



Maha Nasser. *Brothers Apart: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. 288 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-0316-5.

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Banko on Nasser, 'Brothers Apart: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World' (2017)

Maha Nasser's *Brothers Apart: Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Arab World* could be better framed as a book about the ways that poetry and the writers of poems and other cultural texts migrated across political boundaries and physical borders in the postwar era of decolonization, when communism and pan-Arab nationalism duelled for the hearts and minds of Palestinians in Israel. The poems and poets in this tale are primarily those Palestinians who became citizens of the state of Israel by consequence of their presence inside the 1949 Green Line (Armistice Line) and through the Israeli government's "invitation" to them to become such citizens. Nasser's historical subjects are broader than only Palestinian poets: they include all those individuals who fall under the category of "intellectuals." Defined in terms of culture, these intellectuals came largely from working-class backgrounds (or had interests in working-class issues) and included high school and college graduates, teachers, writers, journalists, attorneys, and political party organizers (communists and pan-Arab nationalists) who wrote prose and/or poetry aimed at improving the conditions of society. They encompassed Jewish Israelis from Arab countries like Iraq and spanned roughly two generations.

Brothers Apart aims to "shed light on specific, deliberate, and concrete ways in which intellectuals, cultural producers and political organizers actively resisted these policies of sequestration" (p. 181) by Israel to keep Palestinian citizens from crossing political, cultural, and social borders in the direction of the wider Arab world. In doing so, Nasser's study asks first how Palestinian citizens of Israel tried to foster cultural and intellectual connections to the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s in spite of their political and geographical isolation. A significant focus of the book is how regional and global developments such as the Algerian war and decolonization reverberated back to Palestinian intellectuals in Israel. Reverberate they did: Palestinian communists, often forced to take stances on decolonization that fell in line with the political consensus of their Jewish communist counterparts, found themselves at odds with pan-Arab intellectuals. As part of this focus, Nasser uncovers the new political vocabularies and shifting solidarities created through literary texts and their regional migrations. Her sources are incredibly rich: periodicals produced from within Israel as well as those that made their way from other Arab states into Israel, written and oral histories of poetry festivals and recitations, and interviews with some of the individuals present at

major events and part of literary networks in Israel. Ultimately, *Brothers Apart* makes the intervention that a critical examination of these textual sources helps historians and others to locate the cultural and intellectual history of Palestinian citizens of Israel in the domestic, regional, and global context.

As the book's title indicates, its subjects are almost entirely men. There is mention of Nablus-based Palestinian poet Fadwa Tuqan, for example, but no other women receive attention. This is to be expected since Nasser's research on Arab "brothers" is the foundation of the monograph, but the absence of women intellectuals makes clear the need for further, parallel research by historians on their presence in intellectual, communist, and pan-Arabist circles in Israel. The male domination of the topic is not explained, nor is the masculinity of the cultural and intellectual production analyzed. Disappointingly, it is unclear why the research here needed to only encompass the voices and textual production of men.

The book is an important addition to historians' understanding as to the migration of ideas and intellectuals in Palestine and Israel in the mid-twentieth century. To be sure, it is not directly about migration in terms of the movement of persons and communities across borders in order to make new homes, take on employment, join family, or escape any variety of political, economic, social, or religious difficulties. Nasser instead highlights what types of migration take place when people—in this case, Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel—cannot physically migrate across borders without forfeiting their residence. The book's first chapters do make note of the mainly Iraqi Jewish communists who migrated to Israel in the 1950s and became part of the debates on decolonization, the role of the state in Arab communities and how Palestinians should engage with the state, and how Israel should relate to the wider region. This is a nod to the work of historians such as Orit Baskin and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, scholars of com-

parative literature like Lital Levy, and Ella Shohat's work on displacement of Arabic-speaking Jews in Israel.

