

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

April 25, 2017

Luigi Achilli, *Palestinian Refugees and Identity: Nationalism, Politics and the Everyday*, I.B. Tauris, 2015, 288 pp., \$110.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781780769110.

The sense of national identity and its narrative are intensified within the context of war. That is, narratives arising from anticolonial struggles usually reflect ideals of national unity.¹ Syrian nationalism manifested during struggles against the Ottoman Empire. In the eighteenth century, Palestinian identity, as part of larger Syrian nationalism, was situated in the Holy Land and was formalized after the Egyptian campaign of 1830, when a separate Palestinian administrative entity was created under the control of Muhammed Ali, the viceroy of Egypt. Palestinians then identified themselves as Syrians, Arabs, and as Palestinians. With the coming of the Jewish Project in Palestine and the formation of Zionism, a Palestinian self-consciousness became stronger against attempts of eradication.² Palestinian Identity, however, has been shaped and reshaped with the emergence of the Israeli Occupation and the traumatic expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and villages. Once the banal was challenged, Palestinians found themselves in a position to counteract and defend claims that denied their existence. In this review I explore the emergence and (re)formation of Palestinian identity and nationalism. I further consider how Palestinian national identity is woven into the Jordanian camp context and thus in light of opposing Jordanian and Palestinian identities so as to better address Achilli's analysis of politics, Islam, and national identity.

The Rise of Zionism: Consciousness of Palestinian Identity

Aside from its own historical, cultural, and social dimensions over the past decades, Palestinian identity has been shaped and reshaped under the influence of Zionist claims to Palestinian geography, leaving very limited space for understanding identity apart from the

¹ See: Rosemary Sayigh, "Women's Nakba Stories: Between Being and Knowing," in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 136.

² See: Daniel Miller with Salim Tamari, "There were no Arabs and Jews...: An Interview with Salim Tamari," *Berlin Biennale*, April 16, 2012, <<http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein-en/there-were-no-arabs-and-jews-interview-with-salim-tamari-27368>>, (accessed 5 February 2017).

conflict.³ The rise of Zionism around 1878 and following the Balfour Declaration that was in favor of creating a home for Jews in Palestine in 1922, led to an increase in the immigration rate of Jewish people to the region. Walid Khalidi associates the Nakba to the “ineluctable climax of the preceding Zionist colonization and the great watershed in the history of the Palestinian people, marking the beginning of their Exodus and Diaspora.”⁴ The consequences of the establishment of the Israeli State in 1948 and confiscation of over three quarters of Palestinian land resulted in the brutal expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland.⁵ A sense of Palestinian identity was thus intensified as threats to Palestinians’ homeland and existence grew larger.

Following the ethnic expulsion, Palestinians sought refuge in nearby cities and countries, and the land was segmented and governed by different leaderships: Haifa, Jaffa, and the North were under full control of the Israeli forces, while the West Bank was annexed to Jordan and Gaza to Egypt. Palestinians, who once shared a common national identity found themselves arbitrarily divided and belonging to different “nations.” Palestinians in Jordan and East Jerusalem held Jordanian passports, Palestinians in Gaza had Egyptian travel documents, Palestinians who remained in the North were issued Israeli identification cards, while other Palestinians were classified as stateless.⁶

This traumatic expulsion and the emergence of a multiplicity of narratives led Palestinians to further emphasize a unified identity, which was later reflected in their expression of self as we will later see in the case of Al Wihdat Camp. This was further extenuated in 1967 with the failure of pan-Arabism.

Al Wihdat Camp: Diaspora and Palestinian Identity

Diaspora and exile generates an intense expression of identity and belonging as a result of dispossession, displacement, and marginalization. Palestinian refugees in different locations asserted their identity through narrative—articulating a politics of memory tied to their attachment to land and cultural heritage. We often discuss the issue of exile and Palestinian refugees in ideological terms often overlooking their everyday matters and needs like health, work, and homemaking.⁷ At the beginning of the book under review, Achilli expresses puzzlement about what seemed to him to be a clear absence of politics in Al Wihdat camp, and only later recognizes that politics, nationalism, and identity are embedded in socio-economic constraints. In this book, Achilli attempts to analyze the production and reproduction of nationalism and identity in the context of displacement and expulsion (3). By trying to understand how nationalism operates, Achilli addresses the fragmented experience of Palestinian people and the significance of the ordinary in political production.

