

RECENT BOOKS

SELF-DESTRUCTION DISCOURSES

Suicide in Palestine: Narratives of Despair, by Nadia Taysir Dabbagh. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2005. xii + 245 pages. Appendices to p. 262. Index to p. 265. \$17.95 paper.

*Reviewed by Sylvie Mansour*¹

Nadia Dabbagh's *Suicide in Palestine* focuses on the "suicide phenomenon" in Palestinian society in response to "increasing public discourse and concern [in Palestine] about reports of suicide which was seen as something new and alien" (p. 2) in 1997, implying that suicide was a growing phenomenon. But the value of the book goes far beyond the analysis of a temporal phenomenon. Rather, it looks in a very innovative way at two main dimensions of self-destructive behavior: what is to be found in public discourse and what is related to private life histories, taking into consideration religious and societal beliefs.

After putting suicide in the context of Western literature, Dabbagh examines past and present attitudes to death and suicide in the Arab world. She then focuses on the specific Palestinian context, looking at what could explain why people seemed to discover, in a state of quasi-panic, that suicide was a phenomenon in their community. She postulates that this moral panic happened when people started to realize that their steadfastness was to a certain extent a façade aimed at covering the despair buried deep inside. She also could have made the connection between this sudden interest in the phenomenon of suicide and the concerns that rose up around adolescents' mental health in the aftermath of the first intifada: Countless articles in the media and workshops for social workers and counselors dealt with that issue. Adults were very worried about the fate of the youth of the intifada, their concerns based on a mixture of empathy for those children who had resisted the occupation and a desire to regain control over them, for they perceived the youths' new found independence as a threat to traditional values. The only way to know whether panic in public discourse corresponded to an increase in the incidence of suicide would be to have statistics, so Dabbagh takes the reader on a breathless quest for epidemiological data (which also serves as a pretext to demonstrate how statistics are always partially socially constructed).

In the second part of the book, Dabbagh recounts thirty-one suicide narratives, analyzing the strong connection between private life and living under Israeli occupation. Based on her differential analysis of male and female life histories, she keeps her distance from an overly simplified view that tends too often to present Palestinian women as the main victims in society. Her book is especially admirable for two reasons. Young authors

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seldom are able to use an interdisciplinary approach with the skill that Dabbagh does. She uses concepts from psychiatry and psychology, epidemiological techniques, and anthropological methods without underplaying the contribution of any of those disciplines. She succeeds in giving a very comprehensive understanding of the “suicide phenomenon” in the Arab world in general and in Palestine in particular. She also addresses very sensitive issues without falling into the pitfalls of sensational stories of Palestinian “martyrs” or a unilateral description of Palestinian women’s distress.

Suicide in Palestine is the outcome of a doctoral thesis and consequently will be appreciated by scholars for its solid analysis and references. Furthermore, it is written in an engaging style, enlivened with accounts of a desperate quest for statistics that sometimes holds the reader spellbound: “When I went to the Old Archive everyone laughed and said that no one goes there. I was even told that there were rats. When I finally got the key and went in it was a complete shambles and I could hardly get in . . .” (p. 107).

The suicide narratives also allow the reader to understand what the Israeli occupation really means in the everyday life of Palestinians. The phenomenon of suicide is analyzed in the context of Palestinian identity and of the “ripple effect of war.”

In 2006, one still has to give up the idea of gathering systematic data on suicide rates and suicidal attempts in Palestine. Local newspapers or other media do not seem to be especially interested in the issue anymore. But mental health workers regularly have to deal with the open expression of their patients’ suicidal ideas, as if some kind of equilibrium between steadfastness and despair has been reached, allowing for the acknowledgement of the psychological suffering of families confronted with still worsening life conditions.

A STRUGGLE TOLD IN VOICES

Peace under Fire: Israel/Palestine and the International Solidarity Movement, edited by Josie Sandercock, Radhika Sainath, Marissa McLaughlin, Hussein Khalili, Nicholas Blincoe, Huwaida Arraf, and Ghassan Andoni. Foreword by Edward Said. New York: Verso Books, 2004. xxii + 297 pages. \$22.00 paper.

