

The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank: Theatrics of a Woeful Statecraft



Michelle Pace and Somdeep Sen
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The *Palestinian Authority in the West Bank: Theatrics of a Woeful Statecraft* describes, in an analytical, multi-disciplinary approach, the facade of state-building in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). Pace and Sen assess the long-term impacts of the 1993 Oslo Accords on Palestinian state-building. The accords comprise a series of agreements between Israel and Palestine, facilitated by the Norwegian government with the explicit objective of building peace in this region. Here Pace and Sen interrogate the integrity of the objectives outlined in these negotiations. They question statecraft by using the analogy of a theatre performance: stakeholders are described as performers, some of whom are more willing to participate in the production than others. In this performance, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is described as both a source of hope and great impediment to statehood. Sen and Pace witness this paradoxical “cruel optimism” in their interviews with a multitude of actors and use their research to outline the theatrics of woeful statecraft in the oPt.

Perhaps most poignantly, Pace and Sen artfully remind readers that the ongoing colonial occupation of Palestine is seemingly deleted from the dominant narrative, the script, and the performance in its entirety. Like actors in a play refusing to acknowledge that their set is ablaze, stakeholders continually refuse to acknowledge Israel’s colonial occupation as the foundational political context for the Palestinian struggle.

The authors are immediately clear in their intentions to problematize the Oslo Accords and to undermine the performativity of statehood in the oPt. They repeatedly ask, “Why perform the functions of a state that does not yet exist?” Additionally, they speculate about what opportunities for independence have been omitted in this overwhelming preoccupation with statehood. One such speculation derives from economic opportunities lost in the failure of the accords to prioritize Palestinian financial interests for development.

Physical violence in the oPt is well documented. In Chapter 1, Pace and Sen reorient the reader’s attention to more symbolic forms of violence, wherein subjective identities are split and individuals are incentivised to contribute to state building—an objective that cannot be reached. To unpack these performances, Pace and Sen interview stakeholders from four identified groups: the international community, PA functionaries, Palestinian civil society, and “subjects” of the “state.”

Chapter 2 focuses on the international community in the oPt, which largely comprises European governments, specifically Norway as shown in the Oslo Accords, and wealthy donors who demand “good governance” as a prerequisite to statehood. Pace and Sen give a detailed history of the international community’s role in creating statecraft theatrics, before acknowledging the ways in which these global actors have hindered collective capacity to meaningfully address the colonial context in which Palestinian statecraft operates. The authors note that these stakeholders are aware of their “hollow performance” as an embodiment of the paradox: building a state that will never exist. Yet these foreign actors desperately reorient responsibility to the academic community while remaining preoccupied with their own identity as exporters of peace.

In this chapter, readers are also made aware of the paradox associated with foreign aid, which relieves Israeli occupiers of financial burden while implementing punishingly impossible criteria for statehood. State legitimacy often facilitates good governance, yet the oPt is required to practise it without political legitimacy in order to gain that same legitimacy. This leaves hopeful Palestinian actors amidst a contradiction between good governance and statehood.

In Chapter 3, Pace and Sen interview stateless employees of a non-existent state to insist on the performative aspect of state-building. Individual experiences of anxiety stem from skepticism that that state may never be fully realized, despite the infatuation with state-building at the international level. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, state functionaries perform their duties in order to feed their families and legitimize their roles as employees of the state; this performance is rehearsed while awaiting an independence that may never arrive.

Another paradox is quickly outlined as the authors reveal that PA functionaries are hopeful and dedicated to the idea of Palestinian sovereignty yet maintain full awareness of their own futility in this project: “Statecraft and state-building become fuzzy and intangible concepts, operating in the realm of imagination” (p. 39).

Chapter 4 focuses on Palestinian civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Pace and Sen interview representatives from three different NGOs, all of whom are critical (some more explicitly than others) of the barriers to Palestinian sovereignty. Nonetheless, all participants inevitably contribute to the theatrical production.

Pace and Sen discuss the “NGO-ization of state-building efforts in the oPt” (p. 52); NGOs, including the interviewees, contribute to the state-building narrative while detaching from the expectation of Palestinian sovereignty.

Civil society and NGOs share the anxious experience of PA functionaries, as their existence is similarly injected into the script, thus inextricably bonding their performance with long-term survival. The status of NGOs in the oPt is a product of their historical context, which is deeply informed by political processes such as the Oslo Accords, the neo-liberalization of global aid, and the financial strings attached to provision of relief (i.e., conditioned on markers of good governance). NGOs strive to further connect citizens with their government (PA), which ultimately influences the behaviour of both. In turn, the authors explain, the theatrical performance of statecraft shapes civil society. Despite these actors’ attempts at neutrality, which Pace and Sen recognize as an unsuccessful effort to be removed from theatrical performance, NGOs are labelled as in opposition to the PA.

In Chapter 5 the authors bring attention to the “state” and its unwilling “subjects.” Unlike the PA, the international community, and civil society, the subjects of the Palestinian state are unwilling performers. Pace and Sen turn to dominant literature in the field to reiterate the citizenry’s experience as “strangled twice”—by the PA, who supposedly share a common goal, and the Israeli occupation.

By opposing the PA, Pace and Sen argue, these unwilling performers provide an opportunity for the institution to use force against the general population in an attempt to resemble statehood. Moreover, in “being censured [the subjects]

become personifications of the dominance of the theater as the ‘approved’ brand of political conduct in the oPt” (p. 80).

Pace and Sen interrupt the dominant narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which focuses on state-building, to reconsider Palestine and the deeper meaning of statehood and its implications. They question the presumptive importance of the state and invite the reader to reflect on the elements of Palestinian national aspirations that are missed in this preoccupation with statecraft. Perhaps, as the authors note, state-building should not be viewed through a lens of “anarchy prevention.” Alternatively, the authors ponder a world in which Palestine is reframed as an opportunity to explore alternatives to the state-seeking narrative that dominates international relations.

As we witness the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain with Israel, the authors’ demand for a reinterpretation of Palestinian peace and state-building could not be more relevant. Pace and Sen’s work is valuable to migration and refugee scholars more broadly because it adopts a perspective that is rarely employed in scholarly discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By revealing and dismantling the myths of woeful statecraft, Pace and Sen reorient their audience’s attention to the contemporary implications of failed attempts at statecraft and peace-building in the oPt.

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