

Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa.
Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein, eds. Bloomington, IN:
Indiana University Press, 2006.

Explanations of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa often consist of facile, ahistoric arguments framed in the language of democratization and the “war on terror.” As scholars like Edward Said have argued, the thesis of a “clash of civilizations” (originally put forward by Samuel Huntington) has created an interpretational framework that in its sweeping simplicity obscures more than it illuminates. Moreover, the idea of a grand clash between the values of a Judeo-Christian West and an Arabic-Islamic East easily lends itself for the justification of all sorts of violence; if one picks a side, clashing with the other seems inevitable—and remaining neutral is not an option. Perennial conflict is the tragic but unavoidable result.

Unhappy with such limited answers, the editors of *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* have collected nine essays that attempt to understand current struggles and disputes by viewing them as part of a longer history going back to the beginning of the 20th century, thereby demonstrating the “lingering effects of past struggles on present confrontations” (vii). The volume contains contributions from a variety of academic disciplines and its focus is on Lebanon, Palestine/Israel, and Algeria. As the editors explain in the introduction, their point of departure is the thesis that “the myths and narratives that found and sustain modern national polities are situated at the intersection of competing collective memories of violence” (1). What this means is that (national) identities in the Middle East and North Africa are created through competing interpretations of historic processes such as decolonization, state-building and communal loss. Rather than being the cause of violence, Makdisi and Silverstein argue, subjectivities are to a large extent its product (8). They do not say what, then, causes violence, and that seems to be exactly the point: unless one accepts Samuel Huntington’s thesis, or some version thereof, there is no comprehensive answer to such a general question and each conflict becomes unique in its own right. This being the case, the chapters of this volume are limited in scope but rich in detail, which may disappoint those who had hoped for broad observations on the region. Instead, one is offered a collection of essays on specific topics such as the role of patriotic

sacrifice in Israeli secular culture, Palestinian responses to the Kafr Qasim massacre (1956), and Beirut's "amnesia" after the Lebanese civil war.

The "memory" that constitutes the main theme of the book is neither a stable nor an uncontested phenomenon; it is continuously involved in a dialectical process with the present, being "reworked and rewritten in relation to the political experiences of each successive generation" (1). Glenn Bowman's chapter provides a particularly illustrative case study of the way in which current political circumstances affect the way past events are narrated. Before the Oslo Accords were signed, the essay informs us, the death of Basem Rishmawi in Beit Sahour (a Palestinian town adjacent to Bethlehem) was seen, and dealt with, as an assassination by the Israeli Defense Forces in the context of the Intifada. However, when in the summer of 1995 Palestinian police arrested a man who confessed to having been involved in the murder, the case came to the forefront again. This time it was explained differently, though, as the murder was viewed as an honor killing by a rival family, notwithstanding the fact that the murderers were known collaborators. This appeared to have primarily been the result of the political reality created by "Oslo," in which the Palestinian authorities were eager to downplay sentiments of resistance against Israel in the spirit of Palestinian statehood and coexistence. Basem Rishmawi's death has thus given rise to an almost Rashomon-like variety of interpretations, each of which reflects the prevalent political interests of its time. Not explicitly mentioned by Bowman, yet implicated by his conclusions, is the insight that the "two deaths of Rishmawi" also indicate one way of understanding the differences between the First and the Second Intifada. The case illustrates how the fragmentation of Palestinian resistance movements, primarily brought about by the arrangements of the Oslo agreements, has led to an unravelling of social solidarity, which was experienced by many Palestinians in the Al-Aqsa uprising.

Similar accounts of how political interests shape memory and identity are given in Anja Peleikis' chapter on a multi-confessional Lebanese village, where people were encouraged to "forget" the atrocities that were committed against their religious sects during the civil war, and in James McDougall's analysis of the use of historiography in creating an Algerian national identity. Again, these cases show how certain interpretations of the past are dissimilar from what leaders and politicians would like them to be and how attempts are made at directing people's understanding of history. Political power thus seems to be of great importance in the process of memory and identity formation, but its exact role in

creating or repressing public discourse and collective understanding is not explicitly elaborated upon in any of the present volume's chapters.

Evidently the various essays in this book address a range of different cases, making it a rather diverse collection altogether. One may well ask how a constructivist approach, with a focus on history, identity creation, and "national myths" (Ernest Renan's *Qu'est-ce qu'une Nation?* is cited in the introduction), helps one not only to understand conflicts, but also to solve them. Makdisi and Silverstein hold that a certain kind of closure is quintessential, which is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's idea of forgiveness as the highest political virtue. True though this necessity to forgive may be in the abstract, which deeds should be forgotten or forgiven is likely to be decided by those who are in the best position to pursue their own interests—and, of course, such efforts can never be wholly successful, which is why a certain struggle over memory is likely to remain prominent (the Armenians in Turkey provide one of many striking examples). Finally, a case that is conspicuously absent is the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948, which would offer a perfect illustration of the dialectics of past suffering and present struggles. (There is Gabriel Piterberg's insightful chapter on the victims of Zionism, but this is concerned with Zionist attempts at rewriting history rather than the meaning of the Nakba for Palestinians.) In conclusion, *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa* represents a relatively small niche within the wider field of Middle East and conflict/peace studies. That being said, its approach provides a welcome alternative to certain popular yet fruitless ways of viewing the Orient, making it a good read for anyone interested in looking beyond oversimplification and stereotype.

Book Reviewed by:

Pepijn van Houwelingen, Royal Holloway University of London