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Review – Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

By Alaa Tartir



[The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](#)

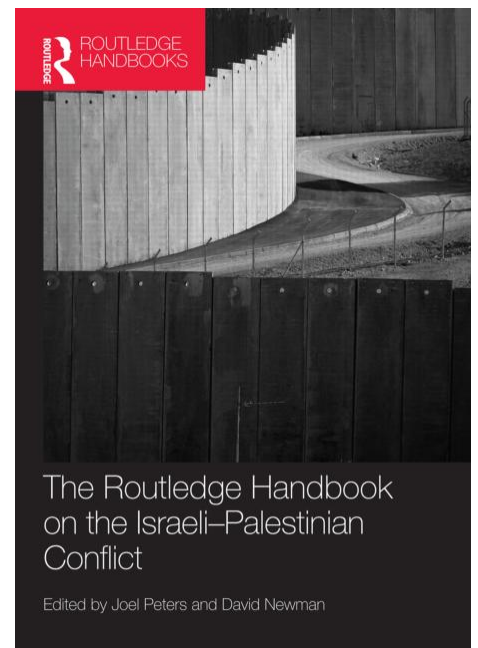
Edited by: Joel Peters & David Newman

New York: Routledge, 2013

The colonization and occupation of Palestine, or what is known in the mainstream narrative as the “Palestinian-Israeli conflict”, acquired remarkable attention over the decades from the world’s media; policy-makers; political analysts; scholars from the academic community; and people and activists from all over the globe. The 1948 Palestinian Nakba and the establishment of the state of Israel as a result of a brutal dispossession and a process of ethnic cleansing as eloquently [discussed](#) by the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé; remain the root causes of the so-called Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Yet after 65 years, realities on the ground point to an [everyday](#) Palestinian Nakba with the entrenchment of the Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian land, and the expansion of its settler colonial enterprise.

The peace process failed to deliver peace or justice, and the numerous peace agreements and rounds of negotiation failed to address the imbalances of power between the colonizer and colonized, and hence the current and regular impasse. This failure fascinated scholars and practitioners alike, and led to the proliferation of publications and ideas on how to understand and eventually solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, due to the existence of multiple narratives, competition between them was inevitable. In an attempt to address the polarized discussion and contribute to a more constructive conversation, comes the 2013 publication of “The Routledge Handbook on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” edited by Joel Peters and David Newman.

The handbook consists of 30 essays/chapters, descriptive and introductory not analytical or critical in nature, and varies in quality, clarity, and objectivity. Therefore, any sweeping judgment about the handbook could be problematic and inaccurate. The handbook covers a range of topics such as the historical background to the conflict, peace efforts, domestic politics, critical issues including settlements, borders, Jerusalem, and refugees, and the role of external actors as the Arab states, the US, and the EU. There is no one major core argument of the edited volume, and chapters need to be read independently and seen as stand-alone pieces. Consequently, the core thrust of the edited volume is unclear; however one of its main objectives is to provide readers with an understanding of the complex issues of the conflict in order to resolve it. This stated objective is problematic for various obvious reasons; however it is not surprising since many of the contributing authors played a leading role in various Track II initiatives accompanying the peace process and/or proponents of normalization activities between the occupied nation and the occupying power.



In the introduction, and at the stylistic level, the editor does not summarize the major argument of each chapter. This makes it more difficult for the reader to navigate and could make the handbook less accessible. Commonly, the introduction chapter in edited volumes sets the overall framework and provides the reader with a feeling about the subsequent content of the book. At the content level, the used narrative and terms in the handbook's introduction are problematic and they don't necessarily convince the reader that this volume will help in bridging the gap between the polarized discussions or provide an avenue for solution to the conflict. Dealing with the conflict as merely a conflict between equal parties without addressing the power imbalances and without mentioning the military occupation and settler-colonial venture; understanding the military occupation as merely a caption of the West Bank; and exaggerating the importance of international aid provided to the Palestinian Authority while dismissing that aid amounts to Palestinians are trivial when compared with aid provided to Israel, are just few illustrations for the problematic narrative that the editor is using. This becomes even more problematic when the editor adopts the notion that Israel reacts to the "terrorist" attacks by Palestinians, and that the demand of the right of return for the Palestinian refugees ethnically cleansed in 1948 Nakba engage the Israelis "in a struggle for survival" (p.6). The unbalanced account and the adoption of the narrative of one party does not give readers -particularly the beginners whom are the major target group of this handbook- any comprehensive picture but rather and unfortunately contribute to the continuation of the polarized discussion.

