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REVIEW OF BOOKS[Current Issue](#) **B**

Autumn 2019

## 'Duel Review': The Conflict over the Right of Return

**Emmanuel Navon & Tamer Masalha**

Two reviews, separately written, about recent books about the Palestinian "right of return."

[Nakba in Hebrew: A Political Journey](#), Eitan Bronstein-Aparicio and Eleonore Merza-Bronstein, Pardes Publishing, 2018

[The War of the Right of Return: The Battle over the Palestinian Refugee Problem and How Israel can Win](#), Adi Schwarz and Einat Wilf, Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir Publishing House, 2018

### It's 1948, Stupid/Emmanuel Navon

Seventy years after Israel's independence, the issue of Palestinian refugees continues to produce controversies—and books. Thirty years ago, Benny Morris coined the term “The New Historians,” to describe the work done by himself (most notably *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*) and other historians to supposedly shatter Israel's good conscience—for which he was rebuked by Efraim Karsh in *Fabricating Israeli History*. More recently, Ari Shavit's *My Promised Land* was [critiqued](#) by Martin Kramer for its claim that “Zionism” committed a massacre in Lod during the War of Independence. But much, apparently, remains unsaid on the matter. Two new books, both published in Israel last year, try to settle the controversial issue of Palestinian refugees from opposite viewpoints: *Nakba in Hebrew* by Eitan Bronstein Aparicio and Eléonore Merza Bronstein, and *The War of Return* by Adi Schwartz and Einat Wilf.

The co-authors of *Nakba in Hebrew* are a couple, both with atypical backgrounds. Bronstein describes himself as an immigrant forcibly converted to Judaism as a child, but who proudly “divorced Zionism” as an adult because he felt like a “colonizer.” Eléonore was born in France, to a Jewish mother and to a Circassian Muslim father who fled the Golan Heights after the Six Day War of 1967. She moved to Israel, but made a point of not applying for Israeli citizenship under Israel's “law of return.” *Nakba in Hebrew* is autobiography presented in the form of an interview, in which Bronstein explains to Merza how bringing the *Nakba* (the Arabic word for the “catastrophe” of Israel's independence in 1948) to the consciousness of the Israeli public became his life's mission. But the book unveils nothing new or previously unknown about the history of Palestinian refugees. It is merely a political manifesto, advocating the Palestinian “right of return” to Israel.

Eitan, originally named Claudio, was born in Argentina to a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. The Bronstein family moved to Israel in 1965 when Claudio was five, to

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join relatives on Kibbutz Bahan; but the family were only allowed to join the Kibbutz after they converted to Judaism and took Hebrew names (Bronstein *père*, being Jewish, was exempt; Bronstein *filis* does not give any details about the conversion process itself, but he does mention that the trauma of his circumcision still haunts him). Bronstein refused to serve the army during the First Lebanon War in 1982 and during the First Intifada in 1988, and prides himself on having convinced his children to evade the draft. He stopped defining himself as a Zionist following the outbreak of the Second Intifada in October 2000, after realizing that “the basic problem is the occupation of 1948 and not (only) that of 1967.” Bronstein laments that the Zionist Left “relates to the year 1967 as the beginning of the occupation as if there had been no occupation” since 1948. In 2002 he founded *Zochrot*, an NGO whose core objective is to promote the Palestinian “right of return” to Israel.

Bronstein describes at length his efforts to identify the remnants of Arab villages abandoned in 1948 and to make Israelis feel guilty about their erasure. His narrative (that Zionist colonizers destroyed and renamed the villages of Palestinian natives) is so single-minded that it betrays a lack of self-awareness. Bronstein lists villages whose names were Hebraized after Israel’s independence, such as Beit Guvrin (formerly Bait Jibrin) and Ein Ayala (formerly Ain Azal). But a similar list could be made of villages with Arabized names: Saffuriya (formerly Tzipori in Hebrew), Nablus (formerly Neapolis in Greek), and Latrun (formerly Le Toron in medieval French), for example. The city of Acre has had its name changed many times: it was Akko under the Kingdoms of Israel; Ptolemais during the Greek and Roman period; Saint-Jean d’Acre under the Crusaders; Akka under the Arabs; Acre under the British; and Akko once again since 1948. The renaming of conquered cities is hardly an Israeli invention.

