

Grab every hilltop

Last Updated: September 05, 2008 12:51AM UAE / September 4, 2008 8:51PM GMT

Three new books detail Israel's undiminished power over Palestinian lives and land. Alan Philips doubts they can upend the entrenched narrative of the conflict that has taken hold in the West.

Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation

Saree Makdisi
W W Norton & Co
Dh105

An Israel in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel

Jeff Halper
Pluto Press
Dh112

Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair

Jonathan Cook
Zed Books
Dh99



Arab workers construct new housing units for Jewish settlers in the West Bank settlement of Givat Zeev in March of this year. AP

It is easy to forget that not so long ago Israelis and Palestinians used to get together for all kinds of reasons. At the start of the Oslo process in the early 1990s, when peace looked to be on the horizon, Israeli musicians were playing in the night clubs of Ramallah. Palestinian dentists in the border town of Qalqiliya were doing a brisk trade fixing the teeth of visiting Israelis. Mega-markets sprang up on the old Green Line, where Israelis would spend their Saturdays buying cheap food and consumer goods.

There were some far-sighted souls, led by Edward Said, who saw that all this activity was dust in the eyes. The so-called peace process, he argued, could never lead to justice for the Palestinians because its basic document, the 1993 Oslo Accords, lacked the elements required for success, not least a freeze on Jewish settlements.

A decade on, we know that Said was right. It is the fate of people whose gaze is fixed on the horizon to have their pockets picked, and that is what happened to the Palestinians. The number of Jewish settlers doubled during the years of the Oslo peace process. While the Israeli jazzmen were blowing their horns in Ramallah, the Palestinians were being quietly robbed of their land.

The end of Oslo has brought a harsh clarity to the conflict. The three authors of the books under review – an Israeli, a Palestinian and a Briton – have each picked apart the elements of Israel's 40-year occupation – brutality by the security forces, legal duplicity and foreign PR of eye-watering audacity. Their conclusion is that just as Washington has got around to accepting the idea of a Palestinian state there is no land left to build it on, only a big prison.

Jeff Halper, a white-bearded anthropology professor who immigrated to Israel after the 1973 Yom Kippur War takes the most personal approach. His life changed, he writes, when he witnessed the demolition of a Palestinian home by the Israeli army in 1998. He instinctively rushed to defend the family, and found himself knocked down into the dirt with Salim Shawamreh, the owner of the destroyed house. Both men were looking up at the barrel of an Israeli gun. At that moment, Halper says, he saw through the "membrane" that surrounds all Jewish Israelis. This is the invisible barrier which keeps life in Israel sharply focused and brightly lit, and turns the Palestinians into dark, inhuman figures in the shadows.

He struggled to comprehend why, if there was land in the West Bank for half a million Jewish settlers, there was no space for Shawamreh, his wife and children – and the 18,000 other Palestinian families who have had their homes reduced to rubble. His conclusion is that Israel, far from being the only democracy in the Middle East is a Jewish tribal state whose guiding principle, from 1904 until the present day, has been the dispossession of the Palestinians.

Halper cannot deny his Israeliness after 35 years of residence. He now considers himself a post-Zionist, which puts him at odds with the mainstream peace movement. He believes that Israel can only "redeem itself" – to subvert a favourite phrase of the Zionists – by ending a century of dispossession and sharing the land with the Palestinians.

The Israelis who think like Halper – including his three sons, all conscientious objectors who refused to serve in the Israeli army – could probably fit around his kitchen table. He left academia to become a full-time activist as the head of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. At the end of August, he was one of the 44 activists who sailed in small boats from Cyprus to Gaza to defy the Israeli blockade. Upon entering Israel he was arrested, and he spent the night in Ashkelon jail.

Dispossession began slowly at the start of the last century and reached a military peak in 1947-48 with the ethnic cleansing of most Palestinians from the state of Israel. In the 1967 war it was not possible to expel all the West Bank Palestinians, so more sophisticated means were found to make life impossible for them, in the hope that the rest would depart. The figures speak for themselves. Before 1948, the Palestinians owned – either outright or through customary title – 93 per cent of the land in Mandatory Palestine. After the Nakba, this declined to 25 per cent, and now stands at a mere four per cent.

The settlers' red-roofed houses, Halper writes, have "replaced the tank as the smallest fighting unit" in the drive to conquer the land. Under the guise of normal governance – zoning, road building and the creation of "nature reserves" – and "security" concerns, the Israelis have imprisoned the Palestinians in what Halper calls a "matrix of control": a dynamic network of army bases and settlements, checkpoints and settler-only roads that chokes off all normal life. This is one of the many legacies of Ariel Sharon, who urged the settlers to "grab every hilltop". The lesson of Israeli manoeuvres in the West Bank is that you do not have to hold all the land – just the right land – to control it.

