

Book

A Palestinian physician's memoir of life in Israel

Working with Palestinian patients, as I used to do, gave me lessons in stoicism I will never forget. Two women in particular spring to mind, describing their admissions to hospital. One had to clamber over a massive earth mound put up as a barrier across the only road to her village. The other woman had to endure a nightmarish ambulance ride with bullets and missiles screaming overhead. Both were in labour. Both were simply trying to reach hospital to give birth. They live under occupation, which makes life—moving around, getting to school, or town, or work, or hospital—more difficult than can be imagined.

The Jewish notion of *tikkun olam* (healing, or repairing, the world) has inspired Israelis to serve abroad in organisations like Israeli Flying Aid and Save a Child's Heart. Israel prides itself on its humanitarian drive, its pioneering health research, and its important contribution on the global stage in advancing the quality of life of many populations abroad. And yet, closer to home, and specifically with regards to the Palestinian people, the picture has been somewhat different.

Most recently, and dramatically, Israel's humanitarian image has been pummelled by the events in Gaza, despite the good works of countless Israeli non-governmental organisations and individuals. The Israeli Army's Operation Cast Lead was designed to stop, by means of overwhelming military force, the intolerable and continuing militant and Hamas rocket attacks into Israel. The Israeli air force, army, and navy onslaught, resulting in more than 1000 civilian deaths—a response described by leading Israeli historian Avi Shlaim as “an eye for an eyelash”—filled the world's media.

The outcries against these events were loud and impassioned, as were the voices raised in denial, defence, or justification. Truckloads of medical

supplies, many assembled by Israeli humanitarian groups, were sent through the gates to Gaza to help the wounded. But this only emphasised that the recipients are a people locked inside a large cage, dependent on those whom they regard as their gaolers to feed and supply them, and unable to find any shelter—let alone flee—when those who hold the keys decide to bomb them.

“Kanaaneh succeeds brilliantly in bringing to light his community, and ‘the wall of seclusion and concealment’ behind which Israel has isolated its Palestinian citizens.”

Gaza is largely populated by descendants of Palestinian refugees; only a minority are originally Gazan. Before the division of Palestine as outlined by the United Nations, in 1947, into two states—one Jewish and one Arab—more than 700 000 Muslim and Christian Palestinians fled their homes or were evicted by Jewish forces. They sought refuge in Gaza, the West Bank of the Jordan, and in neighbouring countries. These people and their descendants have yet to see the establishment of their own state.

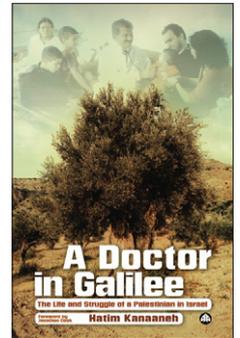
A Doctor in Galilee: the Life and Struggle of a Palestinian in Israel is about the descendants of the 150 000 Palestinians who did not flee, but remained in their homes on land renamed in May, 1948, as the State of Israel, of which they then became citizens. Today, Palestinian Israelis make up about one fifth of Israeli citizens. Other Israelis call them “Israeli Arabs”, a subtle but important distinction: in Israeli eyes the key thing is that they are “Arabs”, and as this book details, therefore, very much other. The state's behaviour towards its Palestinian citizens is less widely known than that towards the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank. And yet, as

shown in Hatim Kanaaneh's account, it is a troubling record.

A Harvard-educated physician and public-health expert, Kanaaneh chronicles what he sees as the Israeli state's “intentional neglect of the health and well-being” of these citizens, as he has witnessed it during 35 years of work as a doctor in Galilee and an employee of Israel's Ministry of Health. His book is a beautifully written memoir of the traditions and customs of his community's life. There are remarkable passages about the cultural significance of land, and a passionate homage to the olive tree, including the legend of a farmer teaching the Persian king the multigenerational interdependence of his work, tending his olive seedlings. But what predominates is Kanaaneh's struggle for that community's basic human rights; his account makes for disturbing reading.

Kanaaneh details Kafkaesque procedures that prevent the provision of running water and sewage treatment plants to Arab Israeli communities. One example is the notion of “unrecognised villages”—although these villages may date back centuries, if the state doesn't “recognise” their existence, it can ignore their development needs for water, sewerage, electricity, schools, and clinics. Even Kanaaneh's attempts to collect data so that he can design public-health services for his community caused trouble: his efforts were seen as subversive, if not treasonous, and were blocked.

Kanaaneh points out the obvious: throwing polio vaccine at a community will never provide full coverage if the sanitation is inadequate. He praises the government's extensive and successful efforts to bring down infant mortality rates in immigrant groups to the level of Jewish Israelis. However, he explains that no equivalent attempt was made to bring down Arab Israeli infant mortality. Where once, in 1948,



A Doctor in Galilee: the Life and Struggle of a Palestinian in Israel
 Hatim Kanaaneh. Macmillan/
 Pluto Press, 2008. Pp 320.
 US\$28.95 (£18.99).
 ISBN 0-7453-2786-9.

this community had lower rates than immigrant groups, infant mortality among Palestinian Israelis is twice that of their Jewish counterparts.

This powerful book describes living with the majority's enmity: "we live in a group of people that, much as we would like to understand them, truly does not like us, a group that hates our guts". Kanaaneh reveals that "we have internalized a sense of inferiority as Arabs in the Jewish state: we are unwelcome, disenfranchised, and unworthy, even in our own eyes". Most poignant is the emotional schizophrenia of Kanaaneh's daily experience: living with constant monitoring and the need "to dissociate the individuals we work with from the collective actions of their state". It is, he says, the system and its ideological basis, not individuals, that fail Israelis,

both Arab and Jewish. "Zionism leaves little manoeuvring space for an Israeli citizen; if you do not serve its goals, you must be its enemy."

Throughout his memoir we read of individual Israelis who object to the discrimination Kanaaneh tries so hard to counter. At one point he experiences such conflict in his role as an employee of the government that Kanaaneh becomes angry and distressed at work. One of his Israeli colleagues pulls him up on his behaviour, confessing to him that she and many others in the office share his revulsion and sadness. Another colleague reverses his *aliyah* (immigration by Jews to Israel) and returns to the USA, bemoaning the system he leaves behind with "its hypocrisy and its callousness".

Kanaaneh succeeds brilliantly in bringing to light his community,

and "the wall of seclusion and concealment" behind which Israel has isolated its Palestinian citizens. The recent election in Israel has seen the rise of Avigdor Lieberman, an immigrant to Israel from Moldova who seeks, among other things, to enact a law requiring Arab Israelis to swear an oath of allegiance to Israel as a Jewish state. Lieberman and his party, Yisrael Beiteinu, also advocate cutting areas of Arab Israeli citizenry out of Israel altogether. With such sentiments motivating the new powerbroker in Israeli politics, the Palestinian Israelis about whom Kanaaneh writes with such impassioned sensitivity will need all the stoicism they can muster.

Emma Williams
emmabwilliams@gmail.com