

Contemporary Muslim World

PALESTINE: A FOUR THOUSAND YEAR HISTORY, Nur Masalha. London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2022, vii+448 pp. ISBN: 978-0755649426.

This comprehensive and authoritative monograph delves into the rich heritage of Palestine and Palestinians, revealing cultures and societies with remarkable depth and continuity that reach back to the dawn of recorded history. Beginning with early mentions in ancient Egyptian and Assyrian records, author Nur Masalha traces the evolution of Palestinian identity across thousands of years, from the Bronze Age to today. The author is primarily concerned with the Orwellian proclivities of Zionism to erase the topography of Palestine and project an invented Hebrew-language antiquity. Using a wealth of historical sources and the latest archaeological findings, Masalha illustrates how the diverse past of Palestine has been deliberately obscured and mythologized, both by religious and political narratives and motives, and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. He argues that Palestine, contrary to popular belief, is neither a recent construct nor an identity formed in opposition to Israel, but one deeply rooted in antiquity. *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* stands as the definitive account of this valuable historical legacy.

Nur Masalha, an academic with teaching experience at St. Mary's University and the University of London, sets out in *Palestine* to present a detailed and comprehensive study. The author takes an academically nuanced and indirect approach, carefully arguing for Palestine as a genuine historical entity and casting doubt on the legitimacy of Israel, though without extensive focus on contemporary politics.

Eloquently presented and argued, this is a very compelling read and a welcome addition to any bookshelf. Through scrupulous research and analysis, this thought-provoking gem of a book sheds light on the resilience of a folk striving to reclaim their place in the world, offering a compelling examination and elucidation of the enduring impact of Palestine but also the indomitable human spirit.

One might also make the tangential observation that the text is a meticulously researched work that challenges widely held Zionist fantasies and propaganda, offering a powerful counter-narrative rooted in both the quantity and quality of historical evidence. This study exposes how the modern republic of Israel has systematically sought to erase Palestinian history through bigotry, ignorance, prejudice and reductionist narratives rooted in quasi-messianic but infantilizing political theories borne outside the region. As a Palestinian historian, Masalha is

uniquely positioned to present this ground-breaking work, drawing on extensive research focused on grassroots and self-determined histories that allow the story – indeed, the autonomy and agency – of Palestine to emerge authentically.

Central to Masalha's work is his demonstration that Palestine and its indigenous population are part of an ancient, continuous history interwoven with diverse cultural influences, aspects and strands. That point possesses much salience and he vividly portrays the historical richness of Palestine and her people, from mentions of the name "Palestine" in Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman records to early Islamic geographers' descriptions of cultural connections between the Palestinian people and the fertile lands they inhabited.

Originally published in 1999, this 2023 edition is a timely reminder to the topicality of the subject matter and the high erudition of the text.

Readers should also be alert to the fact that the work here engages an ideological debate echoed by both Israeli and Palestinian scholars: the significance of names and whether the term "Palestine" represents a historically legitimate country. While Israelis argue that Palestine has never been an independent nation and view "Palestinian" identity as a relatively recent development, Masalha contends otherwise. His book aims to establish Palestine as a distinct geographical, cultural, ethnic, and autonomous entity recognized throughout history.

The book begins with an introduction that incorporates post-modernist terms like "subaltern identities" and frequently references thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Edward Said, alongside repeated use of phrases like "settler colonialist." From there, Masalha embarks on an historical account of Palestine, tracing its roots as far back as the Bronze Age. However, the references to "Palestinian resistance" in the modern era are general and fleeting, and lack the chronological and geographic specifics usually applied to every significant historical figure linked to Palestine from ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom through to the early 20th century. There is no formal conclusion, only a short epilogue within the final chapter, summarising the findings.

The book is not flawless. There are some minor grammatical errors, such as the absence of determiners in some sentences (a, the); there are commas missing and at one point, inverted commas signifying a quote, do not end. There are multiple spelling errors and, remarkably, the name of Khalil Ibrahim Beidas (1874-1949) is misspelt in several directions over several close pages. (270-275)

More egregiously, there are also some distracting repetitions of the text across several pages. For instance, the author asserts his book "argues that academic and school history curricula should be based on contextualised facts, empirical evidence, archaeological and scientific discoveries, not on conventional opinions

of the fictional narratives of the Old Testament and religio-political dogmas” (p.3). Then several pages on we read that “the book further argues that academic and school history curricula should be based on contextualised facts/empirical evidence/ archaeological and evidence-based historical research – not on religious belief or Old Testament sacred narratives and religio-ideological myth-narratives’ (p.18). Almost exactly the same words and phrases appear later (p.32). All this in the Introduction alone. An entire sentence about Palestinian glassworks is repeated immediately (pp.209-210). That this is a fourth edition, makes the errors all the more curious.

Finally, there are some serious historical mistakes. For example, ‘Aotearoa’ is not the indigenous name for New Zealand (p.43). This is, rather, a popular political gesture of recent vintage, predicated on entirely poor historiography. (It was British colonists who first proposed the notion, based on their limited comprehension of the native language and history.)

In conclusion, *Palestine* by Masalha has set the tone for discussions on the issue for many years to come. It is part history, part polemic and part manifesto. As history it fills a surgically precise niche and as polemic it brings the Anglophone reader up to date with events in Palestine. But it is as manifesto that Masalha truly comes into his own. It is fine to bemoan that the current violence in the region can be credited to a dysfunctional paradigm such as Zionism or to warn that the country is heading inexorably towards an apocalypse of one sort or another – but then what is to be done? Few can answer that question cogently or coherently. Masalha argues for what he believes would be the best solution for the entire Middle East, noting that his ideas – rooted in reality, real history and above all, that which the Germans call *Landeskunde* – would also be in the best interests of the Jews and Christians of the region. Whether anyone is listening remains to be seen.

