BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Emily Gottreich

This thought-provoking edited volume, *The Arab and Jewish Questions: Geographies of Engagement in Palestine and Beyond,* revolves around a series of purportedly related questions, none of them simple or straightforward. The original question that leads to the other formulations is the so-called Jewish question, conceived in nineteenth-century Europe as, tellingly, “the Jewish problem,” namely the Jews’ continued existence in Europe. The proposed answer (or “solution,” as it were) came soon thereafter in the form of Herzl’s exile or Hitler’s genocide. The “Jewish question” at its foundation is an antisemitic and Eurocentric concept. A parallel “Muslim question” today manifests European anxieties about the presence of Muslims in Europe. This second question is thus an Islamophobic and Eurocentric concept. The paralleling of these two questions reflects a well-documented connection between antisemitism and Islamophobia. However—and herein lies my principal critique of a book containing the work of some of the sharpest best thinkers on these topics working today—the volume then goes on to perpetuate an Orientalist fallacy by representing the “Muslim question” in Europe as an “Arab question.” To be clear: Europeans are not decrying the presence of Arab Christians or Arab Jews in their midst; it is Muslims—both Arab and non-Arab—whose presence in Europe is questioned. This conflation of “Muslim” and “Arab” is inaccurate and prejudiced, which is why numerous scholars of Islam have identified it as a hallmark of Orientalist thinking and insisted on treating these two categories in a more nuanced way.

Compounding the identitarian-based reading of antisemitism’s relationship with Islamophobia, the volume goes on to suggest that these two European and xenophobic questions are in turn related to a “third question”: Palestine or, as it is phrased here, the Palestine/Israel question, the seemingly intractable geo-political conflict that often spills over into epistemological territory. Here again, a

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DOI:10.13169/arabstudquar.44.2.0104
problematic identitarian framing transforms a colonial situation into an identity crisis. Palestine is neither a Jewish nor an Arab question. Connecting “Jew,” “Arab,” and “Palestine,” is not a reflection of facts on the ground, but rather a Eurocentric and highly prejudicial caricature of a confrontation between Zionist settlers and an indigeneous population. Europeans, moreover, don’t merely “question” the colonization of Palestine, they deny it.

The ten chapters that comprise this volume shuffle and reshuffle these questions in a number of ways, always assuming the universality and legitimacy of this limiting framework, as set out in the introduction by Bashir and Farsakh. The contributors approach the questions from viewpoints ranging from the extremely concrete (should Israel and Palestine studies form a single academic discipline? “Toward a Field of Israel/Palestine Studies” by Harvard historian Derek Penslar) to the highly abstract (“Apocalypse/Enmity/Dialogue: Negotiating the Depths” by the British literary scholar Jacqueline Rose). The broad representation of approaches is itself an achievement: few if any other works have managed to marshal the combined intellectual force of literature, sociology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, political science, Marxist analysis, history, and area studies to tackle this particular set of issues.

The chapters are organized into three parts, though the themes they cover overlap. Part 1, titled “Interrogating Europe: Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and Colonialism,” sets the overall tone, beginning with a philosophical treatment of the Jewish question in Europe by Gil Anidjar, who argues that Jewish-Arab dialogue of any kind is structurally predetermined by the German-Jewish dialogue. The European focus continues in the contribution by Brian Klug, who skillfully deconstructs the 2017 visit of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to France, to measure emerging European attitudes toward Palestine-Israel. The last chapter, “Palestine in Algeria: The Emergence of an Arab-Islamic Question in the Interwar period,” by Amal Ghazal, is one of the few in the volume that is firmly grounded in the Arab world itself, in this case Algeria, where the entrance of the Palestine question into national politics and local Muslim-Jewish relations is considered in light of pan-Arab and anti-colonial politics. Speaking of Algeria, the Amazighity of the Maghrib is dealt with in a perfunctory way throughout the volume, though some umbrage may surely be taken by the Amazigh filmmaker Kamal Hachkar when his film Tinghir-Jerusalem is referred to as being about “an Arab-Jewish community in an Arab country” (pp. 5, 19, n.21).

Part 2, “Beyond the Binary Division between ‘Jews’ and ‘Arabs’: Revisiting National Constructs,” treats the question of Arab Jewish hybridity. It begins with Ella Shohat’s chapter (mirroring Gil Anidjar’s chapter in part 1) framing the broad intellectual terrain that the question of the Arab-Jew touches upon, with particular attention in this case to Orientalist discourse and art in and around colonial Morocco.
Hakem al-Rustom then takes up the silence about Arab-Jews (hyphenated in this particular chapter) in considerations of the Arab question and the Jewish question. Aside from a gaping historical error (the author mischaracterizes Islam’s political force as beginning in the sixth century, rather than the seventh), Rustom’s is one of the most successful chapters in the volume at binding the theoretical and the local together, in this case by exploring local histories of two Cairo synagogues. The following article by Yuval Evri and Hillel Cohen is similarly fruitful in its unearthing lost history, that of Palestinian Jews’ reaction to the Balfour declaration. Part 2 ends with the aforementioned chapter by Derek Penslar, which would have fit better in part 3, “Stubborn Realities and Alternative Visions for Israel Palestine.” Part 3 instead begins with the work of Jacqueline Rose and the possible role for literature in creating an alternative path toward recognizing the interdependency of Israel and Palestine, with considerable reference to Arendt and Scholem. The following chapters—by Moshe Behar (“Competing Marxisms, Cessation of (Settler) Colonialism, and the One-State Solution in Israel-Palestine”) and Maram Masarwi (“Dialectic of the National Identities in Palestinian Society and Israeli Society: Nationalism and Binationalism”—offer close readings of Palestinian and Israeli political histories and aspirations.

Betwixt and between these “three questions that make one” as the introduction’s title has it, lie the reality of Arab Jews, i.e., Jews indigenous to the Arab world. Despite the often brilliant observations made by authors in individual articles, here again there is a problem of framing. The concoctedness of the questions that piggyback on the original “Jewish question” operates, ironically, as an erasure of Arab Jewish identity. This is because one cannot speak of a “Jewish question” that is distinct from an “Arab question,” without reinforcing the Orientalist stereotype that Jews and Arabs are mutually exclusive categories. Indeed, this volume, in its entirety, engages with clichés that should be deconstructed and rejected, rather than centered and elevated.

Hence the overall success of the volume (as opposed to the success of individual chapters) depends on the degree to which one accepts that these questions are, in fact, questions. The so-called Jewish question has a well-known history grounded in European antisemitism, as covered in depth by many of the authors here. The existence of an “Arab question,” however, is a much more tenuous supposition, particularly as anchored to the aforementioned “Jewish question.” That linkage is part of a chronological trajectory, but it is not inherent. By pairing these two questions, the volume risks perpetuating the myth of “Arabs” and “Jews” as equivalent ethnicities, thereby (ironically) erasing the very Arab Jewish identity it seeks to highlight. Islamophobia, on the other hand, is much more easily linked to the Jewish question via antisemitism, but Europe is not where that story ends. For example, what are we to make of manifestations of
Islamophobia in Asia, in Hindu and Buddhist contexts? How people outside Europe understand Palestine and related issues will have to wait for a different volume, with a different geography.

This is a volume that requires an erudite readership familiar with both European thought and Middle East politics, as well as the historical and literary contexts in which they operate. Specialists in Israel and Palestine studies in particular will find rich material with which to grapple.