One of the crucial elements of the sociocultural and political spheres of the intellectual subjects of the book's chapters was their isolation from Arab counterparts in surrounding states and from Palestinians in the diaspora, the West Bank, and Gaza. Upon the creation of Israel in 1948, 160,000 Palestinians remained within the territory that became Israel. They composed 13 percent of the state's population. Many were internally displaced. The 1952 Citizenship Law offered the Palestinians Israeli citizenship, but as the work of many other scholars has demonstrated, they did not have an equal status with Israeli Jews. This is most glaring obvious in the period from 1949 to 1966 when Israel's Palestinian Arab citizens and communities came under military rule. The Arab world also isolated itself from these Palestinians, and the impact of that on cultural exchange forms a central feature of the book's chapters. The Arab League boycotted Israeli goods and citizens, and by the late 1950s and early 1960s, Baathists in Syria publicly referred to Palestinians in Israel as traitors and Zionist agents. Indeed, this perception remained pervasive into the 1960s as the minimal cultural contact which Palestinians in Israel had with Arabs elsewhere did little to change other Arabs' ignorance of their situation and, at times, outright hostility. Instead, as Nasser argues, in the years following the Naksa (setback) of 1967 and the subsequent Israeli military occupation it would be Palestinians in exile who drew attention to how those in Israel used political and cultural means to resist their isolation. In addition, younger Palestinian poets used a greater agency to explicitly position themselves as part of the Palestinian people rather than as cordoned off as Palestinians in Israel.

The tools used to resist isolation included more explicitly political poetry and literature, especially by the younger generation. This was a

change in the attitudes of Palestinian intellectuals as a result of both of the end of military rule in 1966 and the failure during the decade after the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948 of Palestinian members in the Communist Party of Israel and the left-wing Mapam party, and the pan-Arab nationalist sympathizers to agree on an approach to challenge their own marginalization in the state.

The book gives a general history of the role of poetry and cultural production associated with leftist and anticolonial organizations during the British Mandate. It emphasizes that poetry “became a means of placing the Palestinian Arabs’ collective struggle within the larger spatial and temporal imaginary” (p. 32). To some extent, the intellectual life that flourished in the years during and after World War II in Palestine continued to grow after the Nakba’s rupture among certain Palestinians in coastal cities and in the Galilee. The cultural debates, growing poetry clusters, and editorials in Arabic and Hebrew newspapers throughout the 1950s remind us that despite the utter devastation of 1948 and the harsh military rule imposed by Israel on the state’s Palestinian citizens, there was certainly no lacuna in cultural and social exchange nor was this a time of only loss and contemplation.

The Communist Party of Israel (CPI) took the lead in the 1950s in promoting Arab poets’ challenges to their position through the medium of newspapers and journals. In the name of strategy to combat isolation, Palestinian communists joined with their Israeli Jewish counterparts—including Iraqis and Egyptians—to put aside differences with pan-Arab-oriented Palestinians and speak in a united voice. This strategy broke down relatively quickly: CPI leaders framed their calls for equal rights between Arab and Jewish citizens in terms of territorial patriotism. By the end of the 1950s, such a stance contrasted sharply and divisively with pan-Arab expressions of nationalism that questioned why Palestinians in Israel refused to offer full support to the anticolonial, revolution-

ary project of Gamal abd al-Nasser. The CPI continued in its anti-imperial stance, targeting in its periodicals and other mediums the Arab regimes believed to be imperialist. Communist newspaper *Al-Ittihad*, for instance, adopted a pedagogical approach to Arabic literary trends and published poems that called on workers to rise up in Asia and Africa to overthrow imperialists even as it maintained a distance from nation-state expressions of revolution. The CPI’s stance came up sharply against other intellectual narratives from within Israel. The Arabic periodicals *al-Yawm* and *al-Mujtama* framed calls for Arab brotherhood as best achieved under the auspices of the Israeli state. By the late 1950s, a shift had occurred. Most politically active intellectuals no longer wished to appeal to the Israeli state to better their condition and instead sought to rally other Palestinians by alluding to a decolonial, revolutionary spirit of the Third World. In this way, they hoped to connect with Arab counterparts to challenge the perception in the Arab world of Palestinian citizens of Israel as passive victims or traitors. Unfortunately, this shift occurred as pan-Arab nationalists and communists were becoming increasingly hostile to each other. That hostility reflected wider regional trends: Gamal abd al-Nasser as leader of Egypt derided communists as obstacles to Arab unity and to the end of Western imperialism.

Maha Nasser makes an important intervention in her introduction and only returns to it at the end of the book. It is an often overlooked understanding that not all Palestinians desired to be seen as colonial subjects. Most of the intellectuals whose stories are told here actively rejected the very decolonial logic that dictated armed struggle as necessary for national self-determination that historians and sociologists so often focus on during this era. What Nasser successfully underscores is that these intellectuals nonetheless used decolonial frameworks and struggles in places like Egypt, Iraq, and Algeria to make their own conditions of isolation legible. Poetry festivals, discussed at length, signaled a growing recognition

that poetry could have immediate political function as a way for intellectuals to rally Palestinians toward a collective spirit in preparation for greater mobilization. Published, circulated poetry also helped to make connections across borders when Palestinian citizens of Israel could not themselves travel as freely as other Arabs. Festivals created a sense of empowerment for the younger intellectuals of the early 1960s such as Mahmood Darwish and Samih al-Qasim, two poets discussed at length elsewhere in the book.

