase characterized by challenges to the conventional and mainstream historiography. But even that categorization has proved to be too broad. The space given to a reasonable reader could not include all the challenges made in the last few years. I have been content with works which represent trends appearing in other similar works. All the contributions to this volume are slowly becoming part of the accepted literature on the conflict. In fact, one could easily say that it is impossible to teach or read about the conflict without referring to the points and challenges made by the contributors presented here.

The new scholarship displays several discernible characteristics. It provides a history of the conflict which is influenced by recent historiographical debates taking place around the academic world at large. Thus, the works here present a double-edged wish to introduce an interdisciplinary methodology into the research as well as to inject a more skeptical view towards historical narratives written under the powerful hand of nationalist elites and ideologies.¹

A more skeptical view towards national elites as well as towards the history of elites, is part of an effort, following recent trends in European historiography, to rewrite into history the lives of peasants, workers, women and anyone else excluded in the past by hegemonic groups of historians. The field of Middle Eastern studies as a whole has only recently opened up to such views and the last few years saw the appearance of works reconstructing the history of non-elite groups in the area. Hence there was very little in the way of social or cultural history of the Middle East.² In the case of the history of the Palestine conflict these new subject matters appeared even later in the day. Here we are interested in works that could be termed the social history of the conflict. This new orientation is represented here through the works of Zachary Lockman, Ted Swedenburg and Islah Jad. Lockman deals with the life of Jewish and Arab workers in the early Mandatory period – examining the tension between class solidarity and national commitment as well as between colonialist and colonized workers and their respective trade unions. Ted Swedenburg examines the role of the peasant in the national Palestinian revolt in 1936–9. This analysis can be and will be used again for understanding the role of the peasants in the *Intifada*. The *Intifada*, in fact, triggered some of the most intriguing work in the field of social history. One such work is that of Islah Jad, which in this volume discusses the place and influence of women on national politics since 1919 and until the *Intifada*.

A second common and connected feature of the new works is that they seem to perceive the Palestine conflict as one fought between a strong ex-colonial party – Israel – and a weaker one – a colonized party, the Palestinians. A balance of power which dominated the previous historiographical phase – Israelis were determining the agenda and orientations of the historiographical enterprise – demonstrated that they did not only colonize the land but also its history. At that stage, by and large, Israeli historians conveyed the message that Israelis were the victims of the conflict and constituted the rational party in the struggle over Palestine, while the Palestinians were irrational if not fanatic, intransigent and immoral. To be fair, one should say that several, although not too many scholars, outside the area, attempted to write the conflict's history from a different perspective; they wrote under the assumption that both parties to the conflict should be treated as more or less equal in power as well as in guilt and justice.

The stronger party, and this of course may be a temporary state of affairs, has the power to write the history in a more effective way. In our particular case, it had formed a state and employed the state's apparatus for successfully propagating its narrative in front of domestic as well as external publics. The weaker party, in our particular case,

was engaged in a national liberation struggle, unable to lend its historians a hand in opposing the propaganda of the other side.

But things have changed. Palestinian historians succeeded in putting across a historical version which has, in the words of our first contributor, Beshara Doumani, brought Palestinians back into the history of Palestine. Here the two orientations we have described intertwine. The Palestinian historians challenged a major Zionist claim about the absence of any meaningful Palestinian existence before the arrival of the new Jewish immigrants in 1882 by reconstructing 'from below' the life of a Palestinian community in the pre-Zionist era. Thus, as Doumani shows in his article, rewriting the Palestinians into the history of Palestine was done first as a challenge to Israeli historiography, which had totally excluded them when writing about Palestine before the arrival of Zionism, and second as part of a more general historiographical trend – writing about a community as a whole with its elites and non-elite groups.

Butrus Abu-Manneh, our second contributor, long before this more conscientious trend began, researched the conditions in which a new geopolitical entity emerged in Palestine – the autonomous sanjak of Jerusalem. This structural and administrative reorganization, initiated by the Ottoman reformers in 1872, contributed to the emergence of a local Palestinian identity, focused around the city of Jerusalem and occurring before the arrival of the first Zionists. The importance of structural transformation in producing the circumstances ripe for the birth of modern nationalism is one of the main claims made in recent theoretical treatments of the phenomenon of nationalism.³

Other structural changes are described in full in books which have to be read as a whole and therefore I have decided not to include extracts from them in this reader. These are the books by Beshara Doumani, Rashid Khalidi, and the joint book by Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal,⁴ all of which give the impression that before the appearance of the Zionist movement, a local national identity had been in the making.

This view on the origins of Palestinian nationalism contrasts with the claim made by Israeli historians in the past about Palestinian nationalism being only a by-product of Zionism. It also contradicts the more romantic view taken by a small number of old Palestinian historians who argued that Palestine had existed from time immemorial (see for instance the Palestinian Encyclopedia).⁵

The new works are thus written from a sympathetic point of view towards the predicaments of the weaker party in the conflict – the Palestinians. A related consequence of this attitude is the inclusion of more Palestinian scholars among the producers of our historiographical knowledge about the conflict. In the past, Israeli historians working on the conflict's history were considered by the principal academic centers