

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dan Rabinowitz, Khawla Abu-Baker. *Coffins on Our Shoulders: The Experience of the Palestinian Citizens of Israel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xi + 221 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24441-2; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-24557-0.

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## Israel as a Liberal Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: Miles to Go

This is a fascinating work in which Jewish-Israeli anthropologist Dan Rabinowitz and Palestinian-Israeli social worker Khawla Abu-Baker try to analyze the state of Palestinian-Israeli relations through the medium of their own family histories and experiences, within and without Israel. What they have done is to highlight the discriminatory attitude by which the Israeli state has managed to sideline hundreds of thousands of its citizens solely on the basis of their culture and ethnicity. Written in an emotional style, the book serves to create empathy in the listener, provided that he or she is sensitive to the issues at hand. According to the authors, a main issue is that the state has created an exclusionist society in which any non-Jewish, non-Westerner is treated with suspicion as the “other.” While many Palestinian residents of Israel have been able to participate in the fruits of modernization and globalization (albeit, under restrictions and with limitations), they are also subjected to an alarming degree of covert and overt racism. This racism is often disguised in the minutiae of security details in which Israel, as an ethno-nationalistic unit, has cloaked itself to ensure that the Palestinian minority within Israel remains a minority with all the accompanying drawbacks (social, political and economic).

The joint authors seek to place their own familial and personal experiences in contrast, within the spaces created by the state for their respective communities, both Ashkenazi Jewish and Israeli Arab. They realized as they pursued their research that they had been born within a few weeks of each other in the then Palestinian port city

of Haifa. The book thus combines two stories, one a narrative of the Palestinian citizens of Israel and the other the personal stories of two families. This book, in particular, deals with majority-minority relations in Israel. It also fashioned an opportunity for the authors to reflect on their own ethnicity and personality in juxtaposition to each other. In doing so they cast reflections on the literally millions of other Jews and Arabs scattered around Israel and the world. It is no wonder that Israeli State Television made a documentary of the book, as what the authors did was to tell the story of an average Israeli-born Jew and his Palestinian (born in Israel!) counterpart.

There is little doubt that this is an exceptional book. The dedication of the book should be particularly controversial for the majority of Israelis as it dedicates the book to both the Jewish as well as Palestinian members of the Holocaust and “Nakba” respectively. The authors are thereby acknowledging that the Palestinian Holocaust or “Nakba” has equal status (theoretically, if not practically) with the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews. This book calls into question Israel’s claim to be a liberal democracy, while at the same time curtailing the human rights and privileges of the largest religio-cultural minority in the state.

*Coffins on our Shoulders* is essentially about the generation of Palestinian people that came of age during the latter part of the twentieth century (well after 1967), the generation embodied by the 2000 graduation ceremony at Mar Elias School in the Galilee so potently depicted in the introductory chapter of the book. They are the

so-called Israeli Arabs or Arabs who are resident in the state of Israel as they like to be known among themselves. These Palestinians who went on to study in Israeli universities found themselves forced to don aggressive stands for their rights. They were in the vanguard of protest movements and the like, unwilling to be acquiescent (like their parents) as far as their personal rights were concerned. Doing so, they became (especially, the women students) subject to various unfair stereotypes—racial, cultural and otherwise.

In particular, the authors focus on the deaths of 13 Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel who were shot during the period of internal Palestinian demonstrations following the start of the al-Aqsa Intifada in the West Bank and Jerusalem. The eruptions of the so-called Intifada al-Aqsa along with its concomitant protests within Israel by the Palestinian community serve to rivet the reader's attention on both authors as they strive to analyze why the Palestinian community within Israel should burst out in protests. In addition, they consider the Orr Commission Report (submitted in September 2003) as well as the so-called Herzliya Report (2000) that follows the yearly Herzliya Conference on the Jewish future of Israel. Mainly, the two reports analyze the state and future status of the Palestinian minority within Israel. The authors contrast the differing recommendations of the reports and try to develop recommendations of their own as regards to how the Palestinian minority within Israel can be made to feel part of the nation as valued citizens of the state. One of the aims of this book is to bring to light much of

the media-fed public discourse on the role of the Palestinian minority within Israel and to critique the stereotypes faced by Palestinians within Israel and in the Western world.

The book ends with a description of the final game for the National Football Association cup in 2004. It was the first time that a Palestinian team—B'nei Sakhnin, from a poor Galilean Arab town—managed to reach the finals of the NFA. There, B'nei Sakhnin faced Hapoel Haifa in a competition that they were able to win, thereby securing the cup and the accolades of the entire Israeli nation and the Israeli president. At the time, it was felt that this symbolic opportunity should be seized by both Israelis as well as Palestinians to affect a form of reconciliation between the two estranged communities. Unfortunately this has not taken place. For the authors, the ultimate victory lays in the book's ability to merge the personal and political into a coherent single that appeals to a varied reading public not necessarily proficient with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The book makes maximum impact as it combines social-science research with an "autobiographic intensity" of personal descriptions. This is an eminently readable and interesting book, it is political sociology made easy while the multidisciplinary analysis is what holds us. By dealing with the events of October 2000 within Israel, this book courageously lays out a workable plan of action should the state have any sincere ideas of integrating the Arab minority within Israel into the national mainstream.

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