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Introduction: A New Look at Modern Palestine and Israel

From my classroom at Haifa University, up on the Carmel Mountains, there is seldom a clear view of the city below. On a rare day, when smog and pollution are miraculously absent, I can see the Jewish and Palestinian neighbourhoods of Haifa. The city stretches from the seacoast to the Carmel Mountains. The Palestinians live below, in the areas adjacent to the harbour, but in recent years have moved up to the slopes of the mountains, to parts of the town in which they lived before 1948. In Haifa, the standard of living improves as one moves up the slopes; poverty decreases with altitude.

Socio-economic well-being is closely entwined with national and ethnic affiliations and topography. This forms a pyramid which encapsulates the stratification of Israeli society and, more importantly, the history of the land. Given this geographical polity, it is not surprising to find the university at the top of the mountain, marked by a tower of thirty storeys and overlooking the Palestinians, Mizrachi Jews and the less fortunate socio-economic classes of the town. Like all other national institutions in Israel, the community of Haifa University is predominantly Jewish, European and middle class.

Haifa University, however, has a large share of Palestinians, 20 per cent to be exact; more than their share of the population at large. My class consists of both Palestinian and Jewish students; and the course deals with the history of the land. In this very politically charged country of mine, both groups regard history as just another prism through which to view present rather than past reality. I often ask my students, on those unexpected clear days, to associate the view from the window with history. Palestinian students will describe a town that was once a flourishing Palestinian city but was then emptied and destroyed by the Jews in 1948; Jewish students will see a flourishing town built where emptiness and destruction once reigned. Everywhere else in the country the same two conflicting views exist. They represent historical narratives, powerful versions of history accepted as truth, whether told by child carers to kindergarten children or by university

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professors to students of history. The thickness of the narrative varies, but not its sequence or its heroes and villains.

A concise history of Israel and Palestine must take into account these narratives, but cannot accept them as 'historical truth', if only because each is the mirror image of the other. If one version is the historical truth then the other has to be a lie. If both are correct then there is no historical truth, only fictional versions of the past. Something else is needed: an alternative narrative that recognizes similarities, criticizes overt falsifications, and expands the history of the region to the areas not covered by the two national narratives.

Bridging conflicting narratives is difficult enough, but this book also attempts to tell a chapter in 'modern' history. (The two narratives, by the way, accept more or less the same definition of what is 'modern'.) Approaching the concept of modernity critically is thus one possible way of deconstructing both narratives without discriminating against either. There are therefore two hurdles to be crossed before setting off on our journey to the past. The first is coping with, and even struggling against, two very distinct versions of the country's history deeply planted in the minds of most of its people. These are the two opposing national historiographies of Israel and Palestine, which are of course better told in two distinct textbooks. Here they appear in one, where they are sometimes rejected for their pretensions and criticized for their ethnocentricity and elitism, and at others respected for their epic chapters while being ridiculed for their absurdity.

The second hurdle is challenging the principal paradigm of history accepted by national historiographers. This paradigm is based on the theory of modernization, which produces a story with a clear beginning, a distinct present and a reasonably predictable future. Adherents of modernization, whether advocates of the Palestinian or the Israeli view, can pinpoint readily the departure point for the history of modern Israel and Palestine. This is always the first contact with Europe. Challenging this paradigm may help produce alternative departure points for our story.

The term 'modern' is no longer taken for granted as a 'reality', nor is 'modernization' still a universally understood concept. Therefore, a discussion of the question of beginnings, of where and when one begins a journey back into the 'modern' past of Palestine and Israel, is no mere discussion of periodization. Any attempt at it raises complex and interrelated issues ranging from the definition of modernity to the role of national ideology in the writing of history. This introduction is not the place for an elaborate discussion of these problems, but they are too important to be pushed aside. Historiographical reconstructions are deeply affected by historians'

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definitions of 'modernity', 'progress' and 'nationalism', especially where the history of Asian and African societies is concerned.