To most people the map of the West Bank is impossibly complex. To Halper the matrix of control is crystal-clear. "Imagine a blueprint for a planned prison. Looking at it, it appears as if the prisoners own the place. They have 92 per cent of the territory: the living areas, the work areas, the exercise yard, the cafeteria, the visiting area. All the prison authorities have is a mere eight per cent or less – the prison walls, the cell bars, the keys to iron doors, some glass partitions, surveillance cameras and weapons. Not much in terms of territory, but enough to control the inmates."

The final phase of dispossession is now under way in the form of a separation barrier that has encircled Qalqiliya and its dentists with a concrete barrier twice as high as the Berlin Wall.

Halper sees himself as a teacher, trying to educate people, to "reframe" the conflict not in terms of security, as now, but in terms of rights and international law. He wants to help others see through the "membrane" like he did.

Jonathan Cook, a freelance writer living in the city of Nazareth, is an altogether angrier personality. Just as Halper is at odds with the mass of Israelis, Cook has distanced himself from the Jerusalem press corps that provides most of the world with news about the conflict. Based in Nazareth, the capital of Israel's Palestinian minority, he breaks the first rule of the Jerusalem press corps – "Jews make news" – and the second rule: "No editors are interested in Palestinians." By stepping off the treadmill of the staff correspondent, he can concentrate on writing what he likes for where he likes, including *The National*. For Cook, the experience of the Palestinian citizens of Israel is crucial to understanding life on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip and is likely to be a key factor in the unravelling of the Zionist project.

This perspective gives his book *Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair* a feel completely different from any other reporter's work. The Israeli government, which is usually at the heart of a foreign correspondent's coverage, appears as a distant, threatening force.

Cook quotes Moshe Dayan, defence minister in 1967, as saying the Palestinians must live "like dogs" so that they leave. This, of course, has not been achieved, though the middle classes have fled, grabbing any chance they can find to make a better life abroad. The Israeli project, Cook says, is "ethnic cleansing not by butchers in uniform but technocrats in suits."

The hounding of the diaspora Palestinians who returned to their homeland under the Oslo process, only to be kicked out, is at the heart of Saree Makdisi's *Palestine Inside Out*. It is clear that Israel wants to decapitate Palestinian society, removing those with capital and economic expertise – the very people who set up mega-markets for Israeli shoppers in the Oslo years. As Theodor Herzl, the father of political Zionism, wrote, the goal of Zionism should be to "spirit a penniless population across the border by ... denying it any employment in our own country."

Makdisi is the nephew of Edward Said and, like him, a professor of English, though not in New York but at the University of California, Los Angeles. But while he is a smart speaker, the book disappoints. Born in Beirut and living in California, Makdisi is a visitor to Palestine. Every page is packed with facts and statistics, but he fails to take the reader by the hand and lead him through the thicket of numbers and acronyms, as Raja Shehadeh did successfully in *Palestinian Walks*. His sources are mostly the reports of international organisations and Israeli human rights groups. Depressingly, the Palestinians appear as abject victims.

All these writers have succeeded in wresting the narrative from Israel's preferred framework, in which the imperatives of security are the only issues, to one that focuses on the Palestinians and their half-lives as non-citizens with no rights. But the weakness of these books is that the writers all have an academic bent: the audience for these books is a limited one.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the publication of what is probably the most influential book on Israel-Palestine – not an academic tome but Leon Uris's novel *Exodus*. This saga of the heroic birth of the Israeli state was wildly popular when it was published in 1958 and instantly turned into a hit film starring Paul Newman. It furnished the mindsets of Western correspondents and commentators as they covered the Six-Day War – making it seem that the conquest of Jerusalem was part of God's plan.

Halper devotes an anguished chapter to the legacy of *Exodus*. It popularised many of the myths on which Israeli propaganda is based: the Jews as underdogs, the Palestinians as brigands and squatters and, most enduringly, the idea that the Palestinian's defeat in 1948 proved they lacked a true connection to the land they could not defend.

All these falsehoods have been skewered by Halper, Makdisi, Cook and dozens of other writers. But will their books unseat the *Exodus* myth and change the way people think about the conflict? Can any book alter the increasingly incompatible narratives that have taken hold among partisans of both sides?

The Palestinians used to have a national myth made up of armed struggle and steadfastness, one that sought to expunge the victimhood of 1948. The work of Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet who died last month, glorified a kind of heroic resistance. But now, thanks to Israel's military might and its unbreakable bond with America, the Palestinians have been defeated. All that remains of the resistance narrative is the desperate stratagem of suicide bombing, which has only helped the Israelis to win the global propaganda war.

These three volumes are full of tragic tales – of daily humiliation at checkpoints, of villagers cut off from their land, of children walking to school through frontier-style terminals. There is no heroic new myth here, only cosmic victimhood.

Alan Philps is associate editor of The National. aphilps@thenational.ae
