
Zionizing the Palestinian Space: Historical and Historiographical Perspectives

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The Palestinian Space

In 1872, the Ottoman government founded the Sanjak of Jerusalem, thereby creating, for the first time, a cohesive geo-political space in Palestine. For a brief moment, the ruling powers in Istanbul contemplated the possibility of adding the sub-provinces of Nablus and Acre to the Sanjak, which included much of Palestine as we know it today. Had they done so, they would have created a geographical unit in which, as in Egypt, a particular nationalism might have arisen. However, even divided administratively into north (ruled by Beirut) and south (ruled by Jerusalem), Palestine as a whole was elevated above its previously peripheral status (when it had been divided into small regional sub-provinces). The north and south would become a single unit only in 1918 with the onset of British rule. In a similar way and in the same year, the British created the foundation of modern Iraq by fusing the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra into the State of Iraq. In Palestine, unlike in Iraq, familial connections and

geographical boundaries (the River Litani to the north, the river Jordan to the east and the Mediterranean to the west) worked together to weld the three sub-provinces of South Beirut, Nablus and Jerusalem into a cohesive social and cultural unit, a geo-political space with its own major dialect, customs, folklore and traditions (Pappe, 2006: 14-17). Had Zionism not arrived on Palestine's shores in 1882 it would have naturally become the home of a Palestinian nation and state.

However, as in the past, it was external perceptions of space that determined the political future of the country. As opposed to the Zionist viewpoint, the Ottoman and British perspectives did not clash dramatically with the conceptualization of space among the Palestinians (in the case of the British perspective at least until the 1930s), as a result of the lack of Palestinian initiative, which was partly related to the low level of politicization within rural society. Rural society was introversive and, despite the dramatic political events unfolding around it, continued to offer safe spaces to its

members. The villages also remained autonomous during the first years of the British Mandate as British interference in their lives was limited, as under the Ottomans, to the occasional intrusion for the purposes of land registration and tax collection. Urban society seems in hindsight to have been more active in challenging external definitions of the political space; however, this impression may result in part from the availability of more extensive literature on this segment of society, including the written legacy left to us by its elite. The Palestinians seemed to be reconciled to the Ottoman definition of outer and inner space in the society's life, but were of course aware of the British Empire's flirtation with Zionist ambitions to Judaize the space in which they lived. And yet, as Rashid Khalidi demonstrates in his book, *The Iron Cage*, they were slow to react to it (Khalidi, 2006).

In general, however, living in Palestine during the Mandatory period (1918-1948) meant belonging to a more cohesive geo-political unit than ever before. This result was the product of colonialist efforts, which to some extent corresponded to the harmonious ethnic and religious fabric on the ground. This cohesion constituted a break from the past, as Palestine had not previously been a well-defined entity. By 1918, Palestine was more united administratively than it had been in the Ottoman period due to

the aforementioned fusion of the three sub-provinces into one administrative entity after the First World War. While waiting for final international approval of Palestine's status in 1923, the British government negotiated over the final borders of the land, creating a better-defined space for the national movements to struggle over and a clearer sense of belonging among the people living in it. The final shaping of the borders helped the Zionist movement to conceptualize its concept of 'Eretz Israel', the "Land of Israel," in geographical terms.

The Zionist Space

From its inception until the 1930s, Zionism's perception of space, at least in discourse, remained loyal to an admixture of colonialist and modernist notions. Palestine was an empty land that Zionism would develop, and those living in the "empty" land were promised prosperity (an impossibility entailed in all colonialist discourses). Zionist scholarship today continues to represent this modernist paradigm of an early 20th century Palestine as a stagnant, frozen space that became dynamic only with the arrival of Zionism.

The Zionist movement began to play a decisive spatial role in Palestine from the early 1930s. Its dynamism took the British rulers by surprise and paralyzed the Palestinian leadership. The Zionists adopted a holistic approach to their

mission, which infused every sphere of their communal life with energy and determination, just as it invaded every neglected or empty space in the land that it could reach. The movement was led by the trio of David Ben-Gurion, Eliezer Kaplan and Moshe Sharett, who benefited from the advice and guidance of active ideologues such as Berl Kartzenelson. They were promoted by brutal colonizers such as Menachem Ussishkin and Yehoshua Hankin. Their desire for absolute control stood in stark contrast to the readiness of the Palestinian leadership to leave the social and economic life of their community in the hands of the British government. Their greatest success was in extracting the Zionist community from the colonial state in central spheres of life, to the extent that even non-Zionist Jewish groups, such as ultra-orthodox Jews, were made subject to the Zionist leadership's executive and legislative bodies. One of the earliest examples was in the field of education (Shepherd, 2000). The Zionist educational unit, founded in 1914, was an essential tool in the creation of this new reality. With the help of the Mandate, the Jewish leadership effected the segregation of the educational system as early as 1923, and, although bilingual and bi-national education remained available, it was taught privately.

