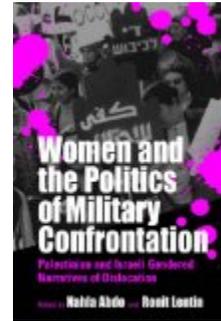


Nahla Abdo, Ronit Lentin, eds. *Women and the Politics of Military Confrontation: Palestinian and Israeli Gendered Narratives of Dislocation*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002. xi + 324 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57181-459-3.

Reviewed by Josette Dermody Wingo (Independent Scholar)
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Autobiographies of Palestine and Israeli Women

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For decades, the Palestine-Israel confrontation has been “the problem that won’t go away.” This reviewer, although not an expert on Middle East affairs, finds this extraordinary book timely. By gathering together the autobiographical narratives of both Palestinians and Israelis, the editors allow these women to speak in their own voices, which are often unheard in the hubbub of people writing about them. This forum gives a reality and immediacy sometimes lacking in other studies. Some of the stories are harrowing and heart rending.

Both editors have extensive credentials as feminist activists and academics. Each one writes about exile and dislocation from personal experience. Nahla Abdo is an Arab feminist who was born in Nazareth and now is a professor of sociology at Carleton University in Ottawa, while Ronit Lentin was born in Haifa under the British Mandate, but claims Israel as her “home.” She lives and writes in Dublin where she teaches at the Department of Sociology at Trinity College. They met at a meeting at Beit Berl College in Israel in 2000 where they discussed different political issues such as women’s place within nationalist projects and the differences between the concepts in Palestinian women and Israeli women. Seeking a bridge, if not common ground, they agreed to converse via e-mail for two years. The prologue details the difficulties of maintaining the conversation, since the two were so far apart in outlook and identity. Factors such as Israel’s occupation of Palestine and the Intifada also pre-

sented problems. Both women had different histories and agendas, but also wanted to see Israelis and Palestinians keep talking, and this book is the result.

The narratives in part 1, “Palestinian Women,” begin with the displacement and dispossession of Palestinians during and after 1948, when the state of Israel was declared. Three generations of Palestinians remember a lost Paradise, with the peaceful orange groves and the airy houses occupied by the extensive family, even if this reality existed only for their grandparents’ generation. Scattered into camps or other cities or countries, the narrators talk of disbelief and despair as all too familiar aspects of exile. Anger is also there, but muted under the strain of adaptation. A number of autobiographies speak of the problems of forming a coherent identity, without roots and separated from the culture into which they were born. Palestine as an entity is not well defined in the west and for many exiles Canada or Tucson may provide a refuge and an academic position, but it never feels like home, wherever “home” is. While problems are recounted, adaptation, courage, and survival are part of the story too. Everything changed. Daughters were schooled in the camps in Lebanon which changed the relationship between mothers and daughters. The old ways of the village had less validity, without new traditions to put in their place. Constant war made women more solicitous of their children’s safety and the middle generation made do by not making waves. Whenever possible, their daughters won scholarships to schools outside of the camps or Beirut, hoping to return with their degrees

and improve the conditions of their people. Radicalization was easier in a foreign land and coming home was usually not a positive experience, since both the daughters and Gaza had changed. Many married, had children, and then divorced. The voices of many of those who were once politically active were stifled through exhaustion, despair, or hopelessness, or the difficulties of speaking out against a struggling nationalist entity—even though the nationalist entity was ignoring women’s concerns and relegating them to the sidelines.

Some of the essays in part 2, “Israeli Women,” tell of the effect of the Shoah on the children and grandchildren of the survivors. According to a number of the essays, Zionism in Israel denigrated the survivors as being weak and, thus, feminine. Patriarchy demanded strong male warriors and masculine values. Israel became a militarized state. Women who acted for peace, such as the well-known Women in Black, were marginalized and derided. Patriarchy also demanded children, and several women wrote about the constant pressure to marry and produce children, seen by the community and family as a woman’s duty. One woman was told she could still study after giving birth, but many educated women felt freer outside of Israel, even though they were homesick.

Not all Israeli women are Jewish, and there are several narratives of the Arab citizens of Israel, who are de-

nied their civil rights, religious freedom, and, often, freedom of movement in a country in which they hold citizenship. Being forced to display flags to celebrate the birth of Israel during elementary school created a conflict of identity for these women. They could not talk about what Israel meant to them and their families, and it is obvious that these memories still rankle and fester. There are ten essays by Palestinian women and seven by Israeli women, plus an introduction and prologue by the editors. Much of the information in this book, presented in a readable form, is not well known outside the circles of activists. The suffering of the displaced is palpable but not considered newsworthy in the larger world. Both Palestinian and Israeli feminists, of varying degrees of radicalization, rue the (self-) silencing of activist thought and writing. Among the possible culprits are the patriarchal political climate, military values, culture constrictions, and class structures. (Palestinian women in the camps in Lebanon do not share everything in common with urban Palestinian women or the academics editing this book.)

This book is enlightening for anyone interested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as in the effects of military confrontation and rule as a policy. Many questions remain, but provocative and informative, this book keeps alive the editors’ hope of transforming society beyond nationalism and sectarianism.

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