Bronstein’s “solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the practical implementation of the Palestinian “right of return.” Since, according to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine), there are presently around five million Palestinian refugees, the inevitable outcome would be a binational state with a Jewish minority. Anyone familiar with the Middle East, and with the history of the Jews in Arab lands, knows that such a state would not resemble Canada, Belgium, or Switzerland—but rather Lebanon, Iraq or Syria. Fortunately, for Bronstein and Merza, they have foreign passports that would allow them to run for their lives after “solving” the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Back in his native Argentina, Bronstein will undoubtedly look for the remnants of former Inca villages destroyed by the Spanish. But then, the Incas themselves were an empire, one that colonized the Diaguitas in the mid-fifteenth century. Bronstein could decide instead to do justice on behalf of the Mapuches. But they too conquered other tribes, such as the Puelches and the Querandis. In other words, Bronstein’s Manichean theory of “colonized” versus “colonizers” does not stand the test of historical scrutiny, and is therefore a myth. Countries are the outcomes of wars, invasions, and migrations. The supposedly “native Palestinians” are themselves descendants of invaders and colonizers from the Arabian Peninsula. The Middle East has no “natives”: it has diverse populations, the product of a dynamic and generally violent history shaped by empires, conquerors, nomads, traders, and proselytes.

Bronstein and Merza claim that the Palestinian “right of return” is “recognized by international law.” This statement is factually wrong, Adi Schwartz and Einat Wilf

demonstrate in *The War of Return*, a book that makes the case against the Palestinian “right of return.” All four authors are correct in recognizing that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not about 1967 but about 1948. But while Bronstein and Merza are willing to let the Palestinians have their way, Schwartz and Wilf are not. Bronstein and Merza insist that Jews must abandon Zionism; Schwartz and Wilf assert that Arabs must abandon the “right of return.”

The main merit of *The War of Return* is in setting the record straight and debunking myths. About 600,000 Arabs (estimates vary from 580,000 and 760,000) left their homes during Israel’s War of Independence. Some fled, others were pushed out, but most (two-thirds) remained within the borders of British Palestine (Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip). The last third moved to neighboring countries: Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. In other words, two-thirds of the Arabs who left their homes in 1948 were not refugees but rather internally displaced persons, since they left their homes but not their country. This point is crucial, because the UN Convention on Refugees (1951) does not recognize internally displaced persons as refugees.

Not only did the Arabs create the refugee problem, by rejecting the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine and by attacking Israel; but the “Palestinian refugee problem,” as it came to be known, constituted but a small percentage of a global refugee phenomenon, and followed the pattern of other conflict zones. The ravages of World War II turned millions of people into refugees. Some 12 million Germans were expelled from Eastern Europe; 1.5 million Poles were forced out of Ukraine and Belarus; and 300,000 Italians had to leave Yugoslavia. The partition of India in 1947 produced 14 million internally displaced persons in India and Pakistan. Like the partition of India, the partition of Palestine produced a *double* refugee problem; some 900,000 Jews were expelled from Arab and Muslim countries between 1948 and the early 1980s.

The Palestinian “right of return” has no basis in international law. Resolution 194, passed by the UN General Assembly in December 1948, does not create any right of return, either for Palestinian refugees or their descendants. Besides being a non-binding resolution, it applies to the refugees of 1948 and not to their descendants; and it offers financial compensation as an alternative to a return, linked to the presumed unwillingness to “live at peace with their neighbors.”

While most countries quickly realized that it would be unrealistic and impractical for the Palestinian refugees to return to Israel, the Arab nations were adamant that Israel take back all the refugees. These conflicting agendas eventually produced a compromise, the creation of UNRWA in December 1949. Under pressure from the Arab nations, the UN agreed to add an article in UNRWA’s status, specifying that the agency’s temporary mandate could be renewed by the UN General Assembly. For the past 70 years, the mandate of the supposedly temporary UNRWA has been renewed on a regular basis.

A second mistake was to agree to renew UNRWA’s mandate despite the creation, in December 1950, of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Since Palestinian refugees were but a portion of the world’s refugee population, UNRWA should have been dismantled the moment UNHCR was established. However, when the Arab states realized that the mandate of UNHCR was to integrate refugees in their host countries, they immediately demanded that the UN continue to maintain UNRWA

and keep the Palestinian refugee issue under its separate jurisdiction. In 1954, UNRWA decided to apply the status of “Palestinian refugee” to the descendants of the 1948 refugees. This unilateral decision has never been endorsed by the UN General Assembly. UNHCR only transmits refugee status after carefully assessing whether or not descendants still qualify. UNRWA, however, do so automatically. Hence, the number of “Palestinian refugees” has grown exponentially from 600,000 in 1948 to over five million today.

*Nakba in Hebrew* and of *The War of Return* were purposely written in Hebrew, their authors seeking to influence Israelis rather than the court of international opinion. Schwartz and Wilf want Israelis to realize that their governments have consistently turned a blind eye to UNRWA, even though this organization constitutes the ultimate obstacle to a two-state solution—which, incidentally, both authors continue to support. As for Bronstein and Merza, their book will only appeal to those Israelis who are willing to give up on the Jewish right to national self-determination. Each book provides the extra motivation that Israelis may lack: either to commit national suicide, or to fight for their lives.