The last half of the book is concerned with the unraveling of the intellectual Arab brotherhood that had advanced in starts and stops in Israel during military rule. The success of Algeria over the French and Egypt in nationalizing the Suez Canal opened space for a more unified, pan-Arab approach to the Palestinians' isolation. However, as Nasser argues "now that the day [when colonialism and Western imperialism were eradicated] seemed within reach, new challenges arose" for Palestinian intellectuals in Israel. As Nasser calls them, "bitter recriminations" (p. 97) between communists and pan-Arabists prevented a unified front. The organization of Ard, a new group positioned within both pan-Arab and Palestinian nationalist frameworks, offered a third alternative for Palestinian intellectuals in Israel to challenge their isolation through. The emergence of Ard led to a crisis within the CPI: the communists' old guard attacked Ard's position even as younger CPI members were drawn toward its pan-Arab positions.

A key question within the intellectual discourses studied in *Brothers Apart* is whether the position necessary to end the isolation and marginalization of Palestinian citizens of Israel should be toward the wider Arab nation as an integral part of it, or toward the implementation of an equality of existence with Jewish Israelis. This element of discourse is traced through all the chapters of the book, as the immediate post-1948 generation, which came of age during the latter

years of the Mandate, and the generation that came of age in the 1960s wavered over whether pan-Arab unity or communist objectives should take center stage in the political, social, and cultural being of Palestinians inside the Green Line. Numerous controversies are situated around this question, and Nasser outlines the stakes involved in formulating positions on either side, from Palestinians in the CPI or in Mapam to those supportive of the United Arab Republic and to the founders of Ard. At the heart of these debates and intellectual discourses is the *nature* of Palestinian self-determination: whose understanding of that self-determination could be implemented in a way that allowed Palestinians to be comfortable with pan-Arab expressions of identity and with expressions of identity that developed out of the two-decade-long existence under military rule in the Israeli state? Ultimately, of course, Nasser makes clear that these were intellectual discussions, albeit presented in poetry, literature, and the pages of cultural periodicals, and by men whose backgrounds may not have been elite. Still, her methodology and astute use of textual sources and interviews do not allow for us to really understand the penetration of these discourses outside the realms of those defined as intellectuals. The book is strictly centered on such individuals, and so her focus on them is certainly valid. What this focus obscures is why such a history matters outside the realm of the intellectual life of Palestinian citizens of Israel. We get a glimpse of how much it matters when Nasser mentions the lackluster showing of the CPI in the 1959 Knesset elections: Palestinian communists' stance vis-à-vis that of Palestinians who professed themselves to be in full favor of pan-Arab unity and in support of the UAR and Gamal abd al-Nasser was manifested in a loss of Knesset seats for the communists.

The book offers a sweeping history of Palestinian cultural intellectuals in Israel during the two decades of military rule: it is unabashedly focused on this cultural and literary scene first and foremost, its developments, and the events

that shaped it and were shaped by it. The book is not a political history of Palestinian intellectuals inside the Green Line, but it weaves the political impact of these intellectuals' varied organizational movements and their outputs, the rise of pan-Arab nationalist solidarities, and anticolonial struggles in Asia and Africa into the narrative. Each chapter offers actions and reactions by intellectuals and their clubs, newspapers, journals, and other literary mediums to political developments in the Arab world and decolonial struggles farther afield. At times, however, the political threatens to subsume the study of the literary and cultural productions of the intellectuals and their movements: chapter 4, for instance, follows the establishment of the PLO closely but offers little in terms of how cultural spokesmen in Israel engaged with the new organization. In doing so, the chapter diverts attention from poet-activist "spokesmen" of the 1960s like Darwish and Qasim, and offers few examples of other, lesser-known, literary spokesmen of this generation. Nasser does leave some inadvertent gaps throughout the chapters. Most strikingly are sweeping pronouncements that leave the reader wanting more specifics. "Leftists," "communists," and "pan-Arab nationalists" are terms used frequently but too broadly.

Overall, the book is an excellent addition to Middle Eastern studies or Palestine studies, but it will also have wide appeal to scholars and students of Arab world history, literature, and textual production, sociology in the Middle East, migration studies, and those who approach the international relations of the region with a humanistic slant.

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