Competing Nationalisms

The handbook opens with two essays in an attempt to understand the "competing nationalisms" through discussing the origins of Zionism and the origins of the Palestinian national movement. Both essays are different in nature and scope, which does not necessarily provide a comparative or complementary element to illustrate sufficiently the "competing nationalisms" dimension. That said, Colin Shindler in his attempt to understand the origins of Zionism, questions if Zionism had concluded its mission in 1948 (he refers to this phase as the revolutionary phase of Zionism) and therefore what does the post-revolutionary Zionism imply? Shindler argues that "six decades after the establishment of the state of Israel, the meaning of Zionism is still open to a plethora of interpretations" (p.19). Therefore there is "no agreement on what Zionism is or is not – or, indeed, whether it actually exists" (p.19).

In his essay, Ahmad Samih Khalidi, focuses on specific themes in respect of Palestinian political demands and aspirations until the end of the British Mandate. Khalidi argues that the Palestinian political demands, that emerged slowly after the First World War, shifted from:

"the relatively modest call for self-rule under the British Mandate to the demand for full independence and statehood by the late 1940s, culminating the abortive experiment of the All Palestine Government in October 1948" (p.20-21).

However, upon the emergence of the contemporary (post-1948) Palestinian movement, Khalidi argues that the political demands moved away from full liberation back to the notion of sovereign statehood- albeit in only part of the Palestinian national patrimony. Khalidi concludes, however, that:

"self-rule, national government, independence, entity-building, liberation and the two-state solution can all be seen as part of a continuum whose end remains unfulfilled and whose prospects are uncertain at best" (p.29).

The transformation in the character and demands of the Palestinian national movement continued over the decades as the case of the [PLO](#) and its representation indicate.

War of Narratives

In its second part, the handbook covers the “war of narratives” particularly between 1882- 1949, the narrative around the Palestinian Nakba of 1948, and the narrative of the 2000 Camp David summit. This section of the handbook also includes an essay about the first and second Palestinian Intifadas; however it appears to be misplaced and does not harmonise with the other three chapters. Paul Scham in his essay argues that both the Palestinians and Israeli understandings of history shape and are shaped by on-going political events. And therefore, Scham argues that it is impossible for many on both sides to see their adversaries as not historically deceptive, and themselves as righteous victims. His explicit message, while hard to imagine, is that what both sides -Palestinians and Israelis- need is an “acknowledgment of the other narrative, not an acceptance of one or an attempt to reconcile contradictions” (p.43). Such messages are regularly repeated and found in the mainstream narrative, however neither the description presented in the essay, or the decades of experiences and trajectories of the conflict could make such a message feasible and attainable unless the imbalances of power are addressed and the trajectories of everyday suffering due to the Israeli military occupation reaches to an end. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once said, “Whoever writes his story will inherit the land of words, and possess meaning, entirely!” and therefore [reclaiming](#) the narrative and [how to do so](#) remain a contested but vital issue indeed.

Kristen E. Schulze in her focus on the “battle over history” represented by the 1948 Palestinian Nakba, argues that the Nakba, or what she calls 1948 war, is not just history but it cuts to the heart of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, past and present and remains one of the most important factors in achieving a just and lasting peace (p.46). One of the conclusions that Schulze reaches is that:

“while Israeli and Palestinian revisionist historians since the 1980s made concerted efforts to challenge their own national narratives, politicians on both sides continued to cling to what they perceived as historical truth” (p.54).

What is crucial is not to challenge one’s own national narratives only, but also and mainly to acknowledge that the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians is a continuous phenomenon rather than as discrete historic events and what is needed is a [political agency](#) for Palestinian return.