And yet, until the end of the Mandate, the Zionist movement in practice possessed just 5.8% of the space in terms

of land ownership. However, with little effort and mainly as a consequence of the Holocaust, this minimal share was dramatically increased by the United Nations, which replaced the mandatory power as the international trustee in February 1947. In November 1947, the UN offered a final suggestion for a future solution, the partition plan, according to which 55% of the land would be allocated to the future Jewish state. However, the leaders of the Zionist movement made it clear in the negotiations that they expected to be assigned at least 80% of the land (an area equivalent to present-day Israel minus the West Bank). The rejection of the UN partition plan by the Palestinians and the departure of the British enabled the Zionist movement to take possession of the coveted 80%, despite the resistance of some neighboring Arab governments. Within six to seven months in the year of 1948, Jewish forces had appropriated the land and expelled the majority of the people living on it.¹

The takeover was accompanied by the physical destruction of Arab houses, the Judaization of villages, towns and holy sites, the demolition of mosques and churches, and the legalization of the state's appropriation of most of the country's land-space.

Spatial expansion continued in 1967, and following the June War of that year Israel's territory came to stretch from the Suez Canal to the northern tip of the

Golan Heights. Large areas were now in the hands of an ideological movement obsessed with space and land. Dynamic construction efforts that provided many with jobs and new-found affluence characterized these early years of the building boom up to the 1973 war. The newly-acquired space was covered with what the Zionist national poet Natan Alterman described as “a cloak of cement”.

Control over the space was established using the same methods and principles that had already been availed during the Mandatory period. When space became an issue in the 1930s, the Zionist settlements were built as gated communities called *Homa ve-Migdal*, or “a wall and a tower”. Settling in the midst of the Palestinian space in those mandatory days required fortification (a wall), particular caution (a tower), and subsequently claiming all the space between the gated communities as Zionist space. When the opportunity arose, as it did in 1948, this claim in practice meant the de-Arabization of the space.

The same strategy was implemented in the areas occupied by Israel in 1967 and not only in the Palestinian areas, for the dream had by now become the creation of an empire to include the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. Fortified walls were erected throughout the newly-acquired territories, the most famous of which was the Bar Lev Line (named after

the then-general chief of staff Chaim Bar Lev), which ran parallel to the Suez Canal like a kind of a Maginot Line and functioned much like its Second World War model during the 1973 war. New roads were also paved to lead to new settlements being constructed in the occupied territories, in breach of international law. Opportunities for entrepreneurs to prosper through investment in construction were thereby generated; these thriving enterprises, as always in the modern history of Israel and Palestine, stood in direct contrast to the continued deprivation of the Palestinians in general, and the refugees in particular.

Not only the methods of appropriating the land, but also the accompanying discourse, were identical. The connecting thread was the promise of bringing progress and prosperity to the native population; indeed, mastery over space has had an important economic aspect since 1967. The creeping annexation of Palestinian land had led to the integration of the local Palestinian economy into the Israeli economy and created relations of dependence that had become by far the most important aspect of life under occupation. With the exception of 1975, when the Israeli economy slipped into recession, the economic boom of this market generated a significant amount of economic activity in the occupied territories. In general terms this increased activity meant a rise in consumption levels

and a decline in unemployment. These two factors led Israeli academics to boast of a successful process of modernization in the occupied areas.² However, the paradigm of neo-colonialist dependence meant that there was no investment in the Palestinian areas themselves, and no infrastructure for depositing and accumulating superfluous capital and profits. In fact, these two indicators of economic activity, saving and investment, declined with the creeping annexation. Worse in economic terms was the effect on local industry: Israelis dumped their products in the territories, thereby undercutting local factories and producers. This policy was accompanied by an aggressive marketing campaign of Hebraizing signposts, public spaces and individual consciousness.