Al Wihdat Camp was established in 1952 consisting of 479,164 acres to the south east of Amman. The camp is home to Palestinians who were exiled from Palestinian villages, towns and cities in 1948 like Al Ramla, Allod, Al Safiryeh, Der Tarif, Yaffo, Beit Dajn, Beit Nabala,

³ See: Nazmi Al-Ju’beh, “The Palestinian Identity: Historical Perspective,” in *The Palestinian Identity: Historical Perspective in Palestinian Identity in Relation to Time and Space*, Mitri Raheb, ed. (Diyar Publisher, 2014), Kindle Location 171.

⁴ See: Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains* (Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), xxxi.

⁵ See: “Founding of the State of Israel,” <http://www.palestinefacts.org/pf_independence_israel_date.php>, (accessed 5 February 2017).

⁶ See: Khalidi, *All That Remains*.

⁷ Diana Allan, *Refugees of the Revolution: Experiences of Palestinian Exile* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), Kindle Locations 205-210.

and Beer Al Sabe.⁸ Originally the camp, established by UNRWA, included 1400 housing units, but in 1957 more land was annexed and an additional 1260 units were built. Unofficial records claim that the camp's population is over 300,000.

In his book, Achilli explores the narration of national identity through spaces of everyday life, among camp dwellers who embed the political within their efforts to achieve socio-economic integration. Achilli argues that the process of assimilation into Jordanian life has triumphed over an ideological nationalistic ethos thereby leaving camp dwellers with a diminished sense of agency. The name of the camp itself, meaning “housing units,” signals an absence of agency and a clear attempt for socio-economic integration. Consequently, “Palestinian refugees are locked in a bind between repression and resistance” (8). Achilli's ethnography of Al Wihdat camp dwellers takes us away from the ideological discussion of refugee status and directs us towards the significance of the ordinary in refugees' manifestation and agency of political identity stimulated by the social and economic realities on the ground.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Achilli focuses on the struggles camp dwellers undergo to create a sense of belonging to the camp outside of Palestine, and their efforts to intertwine the political and expressions of national identity within everyday practices. Along with the urban expansion of the city of Amman, as well as the camp, Al Wihdat was incorporated within the city. This very incorporation challenged stereotypes of what a refugee camp is; however, spatial identification continues to play as a meaningful signifier and a sense of Palestinian national belonging is intensified across camp dwellers who continue to refer to themselves as *mukhayamjeh* (translated as “being from the camp”). It is with such employment of language that camp dwellers distinguish themselves from Jordanians. Hopkins and Dixon, drawing upon psychological as well as demographic definitions of belonging, similarly address the impact of space on the construction of national identity.⁹ The paradoxical status of Al Wihdat camp is that it is simultaneously a place for imploring national belonging and exploring opportunities for integration into the broader Jordanian society. Palestinians in Al Wihdat Camp are left in a state of limbo between integration and expulsion, between belonging and assimilation.

Not only were the established camps based on the immediate needs of Palestinian refugees, but they were established in an effort to control refugee migration through strict methods of classification, medical screening, and enumeration—the so-called humanitarian relief process itself, in addition to the trauma of the Nakba, while offering tremendous support, further separated Palestinians from their social, cultural, and historical ties (58). Against this backdrop, refugees reverted to daily practices in order to affirm their identification with Palestinian-ness—e.g., cultivating a strong allegiance to the camps' football club. At first refugees resisted settlement in the camp, fearing that it would signal their acceptance of the loss of their homeland. But, Achilli contends, they gradually came to embrace and therefore subvert the symbols they initially fought against (e.g., their refugee status, the rations card, the camp, UNRWA facilities) in order to “remould a national identity in the context of a lasting exile” (60).

Eventually, Palestinian refugees in Al Wihdat employed the space of the camp to recreate a sense of being home; i.e., Al Wihdat's spatial landscape is organized in such a way

⁸ Information obtained from: <<http://palcamps.net/ar/camp/36/%D9%85%D8%AE%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA>>, (accessed 5 February 2017).

