

WATCH: Rashid Khalidi on the Historian's Role, Violence in the Middle East, and Palestine

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WATCH: Rashid Khalidi on the Historian's Role, Violence in the Middle East, and Palestine

[0] December 21, 2015



by JULIE POUCHER HARBIN, EDITOR, ISLAMiCommentary on DECEMBER 21, 2015:

Rashid Khalidi talked with Shai Ginsburg about the role of the historian, his take on violence in the

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Middle East and his new book project on the hundred year war in Palestine — in this an interview recorded in October 2015 during Khalidi's visit to Duke. Sponsored by the Duke University Middle East Studies Center, Khalidi's visit also included [a public lecture \(Watch Here\)](#) and a faculty symposium ([see Ginsburg's remarks here](#)) on his work.

Rashid Khalidi is the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies in the Department of History at Columbia University. Shai Ginsburg is an Associate Professor in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at Duke University and affiliated faculty with the Duke Islamic Studies Center.

Some highlights:

Khalidi on how historians have changed how they write about the history of the Middle East: "History entirely changes with the perspective from which it's seen. Nobody would have written a history of the Middle East, the role of religion for example in the Middle East, in 1970 the way people write it today in 2015. No one that I know of paid attention to the role of Islam, political Islam, up through the '70s. It was understood and believed that there was an inexorable secular trend, that modern state-building had achieved certain things...A lot of what people have said (about the Middle East) has proven to be not so solid as we once thought."

Khalidi on when historians are asked to predict the future: "I have no idea of where it's going to go. I've been wrong so many times. Sometimes I'm right. I wrote a book "Resurrecting Empire" about the beginning of the American occupation of Iraq a couple years after the Afghan War started, in which I pretty much laid out what was going to happen, and which proved to be all too true. Not to say I was predicting anything, it's just that after having looked at two centuries of imperial adventures in the Middle East I could see why what the US was trying to do in Iraq was not going to go well, and unfortunately I was right."

On the difficulties of teaching, writing, talking to the public on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict: Talking to the public yes (difficulties). Talking to a student audience less so. Most of what people think they know about Palestine is wrong. With a general audience you are talking to people who think they know a lot about Arabs and Israelis, about Palestine— on the basis of the Bible, on the basis of entirely worthless books like Joan Peters' book "From Time Immemorial," books that have no scholarly value whatsoever... or on the basis of the movie "Exodus" or the book. Sources that are thoroughly unreliable for understanding the 20th century and 21st. century. You start off with a lot of misinformation. The second thing you start off with is a lot of very strong beliefs. In fact the less a person knows and the stronger their beliefs are, the more of a problem you're going to have dealing with that."

Khalidi did note that the amount of misinformation that a general audience believes has "decreased a bit."

"There is a better sense in much of the published scholarly literature of the realities of the 20th and 21st centuries in the Middle East," he said. "An educated public is getting a better sense of things no matter where they stand politically. But with a general audience because of the general level of ignorance in the world, you'll often find in this country it's an uphill struggle."

He also talked about the difficulties of explaining situations, like in Syria, where civil wars and proxy wars are going on at the same time. This also happened in Lebanon for 15 years and it's what's been going on in Iraq since 2003.

"My view of many things in the Middle East has changed. When I started I had a much less jaundiced, much less critical view of Arab nationalism. I now repudiate some of the things I wrote in my first book which was published 35 years ago, and had written in the early '70s," he said. "About Palestine, I think I have a much more jaundiced view of Palestinian nationalism than I did when I was a kid... And I think my understanding of the conflict has also evolved over time. In some cases I've come back to views I held when I was much younger. And in other cases I've discarded views that I don't think make sense anymore."

"I hope to do that by talking about things either in my experience or through documents or through personal experiences of other people as shown in their biographies or autobiographies or documents about them over that century," he said.

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Khalidi, author of [“Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East,”](#) said his next book “will be meant for a more general audience.” It will frame the conflict as “a war on the Palestinians” fought by different parties; including the British before World War 2, then Zionist militias, the the army of the State of Israel, and the Jordanian Army, the Syrian Army, Lebanese militias who played different roles.

Khalidi spoke of this violence against Palestinians as not just “spectacular violence,” but “grinding, every-day brutality and humiliation and subjugation and control.”

“A checkpoint, a cattle-herding barrier like the Qalandiya crossing, is violence incarnate, it’s not just gun towers and it’s not just the guns,” he said, adding that there is also the “procedural violence” of complicated permitting rules.

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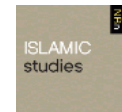
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