Palestinians challenged and opposed these spatial policies. The first Intifada had all the makings of an anti-colonialist movement, and the struggle over the space was played out in a typically asymmetrical colonialist fashion. The uprising was immediately met with a brutal policy of punishment and retaliation. The focus of the retribution was spatial in two respects: Israel became justified in reducing the Palestinian space within the occupied territories – by annexing it directly or indirectly to Israel – and, secondly, limiting the space became a punitive measure at the most ‘micro’ level of life, that of one’s home. Thus the most severe

of these punitive acts was the sealing off and demolition of houses; or rather the makeshift homes of the refugees. Given the limited space afforded by such “houses”, one can only imagine the effect of such punishment on the Palestinian population. This same process was revived after the second Intifada, with even greater force and brutality.

Inside Israel establishing mastery and control over the space was also in the main an “Arab” affair, consisting of policies directed against the Palestinian community in the Jewish state. Since 1949, Palestinians in Israel have been concentrated in two areas: the Little Triangle, or Wadi Ara, and the Galilee. There were, and still are, socio-economic disparities between the two geographical centers of Arab life in the Jewish state. In the north, the Arab population Galilee was generally more affluent than that of the Little Triangle, where the population was crammed into a small space and allowed access to a limited range of occupations. Unsurprisingly, petty crime and unemployment rose in some towns, although, given the levels of socioeconomic hardship, the levels remain very low indeed, relatively speaking.³

A Post-Zionist Spatial Challenge

The robust Palestinian resistance did not erode Israeli control over Palestine, but it did persuade several Jewish individuals and groups to accept the logic behind the

resistance. This new spatial standpoint entailed both a degree of identification with the Palestinian plight, in the political realm, and, academically, a partial acceptance of postmodernist and relativist thought. Thus this trend was given the working title of ‘post-Zionism’.

A general word on post-Zionism may be useful at this juncture. Towards the end of the 1980s a number of Israeli scholars, both inside and outside the country, researched aspects of past and present Jewish society in Israel/Palestine. Their research contradicted the conventional Zionist and the official Israeli historical narratives, debunked the most sacred “historical truths” of Zionism, and questioned their relevance for the present generation. Moreover, these scholars criticised the role played by Israeli academic institutions in shaping the Zionist self-image, and its portrayal of the Palestinian reality. Directly and indirectly, they deconstructed the works of those who had come to dominate Israeli academic writing on the history of Palestine as well as contemporary Jewish society. Because of their prominence in the public consciousness they constitute a veritable cultural phenomenon in Israel. The local press, then as now, referred to them as “post-Zionist” scholars, a term which, though not accepted by some of the scholars themselves, is a convenient one for describing the essence of their undertaking, and will be used herein.¹

From a chronological perspective it seems that the first academic attempt was to re-write the history books of Israel. However, soon, and perhaps quite naturally, the challengers from within the academy did not merely question the “truth”, but were intrigued by the way in which this “truth” was constructed and represented by the academy. The ideological role of the academy was exposed factually and methodologically. The factual challengers strove to portray, in a pure, positivist manner, what they believed to be the true nature of the Zionist project in Palestine and during the various chapters of Israel’s past. They viewed that history from the victims’ standpoint, and Zionism was depicted as a victimising movement. In particular, they rewrote Israeli behaviour, or rather misbehaviour, toward the Arab world and the Palestinians, in the past and present. The mainstream Israeli academy was accused of covering up and concealing these unpleasant chapters and truths from the public eye. The emerging picture provoked angry reactions from public figures and press commentators; its portrayal of Israeli and Zionist conduct and policies towards the Palestinians and neighbouring Arab societies as aggressive, at times brutal and inhuman, and often morally unjustifiable, was one with which most Israelis were unfamiliar.

