

## **They Were Here Before the Conflict**

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Rabinowitz Danny

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"Palestinians: The Making of a People" by Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, Keter Publishing, 320 pp.

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During a fascinating scientific conference about Palestine held in Chicago in February 1999, Dr. Beshara Doumani of the University of California at Berkeley, one of the most prominent Palestinian historians today, spoke about the main obstacle which, in his opinion, is impeding the development of a Palestinian historiography. Almost everything that has been written about Palestinians, claimed Doumani, has been written from the perspective of the conflict with Zionism. The bulk of the research on this topic concentrates on the period after 1882. The 17th and 18th centuries are the virtual black holes of Palestinian history. These feelings are common to other major historians studying the annals of Palestine and Palestinians. Professor Rashid Khalidi of the University of Chicago increasingly writes about episodes and events that occurred during the early Ottoman period in Palestine, as does Zachary Lockman of Harvard's Center of Middle Eastern Studies. Even historians from Israeli universities are showing a growing interest in this area.

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"The Making of a People," a joint effort by Baruch Kimmerling, a professor of sociology at the Hebrew University, and Joel Migdal, a professor of international studies at the University of Washington (Seattle), makes an important contribution to the understanding of those processes in Palestinian history which do not involve the conflict with the Zionists and the State of Israel. The main argument of the book is that Palestinian national and cultural identity is the result of three popular uprisings: the Palestinian Peasants' Revolt against the occupation of Ibrahim Pasha in 1834; the Great Arab Revolt against the British in 1936-1939; and the Intifada. Each of these three uprisings, claims the book, led to far-reaching social and political developments among the Palestinians. The uprising of 1834

and its suppression "laid the foundation for a far more complex [Palestinian] society." The revolt against the British, about 100 years later, was "the first real attempt to resolutely demonstrate the political will of the people at an advanced stage of its formation." The third revolt, the Intifada, which broke out in 1988, set as its objective "to lay the foundation for political independence."

This interesting claim by Kimmerling and Migdal naturally places them in the category of scholars who believe that the processes involved in building a nation are dynamic ones: Rather than nations generating wars, wars generate nations. This claim also exposes what might be claimed to be the principal theoretical limitation of the book. It is not unlikely that the conclusion of the book, including the Intifada, the building of the Palestinian nation and what is known as the peace process (which the authors relate to with cautious optimism), is what determined what was to be included in it. It may very well be that the nationalistic "happy end," from the point of view of the Palestinians, is what dictated the choice of processes to be reviewed in the book, and the underscoring of the three uprisings as the events which initially shaped the linear historical process whose end is already known.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, which has four chapters, deals with the 1834 revolt and the creation of modern Palestine, the urban development of Palestine, the formation of Jerusalem as the national center and the Arab revolt of the late 1930s. The second part, which deals with the events of 1948 and their social and political significance, describes the sudden and traumatic reversal of the national achievements that the Palestinians had succeeded in attaining since the 19th century. The third and last part, entitled "Rebuilding a Palestinian Nation," deals with Arabs in Israel, the Arab diaspora, the rebirth of the armed struggle from the late 1950s on, the Israeli occupation and the Intifada. The last chapter, written for the Hebrew edition in 1999, deals with the Oslo agreements and the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority.

Some might claim that 1834, the point in time where the book begins, is not early enough. Rashid Khalidi, for example, recently described a series of events that took place in Jerusalem and in Istanbul in 1701. These events centered around protests by Palestinian dignitaries against the Ottoman Empire concerning permission granted to a French consul to arrive in Jerusalem.

The documents quoted by Khalidi clearly show that by the end of the 17th century, there already existed a developed collective political awareness among the Arab-speaking population in Palestine. It can be assumed that additional studies in this vein will reveal an abundance of similar evidence from the 18th and 19th century. The beauty of the claim presented by Kimmerling and Migdal is that even if further studies show that the process that they describe began much earlier, their basic thesis is not affected. Their attention to social processes and popular developments is excellent, and the development of the plot they weave over a period of 190 years is convincing and gripping.