While recent theoretical debates on history, modernity and nationalism have to be taken into account in any introduction to such an intricate subject as the history of Palestine and Israel, I have chosen an indirect treatment. This is to present a summary of how modern histories of either Israel or Palestine usually begin. My aim is not to show that the theoretical approach is 'wrong' or 'right', but that it exposes only part of the historical reality, albeit a significant one. Books on the region are abundant because of its high profile in the global media, but the narratives are similar due to the dominance of modernization theory in Middle Eastern studies. This introduction tries to explain why, despite extensive scholarly and popular endeavours, there is room for a new account of the region's modern history that differs from the common version.

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN PALESTINE – THE COMMON VERSION

In the common narrative, the historiography of Palestine begins with the incursion of Napoleon's army into Palestine and Syria at the end of the eighteenth century. But his stay was too short to be regarded as an 'influence'. The role of modernizing Palestine was kept for the Egyptian ruler, Muhammad Ali, who held Palestine between 1831 and 1840. Muhammad Ali was a general in the service of the Ottoman sultan, and had worked his way up through intrigues and coalitions to become Egypt's ruler at the beginning of the nineteenth century. His ambitions stretched beyond the Nile, perhaps even to overthrowing the sultan. As part of his bid to widen his power in the area, he annexed Palestine and Syria.

It was Muhammad Ali's son Ibrahim Pasha who became Palestine's most impressive modernizer. Ruling the lands in his father's name, he introduced agricultural reforms, centralized taxation, safer roads and a constitutional system that gave fair representation to the local elite (for the first time in the history of the Ottoman Empire, the new representative bodies included Christians and Jews).[1]

The old system was restored when, with the help of the European states, the Ottoman reformers of Palestine defeated and replaced Ibrahim. The Europeans returned the status quo ante to Palestine, but enabled modernization to continue in full force. It began, according to most models suggested by modernizationists, with technology and economics. More structural reforms from Europe were implemented, first in the

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capital, Istanbul, then in the principal provinces, and finally in marginal areas. The Ottoman reformers, at work from the 1830s until at least 1876, created new social and political realities in Palestine. The reforms, known as the Tanzimat, were mainly a centralizing and reorganizing effort designed to hold together an empire that threatened to disintegrate under the pressure of ambitious local rulers, embryo national movements and greedy European imperialists. In Palestine, their implementation began in the 1840s. The agents of change in Palestine were thus the reforming governors of Beirut and Damascus, the two regional capitals, which between them shared power. Other agents of modernization were the European consuls, who had been there since the late 1830s, and European merchants and bankers who began arriving in the wake of the Crimean War (1853–56). From a modernizationist point of view, this war was a catalytic event, facilitating and accelerating the process of change. The Tanzimat signified the decline of Ottoman power in Palestine and the rise of European interest in the region. The result was economic integration with Europe, and greater interference by European consuls in both local affairs and central politics.

The most important consequence of integration with Europe, from a modernizationist point of view, was the emergence of a national and secular society in Palestine. This was possible only after a fundamental change in the relationship between Palestine's Muslim majority and Christian minority. Under European pressure, exacerbated by the Ottomans' dependence on British and French aid during the Crimean War and afterwards in the face of the ongoing Russian threat, the sultans promised improvement in the status of their Christian subjects. This promise was fulfilled to some extent by the creation of a basis for the secularization of society, and coincidentally of a common base for future Arab nationalism.

At the point where nationalism emerges, the common narrative is very much in line with modernization theories, according to which nationalism is the penultimate stage in the process of becoming 'modern' and follows the importation of Western technology and military know-how and the emulation of Western administrative structures and institutions. This stage is said to appear only when a society is 'ripe' enough to be transformed conceptually with the help of Western ideology and moral political philosophy.[2] A very particular group of people facilitated Palestine's entry into this phase of perceptional transformation: American missionaries teaching in schools opened in the second half of the nineteenth century. Through these schools, the future leaders of Palestinian nationalism were introduced to nationalism, democracy and liberalism. At first

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only Christians were interested in this secular education, but with the admission of Muslims these schools became the private schools *par excellence* for the elite.

