

Editorial:
Critical Reflections on Israel/Palestine:
Writing from within the Conflict

One of the most difficult tasks scholars face is to reflect critically on their own societies. They often expose themselves to the hostility of entrenched interests and to a range of practices aimed at silencing dissenting voices. This difficulty is even harsher in nationalistic societies, where myths of history, geography, politics and identity are often treated as 'sacred cows'.

The difficulty of writing critically 'from within' is further amplified in times of ethno-national conflict. The specter of continuous violence, and the conspicuous existence of 'an enemy', tends to make national communities 'close rank' and mobilize behind the 'collective effort'. This is a period in which myths and clichés are flagged as ultimate truths, and poignant, sophisticated analyses are considered, at best, a waste of resources, or, at worst, a 'danger to the national spirit'.

All this is highly pertinent to Israel/Palestine, where a violent conflict between Israel and the Palestinians (known as the al-Aqsa intifada) is nearing its fourth year. This period has been marked with unprecedented brutality, and repeated waves of violence and terror causing the loss of some 3,500 lives (three quarters Palestinians, and many, from both sides, innocent civilians).

Yet, despite the difficulties, Israeli and Palestinian scholars have continued to research and write about their own societies, often under very trying circumstances. This is particularly evident among the Palestinians, due to the fact that universities have been closed for months, and accessibility to basic facilities have become highly restricted. However, true to the spirit of Hagar/Hajer, these people continue to produce incisive and critical scholarship, not accepting any societal 'truth' as given, and presenting difficult questions on power, manipulation, abuse and domination.

The double issue of "Hagar/Hajer", now in your hands, is devoted to a collection of such works, which have accumulated on our desk during the last year. These works deal with Israel/Palestine or with directly related topics, such as Zionism and the Palestinian diaspora. The articles all explore topics relevant to the shaping of the volatile, contested, but also dear place both Zionists and Palestinians regard as a homeland.

Before touching on the rich content of this volume, however, I would like to inform the readers of some recent developments relevant to our journal. First, Lev Grinberg has completed his term as Head of the Humphrey Institute. For the last four years Lev has been one of the main 'engines' behind the birth and production of the journal, and behind the scholarly group of Humphrey Fellows from which the journal emerged.

While Lev remains a key member of the editorial board, I wish to thank him now, as editor, for his enormous contribution to date, and for his cooperation, energy and imagination.

The new Head of the Humphrey Institute will enter the position in a trying time of financial crisis, which may threaten the future of our journal. This next year will, therefore, be devoted to securing new financial bases for continuing its publication. Indeed, the present volume reached the printers only after a concerted fundraising effort (as detailed in the 'acknowledgements' below).

In the meantime, four new members have joined the editorial committee – Sarit Helman, Gulie Ne'eman-Arad, Arie Arnon and Yossi Yonah, while Jimmy Weinblatt, the University's new Rector (Head of academic affairs) has given up his seat. I wish the new members a productive and creative time with us, and warmly thank Jimmy and particularly Fran Markowitz for her tireless and highly professional contribution over the years.

Let us return now to the diverse content of the present issue. It is opened by two analyses of central aspects in the making of Israeli and Palestinian societies. Uri Ben-Eliezer begins with a demonstration of the obstacles facing the development of an Israeli civil society, while Issam Nassar employs a contemporary vantage point to reflect on the difficulties of writing a Palestinian history. Both reveal a multitude of unresolved tensions and a far more complex and contestable reality that lies behind the putatively objective terms, 'society' and 'history'.