### **On the Limits of Consciousness, the Engineering of Ignorance, Fascism, and the Nakba\*/Tamer Masalha**

Rarely does the discrepancy between two books become so immediately clear. Just a glimpse of the cover images reveals the philosophical, moral, and intellectual abyss that lies between them.

*Nakba in Hebrew* features a picture of a decrepit wall, its faded paint peeling, a chair with torn upholstery standing beside it. This setting evokes memories of a forlorn past, of a life cut short, condemned to poverty and abandon. It invites the reader to halt before turning opening first page, and try to imagine the sights and sounds that once animated the room; it is a graphic portrayal of a void, the most accurate possible.

This ambiguity is reinforced by the provocative title, *Nakba in Hebrew*. Virtually the most charged word in Arabic – certainly to Israeli-Jewish ears – rendered, as though spitefully, in the national language of those who perpetrated it and have been trying to sweep it under the carpet. The tagline, “A Political Journey,” suggests that for the authors the Nakba is not necessarily a geographical location, but a discursive one.

The design of *The War of the Right of Return* is as diametrically opposed as can be. The title is spread across the page in stark colors, echoing splash headlines that appeared in the Israeli tabloids during the Second Intifada. The words “war” and “return” are in black, whereas the word “right” is in white, as if it were a phantom never meant to take physical shape. It suggests that the Right of Return is not a right, with moral, legal and political implications. It’s just not real. What is real, however, is the risk that it poses. It is concrete and palpable. So is the war against it. And the contrast to the amorphous right is striking.

A drawing of a broken key, in flashing red, amplifies the threat – and the campaign against it. If only we know how, the authors seem to suggest, we will overcome it. The key, of course, is the well-known symbol of the Nakba, the last relic of thousands of houses lost and left behind. The key is a reminder of a property claim – personal as well as collective – that refuses to go away. The key is the main weapon in the arsenal that the authors set out to destroy with their pen.

The Hebrew tagline – “The Battle Over the Palestinian Refugee Problem and how Israel can Win” – is also far removed from the evocative ambiguity of the cover of *Nakba in Hebrew*. There is no room for ambiguity here, the authors seem to say outright. Strategic goals in the title, tactical ones in the tagline, and the heritage of Israel’s victories in the battlefield to draw on.

Perceptive readers are sure to have noticed what is missing from the book’s cover, both in the title and the tagline – the word *Nakba*. Thus, a book intending to discuss the consequences of the most formative historical event of the Arab-Israeli conflict is missing the very word that designates the event itself.

This book’s cover, including its title and tagline – their confidence, directness, phrasing – all these are supposed to remind the reader of the typical idiom used in the Israeli political and intellectual discourse. The cover is worded in the familiar Israeli militarist style of generals about to attack the next hill – a political reality with a simple operational design, confidently planned for yet another victory.

There is something depressing, while at the same time illuminating, in Schwarz’s and Wilf’s book. The depression stems not necessarily from the political-moral position regarding the Nakba and the “imposed solution” the authors offer to the perpetual problem of the refugees. What is depressing is the growing extremism of the intellectual smugness that has been typical of the Israeli establishment all along – a smugness that has been increasing in recent decades. The book’s clichéd collection of words, sentences, and arguments conceals the authors’ contempt for reality, for the facts that have accumulated over the years, facts that repeatedly clarify the process of ethnic cleansing that began in 1948 and continues to this day. The only difference is that today this process is called by another name and employs other means (see the latest developments in Umm al-Hiran, East Jerusalem, Al-Araqueeb, and generally in Area C). The same unease with or inability to recognize the facts, respect reality, be willing to read the history and the political map, conduct a dialogue with the other side, and recognize the limits of power and language – all these add up to an endeavor of contempt for the truth, willful repression, and the adoption of a contrary, hostile position towards any discourse or narrative that does not comply with the narrative of the dominant majority. This kind of behavior is characteristic of the spirit of the times, both in our region and in many other places worldwide.

The book is for the most part a collection of historical anecdotes, interspersed with fragments of identical, interchangeable arguments similar to the talking points of Israeli “Hasbara.” These are the main ones: 1) There was no Nakba, since the Arabs left of their own free will. 2) Even if there was, this event is no different from events in many other places in the world that have known national conflicts. 3) The exact number of the original refugees is unclear; therefore, there are no “refugees.” 4) There was no Palestinian state, therefore there are no Palestinian refugees. 5) A refugee is a member of the first generation and not someone born in another country, with no link to the ancestral land. Most of the refugees are members of the second generation, therefore there are no refugees. 6) If indeed any Palestinian became a refugee, he has no one to blame but himself, since his refugee status is his own fault. He sought to destroy us and paid the price. 7) If we bring about the elimination of UNRWA – the humanitarian relief organization for Palestinian refugees (something that Israel has refused to do, as a result – according to the authors – of its shocking political blindness, and despite the support for this move by the hawkish U.S. administration) – we will thereby also eliminate the demand for the Right of Return and its recognition in the political and public spheres. This will solve the refugee problem and end the refugee condition, which will be dealt with according to the location of the refugees and the

circumstances of the state absorbing them. 8) Any recognition of the Right of Return, of the refugee problem, and of the Nakba amounts to recognition of the program of the Palestinian collective to destroy the State of Israel. 9) It is impossible to reach a peace agreement without abolishing the Right of Return. 10) There is no political solution besides dividing the land.