While Egyptian rulers, Ottoman reformers and European consuls, advisers and bankers were all bringing the message of Europe to the local elite in Palestine and Syria, there was reaction by guardians of the old ways. These 'reactionary' forces prevented the completion of the process. As with everywhere else in the Middle East, Palestine was frozen in what modernizationists call a 'transitional' period, namely between tradition and modernity. This means that only parts of the elite were modernized, and that most of the land was still 'primitive'. This would have continued were it not for the arrival of new agents of modernization in Palestine in 1882, the early Zionists. Zionism was a European phenomenon, and so, from a modernizationist point of view, its influence in Palestine was part of Westernization. Zionism acquired the power and motivation for change previously accorded colonialism.

The British Mandate after World War One consolidated European influence in Palestine, and was the last modernizing factor in the narrative of pre-1948 Palestine. It was due to its presence and policies on the one hand, and Zionist plans and ambitions on the other, that the Arab community in Palestine regrouped under traditional leadership, headed by Amin al-Husayni, and became a new national Palestinian movement. In fact, at the juncture of 1918, most history books diverge and divide the region's history into two distinct parts, Palestinian and Zionist. As for the post-1948 period, I doubt whether more than a handful of books deals with the two national histories as a single subject, except in the specific context of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

The narrative thus presents a linear history of the modernization of Palestine from a primitive to a modern era. In the Zionist narrative, Zionism is part of that progress, and in the Palestinian one, Palestinian nationalism is the message and outcome of modernity. The conflict is seen almost as the inevitable, but temporary and dispensable, product of these two conflicting consequences of modernization, to be brought to an end by the completion of the modernization process.

DECONSTRUCTING THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN PALESTINE

Modernization theory presupposes that there is a detectable moment in history, in this case 1799, when societies cease to be traditional and stop living in the past. In this view, Palestine left the past behind with the help of the West. With Europe's magic touch it was exposed to enlightenment

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and progress. As in other cases of Westernization, whether this exposure was a tale of success or failure has yet to be determined.

In the modernizationist view, local Palestinians, the subaltern society, are not valid subject matter for historians unless they were, or until they are, modernized. It happened that Palestine's elites succeeded in becoming Westernized, which is why the narrative of the country's modernization is more their story than a 'people's' story. The elite left behind written evidence of their world, which helped historians to reconstruct the elites' history as if it were Palestine's history. In other words, the conventional history of Palestine and Israel is one that is extrapolated from the political archive.

But the local elites are not the heroes in the drama of modernization; theirs is a secondary role. The principal players are the foreigners who facilitated the fusion between the West and Palestine. These external facilitators are referred to in the modernization literature as 'agents'. As we have seen, several agents of modernization entered Palestine after Bonaparte's brief invasion in 1799. In the eyes of the conventional historians, all these agents had one thing in common: they succeeded in transforming Palestine beyond recognition. So in their view the history of modern Palestine is both Eurocentric and highly dramatic.

It would be natural to assume, at the present stage, that Israeli historiography will subscribe to the modernizationist narrative and that Palestinian historiography will challenge it. The Israeli (and before that the Zionist) version of past events adopts and echoes what I call the 'common version'. Israel's self-image as a Western entity in the midst of an Arab wilderness, and its perception of the Palestinians as 'Other', feeds this view. But the present state of affairs is not that simple.

At first glance, the nationalist Palestinian version might be seen as an alternative to the Eurocentric, or colonialist, view. On the contrary, however, the emergence of nationalism in Palestine is an integral part of the Westernization story. A side-effect of modernization is the nationalization of local traditional societies. It is written into the story of modernization that a society will be nationalized under the influence of the Western modernizer, only to rebel against the modernizer in the name of Western ideals such as the right to independence and freedom.

Therefore we can say that the hidden hand of the national narrative has written the history of the land of Palestine/Israel or, more to the point, has produced two conflicting historical narratives that quite conveniently fall into the paradigm of modernization theory. Fortunately for the Israelis, due to their closer identification with the West, their national historiography has until recently been more respected as academic research, more loyal to the

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'truth' than to ideology. Palestinian researchers were less fortunate. Without a state of their own, they lacked an appropriate academic infrastructure, and although their works adhered to the same scholarly rules as in the West, they were generally portrayed as mere propagandists. This academic evaluation has recently been reversed; a swing of the pendulum that owes as much to politics as to the transformation that has taken place in human sciences. Nevertheless, the histories of the region have until very recently been telling either a pro-Israeli or a pro-Palestinian story. The historians may have wished to be neutral and objective, but they either belonged to, or identified strongly with, one of the two parties in the conflict.

