



Neil Caplan. *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Contested Histories.* Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 336 Seiten. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4051-7539-5; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4051-7538-8.



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N. Caplan: The Israel-Palestine Conflict

One might wonder why there is a need for yet another book on "The Israel-Palestine Conflict", as Neil Caplan's book is entitled. Hundreds of books have been written over the last decades (Amazon lists 1355 history books on the Arab-Israeli conflict). Especially since the challenge of the Zionist narrative by the so-called "New Historians", books on the topic have mushroomed and a bitter fight between them and the classical Zionist historians emerged. On the one hand, the New Historians along with the Palestinian historians maintain that the established Zionist historians give an apologetic, legitimizing and glorifying account of Israel's sensitive and conflict-laden past. On the other hand, the established historians claim that the New Historians did not contribute anything essentially new, but merely re-evaluated the Arab-Israeli conflict through a pro-Palestinian lens. Yet both camps agree that the respective other side falls short of certain professional standards.

Caplan attempts in his book to shed some light on the ongoing discussion, not by exposing new historical data, but by an analysis of the abundant literature – hence the subtitle "Contested Histories". This is a more than wel-

come attempt as the number of books has become almost unreviewable and a book to contrast and summarize both sides of the historical accounts was of urgent need.

The book is divided in three parts. The first and the last part (two chapters each) can be seen as the framework and necessary commentary on the conflict and its historiography. The second part (eight chapters) depicts the actual history of the conflict with a special focus on its contested issues.

Not surprisingly, Caplan starts out in his first two chapters to elaborate on the problems of teaching, speaking or writing about the conflict. As the author states, every researcher runs the immediate risk of being drawn into the conflict that continues on the level of historiography. "Accepting the Zionist narrative of return contradicts the Palestinian narrative of being invaded and colonized, while subscribing to the colonialist interpretation undermines the legitimacy of the Zionist case. Observers, scholars, and journalists who consider themselves open minded, unbiased, or neutral will immediately upon crediting one view over another – become part of the debate itself, with the resultant approval or

disapproval of the parties themselves. Even the answer that 'both are true' contains a position that would be considered 50 percent incorrect by most partisans on either side.' (p. 47) Anyone dealing with the Middle East Conflict can probably attest to Caplan's observation.

The author argues that the dual conception of righteousness and the expectation of the fulfillment of legitimate claims is an outstanding feature of the conflict. Both sides insist on their right to the land and both feel that they have been deprived from their rights in various respects. Caplan argues that the conflict gravitates around these rights which are absolute and not negotiable.

As a consequence of focusing on absolute rights, writings about the conflict also tend to render questions absolute and to prove them with historical findings. This has the effect that the actual historical event becomes bigger than life because it represents the whole conflict and not just an episode. A telling example of this situation was the attempt to create a joint Palestinian-Israeli committee (headed by Benny Morris and Joseph Massad) for 'Historical Truth and Political Justice'. The committee had to suspend its work as both sides were not willing to put the question aside as to whose ancestors first inhabited the land (p. 43). As a consequence of this all-embracing approach, the other side is often accused of spreading propaganda in contrast to one's allegedly true representation of the conflict.

With this introduction in mind, Caplan turns to the second and main part of the book, where he delivers in eight chapters (around 180 pages) his account of a history of the Middle East Conflict. He summarizes by clusters of 10 to 25 years, according to the respective developments. Caplan begins with a chapter on the background before 1917 and ends with the new focus on Israeli-Palestinian developments since 1982 after the peace with Egypt. In each chapter he follows a certain pattern: First he describes briefly the historical developments and second, he explains why the interpretation of certain events is disputed and which arguments both sides employ.

Along the evolving history of the conflict Caplan formulates eleven 'what he calls' 'core arguments'. These

arguments deal with specific historical facts, yet they become linked to the national narratives in general and to the respective claims to the land in particular. Thus no party can risk defeat in one argument without suffering a broader loss of legitimacy. The following questions will give an idea of Caplan's undertaking: Who was first in the land and whose land is it? Is Zionism a national liberation or a colonial expansionist movement? Is Arab/Israeli/Palestinian violence justified or must it be condemned? How did the Palestinians become refugees and why are they still considered to be refugees? Are the areas conquered in 1967 to be considered as occupied and can Israel build there? Does the PLO attempt to eliminate Israel and replace it with an Arab state? And so on.

As one can easily see, all of these questions will be answered in a diametrically opposing manner by the respective parties. Therefore, Caplan maintains that these questions are not winnable, because no side will yield to the other's account. The difficulty for historiography is now, at least in Caplan's eyes, to find an interpretation of historic accounts that fits the available facts best. While admitting that 'there can be no objectivity in human affairs' (p. 225), Caplan elaborates on the different interpretations of the historical circumstances and explains, with consideration and a broad knowledge of the literature, which arguments are 'from his perspective' 'most convincing and why'. The author leaves certain space for interpretation, but he also explains why monolithic explanations are most of the time too simplistic. To the best of my knowledge, this renders Caplan's book the first that seriously considers and qualifies both sides of the 'War of the Historians' (as the New Historian Avi Shlaim put it).

With 'The Israel-Palestine Conflict', Neil Caplan offers a dispassionate and level-headed guide to the conflict and its historiography. The book may serve not only as an advanced introductory reading, but also as an authoritative overview of the literature and disputed issues of the conflict. As a minor point of critique, it should be mentioned that his description of the peace process during the last two decades is very brief. Nevertheless: The book deserves a pronounced recommendation.

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