The academic challenge began with the appearance of new books that rewrote the

history of the 1948 war. The “new historians” in Israel, as the group writing on the 1948 period became known, then moved back in time from 1948 and began revisiting early Zionist history. This research was done mainly by sociologists who employed theories and methodologies – untouched hitherto by their peers – which substantiated a blunter ideological claim: their theoretical perspective allowed them to look at Zionism as a colonialist movement without being accused of straightforwardly adopting the Palestinian discourse. However, even without adopting the prism of colonialism, the usage of neutral methodological tools enabled sociologists to examine, with the help of domination and co-optation theories, the dictatorial and arbitrary nature of the Jewish political system that developed in the mandatory period (Ram, 1994). The neutral methodology created a professional discourse, one which is now accepted by most scholars in Israel writing on Zionism, except those closely connected to the establishment. Thus, “The Redemption of the Land” became occupation, “*Oleh*” became immigrant, “Hebrew work” became expulsion, etc.

The “new historians” also moved further forward in time and began to “reconstruct” the early 1950s. Again, it was mainly sociologists who painted a picture which challenged the collective national memory that presented young

Israel as a melting-pot in which all of the Diaspora was gathering to live happily ever after. The first step was to slaughter Israel’s most sacred cow – security. These sociologists rejected the government’s explanations that it was solely due to considerations of security and national defence that North African Jews had been pushed to the geographical and social margins of the society, and contended that an *Apartheid* regime was being imposed on the Palestinians living in Israel. These policies were exposed as racist and nationalist (Shohat, 1989).

Political scientists went further still by linking the past to the present and beginning to assess Israel as a militaristic society. They provided analyses in which Israel appeared as an active, rather than a merely reactive, player on the regional map. Instability and conflict in the Middle East were now also attributed to the actions of Israel, and not just to “Arab radicalism” or “Arab intransigence” (Eliezer, 1995; Carmi and Rosenfeld, 1989; Erlich, 1987).

Post-Zionist geography is harder to come by. There is the pioneering work of Oren Yiftachel, about whom more will be said later, one of the few geographers to have remained critical beyond the Israeli academy’s brief post-Zionist phase. However, overall the challenges to the Zionist spatial conception of the land came from the other disciplines, as described above, mainly because the

geography of the land is part of a bizarre discipline called 'Eretz Israel studies', which in some universities is larger than the geography department. Thus many geographers as such are affiliated to this ideological academic attempt to provide a Zionist scaffold for research into the land and its nature.

More direct post-Zionist spatial challenges were launched outside the academy. Post-Zionist Israeli cinema demonstrated respect for the other side's perception of space, as Nurith Gertz's comparative study of landscape memory in both Israeli and Palestinian cinema attests. In fact, post-Zionist cinema in the 1990s experimented with space and identity beyond the frame of Zionism (Munk, 2005).

Indeed, if one considers the sum of the challenges posed by the new historians, the critical sociologists and the more open-minded political scientists, it is clear that in the 1990s a substantial number of Israeli scholars were challenging the spatial concepts of Zionism. The first message of these scholars was that the land had been Palestinian – in history, culture and character – prior to its colonization. Secondly, the imposition of the Zionist identity on the land after 1948 victimized not only the Palestinians, but also Mizrahi Jews and women. Finally, the drive to master the space has driven Israeli policy towards the conflict with the Palestinians since 1967. It can explain the successive

Israeli conceptualization of peace: the desire to create a racist, ethnic state next to a group of Palestinian Bantustans, the ongoing ethnic cleansing in parts of the West Bank that Israel wishes to annex, the discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the war crimes perpetrated against the population of the Gaza Strip.

A more probing look at the academic challenge would, however, reveal a certain ambiguity over describing the Zionist conquest of the space as colonialist. Post-Zionist spatial studies tended to be more interested in the application of post-colonial theory to the local case-study, whereas critical Palestinian and anti-Zionist scholars insisted that the situation on the ground remained colonialist and had not yet become post-colonialist (Shitrit, 2005).

Some went even further in their criticism of post-Zionism for failing to "walk the extra mile". "So on an experimental level, we see that a true post-Zionist discourse will create new relationships between community, state, and the society, remold the spaces in which these groups and structures interact, and in the process reorder the space of Palestine/Israel, not just in terms of borders, but in terms of cities and neighborhoods. From this perspective post-Zionism was still modernist, or Zionist," wrote Mark Levine, for example (Levine, 1996).

In any case, this critical energy –

whether deemed significant or not – petered out in 2000 and was replaced by a new balance of power in the production of knowledge in Israel: the rise of neo-Zionist scholarship and with it the reaffirmation of the classical Zionist spatial interpretation of the present reality.