The book naturally determines the development of Palestinian history within a clear geopolitical context, taking into account powerful external forces that affected the Palestinians - the Ottoman Empire, the Mohammed Ali dynasty, the British, Arab countries, the Israelis. But the principal value of the book is that because of its straightforward manner and willingness to deal primarily with Palestinian society and history per se - rather than as a reflection of the conflict - it turns the Palestinians from a hackneyed object into a subject with an independent life of its own.

The book reveals a nation with a history, which can and should be understood on its own and from within itself. This point of view, which was deeply significant for the relatively neutral readers of the English and Italian editions of the book, is all the more vital for Israeli readers.

Kimmerling and Migdal wrote a book with a deep commitment to social processes. This is a history written, as much as is possible, from the grassroots level. It is not the story of kings and counts and muftis and eloquent diplomats. It is rather a sociological attempt to identify the deeper currents that shaped the ages and which often determine the fate of entire populations. The authors' sociological insights are always interesting, generally convincing and they often shed new light on historic events that readers may be familiar with from before.

A good example of this is the detailed examination of the growth of the Palestinian National Movement after World War I, and the insights this provides concerning the later uprising in the late 1930s. Here and there, there is a tendency to paint matters in simplistic terms. This can be seen in the identification of one social process, and then turning it into a one-to-one exclusive pivot upon which an

entire complex and varied period hangs. A case in point is the importance the authors attach to the development of the leading families in Jerusalem (The A'ayan) or the rise in importance of the Palestinian coastal cities in the first third of the 20th century. But this is not a cardinal defect and it is understandable, considering the breadth of the historical topic they are dealing with. A detailed discussion of 150 years of in-depth processes in 250 pages is an impossible mission itself, to say nothing of maintaining uniformity in the level of analysis.

Kimmerling and Migdal are good, thorough and far more skilled researchers than is reflected in their book. For those more familiar with Palestinian history and sociology, it is clear all the way through that the authors have based their findings on carefully researched and convincingly argued studies and sources. It is clear but not proved. In the English edition of the book, the method used to cite sources was already lacking. In the Hebrew edition, the publishing house outdid itself by completely dispensing with a list of sources. In fact, the only reference to a source used by the authors is the name of a scholar mentioned in the body of the text, as part of the story. For example, "the Palestinian sociologist, Salim Tamri, found that ...", without naming the book or the article where the authors found Tamri's comments. Consequently, anyone desiring to follow up on the sources which the authors used is headed for disappointment. The book also has methodological weaknesses. There are too few "small" human-interest stories, and that is a shame. When this type of text is included - for example, the distressing personal account of the Palestinian historian Emil Shoufani concerning the atrocities that took place during the occupation of his village by Israeli soldiers in 1948, the result is a profound and sensitive portrayal, which bolsters the macro-analysis that the local story serves to establish. The preference of Kimmerling and Migdal for broad brushstrokes is also reflected in their almost total disregard for the varied anthropological literature recently written about Palestinians, concerning both Israeli citizens and those residing elsewhere. It is unfortunate that the chapter that deals with Palestinians who are Israeli citizens disregards the work done by Dr. Oren Yiftachel of Ben-Gurion University, one of the Israel's leading political geographers today.

The translation into Hebrew leaves in a number of superfluous details, which are familiar to every Hebrew reader and therefore need no

explication, such as the footnote which explains what the Green Line is. These drawbacks however are inconsequential, having little effect on the final outcome.

This book by Kimmerling and Migdal is undoubtedly one of the most important and sophisticated reference books published in Hebrew in recent years. It can be considered a major turning point, in Hebrew, for the important process the academic world is undergoing - the renewed link between the social sciences and history. Like Kimmerling and Migdal, increasing numbers of sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and political scientists are undertaking the writing of history. Correspondingly, more and more historians are making use of theoretical insights in their analyses. The book's importance also lies in the choice of the authors to concentrate on the Palestinians not through the prism of the conflict, which shows many Israelis that, like Jews, the Palestinians also existed before the conflict. And if there was life before the conflict, then there is probably life afterward too.

Dr. Dan Rabinowitz is a senior lecturer in the department of sociology and anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His most recent book, "Anthropology and the Palestinians," will soon be published by the Israeli Institute for the Study of Arab Society