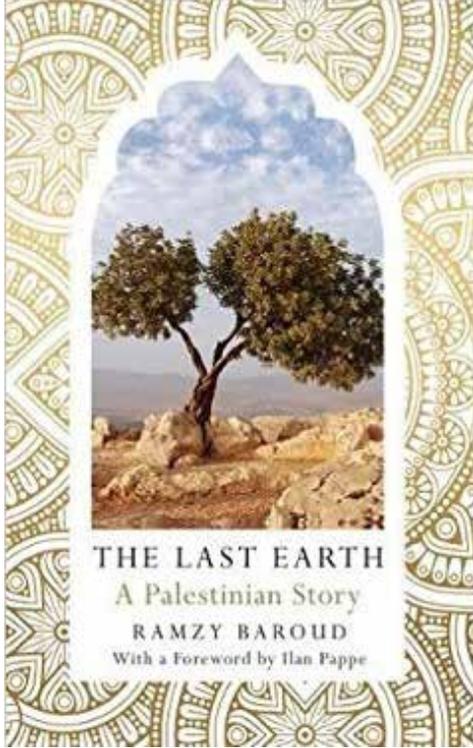


# KİTABİYAT

The Last Earth: A Palestinian Story By Ramzy Baroud. Pluto Press, London, 15 February 2018. 280 Pages.



*The Last Earth: A Palestinian Story*, published in February 2018 by Pluto Press, by Ramzy Baroud, is a new attempt aimed at retelling the Palestinian narrative. With a foreword by Ilan Pappé, the book documents the lives of eight Palestinians who came from different backgrounds and countries. The book focuses

on a new approach to conveying history, based on ordinary people's accounts, where Palestinians share personal narratives that represent the collective Palestinian experience. Woven together, the many accounts read like one cohesive narrative, narrating history in non-chronological order, going back to the Palestinian Nakba of 1948 until today.

As the book reveals, the Palestinian narrative, be it in the occupied territories or in the Diaspora, shares much common ground. This narrative has been plagued by various problems, both internal and external, such as divisions, exile, checkpoints, separation, imprisonment, loss, and displacement. The book, therefore, is an attempt to present a unique analysis of people's history of Palestine, as opposed to the official narrative about the cause, which has been dominant for a while. Despite these differences among Palestinians, ordinary Palestinians seem to have a united narrative about their perception of Palestine, at least metaphorically.

The book reflects an emerging trend in which Palestinian refugees are the narrators of their narratives. Baroud is in fact representing a generation of fine Palestinian historians who grew up in Palestine under Israeli occupation. His book challenges the mainstream narrative of the history of Palestine, which has been told by offi-

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cial or by non-Palestinians, to present a new phase of narrating ‘history from below’. As the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said put it, “the fact of the matter is that today Palestine does not exist, except as a memory, or, more importantly, as an idea, a political and human experience, and an act of sustained popular will.”<sup>1</sup>

The book tells the narrative of normal people, those who had a particular experience of imprisonment or displacement. For example, in 1948 Ahmad Alhaaj ended up as a refugee in Gaza at the age of 15. In the meantime, in 2018, at the age of 85, he is still living in a caravan, insisting on his right of return. After all these years, including ten years in Israeli and Egyptian prisons, he has not lost his sense of humor. He recalls how Israeli jailers would give him a pair of socks for two-left feet because he was a leftist. He insists on using the word “crime” to describe what happened to the Palestinians in 1948.

The experience of people mentioned in the book is complex and unique; however, it is representative of the collective experience of Palestinians under occupation and in exile. Hence, the Palestinian collective history is as interconnected and overlapping, as are the chapters in the book. The narrative of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon’s refugee camps or in a town in the occupied West Bank resonates to a Palestinian prisoner in Israeli jails or a Palestinian living under Israeli control in the Gaza Strip or in the Diaspora.

The book humanizes the Palestinian struggle. For years, Palestinians have been reduced to numbers and statistics. Each chapter takes the reader into the experience of an entire generation. *The Last Earth* is an attempt to convey the message that the Palestinian journey for self-determination is a human one, a cause of a people with hopes and dreams, a people who dream of a home free of conflict and ideological considerations. It connects the readers with Palestinians who have gone through detailed experiences under occupation so that readers connect to these people, feel their plight and better understand their aspirations.

In the book, the memories of Palestinian hunger striker Hana Shalabi are that of an entire generation of Palestinians who were separated from their families for decades, spending the best of their lives behind Israeli bars. It also speaks of Israel’s fear of a woman shackled to a hospital bed in Haifa, or rather her memories of Haifa, where she is originally from. She was transferred to a new hospital after she told her jailer that one of her dreams came true: visiting her original home. Hana was separated from her family in Jenin, practically forever, after she was deported to Gaza upon her release.

While *The Last Earth* is about the past, it is also a reminder of the present, and it is an indication of how life seems for the future generations. The narrative of Gaza is not different from that of Jerusalem or that of Jenin. It is one continuing plight that continues, just like the permanency of the Palestinian cause. It goes

<sup>1</sup> Said, Edward W. “The Question of Palestine,” London: Vintage, 1992.

beyond the boundaries of time and place. The narrative of a child in Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria seems to be no different from that of Sarah Saba, who ended up in Australia, living in a different state, and still self-describing herself as a refugee.

Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion once said that the old will die and the young will forget.<sup>2</sup> Narratives of young Palestinians have falsified Ben-Gurion's statement. Second and third generation Palestinians still have close ties to Palestine and are aware of the Nakba. For the coming generations of Palestinians, the book is meant to be an eyewitness account of current life, and how life has developed over the years.

Baroud adopts a new style of chronological narration which presents in a novel-form. The stories look fictional in their styles, but they are real experiences of real people who lived inside and outside Palestine. The author has

written several books on Palestine, focusing on Palestinian history, including *Searching Jenin* and *My Father was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story*.

Baroud's book is an illustration of an African proverb that does not attempt to generate pity. It reads, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter". Rather it aims at conveying the details of the lives of a people, who act as if they "are above occupation, not under it," as Palestinian novelist Ibrahim Nasrallah put it.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the book is a contribution to narrating Palestine, in all its possible forms, by Palestinians who are at the same time struggling to own their own narrative.

Yousef M. Aljamal  
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<sup>2</sup> Nabulsi, Karma, "The Great Catastrophe," *The Guardian*, London, published on Friday 12 May 2006, website <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/may/12/israel1> (the website was last accessed on 6 December 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Nasrallah, Ibrahim, "Under the Midmorning Sun," Arab Scientific Publishers, Lebanon, 2009.