The Demise of Post-Zionism

The ramifications of the second Palestinian uprising in the Occupied Territories and in Israel itself in particular for the success of the critical post-Zionist movement were so powerful as to render the short post-Zionist decade insignificant, at least ostensibly. However, viewed today, eight years later, it can be argued that the post-Zionist enterprise did plant new seeds of thought, which it might be hoped will bloom, if not in the near future then in a more distant one. When the second Intifada erupted it became clear that, for some of its proponents, post-Zionism had been merely an intellectual fad or a Zionist tactic: it was both a *bon ton* and a useful means of presenting a more peaceable Israel to the world. However, a few others remained solid believers in the need to transform the ideological infrastructure on which the state was built; they genuinely regarded the basic ideology of Zionism as an obstacle to peace and normalization in both Israel and Palestine.

Within a few weeks of October 2000, the Israeli public discourse had been

reconfigured along strictly consensual lines. The new discourse of unity engulfed all, including those working in the aforementioned areas of cultural production. People whom I have referred to in this article as “post-Zionists” issued *mea culpa* statements, reasserting their allegiance to Zionism and declaring both their distrust of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and their animosity toward the Palestinian minority in Israel.

The public discourse revealed a sense of relief; a decade of disintegration and disunity had come to an end and been succeeded by a unity that re-embraced even the extremist settler movement in the Occupied Territories.

The same attitude was evinced towards the diffident post-Zionist – to say nothing of the Palestinian – conceptualization of space and the spatial dimensions of the conflict. Today, Zionist scholars ascribe the cause to the fact that territory remains a central component of national identity within the contemporary political discourse for both sides of the conflict, and that both populations oppose power-sharing within the same space, out of fear of domination by the other. It seems, however, that while there are various Palestinian conceptions of how to share the space, the above description aptly portrays the mainstream Zionist attitude and the extreme positions of the Palestinian Islamist groups. The paradigm of parity – namely of projecting onto the

Palestinian side the same total rejection of sharing the space – characterized the liberal Zionist depiction of the reality: both sides have been equally stubborn in their refusal to share the land and thus partition or some kind of separation is the only way forward. This partition was, of course, to be accomplished on the most unequal of terms, with over 80% of the land designated to the Jewish side and the remainder, a cantonized, fragmented and divided area comprising less than 20% of the land-space, to the Palestinians. This logic was accepted during the Oslo era by the external mediators and has served as the basis for all the subsequent abortive peace proposals, under the auspices of the Quartet.

The Zionist geographers of the 21st century draw attention to the acceptance among Jewish citizens of the possibility of change within Israel's territorial configuration or of a diminishment in the importance of the territorial dimension of the national struggle. By this they mean a willingness to withdraw a direct Israeli presence from parts of the West Bank and all of the Gaza Strip. David Newman, a recent exemplifier of this position, is content with describing, rather than analyzing, this current Zionist position. Consequently he attributes a tactical readiness to alter the boundaries of Zionist domination of the land to a fundamental change in the Zionist conception of national identity. This, to my mind

insignificant, change in Israeli perceptions is depicted as a willingness to consider national identity as more permeable and inclusive (Newman, 2001). Liberal Zionist academic discourse of this kind has been mistaken by many in the West for a genuine critique of Zionism.

In contrast to this approach, Oren Yiftachel, as a professional geographer, has continued to challenge Israel's spatial policies, with a particular focus on its activities in the Negev. He analyzed the spraying of fields cultivated by Arab Bedouin with toxic chemicals, the demolition of their houses and their expulsion from their villages as examples of ethnic policies. He defines Israel as an ethnocracy. Although his analysis focuses more on the contradiction between citizenship and ethnicity than on spatial policies, the connection is obvious as the two – the identity of the state and the definition of the space – are closely interrelated. Yiftachel criticizes the attempt of the Zionist left to span the unbridgeable gap between an ethnic space and a democratic space by terming Israel an ethnic democracy, an academic oxymoron similar to the more popular oxymora that have guided Israeli society since the inception of the state, including the "Jewish democracy", "the purity of arms" and an "enlightened occupation". Yiftachel does, though, highlight the bi-national nature of the space and Israel's unilateral attempt to nationalize it

through what he describes as “spatial malleability”, a situation in which the state has no clear boundaries and thus finds it difficult to construct an overarching citizenship for its heterogeneous population. However, the situation could, of course, be reversed: Israel cannot provide itself with a stable spatial framework – or for that matter a constitution – as long as it contains significant numbers of non-Jews and Palestinians. And as Yiftachel rightly comments, when there is even a slight possibility of consolidating Israel’s borders – for whatever reason – the notion of ethnic cleansing is strongly and openly propagated; as Avigdor Lieberman has put it, “There is nothing undemocratic about transfer” (Yiftachel, 2006).