In the third part of the handbook and surprisingly, Galia Golan in her essay about the peace plans between 1993-2010, concludes explicitly that “the outline of a peace agreement is now relatively clear” (p.105). Such conclusion does not resonate neither with the trajectories of the peace process itself, nor with the facts on the ground that are characterized by an entrenchment of the military occupation and an expansion of the Zionist settler colonial enterprise in occupied Palestine. If the peace agreement’s outline is relatively clear, then the question that needs to be answered is why those peace agreements failed to put an end for the conflict? One simple answer could be that the peace negotiations over the decades ignored basic [rules of thumb](#) which led for continuous failure and persistence of the conflict.

Complex Issues and Domestic Actors

The handbook also tackles few issues in its fourth part including the issues of refugees, Jerusalem, borders, water, among other. Rex Brynen in his essay about the Palestinian refugees argues that any peace agreement between Palestinians and Israelis need to address key aspects, namely: return, repatriation, and resettlement; restitution, reparation and compensations; moral acknowledgment; and development of refugee’s communities (p.109).

Arie Arnon discusses in his essay the economic dimensions of the conflict before and after 1967 and reflects on the economic arrangements dictated by the Oslo Accords, namely the Paris Protocol signed in 1994 to arrange the economic relations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Arnon argues that the unbalanced custom union established in the aftermath of Oslo Accords between the Palestinian and Israeli economies was always favouring the Israeli economy and harming the Palestinian one and its productive capacity, and hence the absence of sustainable development over the decades. Arnon argues that the closure policies by Israel, the second Intifada, and the Palestinian election in 2006, led to the de facto collapse of the Paris Protocol. However, the absence of an alternative to Paris Protocol, “testifies to the damaging lacuna that exists in the economic sphere in 2012” (p.173), Arnon argues. However, the notion that there is no alternative for the economic framework of Oslo Accords and the custom union model, is inaccurate and dismisses multiple voices that argue for a [different economic framework](#) that is based on a resistant Palestinian economy, that [puts an end](#) to the Oslo economic framework, and challenges the conventional wisdom proposed by the international donors community, particularly its leading arm, [the World Bank](#).

The fifth section of the handbook discusses the roles and evolution of certain domestic actors in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO); the Palestinian Authority (PA); Hamas; the Palestinian civil society; the settler movement; the Israeli peace movements; and the Palestinian citizens of Israel. However, the big elephant in the room was dismissed, the Israeli governments. Dismissing such an important local actor is quite puzzling and leaves the reader unsatisfied.

Nigel Parsons’s two essays about the PLO and PA track the evolution of these two institutions. A description of the PLO institutions and their contributions particularly in the realms of reconstructing the national identity and in securing recognition is provided, before delving into the relationship between the PLO and PA. Parsons argues that:

“in lieu of the conversion of semi-autonomy into sovereignty, the organization retained authority over negotiations and pursued wider Palestinian diplomacy. It continued to provide representation for the Palestinian people as a nation, bridging the Occupied Territories and the diaspora; and it maintained a substantial network of diplomatic missions, increasingly afforded embassy status, around the world” (p.209).

Such “conventional wisdom” conclusions are challenged by various historians like Osamah Khalil, particularly in issues related to [legitimacy and representation](#). The essay about the PA describes in details its institutional basis and its executive, legislative, and judiciary branches. Parsons’s book [“The Politics of the Palestinian Authority: from Oslo to al-Aqsa”](#) provides a comprehensive analysis of the PA and PLO and adds a significant and distinctive contribution to the scholarly work on Palestine.

Khaled Hroub in his essay about Hamas:

“describes milestones in Hamas’s historical chronology and intellectual development and the political challenges it faces in a region beset by turmoil. The analysis pays particular attention to the tension between utopian and ideological ideals driven by religious aspiration within the movement, on the one hand, and the political realities which have compelled Hamas to adopt pragmatic positions with a visible relaxing of its ideology, on the other” (p.233).

While the discussion in the essay about the Palestinian civil society written by Michael Schulz could be contrasted and understood from a different perspective as was argued by an [Al-Shabaka’s publication](#) recently.