National historiographical writing, on both sides, has assumed that a history of the land is synonymous with its history of nationalism. Nationalism, as a concept, is seen as encompassing the lives of everyone in a given land; in reality, it is a story of the few not the many, of men not women, of the wealthy not the poor. In that sense, it has been much more than just taking sides. The history of either the Palestinian national movement or of Zionism has been tantamount to the history of the land of Palestine and Israel. Nationalist historiographers do not differentiate between land and nation; these are the same and become an essence at the same historical time. The nation, like the mother- or fatherland, is portrayed as an essentialist entity. Nationalist historians are not concerned with dates of birth but with dates of discoveries. The question is not when a nation was born but rather when was it reborn. As Homi Bhabha so felicitously put it: 'Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye.'[3] So the origins of nations and their lands can only be found in a distant or ancient past: a nationalist convenience noticed and ridiculed by Benedict Anderson.[4]

WRITING THE HISTORY OF ONE LAND, TWO PEOPLES

Even more encompassing, in the case of Palestine and Israel, is the history of the intra-national conflict, which became the essence of the region's history, the history of Palestine and Israel. Can this history be reconstructed differently? In his book I attempt a new approach. I hope to do this without marginalizing the importance of the West, political elites, nationalism and the intra-national conflict, or ignoring the importance of some of the main changes chronicled by modernization theorists. These processes include developments such as the industrialization, urbanization, hygienization, secularization, centralization and politicization of what I call 'non-Western' societies which came in contact with the West.[5]

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All these factors are included, but they are viewed more sceptically than in the past. This new approach, therefore, does not question the actual occurrence of the processes described above, but rejects the logic of the way modernizationists construct the connections between them. Against the structural and teleological pattern of change and development caused by contact with the West, an alternative view finds a fragmented and fractured process of transformation, in which local societies move with equal fervour 'back' (into the past) or 'forward' (into Europe) along the line drawn by modernization theory. Contact with a powerful 'Other' is as much a negative as a positive factor. It destabilizes and polarizes local society before nationalism tries to cement it back together. Society is transformed, and the external impact produces kaleidoscopic and modular instances of continuity and reform, unpredicted by theory and not fitting any European historical example.

This is an approach that owes much to the lessons learned from case studies in Asia and Africa in the 1960s and the 1970s. Thus, both inductively and deductively, the a priori view of Palestine's recent past is bound to be more post-structuralist than before. But before I deter the reader with the prospect of post-modernist jargon, I wish to add that this is not why I turned to the critique on modernization and nationalism. I was more interested in how a new approach introduces to the historical scene actors who were absent, or totally marginalized, in the modernizationist approach. In attempting such an approach, this book argues that the history of these actors is no less the history of the place than is the history of nationalism, of conflict, of elites, or of Westernization.

In this 'de-modernized' history, a new leading actor is the subaltern society, which refers to the groups that as a rule live outside the realm of politics and power, and are willing to rely on the state and elites in some, but not all, aspects of life. The narrative is clear; it begins with a society in Palestine as remote as possible from politics in the late Ottoman period and ends with its condition in the post-Oslo reality of the 1990s. In between, it is invaded, seduced, and moulded by elites, politics, ideology, nationalism, colonialism and Zionism. New factors, such as mass media and state education, appear with time, complicating the interaction even more.

This society makes brief appearances in books subscribing to modernization theory, where it is presented as the 'masses': pawns, passive beings to be judged by their obedience to some or other elitist policy or decision. They are accorded in this book a very different identity and pattern of behaviour. They are not one mass of people. They are grouped according to choice in small social units, usually households. But, with time, they prefer to define

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themselves via ethnicity, gender, occupation, class or culture. They change at will, but at times are forced to, not always to their advantage. Their world is a mix of material necessity and spiritual solace. Many of them are closely connected to the land where they live or chose to settle on. They cling to the land or to their property not from a national imperative to protect the mother/fatherland, the entity, but for much more mundane and at the same time humane reasons.