Reviewed by Zachary Wales²

In the same way that the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) marks a sign of our times, its first book builds on a trend pioneered by Howard Zinn’s *Voices of a People’s History of the United States* (Seven Stories Press, 2004). As a collection of individual accounts, it does not attempt to derive a perfectly consistent voice from a popular movement. Rather, this carefully orchestrated narrative is precisely what the ISM, as with any mass movement, was meant to be: the sum of its voices. Deliberate or not, the decision to record history through a compilation of essays, e-mails, letters, diary entries, interviews, and newspaper reports is raw, audacious, and anything but simple.

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This point is made early in the collection's foreword by the late Edward W. Said, who wrote, "there is a wide discrepancy today between our cultures and societies and the small group of people who now rule these societies." In today's growing body of progressive thought—at least for those who choose to access it—there is the tacit understanding that media institutions are failing us, that societies and cultures are governed remotely by their more privileged counterparts, that thoughts and lives are political currency, and that we are ever more disconnected from the common human on the other side of our *New York Times*.

How then to bridge this gap coherently, particularly in the pandemic ignorance over the occupation of Palestine? To this end, *Peace under Fire* was not constructed haphazardly. The collection plots the ISM's history from its beginnings to the present in a show-don't-tell fashion that lends preference to testimony over self-identification. For it is only after a great many hardships and a handful of victories that a social movement can give itself a name—and even this is a simplification. Just as no brilliant nonfiction is scripted, the essence of a successful movement lies in its testament.

This is evident in the way that the ISM's history attests to the course of the second intifada. For instance, several days after Ariel Sharon walked into al-Haram al-Sharif, a contingent of Palestinians and internationals peacefully took over an Israeli military outpost in Bayt Sahur near Bethlehem. The event culminated with a Canadian planting a Palestinian flag atop the garrison's watchtower, giving birth to a concept that simultaneously emboldens the ISM and inflicts it with irony: had the flag bearer been Palestinian, he would have been shot. After all, what later would become the signature strategy of non-Palestinian ISM members—ushering children and medical workers to safety by virtue of an orange vest that connotes "international + death = bad publicity"—is among the ugliest tableaux of the intifada: the exploitation of perceived humanity. But this too is taken to task, as the narrative progresses from the confession by Nancy Stohlman as she cashes in on her international status to abandon the besieged Church of the Nativity, "I am crying and ashamed . . . like a rat fleeing from a sinking ship" (p. 68), to the reaction of Alice Coy in Gaza, after Israel's murder of Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall, "I am still in shock at losing my second friend in under four weeks. I feel like a Palestinian" (p. 245). Taken in its entirety, *Peace under Fire* is the statistical law of large numbers unfolding before the reader's eye; as with the variability of an infinite succession of coin tosses, the identities of foreigner and local, Jew, Muslim, and Christian meld into a common thread.

That said, *Peace under Fire*'s editors do a notable job of organizing the narrative so that it does not become the white noise of victimhood. Not only are the sections distributed geographically, covering some of the most essential historical locations—Jenin, Nablus, Rafah, the Muqata in Ramallah—but they take stock of the qualitative dimensions of occupation: checkpoints, refugee camps, the apartheid wall, the business end of an M-4. In reading these accounts, one is struck by the variegated cultural identities of ISM members and how their respective consequences in this line of activism depend on their being Palestinian, Israeli, or American, to name only a few. No sooner does one discover a universal link than it is quickly torn away by the severe racial overtones of Israel's project. Regardless, one comes away with distinct memories of individuality: Huwaida Arraf's "infectious sense of total calm," Neta Golan's acid defiance to her own authorities, and Jeremy Hardy's self-deprecations, "Palestinian

women have a way of looking at you that says, ‘Are you uniquely stupid, or is it a male thing?’”

Peace Under Fire’s table of contents could be modified and an index might prove beneficial, not to mention that the epilogue from the Israeli reservist Daniel Dworsky could be complemented by the voices of contemporary refuseniks—but these matters are for later editions, which will have to include the ongoing campaign in Bil’in, of course. For now, this work documents that common thread, where the experience of trauma sublimates into hope, anger, stupefaction, humor, longing, and anything but silence, as that is where the cause ends.

POLITICALLY ENGAGED TOURISM

Palestine and Palestinians: Guidebook, by the Alternative Tourism Group. Bayt Sahur: Alternative Tourism Group, 2005. 425 pages. Appendix to p. 436. Index to p. 444. \$30.00 paper.