The essay by Naomi Chazan about the Israeli peace movements “sets out to examine extra-governmental peace action in Israel since 1967: to map its constituent groups, discuss its dynamics, and assess its impact over time” (p.267). Following to the presentation of the four distinct phases for the evolution of the peace movements in Israel, Chazan concludes that:

“the shifting resilience of Israeli peace movements is a function of the interaction between their changing objectives and internal characteristics, on the one hand, and shifts in the social and political environments in which they operate, on the other hand. They are therefore as much a product of their socio-political context as a key trigger for its transformation” (p.268).

This section of the book could be further enriched by discussing the anti-Zionist movements in Israel, and also the Palestinian civil-society led movement of [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions \(BDS\)](#).

International Engagement and External Actors

The last part of the handbook discusses elements of the international engagement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through discussing the roles of the US, Russia, Europe, the Arab world, and the “Jewish diaspora” and the pro-Israeli lobby. Dov Waxman argues that the pro-Israel lobby in the US is not as powerful, or as politically homogeneous, as the popular critique of it suggests. But by no means irrelevant (p.364). A perspective from the Palestinian diaspora is missing and neglected which could add further insights and complexity for the discussion knowing that half of the Palestinian nation is forced to be in the exile.

Steven Spiegel in his discussion about the US role/sponsorship of the peace process, between 1993-2010, fails to reach an agreement to multiple reasons such as the critical mistakes of each US administration; the absence of alignment; the local domestic politics of the US; Israel and Palestine; and the complexity of the negotiated issues as Jerusalem and the refugees (p.323). Despite the failure over the decades, however Spiegel safely concludes that any major movements on the Palestinian-Israeli peace process front will be accompanied by American sponsorship. The focus on an exclusive US-led peace process, termed as a [dishonest broker](#) for peace, goes against the increasingly requested demands of a [multiple-heads led peace process](#) that learns from the limitations and failures of a [US-led effort](#).

Finally, Rosemary Hollis argues that there is “no exit strategy” for the European engagement in pursuit of a negotiated solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and that the European involvement combines:

“a strong EU declaratory position; membership of the Quartet; leading donor support to the PA; co-financing UNRWA; training and equipping the Palestinian Police in the West Bank; and providing a monitoring mission for the Gaza-Egypt borders crossing (inactive)” (p.344).

Hollis concludes by arguing that “the Europeans are no more capable of imposing a two-state solution now than were the British of enforcing partition in Mandate Palestine” (p.344). The EU has a great level of leverage on both Palestinians and Israelis; the question remains: when the EU will use this leverage? Indeed, it is a political decision par excellence.

Conclusion

This review highlighted 15 out of the 30 essays in the handbook and therefore there is a wealth of knowledge to be read and debated in the uncovered essays in this review. The essays, each one comprised of 10 pages, provide an accessible resource for students of Middle Eastern studies and those interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Few essays need to be read with caution and supplemented with other reads from different perspectives in order to get a balanced or comprehensive view about the issue. Other essays try to say a lot in a matter of ten pages which pushes the reader to look for further readings such as the ones provided at the end of each chapter in order to unpack many highlighted issues in the discussions. Other essays provide comprehensive introductory understanding for very complex issues. Overall, this handbook covers a wide range of topics and issues and it acknowledges the absence of a unifying framework for understanding of the conflict at the conceptual level. However, the complexity of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the different understandings of the conflict, its root causes, and indeed the persistent failure to solve it, will urge readers to look for further in-depth readings and analysis, possibly from different perspectives to expand the horizon of understanding. The complexity of the conflict and the multiple existing narratives, allow for an endless debate almost around every single argument proposed and advanced by the Routledge handbook and indeed about any other publication tackling the contested and persistent Palestinian-Israeli conflict; something that preserves and reflects the particularity of this conflict.

The handbook is another scholarly production that attempts to understand, contextualize and theorize the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It aims to provide solutions and bridge the polarized discussion and the sort of dialogue of the deaf. While the handbook provides a certain understanding about the conflict, it fell short in providing solutions and few of its chapters entrenched the polarized discussion. The secret for solving the dialogue of the deaf starts first and foremost through addressing the imbalances in power including the ones in the realm of knowledge production and its politics. Otherwise, readers will keep reading further publications analysing the failures and the competing narratives and nationalisms, but hardly providing any solutions or future promising prospect for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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Tags: [Palestinian-Israeli conflict](#), [peace process](#)