Surrounded: Palestinian Soldiers in the Israeli Military


Reviewed by Matthew Sohm

The Arab soldier in the Israeli army inhabits a precarious position in society. By seeking the economic and social benefits of enlisting, he runs the risk of being alienated from his own community without ever obtaining the fruits of his ambition. In Surrounded: Palestinian Soldiers in the Israeli Military, New York University anthropologist Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh provides a cutting critique of the Israeli state’s capacity to accommodate its Palestinian citizens. She examines the role played by the 3,000 who volunteer to serve in the Israeli army – the group, in other words, with the highest aspirations for inclusion in Israeli society and, presumably, with the greatest loyalty to the Israeli state. Based on this research, Kanaaneh offers a broader analysis of mainstream Israeli society’s relationship with its Arab citizens. Contrary to the inclusionary Israeli rhetoric of “good Arabs” or “our Arabs” as a means to distinguish the Jewish state’s Arab citizens from the stateless inhabitants of the occupied territories, Kanaaneh shows how in fact Israeli Arabs are subjected to systematic discrimination and marginalization within Israeli society. Kanaaneh’s portrayal effectively captures the ambiguous identity of the work’s subjects: neither “Palestinian” nor “Arab Israeli” (as the author notes, even self-identification is fraught with conflict and complexity), her subjects aspire to become part of an Israeli state that, as the representation of the Jewish collective, will never fully accept them as equal citizens.

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The book is divided into nine thematic chapters. It opens by way of a background briefing, with an explanation of the complicated role of Arabs in Israeli society, centered largely on the historical origins of the Palestinians’ present situation. It then shifts to the heart of the author’s research: a discussion of why Palestinians would join the Israeli army in the first place. Arab Israelis, unlike Israel’s Jewish citizens, are not required to undertake military service, a fact that places them at a disadvantage with Jews in obtaining employment and higher education. Enlisting, Kanaaneh explains, provides Arab Israelis with social and economic advantages not normally afforded to them. Not only does military service pay a relatively high wage compared to what Palestinians in Israel can otherwise earn, Palestinian soldiers also tend to receive preferential treatment when dealing with the state in matters concerning building permits, taxes and loans. Furthermore, it puts them on a somewhat less unequal footing with Jews in higher education and employment.

As the reader learns in the following several chapters, these benefits are often undercut by the inequalities of the system that provides them. In joining the Israeli army, Arabs entrust themselves to the state’s meritocracy, often at the cost of being viewed as a traitor in their own communities - and all with the aspiration to benefit from the advantages presented by the society in which they are technically citizens. What they encounter in the army is a “distorted meritocracy” that seems to reflect Israeli society as a whole: Arabs are relegated to lower-ranking, often dangerous positions in the army, singled out for punishment and, most crucially, are systematically denied promotions. In other words, what the reader finds is a classic - and tragic - story of coercion: a system that provides a minority with enticements and promises, but then impedes them from enjoying these benefits. In the final chapter of Surrounded, Kanaaneh places this experience within a comparative historical framework. In the sense that they are serving in the Israeli army for material rather than ideological goals, she argues, the experience of Palestinians mirrors the other histories of foreign soldiers often on the “wrong side”: Algerians fighting with the French; Indians with the English; and Latin Americans presently in the ranks of American troops in Iraq.