Reviewed by Ilan Pappé³

It is difficult these days to think of Palestine as an ordinary tourist attraction. For those who choose to visit it as “Israel” and continue to deny the existence of Palestine or the Palestinians, it is indeed full of tourists’ resorts and sites of religious pilgrimages and of Jewish heritage. For some Europeans, whose charter flights take them directly to the Gulf of Aqaba, “Israel” is the city of Eilat on the way to the Sinai. However, ever since the outbreak of the first intifada, “political” or “ideological” tourists appeared. These people come with prior knowledge and with a desire to help, or at least to be informed. Even if they are not all hard-working volunteers in the International Solidarity Movement, they still are willing to invest time in listening to lectures, attending workshops, and even helping a bit while they are in Palestine or in Israel.

Until now, this group of tourists and visitors did not have any “tourist guide” to help them. The book under review is the ultimate guide for such a brand of committed tourist and activist. It would be wrong, however, to limit the definition of this book to a mere aide for the inquisitive tourist of modern day Palestine, for it breaks new ground in two very significant ways. First, it treats Palestine, from the river Jordan to the Mediterranean, as one subject matter for the visitors. It is through such a perspective that one can appreciate that Israel stretches over almost 80 percent of Palestine and that in 1948 al-Dawayma, today in the West Bank, and Tantura, today in Israel, suffered in a similar way from massacres carried out by Israeli forces.

Second, the book connects very smoothly and concisely the past and the present. It tells the tourist what can be seen and what could have been seen had it still been there. The present map and the erased map of Palestine are the contexts in which places are visited and discussed. Some illustrations in the guide, despite its compact format, give the readers a taste of this juxtaposition of a Palestinian past that was wiped out and a new Israeli reality that took its place.

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The book's first eighty pages are devoted to the land's history, including its natural and cultural histories. It is based on the most updated analyses appearing in recent years. These debunk successfully the Zionist historiographical narrative. Thereafter, however, the orderly structure is lost, although this actually makes for a better text. Its value is that it reflects the admixture of emotions, impressions, and reactions one feels when one visits Israel and Palestine. Biographies of famous Palestinians, some of them assassinated by the Israelis during the second intifada, with the local history of a village are located next to famous poems, recommended cuisine and restaurants, and a guide to religious sites. This cacophonous display resonates with the uneasy coexistence between normalcy and abnormality in the land, people striving to lead an ordinary life under occupation or discrimination and against the bitter memories of the past; sometimes they succeed, sometimes they do not. The guide thus at times impresses upon the reader that what Palestine and the Palestinians have to offer is good food, beautiful locations, and intriguing cultural gems. But these attractions are accompanied by assassinations, house demolitions, checkpoints, roadblocks, and the exile from 1948 until the present.

The most telling example of this blend of joy and death, feast and catastrophe is on page 353 of the guide. At first it seemed to me to be a serious editorial fault. Opposite the story about the Tantura massacre in May 1948 there is a picture of a wedding. Like so many photographs in this guide, it has no caption. Initially, one could not think of a greater contrast than that between the massacre and the marriage ceremony. A closer look at the picture, however, shows a bride and a groom walking away from their loved ones, who remain behind a border crossing, separated by a group of UN observers. This could be a typical wedding scene in the occupied Golan Heights, where the Druze community was divided in 1967 by the Israeli occupation and where weddings cannot be attended by all those invited; worse, the couple has to choose which side of their families they must leave forever, as they opt whether to live on the Syrian side or in the occupied Israeli side of the Golan.

Apart from this disorganized and reflective presentation of Palestine and the Palestinians today, the guide also has practical information for anyone wishing to tour the country while being aware of the difficulties of movement in some areas and the relative accessibility of certain other destinations. For example, it has a very detailed and useful section on the current procedures in the Israeli airport—a site where, in my experience, a random policy of harassment can make a trip to Israel and Palestine a nightmarish experience. The good advice in this section could certainly ease the passage of those most likely to face harassment: Americans of Arab origin or Europeans who are likely to be treated by the Israeli authorities as potential peace activists, the worst crime in Israel today.

As someone who was born in Israel, I am especially appreciative of the direct and unequivocal language used throughout the book. There is no wish to hide things or to beautify them—this is a guide that wants Palestine to be transparent, and this is most needed now when this reality is totally distorted in the Western media. Right now, the land craves the tourists who would be the future ambassadors of its current misery and messengers of solidarity with the people who struggle to shrug off the occupation and its horrors. This guidebook is for them.