

## RECENT BOOKS

### PRACTICING AUTHORITY

**Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule**, by Ilana Feldman. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2008. xii + 235 pages. Notes to p. 295. Bibliography to p. 312. Index to p. 324. \$79.95 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

*Reviewed by Rochelle A. Davis*

*Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule* provides a fascinating and sophisticated examination of the foreign governing systems enacted by civil servants in the Gaza Strip during the periods of the British Mandate over Palestine (1917–48) and the Egyptian administration of the Gaza Strip (1948–67). The mainstay of Ilana Feldman's book is what she calls "the tenuous domain of the everyday that was never entirely lost" in the "ruptures of Palestinian history" (p. 2). Feldman is both an anthropologist and a historian, and thus her book, an "ethnographic history," examines both the "government at work" and what it meant for people to "work for the government." Her analysis encompasses historical material currently held in archives in four different countries, enriched with oral histories of civil servants, and made sense of by her own experiences of living in Gaza amid the modern-day bureaucracy of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Israeli occupation authorities.

Feldman's book shows how Gaza's numerous rulers produced authority through practice—something she calls "reiterative authority," in which the work of government was done with a regularity that "bound people and government in new ways" (p. 220)—but without legitimacy. Feldman demonstrates how continuity, despite regime change, was maintained via reflective habits that make up the processes of government and "are part of the formation and consolidation of bureaucratic authority" (p. 65). In Gaza, the secure foundation for authority never existed: the British Mandate tried to impose itself, with a great deal of

resistance, and the Egyptian administration was never asserted as more than a caretaker. In this context, Feldman asserts that "it was also the focus on the work itself, rather than the regime that required it, that provided a means through which government could be disassociated from the nationality of the rulers" (pp. 65–66).

Feldman also reflects on the tensions between government employees' sense of duty to their work and their feelings toward their communities. Specifically, workers used a concept of dissociation that allowed them to continue working for governments, which, in the case of the British, denied them national rights as a people. Following 1948, however, she posits that working in the government helped transform civil servants' own experiences of loss, as it allowed them to help their families and fellow Palestinians. Feldman concludes that "in the process of making themselves feel better about their work and defusing the challenge politics posed to their own comfort, civil servants contributed to the consolidation of governmental authority" (p. 84).

The creation of Israel in 1948 brought two hundred thousand refugees into the Gaza Strip (tripling the local population, which numbered around seventy thousand). Palestinians felt that it was international regimes' obligation, due to their role in partitioning Palestine in 1947, to take care of these refugees. Analyzing the ensuing political and humanitarian systems that were developed to deal with the crises, Feldman proposes the idea of "tactical government," described as a "means of governing that shifts in response to crisis, that often works without long-term planning, and that presumes little stability in governing conditions. It is this practice that contributed to the tenacity of government, despite its instabilities" (p. 3). This concept also allowed government employees to continue their practice of disassociating from their employer.

Feldman presents an engaging discussion of the file versus the archive. She points out that the British planned their withdrawal from Palestine in 1948 and therefore had specific ideas for archiving the Gaza documents—saving certain materials and classifying others with the intent of creating

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an archive for historical purposes. On the other hand, the Egyptians in Gaza had made no such preparations. Thus, the 1967 Israeli invasion meant that their files, most of which were meticulously collected into Israeli state archives, are like a snapshot of government frozen in time, with its own filing system still in place. This method of maintaining the files reveals the intentions of the Israeli authorities who captured them, and who then, as Feldman notes, closed them off to researchers while she was working on them, neither declassifying nor classifying them, largely because they did not know their contents.

The richness of this study is in the mundane, in its reflections on, and deep understanding of, people's lives and work as government employees. It presents Gaza as a normal, everyday place, where civil service retirees receive pensions and attend a club for retired civil servants, and where the population does not want to install water meters that would charge them for usage. Despite this normalcy, Feldman also shows how Gaza was made to be a place apart by historical circumstances, borders, and policies that continue until today. Considered a backwater during British Mandate rule, Gaza between 1948 and 1967 was more closely connected to Cairo than the other Palestinian cities. This isolation continued after 1967 and is even more obvious today, with the unprecedented lockdown of the Gaza Strip. By making Gaza seem normal, Feldman enables us to see beyond the current headlines and fearful murmurings. She allows us to understand the way in which Gaza has been administered from 1917 to the present by tactical governments that continue to maintain authority, but lack legitimacy.

#### NEGLECTED NARRATIVES

**The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries**, by Rosemary Sayigh. London: Zed Books, 2007. xxviii + 210 pages. Notes to p. 228. \$25.95 paper.

*Reviewed by Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman*

As the reconstruction of Nahr al-Barid refugee camp in northern Lebanon is halted

once again, this time due to the discovery of an archaeological site, twelve thousand Palestinians from the camp have taken to the streets in protest. The remaining nineteen thousand refugees continue to reside in eleven other camps in Lebanon, unable to return two years after the Lebanese army destroyed it. The struggle for these refugees has shifted, albeit temporarily, from the right of return to Palestine to that of return to the camp.

The reprint of Rosemary Sayigh's *The Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries*, originally published in 1979, could not have come at a more opportune time. Its combination of oral history of ordinary Palestinian refugees and Sayigh's astute analysis of their anticolonial, anti-imperial struggle reminds us of the voices that must be amplified. Sayigh's research was conducted between 1975 and 1978, during the Lebanese Civil War, when the Lebanese Forces militia destroyed the Palestinian refugee camp of Tal al-Za'atar and many refugees fled to Nahr al-Barid. But the significance of *The Palestinians*, like Nafez Nazzal's groundbreaking *Palestinian Exodus from the Galilee* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978), is that the time period during which Sayigh interviewed her subjects allowed her to extract memories from people who could not only narrate the contemporaneous Palestinian Resistance Movement (PRM) but also recall life before the Nakba.

The book is structured chronologically and broken down into chapters that correspond to various phases of Palestinian life. It begins with "The Peasant Past," which documents life in Palestine before the Nakba, using oral history to compare different forms of colonialism affecting fellahin lives from the Ottomans to the British and the Zionists. The interviews also give readers a window into Palestinian village life: from agricultural production to weddings, education, and a collective way of life. Village collectivity was significant given the need to resist the layers of colonialism that substantially increased peasant poverty and eventually led to landlessness. Sayigh's analysis thwarts a romanticized view of the fellahin by addressing various conflicts within villages, and between villages and urban dwellers, Druze, and Bedouins. Sayigh maintains focus on the class consciousness that shaped resistance to the Zionist takeover of Palestine, in the form of labor organizing in cities like Haifa and Yaffa and armed rebellion among the fellahin. Her characterization of

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