As I noted above, Schwarz's and Wilf's book is also illuminating, the closer we read it to Bronstein-Aparacio's and Merza-Bronstein's. The comparison is particularly stark after reading the latter's chapter on "A Brief History of the Nakba in Israel." In fact, this chapter links the two books together. The link does not lie in whether the Nakba did or did not occur, or what its possible solution is. It lies in the emphasis that both books place on its importance in the development of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and on its influence on the shaping of the Israeli political consciousness. The Nakba is the soil that grew the political institutions and society that displays hostility and violence both towards the Palestinians under their control, and towards any internal criticism. According to Eitan and Eleonore, the end result of the "war" against the Right of Return or the existence of the Nakba is the obliteration of any real difference between many parts of the Israeli right (including semi-fascist organizations such as Im Tirtzu), and the Israeli center-left, which obstinately refuses to acknowledge the Nakba and its moral, legal, and political responsibility for this event's occurrence.

The strategy, in my opinion, is quite simple: when the wish to uphold a structure of willful ignorance meets with too many cracks in reality and in the public discourse, the only way to preserve this worldview is to apply additional force, in order to achieve a conformity that can maintain the status quo. Thus, the denial of the Nakba and all of its characteristics and consequences leads to the "Nakba Law," the "Culture Loyalty Law," and the "Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People," as well as countless other witch-hunts. In turn, these laws generate an intolerance that further widens the net of "who-else-has-joined-the-ranks-of-Israel's-enemies" (the left, the New Israel Fund, and others like them).

Thus – according to Schwarz and Wilf – if UNRWA is abolished, the refugees will no longer be refugees; never mind the humanitarian consequences or how this will impact the stability of regimes and states that are unable to support so many refugees in their territory. Above all, the organization must be eliminated because the basic assumption of the authors is that it is a political body providing humanitarian aid that enables the ongoing resistance to the Zionist vision of the Jewish homeland.

This strategy is also apparent in the management of the conflict in the Occupied Territories: the assumption is that if we bomb Gaza again and again, we will "sear their consciousness"; and that if we move the American embassy to East Jerusalem and destroy many houses in the area, they will finally understand that Jerusalem is the unified capital of Israel; and that if we continue to settle the Territories while denying basic human rights to hundreds of thousands, they will accept our superiority.

The picture that arises from Eitan's political journey, as described in his and Eleonore's book, is no less than the exposure of the genealogy underlying Israel's deeds of concealment and repression and its engineering of ignorance. All these are directed and orchestrated by the Israeli establishment, in the public sphere and in the national consciousness. The book reveals that the Nakba is not just the story of the shaping of Palestinian identity over the generations, nor of the fate of the Palestinian refugees; it is also, and mostly, about the shaping of Israeli identity and its formative story, against the background of the Nakba's reality. This is a story about a conflict

between two peoples that repeatedly requires a new balance point. Once that point is reached, it serves, in turn, as the basis for the application of more power and of new means intended to impose a political and conceptual conformism on one people, with the aim of suppressing, and even negating, the other.

To conclude, I will quote an anecdote from the book by Eitan and Eleonore, describing the testimony of a Palmach fighter named Ezra, who told the following story:

“And in the hallway, I remember a wounded Arab lying on a bed, wounded so bad that I thought it would be an act of mercy to finish him off... as I’m raising my Tommy gun... he looks at me and says in Yiddish: ‘Hobn rachmones’... have mercy... and those words in Yiddish stopped me, I froze in my tracks.”

This is a spine-chilling story about how one awakens from a nightmare, about a sudden understanding that the wounded Arab’s blood is just as thick as Ezra’s or the blood of the Jews murdered in the Holocaust, or the blood of anyone else. But this is not a thought appropriate to those wishing to abolish the Right of Return. This is not a thought appropriate to those wishing to deny the refugee status by abolishing a relief organization that opens clinics and schools and distributes flour in the refugee camps.

“On the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion,” says Psalm 137. Redemption begins with the endurance of memory. And if the Palestinian is no less human than the Jew, then why think that by force, persecution, and abuse, the refugee can be defeated – and that the memory of his homeland, of which he was dispossessed and to which he seeks to return, can be obliterated?

*\*Translated by Anat Schultz*

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