

## Interfaith encounters on campus and in academia

The public debate about Israel and Palestine on university campuses both in the United Kingdom and United States has become central to wider conversations concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The historian Derek Penslar has highlighted how this debate has been primarily student-led and thus far has rarely integrated the expertise of academic teaching and research that has been carried out concerning Israel/Palestine in the distinct academic fields of Jewish, Israel, Middle Eastern, and Palestine Studies.<sup>1</sup> The fact that these distinct fields exist within academia has recently been challenged by both Penslar and his peers, who have recognised the structural and political factors that have contributed to such polarisation within the academy.<sup>2</sup> As the inaugural publication of *Palestine/Israel Review* argues, the separation of the study of Palestine/Palestinians and Israel/Israelis obscures the complex and intimate interconnections between Palestinian and Israeli societies, impacting both campus discourse and wider public understandings of the historic context to contemporary events in Israel/Palestine.<sup>3</sup> In addition to structural factors that have contributed to the creation of separate academic fields, both lack of linguistic skills and barriers to access of archives have prevented meaningful collaboration between scholars.<sup>4</sup> There is clearly a need to examine how pedagogical resources such as intertextual analysis and translation may be utilized in a way to encourage engagement with topics concerning Israel/Palestine that both recognises the limitations of this current academic model and provides an opportunity to imagine an alternative discursive path forward. Given the centrality of religious and theological ideas to discourses surrounding Israel/Palestine, such engagement also entails a reconsideration of the structure of interfaith encounters on campus and in academia.

I first read the writing of Ghassan Kanafani in the unlikely setting of a Modern Hebrew classroom at an American university. The 1969 novella *Returning to Haifa* provides a fictionalized account of a Palestinian couple – Said and Safeyya - who go back to Haifa following the 1967 war in search of both the home and their child that they were forced to abandon nearly 20 years earlier. Upon returning to their former home, the couple learns that their house is now inhabited by a Jewish woman who had arrived as a refugee from the Holocaust, and who subsequently adopted their son as her own, raising him as a Jewish Israeli. While their son is now a tall man donning an Israeli military uniform, the house maintains remnants of the life that Said and Safeyya lived there, before the events of 1948, including a photograph of Jerusalem and a Syrian carpet.<sup>5</sup>

Kanafani's writing is controversial, multi-layered, and complex, reflecting the realities of the experiences of both Israelis and Palestinians. As a Palestinian refugee himself, Kanafani depicts the intimate and intertwined relationship of the traumas of both Israelis and Palestinians in a way that does not disregard his own political stances as a spokesperson for

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Penslar, "Toward a Field of Israel/Palestine Studies," in *The Arab and Jewish Questions: Geographies of Engagement in Palestine and Beyond*, ed. Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh (New York Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2020), 173.

<sup>2</sup> Tamir Sorek, Honaida Ghanim, "Palestine/Israel Review: Carving Out a New Intellectual Space," *Palestine/Israel Review* no. 1, 1, <https://doi.org/10.5325/pir.1.1.0001>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ghassan Kanafani, "Returning to Haifa," in *Palestine's Children: Returning to Haifa and other stories*, translated by Barbara Harlow and Karen Riley (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 2000), 149-197.

the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).<sup>6</sup> In 2005 the Baghdad-born Israeli writer Sami Michael published *Doves in Trafalgar* as a response to Kanafani's 1969 novella, focusing on the experience of the Palestinian-born child who was raised as a Jewish-Israeli by a Holocaust survivor. It must be noted that Michael's response was written without the consent of the original author – Kanafani was killed in an explosion in Beirut in 1972 that has been attributed to the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad. Yet as a native Arabic speaker who came to Israel from Iraq, Michael has said that he saw himself in the character of Kanafani's Palestinian child, as a figure who was abandoned and adopted by Jewish-Israeli culture.<sup>7</sup> From 1948 to 1950 700,000 Jews from North Africa and the Middle East immigrated to Israel as a result of an acute rise in antisemitism across the Arabic speaking world.<sup>8</sup> Once in Israel, this population known as Mizrahim, meaning 'Eastern,' faced various forms of prejudice, including the marginalization of the Arabic aspects of their culture and Jewish practice.<sup>9</sup> Mizrahi sociologist Yehouda Shenhav describes this as the "denial of the Arab surrounding" of Jewish Israeli culture, which included the denial of the linguistic relationship between Arabic and Hebrew within Mizrahi identity, in an effort to associate Arabic with the non-Jewish 'other.'<sup>10</sup> The denial of the shared linguistic heritage of Arabic and Hebrew formed part of a larger project that had taken place over decades, to establish Hebrew as a codified vernacular used by Jews within a Jewish state.