In Surrounded, Kanaaneh tells an engaging, highly readable story. The range and ambition of Kanaaneh’s work is all the more impressive given its length of just over 120 pages. The story of Palestinian soldiers is well told, with an appropriate balance between ethnographic detail and more generalized analysis. The author shifts skillfully between a range of sources: interviews; Israeli newspaper articles; scholarly works by anthropologists, political scientists, and historians; and even fiction. The result is a well-crafted book that
addresses themes as wide-ranging as identity, gender, political participation, citizenship and economic marginalization. Kanaaneh’s account is based on ten months of interviews conducted from 2000 to 2005 with seventy-five Palestinian Israelis who had worked in the Israeli military, Border Guard, and the police force. Seventy-two of the seventy-five were men; most were from the lower or lower-middle classes; and most came from regions in Israel with a predominantly Palestinian population (the Gaililee, the Triangle, and the Naqab). An afterword on research methods provides abundant detail about the work’s sources, as well as a particularly circumspect account of the author’s own position as an Arab citizen of Israel (from the town of Ar-rabi in the Galilee); an American anthropologist; and critic of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. As such, in a book characterized by ambiguities and blurred distinctions, the author is quite open about her own ambivalent feelings toward her informants, people whose actions she often perceives as morally questionable yet whom she nonetheless views as victims of an oppressive system. In spite of this characterization, what the reader finds in the pages of *Surrounded* is a detached but sympathetic account of Palestinian lives within Israel’s borders.

Moreover, by focusing on the role of Palestinian soldiers, she deftly broadens the discussion to a wide range of issues that have implications outside of the military. As a case study, it provides insight into policy debates concerning the role of stigmatized minorities in democratic states. More specific to the situation in Israel-Palestine, it shows the urgency with which Israel needs to resolve the contradictions in the way it treats its citizens. This is especially relevant given the growth of Israel’s Palestinian population, which has a higher birth rate than its Jewish population, a reality that will inevitably have a bearing on any future peace settlement leading to the creation of a Palestinian state. Finally, by focusing on the great difficulties faced by the most fortunate Palestinians, the book implicitly makes an even more powerful, and distressing, statement about the plight of the Palestinians not discussed in this book – those living in the West Bank and Gaza. Despite this, Kanaaneh’s argument appears somewhat overstretched when it addresses broader comparative themes. In the final chapter’s trans-regional and trans-historical approach, one is left guessing as to the usefulness of a comparison between Israeli attitudes toward Palestinians and American racism toward African-American soldiers during World War One; or the experience of Senegalese soldiers in the French army and Palestinians in the Israeli military. These examples show a similarity, certainly, but fail to explain two important things: first, why do such similarities exist and, second, what is their overall significance? The author also glosses over historical changes in this final chapter. Surely 1917 and 2009 represent such different
historical periods that similarities between the two cannot simply be taken for granted. What this demands, and what Kanaaneh fails to provide, is historical explanation.

Conspicuously lacking from this comparative account is the role of non-Muslim soldiers in the army of a Middle Eastern or Muslim nation. The closest Kanaaneh gets is Kurds in the Turkish army who, while a minority, are still Muslim. Perhaps this omission simply reflects the reality that there are no Jews or Christians or other large religious minorities serving in the Egyptian or Moroccan or Iranian armies. If not, this is a fact worth noting, and one certain to deflect potential (and perhaps needless) criticism. If so, Kanaaneh opens herself to accusations of holding double standards. Do minorities fare any better in the armies of any of Israel’s neighbors? After all, if Israel is not really a democracy, as Kanaaneh claims, then there is no reason to expect its government to behave any more democratically than that of Egypt. Indeed it seems likely that minorities are treated poorly in most armies most of the time, a conclusion that the book’s final chapter seems to suggest. While such a comparison does not justify Israel’s treatment of its Palestinian soldiers, it would help both to place Israel in a truly comparative framework – one that accounts for both positive and negative examples – while also allaying any doubts that Kanaaneh is not simply critical of Israel but holds it to a higher standard than she does other nations. To do so is at odds with Kanaaneh’s overall political thrust, which suggests (quite reasonably) that Israel should not be entitled to special dispensation but instead should be bound to the rules of the international community.

These criticisms do not detract, however, from the work’s overall quality, readability and timeliness. Given its accessible style, and the author’s ability to use ethnography as a way to distill complex issues into compelling human stories, *Surrounded* is a book that should be recommended for a range of audiences. While it is perhaps best suited to undergraduate classes in history, anthropology, politics, and Middle East studies, graduate students in these disciplines will also find the text useful for discussion and debate on one of the most complex, and intractable, issues of our time.