FAITH AND LOYALTY – BOSNIAKS AND THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN EMPIRE, by Dževada Šuško, London/Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2024, xxvii+218pp. ISBN: 979-8891930452.

This book is perhaps the most comprehensive narrative history of Bosnia between 1878 and 1918 available in English. Author Dževada Šuško explores the diverse religious and ethnic communities of Bosnia, a land shaped by the overlapping political and cultural influences of multiple empires. By disentangling the myths and legends that have obscured Bosnia’s past and the experiences of her Muslim population, Šuško sheds light on the true forces behind the country’s complex historical evolution.

To fully understand any historical era, one must explore the thoughts and perspectives of its people. Achieving this insight also relies on the presence of adequate written records and physical artefacts. The overt aim of this book is to “to examine the reorientation of loyalties among the Bosniaks. It will try to detect, illuminate and analyse elements or examples of loyalty as well as disloyalty” (p.xxiv). This challenging task demands an empathetic imagination and a profound understanding of human nature and psychology.

In the late 19th century, Bosnia and Herzegovina – a small but strategically important region with a predominantly Muslim population – became a focal point of Great Power interests. The expansionist goals of the European empires – Russia, Great Britain, Austria in particular – as well as multiple nationalist movements in Eastern Europe, led to the emergence of the Eastern Question in Europe, or what in German language was called *Die orientalische Frage*. This expression described the power vacuum caused by the persistent political and military weakness of the Ottoman Empire. In 1878 Bosnia was incorporated into the complex Austro-Hungarian realm under the Hapsburg monarchy. This transition profoundly affected the Bosniak folk group or nation, who suddenly found themselves under European ‘Christian’ governance after centuries of direct Islamic rule under the Ottoman regime. This work explores how the Bosnian Muslims navigated this dramatic shift, balancing their faith and identity while adapting to new realities.

Integrated into European affairs, the Bosniaks skilfully and rapidly bridged two contrasting worlds, simultaneously preserving their Islamic heritage whilst engaging with the dynamics of Central Europe. These turbulent post-Ottoman times provide a fascinating lens through which one can examine the complexities of political, economic, societal, and cultural transformation and negotiation. The study here delves into how radical modernization processes reshaped Bosnian Muslim life and the extent to which their loyalties transitioned from the Ottoman civilization to the Austro-Hungarian framework.

The duty of the historian really is to comprehend and then to try to convey that comprehension. Central to the author’s thesis here is the role of Muslims inside a secular European polity. This book explores the intense and intimate encounter between ‘Christian’ and ‘Islamic’ Europe in Bosnia and Herzegovina, using the concept of loyalty or fealty as a key analytical framework. Focusing on the Bosniak people, it examines their response to the profound transformations that reshaped their homeland in the 19th and 20th centuries. Historically, all the inhabitants of Bosnia identified as Bosniaks. However, from the 19th century onward, Orthodox Christians and Catholics increasingly aligned themselves with Serbian and Croatian national identities, respectively, owing to the rise of nationalism abroad. This left

the term ‘Bosniak’ to refer exclusively to the Muslim population. Today, it is widely accepted that Bosniaks are Bosnian Muslims whose homeland remains Bosnia, though many now live in diaspora due to multiple waves of migration, particularly from the 19th century through to the 1990s war.

Dževada Šuško serves as a professor of international relations at the Sarajevo School of Science and Technology. Her research encompasses European history, society, and politics, with a particular focus on Islam and Muslims in Europe, migration, diaspora, and intercultural relations. She has published extensively in multiple languages, including works such as *Both Muslim and European: Diasporic and Migrant Identities of Bosniaks* (2019) and *Populismus im südosteuropäischen Kontext* (*Populism in the Southeast European Context*, 2023).

The book contains an excellent array of black and white photographs, featuring images of people, headstones and newspapers from the period. All these really help to flesh out and illustrate the points under discussion, with pictures of Muslim cooperation with the new authorities, new technologies and new forms of communication. The end-notes are first-rate and provide readers with steady evidence for the author’s arguments; these will also proffer students and researchers alike with further material to review. However, there is only one map and one statistical chart, and I would like to have seen more of both. The legal borders of Austrian Bosnia changed significantly in 1907, when the territory was formally absorbed into the Hapsburgs empire and the Sanjak region of Novibazar was divided between the neighbouring kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro, and there were further population movements and emigration.

The book is not flawless. There are some small misspellings such as ‘populiation’ (p.131). Elsewhere, the appellation ‘Bosniak’ is misspelt ‘Bonsiak’ (p.153). There is some needless repetition of statistics (p.38, p.88, p.91, p.149) suggesting a need for tighter editing.

No doubt, this book will be compared to *The Afterlife of Ottoman Europe: Muslims in Habsburg Bosnia Herzegovina* (2023) by Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular, which it holds up to very well.

In conclusion, *Faith and Loyalty* by Šuško will be a welcome asset to any library. This volume places the era and the experiences of the Bosnian Muslims in context, highlighting the rich and intricate history of a country whose past has often been overlooked. It serves as an essential guide for both general and specialist readers seeking a clear and comprehensive account of the war in the former Yugoslavia.

Well written, well-presented and well-argued, this will be the definitive text on this topic for many years to come.