The issue continues with three literary analyses, which vividly illustrate the 'thick' embeddedness of Jewish and Palestinian writers within their national affairs and struggles. Catherine Rottenberg takes us back to Jewish nationalism in nineteenth century America, as it surfaces in the poetry of the enigmatic Emma Lazarus; Amal Jamal takes us on a tour-de-force of Palestinian national literature and discusses its mutual relations with the development of Palestinian identity; while Ruth Tsoffar explores the fascination, almost obsession, of male Mizrahi poets with bodies and bodily injuries, illuminating a new angle of studying the making of Israeli (Mizrahi) identities. All three captivantly bring forth different examples of how this type of literary writing is not only 'embedded' in 'thick' national and material contexts, but how, in turn, it can also shape many aspects of the public discourse and collective identity.

The following two papers analyze some of the trials and tribulations of Israel's ethnic relations. Hassan Jabareen uses a legal-political framework to introduce a new perspective on the relations between the Israeli State and its Palestinian-Arab citizens, claiming the existence of a clear shift among minority elites towards a more assertive agenda. This agenda calls for the recognition of Arabs in Israel as a Palestinian national minority, and for equality with Jews not only in regard to individual rights, but collective rights as well. Lisa Anteby takes the reader through some of the internal and

external boundaries affecting Zionist-Jewish society by studying the integration of Ethiopian and Russian immigrants. Countervailing pressures emanating from globalization and nationalizing Zionism underlie her analysis.

The issue's last two research articles deal with two groups who are conspicuously marginalized in the general discourse on Israel/Palestine - Palestinian refugees and the Bedouins of the southern Negev (Naqab) region. Sari Hanafi, in perhaps one of the first known attempts, analyzes the population of Palestinian refugees in sociological terms. He uses the notion of diaspora to crack open the Palestinian taboo on the issue and show how the great variations in the conditions and aspirations of Palestinian refugees create variegated social and political landscapes, and very different future trajectories. Isaac Nevo, in the closing article, uses the 'Taylorian' concept of 'politics of recognition', reversing it, however, in his examination of Israel's policy towards the Negev Bedouins. He claims that the state's policy has been based on long-standing practices of denial of Bedouin identity and rights, in other words, on a 'politics of un-recognition'.

Additional sections of this special issue introduce the readers to other debates and controversies affecting our country. In the 'Open Space' section, Gad Yatziv chastises Israelis for being helplessly dragged into a postmodern existence, where societal values and structure are fatally destroyed. Naomi Graetz takes us through a range of Jewish and Muslim religious texts, and their treatment of Hagar/Hajer. Drawing on her feminist perspective, Graetz asks if today Hagar can/could be regarded as an abused woman. The issue concludes with three timely reviews. Lori Allen and Sarit Helman take the readers through the crop of recent books published on Palestinian and Israeli societies, respectively, while Esther Zandberg tells the story of an architectural exhibition on West Bank Jewish settlements, which never took place due to self censorship applied by the Israeli architectural establishment.

Perhaps the 'exhibition that never was', best symbolizes the current ambivalent state of affairs in Israel/Palestine. The multiplicity of power plays, maneuvers, illusions and broken taboos, and the continuing attempt to gloss over the harshest reality with denial and censorship – illustrate many of the ills that plague our country. Yet, efforts to open all issues to questioning and investigation – as the authors of this volume have put forth – are a necessary, if not always sufficient, step for the transformation towards a genuine reconciliation both Palestinians and Israelis truly deserve.

Acknowledgements

The production of this issue would not have been possible without the generous contribution of certain personalities and bodies, to whom the 'Hagar' team is deeply grateful. We heartily thank the **Rector** of Ben-Gurion University, Prof. Jimmy Weinblatt; the **Center for Bedouin Studies and Development** (Headed by Prof. Alean Al-Krenawi); the **Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences** (Headed by the Dean, Prof. Avishai Henik), and the **Negev Center for Regional Development** (Headed by Prof. Yehuda Gradus). Their contributions have enabled the continuation of our scholarly and intellectual project, and hopefully have given us time to regroup and secure the journal's future.

Last but far from least, the tireless work of **Orna Nachmani**, the administrative manager of the Humphrey Institute is highly appreciated, in pushing, encouraging and organizing the production of this volume.