Neo-Zionist Spatial Perceptions

Yiftachel is something of a voice in the wilderness. The post-post-Zionist reaction in the sphere of spatial considerations and deliberations has been very much in the order of the reaction in other fields of inquiry or activity. The relative critique of the 1990s has been replaced by a neo-Zionist reaction. As I have noted elsewhere (Pappe, 2006), the classical Zionist perception of the land and ethnic purity was that they should be achieved either through war or via a more sophisticated and protracted process that should hide the real objectives, objectives which could estrange the “civilized world”.

However, with the post-2000 neo-Zionist reaction the need to shield the real aims of territorial expansion or ethnic purity was dispensed with. This new self-confidence had much to do with the September 11th al-Qaida attacks on the U.S. and the ensuing American “war on terror”, which endorsed and embraced the neo-Zionist ideology. It is also possible that a deeper dynamic was at work here: a desire to eradicate any possible doubts that post-Zionism had failed to establish roots within Jewish society in Israel by reverting to an inflexible interpretation of classical Zionism.

Neo-Zionism here does not necessarily entail a shift to the right, but rather a reshaping of the consensual center. The fact that A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, Arnon Soffer, Ephraim Sneh, Benjamin Netanyahu and many others have been able openly to favor the principle of ethnic purity above any other value, including values such as human or civil rights, democracy and humanism, demonstrates that these notions occupy the center ground of the political system and not its right-wing margins.

Had not the previous Olmert government been weakened by personal rivalries, fallen into the debacle in Lebanon, and above all lost its compass – Ariel Sharon – the policies announced by the government, and not only those enacted on the ground, would have very accurately represented this neo-Zionist

vision of the final borders of the Jewish State. The present phase, like the peace process of the 1990s, would have become another period in which spatial considerations were very much the focus of Zionist strategizing, with the dire result that Israel would have first consolidated its grip on the space, and then determined how to Judaize it. More specifically, there would have been greater public access to both the planning schemes and the policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians who live in the Greater Jerusalem area and around the separation wall, and the exact boundaries of the areas in the West Bank to be annexed to Israel.

Neo-Zionist spatial policies in the 21st century are not only aimed at the occupied territories; in the Negev they focus on transferring the Arab Bedouin into reservations as part of efforts to de-Arabize the space. Elsewhere the familiar policies of discrimination continue to regulate land transactions, land rights and ownership, land allocation, etc.

As mentioned above, even at the height of its influence, the post-Zionist challenge did not penetrate the geography departments of Israel's universities. Unsurprisingly, today this discipline is ultra-nationalist, and its practitioners in Israel and abroad are writing bizarre books that commend the aesthetics of Zionist colonization, which "redefined the space by its de-alienation" (Zakim, 2006). Thus the old and romantic discourse of Zionism

as nationalism has returned, where the land – which was robbed from the Palestinians – is the major constitutive factor of self and nation. We are back at square one; how terrible.

Notes

- 1 I describe this process in my recent book, Pappé, Ilan (2006) *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. New York and London: Oneworld Publications.
- 2 See Raphael Israeli, ed (1984) *Ten Years of Israeli Rule in Judea and Samaria, 1967-1977*. Jerusalem: Magnes (Hebrew).
- 3 Political parties and NGOs, and not the state, are responsible for this relatively low crime level. The Islamic movement in particular has played an important role in this regard. It was in the Triangle that political Islam sprang up, especially in areas where difficult living conditions similar to those in the Palestinian spaces within refugee camps prevailed, in the slums in the Arab inner cities and the impoverished villages of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

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The chapter reviews curriculum debates globally, which involve negotiation between political, historiographical and pedagogical principles and perspectives. One difficulty is the reconciling of "big..." In: Zajda J. (eds) Nation-Building and History Education in a Global Culture. Globalisation, Comparative Education and Policy Research, vol 13.