

Not All Black and White

Michelle Woodward

In photography books, Palestine is a schizophrenic place. In certain books it is primarily funerals, masked militants with guns and crumbling buildings, while other volumes reveal beautiful historical architecture, smiling craftsmen and weddings. These facets of life in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are, in reality, simultaneous and intertwined. However, in the iconography of Palestine that has developed in the shadow of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the two visions are kept rigorously disconnected. For the most part, the books under review yet again separate politics and violence from society, culture and daily life.

Larry Towell's book **No Man's Land** (London: Chris Boot, 2005) is part of the liberal tradition of "concerned photography" championed by his agency, Magnum Photos, since the late 1940s. Although individual photographers in the agency have their unique approaches, and fewer and fewer work in this old-fashioned tradition, concerned photography offers direct and sympathetic depictions of the powerless and dispossessed. The goal is to show what is wrong with the world, what needs to be changed. The style is personal, artistic and engaged. There are no claims to objectivity in this tradition, because the photographer is supposed to be appreciated as an author, not a mechanical recorder.

Although the beginning of Towell's book features a contextual timeline running from 1917 through 2004 that provides the big political picture, his photographs tend to tell a different story. The images give the impression of people engaged in meaningless violence, rather than struggling over power and land. This impression results from showing moments of clash, conflict and separation

between Israelis and Palestinians, but rarely giving any sense of the political forces and social mobilizations behind either occupation or resistance.

Towell focuses on the micro level of individual lives. He is effective in giving voice to a feeling of despair, pain and localized chaos, but because he rarely gets involved in his subjects' lives, the images seem to come from a photographer wandering the streets but never getting below the surface. Judged on this level—street photography in Palestinian towns—Towell succeeds. He is an excellent photographer, and many of his photographs are brilliantly detailed wide-angle tableaux that capture myriad interactions and layers of physical description. He has a talent for highlighting a poignant expression in the midst of a difficult situation. Towell also beautifully photographs singular details—the personalized slingshots of stone throwers, traces of artifacts in demolished homes, a woman's dress drying against a background of graffiti, a stone in a ray of light.

Although, in his acknowledgements, Towell praises the work of Israeli, Palestinian and international peace activists, in his photographs he focuses heavily on violence, both its perpetrators and its victims. Although not as dramatic, a depiction that also examines the work of various peace activists, civil society groups, religious charities and political factions would be unique and illuminating.

The photographs by George Azar in **Palestine: A Guide** (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2005) are an explanation of sorts about what the people in *No Man's Land* might be fighting for. His goal is summed up in the book-jacket blurb: "*Palestine: A Guide* offers the visitor an authentic vision of why, despite lacking legal status as a state, Palestine is a real place on the world map." Azar

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participates in the struggle of the Palestinians to prove they deserve a sovereign state by comprehensively documenting their historical traces and cultural identity throughout both Israel and the Occupied Territories.

Azar's photography does not completely ignore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—there are occasional depictions of the wall Israel is building around and through the West Bank, army checkpoints and soldiers. But the conflict is downplayed, in what can be seen as a corrective to the overwhelming concentration on confrontation in the majority of photography projects on the Palestinians, including Towell's book and, to a certain extent, Azar's previous book, *Palestine: A Photographic Journey*. In addition, Azar's photos are not presented in the usual spare fashion of most photography books, which privilege the creative expression of an artist over captions or explanations. By combining his photos with text by Mariam Shahin into a guidebook format, he downplays his photos as art but complements them with information.

Azar's color photographs are less complex and layered than Towell's, and often focus narrowly or in close-up on a decorative detail. However, what is at first most striking about the photos is that they are clearly by someone who feels at home in the West Bank and Gaza. This is a considerable change from most photographers, who, it appears from their work, are just passing through, and are often confused and disturbed by the conflict they see. Azar has done his share of war photography in the region; as he has said, this is his chance to depict what he enjoys about the Middle East.

For the most part, Azar's work here is in the tradition of glossy coffeetable books, though on a smaller scale. Where he transcends this attractive, but sometimes shallow, style is in his photographs of people. These are never symbolic or metaphorical images, but always present distinct individuals. He captures an openness and warmth in people whose trust he has obviously gained. In his choices of what to photograph he also rejects the usual clichés, such as in an image of two men dressed professionally in button-down shirts and dress pants, and carrying briefcases, absorbed in conversation as they walk down a Nablus street. The everyday normalcy of the image is exactly what most photographers would avoid, but the way Azar makes the men the center of the image, while also showing the old stone buildings and bustling market atmosphere of the street behind them, conveys his affection for the people and the place. In many ways, that is the joy of his photography. He so clearly delights in his subject matter that it is impossible not to feel drawn to it—which is certainly just what he and Mariam Shahin are aiming to achieve.

In contrast to Towell's bleak focus on violence and Azar's uplifting vision of Palestinian culture, Kai Wiedenhöfer's book **Perfect Peace: The Palestinians from Intifada to Intifada** (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002) presents a wider range of emotions and experiences. He includes pictures of families at the beach, people working in agricultural fields, merchants and fishermen, along with armed men, political rallies and conflict with Israeli soldiers. In addition to his broader focus, Wiedenhöfer has a different visual style. He gets so close to his subjects that unfocused bits of faces, hands or feet often fill up the edges of the images. By photographing events and emotions at such close range, he seems to be

trying to put the viewer in his shoes, prodding us to feel what he felt—empathy and connection, but also a suffocating crowdedness. His photos are crammed with people, buildings, fences, flags and graffiti. There is rarely open sky or a broad vista. As he explains in his afterword, Wiedenhöfer learned Arabic and lived in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, spending much of his time getting to know people. His time there was not always easy, and his honest understanding of the uncomfortable dynamics of dropping in to portray someone else's reality makes his book especially engaging.

Surveying photography books published for an American or European audience, it becomes clear that Palestine is not often depicted by Palestinians. While there are many Palestinian news photographers working today, the specialized realm of book publishing remains mostly out of reach. Fortunately, the art world is beginning to notice the active photography scene now thriving in the Arab world, especially in Beirut and Cairo. A Dutch photography organization, Noorderlicht, arranged an exhibit of "Arab photography" in 2004. The accompanying book, **Nazar** (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2004), is an excellent introduction to contemporary photographic practices in the region.

Playing with media stereotypes of the Palestinian terrorist, the artist Tarek Al-Ghoussein takes self-portraits with his head wrapped in a *kaffiyya*. In "Self-Portrait 6" he walks past the nose of a large commercial airplane on the tarmac. There is nothing threatening about either his demeanor or the banal setting. The photo is clearly staged and does not mimic the conventions of news photography, and yet it is impossible not to think of a Palestinian hijacker. Work by artists such as Al-Ghoussein in *Nazar* provides a jolt of ironic critique missing from the work of sincere documentary photographers like Towell, Azar and Wiedenhöfer, reminding us that the world is not all black and white. ■

EDITOR'S BOOKSHELF

