

# H-Net Reviews

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**Hillel Cohen.** *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929*. The Schusterman Series in Israel Studies. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2015. 312 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61168-811-5; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61168-810-8.



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Hillel Cohen's book title declares 1929 as year zero of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Is it though? Cohen's book is the first broad study about the 1929 riots. It is a wonderful example of how to write micro-history in a way that places a pivotal event on the timeline of a continuing conflict in order to illustrate its importance and influence in historical perspective. *Tarpat* or *Year Zero of the Jewish-Arab Conflict 1929* leans on both British and Israeli archival materials together with Israeli and Palestinian memoirs and newspapers. Cohen, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, known for his extraordinary ability to assemble minute details, sheds new light on these events, specifically from the Palestinian point of view.

The author consciously chose to move between the violent events set during the week of bloodshed at the end of August 1929, but not in a chronological order. Presenting the events non-chronologically leads to confusion at times. In spite of the back and forth movement of the historical timeline, throughout the book, the writer uses subchapters phrased as questions to tighten his narrative and "hook" the reader. Although *Year Zero* is composed in a non-chronological timeline with a postmodern character, the core of the research methodology leans on traditional, archival research work. The author relies on a

wide collection of primary source material and processes them to get to a central insight regarding the historical importance of the 1929 riots.

Cohen's book contributes to our understanding of the 1929 riots in a number of ways. The first and most important is his discussion of the relationship between early Jewish inhabitants of Eretz Israel/Mandate Palestine, mostly those with Sephardic roots, and the Zionist movement, following violent encounters between them and their Arab-Palestinian neighbors, toward whom they felt close, as Cohen shows. The targeting of the Sephardic old community, highlighted by the erasure of the Jewish community in Hebron, illustrated the importance of developing an armed national group, able to protect the Jewish community in a time of need. Cohen's second major point is that the 1929 riot expressed the rise of national identity as a vital component in the Arab-Israeli conflict. As the riots ended, Jews and Arabs started to form around their national flags. These national identities, too, started to accumulate a religious aspect that strengthened mostly in the 1960s.

This trend of looking for common tendencies between Arabs and Jews is entwined in the book, at times consciously and at times hesitantly. The description of

the extraordinary provides the feeling of an affinity to balance between the pain and suffering of two communities that are in a national struggle to this day. This point stands out in comparison to sporadic encounters where Arabs were attacked by Jews as a response to the riots against them, and avenged during the week of riots, as opposed to the number of victims from the Arab side, killed mostly by British Mandate policemen, who shot them while they tried to attack Jewish towns and neighborhoods.

Cohen also states that “Zionism was shaped by the Palestinian National Movement... Israeli Zionism and the Jewish Community in Israel as we know them today are products of Palestinian Nationalism and vice versa” (p. 57). This surprising statement seems artificial and does not align with the spirit of the 1920s-30s. It stands in contrast to an essential understanding of Zionism, mostly in its socialist expression of the Labor movement that

ruled the Zionist political discourse until the second half of the 1970s. In this context, one should remember the Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, who in the late 1960s insisted on saying that she herself is a Palestinian, and that there is no such thing as Palestinian people from a historical perspective; one can say, while the Zionist movement already had a well-formed and active political structure in the early twentieth century, the Palestinian national movement only began to form, politically and socially, in the mid-1920s.

In conclusion, Cohen’s important book is meticulous in its detail and provides a new frame for the 1929 riots. After reading the book, I still do not have the answer to the question if the 1929 riots are year zero for the Arab-Israeli conflict, but as Cohen points out, the events of *Tarpat-1929* are important and cannot be ignored when researching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the British Mandate and perhaps even after it.

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