⁹ See: Nick Hopkins and John Dixon, “Space, Place, and Identity: Issues for Political Psychology,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2006), 173-185.

that reflects their lost homeland. Residents of certain areas and neighborhoods within the camp hold certain characteristics and identify with specific villages or towns in Palestine from which they originated. Even the streets, the barbershops, the corner shops, and grocery stores in these areas were named accordingly. In this sense, Palestinians have been able to sustain strong feelings of space, home, and belonging. From a political perspective, Achilli argues that this is a technique for regaining control over their own agency; that is, these methods prevent full assimilation by insisting upon the distinction between Jordanian-ness and Palestinian identification.

Achilli continues his account by connecting national identification, agency, and socio-economic status as reflected in work opportunities for camp dwellers. Working in Jordan plays an integral role in classification and even exclusion of Palestinian refugees living in the camp, from Jordanians and even Palestinians living outside the camp. Discrimination and exclusion is especially visible in the public sector where camp dwellers face challenges working in the education sector or advancing in public and governmental positions. While this interplay of integration and exclusion takes place, camp dwellers struggle to root a national identity and securing economic integration by setting up successful connections to support their careers (82). In the camp, discrimination and material poverty have “reproduced forms of self-understanding based on the conception of ‘the refugee’ as embodying an ideal of resistance” (99).

In his third chapter, Achilli further analyzes the construction of nationalistic ideals embedded in the pursuit of an ordinary life by tracing political agency in the context of Islam. In the camp, many refugees have sought to ground their lives on Islamic principles; since the political has failed them, camp dwellers resort to alternative instruments of self-improvement, utilizing Islamic doctrine and belief to make sense of their exile and create a unified sense of belonging (126). While Achilli attempts to play a neutral role in his analysis of how camp dwellers understand and employ Islam as part of their daily lives and as a means to achieving political agency away from the political, and as he tries to understand Islam from a different perspective, his comparisons and analyses often carry an understanding that is highly influenced by westernized views, and sometimes showcasing surprise of the virtues of Islam understood by camp dwellers. A westernized understanding of Islam as a religion, influenced by media, marks it as oppressive, outmoded, anti-intellectualist, extremist, restrictive, and dangerous.¹⁰ Such projections limit us from seeing Islam as a religion that calls for equality, knowledge, justice, fairness, and democracy.¹¹ In this light, Achilli’s correlation to what Islam means to Palestinian refugees is highly influenced by current international politics; where camp dwellers inter-relate Islam with nationalism within their daily practices they believe being “good Muslims” is a means to sustaining their Palestinian-ness. “In Al Wihdat, Islamic and nationalist discourses are firmly entangled: the sacredness of national sentiment finds its expression through the cultivation of a pious self” (133). While this can be inferred from field notes, a more critical approach to addressing the issue of Islam in general and within the context of the camp more specifically is needed, further reflecting on its origins and its virtues against stigmatized perspectives.

Conclusion

¹⁰ See: Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

¹¹ Ibid.

In his book "*Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that a nation is a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group.¹² Palestinian refugees in Al Wihdat Camp associate themselves with the Palestine of the 1948, as they remember it, and have a strong sense of belonging to their homeland, which they express through ordinary activities in their daily lives. Yet, for the sake of survival and socio-economic flourishing, they simultaneously must cultivate a trans-Jordanian identity. While attempting to define nationalism, Anderson identifies three paradoxes:

(1) The objective modernity of nations to the historian's eyes vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists. (2) The formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept... (3) the 'political' power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence.¹³

In analyzing the daily lives of camp dwellers in Al Wihdat camp, one can witness the interplay of all these paradoxes. While diasporic people are constantly reminded of their state of limbo, the issue of identity becomes a contested one. The diaspora brings instability and fluidity to the notion of self that is so vividly visible in the case of Palestinian refugees in Al Wihdat Camp.

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¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

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Citation Information

Kuhail, Sarah, Review of *Palestinian Refugees and Identity: Nationalism, Politics and the Everyday*, *SCTIW Review*, April 25, 2017. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1466>.

ISSN: 2374-9288