Arabic can be found in Hebrew today, usually in the form of slang or nouns as loanwords to describe everyday items such as food. Amid nationalist ideologies that promoted monolingualism, seeking to build a solid barrier of separation between the two groups throughout the twentieth century, the reality of social and political multiculturalism penetrated the linguistic sphere.<sup>11</sup> Today, the Maktoob Project, housed under the auspices of the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, continues to examine the porous boundaries that have been constructed between Jews and Palestinians, or Hebrew and Arabic, through translation. The Maktoob Project is the only project in Israel-Palestine dedicated to translating Arabic literature into Hebrew. Each text is translated by a team of native Hebrew and Arabic speakers, who work in dialogue to create a translation that is in harmony with the original text. Its work gained particular importance after the passing of the 2018 Nation State Law, which stripped Arabic of its status as an official state language in Israel.<sup>12</sup> Rather than aiming for 'coexistence' between Arabic and Hebrew, with the two languages existing side by side, Maktoob claims to work using an Andalusian model of translation, referring to the medieval Al-Andalus Judeo-Muslim tradition that acknowledges the intertwined cultural and linguistic heritage of each language.<sup>13</sup> Rejecting the limitations of contemporary geopolitical partition and linguistic division enforced between Arabic and Hebrew, the Maktoob Project looks to the history of Muslim-Jewish cultural relations and identities to form a new method and opportunity for interfaith encounter today.

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<sup>6</sup> Gil Z. Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 270.

<sup>9</sup> Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," in *Social Text*, no. 19, 20 (1988): 1-35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466176>

<sup>10</sup> Shenhav, 59

<sup>11</sup> Yuval Evri, "Partitions and Translations: Arab Jewish Translational Models in Fin de Siècle Palestine," in *Journal of Levantine Studies*, (Jerusalem: The Van Leer Institute, 2019), 72.

<sup>12</sup> Jen Marlowe, "Israel's Mizrahi Activists are Fighting the Racist Nation-State Law," *The Nation*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/israel-racism-mizrahis-palestinians/>

<sup>13</sup> Evri, "Partitions and Translations," 71.

In introduction to *Returning to Haifa* states that “literature can provide the human dimension that the historian's work alone cannot.”<sup>14</sup> My personal desire to learn Hebrew was motivated by my academic ambitions, with hopes to be able to engage with archives and historical texts in their original form. However, I recognised that my other classmates had more personal and highly emotive reasons for stepping into our classroom, driven by a desire to either start a new life based on theological motivations in making Aliyah to Israel, or to rectify remnants from their past that might explain their current displacement, whether as a Palestinian student who was unable to return to their family’s ancestral home, or a first generation Israeli-American experiencing generational detachment from their linguistic roots. For some, reading Kanafani was the first time engaging with Palestinian narratives concerning the history of the establishment of Israel. Reflecting on both Kanafani and Michael’s texts in Hebrew led to consideration that would not be afforded if each participant was communicating in their native tongue. The obvious peculiarities of discussing the experiences of Palestinian refugees and the cultural struggles of Israel’s Mizrahi population in Hebrew within the setting of an American classroom naturally led to a more careful and nuanced reading. Although we had not entered the classroom with the intention of becoming agents in an act of interfaith encounter, engaging with these texts provided a space for both an empathetic and intellectually productive conversation concerning the relationship between Palestinian and Israeli societies. The purpose of such a conversation is not to produce a neat narrative that will satisfy all participants concerning Israel/Palestine, but rather an acknowledgement that this is neither possible nor beneficial to academic inquiry. Instead, this form of encounter allowed participants to expose and acknowledge critical issues that have contributed to discursive divisions that are currently present within the academy. Gil Hochberg proposes that the ability to read both Kanafani and Michael as intrinsically intertwined, rather than ‘in dialogue’ or ‘in conversation’ with one another, existing alongside parallel lines with a strict border between them, encourages the reader to think with “the impetus to imagine potentialities not yet fully identifiable.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, it acts as an opportunity for new avenues of thinking about potential futures can be forged from such an exploration of the intimate connections between both Israelis and Palestinians, rather than treating them in isolation to one another.

Both the methods of textual analysis and translation have the potential to act as models of how the intimate interconnective realities of Israel/Palestine can be placed at the centre of pedagogical frameworks, resulting in a challenge to the existing polarisation between distinct academic fields. Although by no means all-encompassing when addressing the key political inequalities and structural issues that are central to such an academic and discursive stalemate, there remains potential to awaken new possibilities of understanding the relationship between Israel/Israelis and Palestine/Palestinians by transforming the classroom into a space of interfaith and cross-cultural encounter. Through a change in how these topics are addressed in on campus and in academia, new opportunities arise when considering the future in Israel/Palestine.

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<sup>14</sup> Ghassan Kanafani, “Returning to Haifa,” in *Palestine/Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture*, no. 15, 1 (2008): 213-227.

<sup>15</sup> Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine*, 15