These local actors are leaders as well as ordinary members of the community. They are Palestine's women and children, peasants and workers, town dwellers and farmers. They are defined according to their religious or ethnic origins as Armenians, Druzes, Circassians, or Mizrachi and Ashkenazi Jews, as well as to their views on religion, whether secular, orthodox or fundamentalist. In writing about them, definitions call for a balance between their own claims and the author's understanding of what groups them together. Feeding a family, staying on the family land or attempting to make a new life on foreign soil can be portrayed as patriotism or nationalism: for most people it is an existentialist and survivalist act.

The second new actor is the past in its garb of tradition and religion. As conventional modern history has it, the past is an obstacle to the progress brought by the West to Palestine. Its presence is the best explanation of why parts of Palestine and of Israel have not completed the process of modernization. This negative intrusive past is widely present in Palestine or among the Palestinians, but less so in Israel. In Israel, it is a feature of life among Jews from Arab countries but not from Western countries. It is a stronger factor among women than among men, among peasants than among land owners, and among workers than among employers. In the conventional view, the history of modern Palestine and Israel is the history of the disappearance of this past from all disadvantaged groups waiting to realize a better future. Pessimists such as the late Elie Kedourie believed that for many that future was unattainable; optimists such as the late Albert Hourani asserted it was just a matter of time. But a whole generation of historians of Palestine and Israel assumed that the past, represented by tradition, religion and customs, had to disappear in order to give way to the emergence of a modern, developed Palestine or Israel.

In this work, I wish to reintroduce the past, and show that it was and still is a vital factor in the lives of the people of Israel and Palestine. The past is not always regressive, as the present is not always progressive. In Palestine, as elsewhere in the Middle East, the past contained egalitarian patterns of behaviour that were lost in the present. Similarly, the encounter with the West did not always improve women's status or invariably reduce clan

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power. Rather, the past proved adaptive and resilient, with the basic relationships within society remaining what they had been, despite dramatic political changes brought by colonialism, Zionism and later by Palestinian nationalism.

That is why, in this history of Palestine and Israel, secularization is not described as an inevitable consequence of encounter with the West. Religion is presented here as elastic: adapting successfully to a changing technological and even political world. Tradition appears not as the last obstacle to becoming 'modern', but as a defensive and adaptive mechanism of those who found themselves caught within the turmoil of a changing reality. Religion and tradition became – remained – formidable forces affecting politics, society and culture.

When the past plays such a role, it also affects our understanding of change. Change in this book is not linear, and definitely not harmonious. At times, the meeting with the West strengthened traditional modes of behaviour, and broke them at others. For some, change was fast, for others moderate, and for the rest barely existent. Perhaps even 'change', but definitely 'continuity', are terms we ought to rethink. The post-colonialist critique and subaltern studies, which seek alternative ways of reconstructing the past of the colonized and the natives, have already suggested a reappraisal. They abhor the description 'pawns of the past' and do not view Westernization as inevitable or positive. They look for a new way of describing the local actors in the history of Asia and Africa as human beings who, cautiously and painfully, carved a path in a world that had been theirs before its invasion by others.

In national historiographies, the past is generally romanticized. The past that nationalism tries to bring back into the story is a distant and magnificent past, reinvented by national movements as the cradle or dawn of their existence to claim a hold over the present. I have tried to dissociate myself from that kind of historical reconstruction, first by giving the area a bi-national name, and second by not referring to an obscure, splendid past. The 'ancient' past, so important for national movements, seems to me irrelevant to most of the people. I would rather begin with the more recent, relevant, 'ordinary' human past, not the version favoured by either the Palestinian or Israeli histories. Nor is the nation described here as it would be in a nationalist chronicle, as something eternal. It is a human invention, which appeared relatively recently to serve particular purposes and benefited some but destroyed others. Above all, it was never the essence of life that it pretended, and still pretends, to be. Life is determined by physical factors, such as climate, the locust, economics and tradition, no less than by nationalism.

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