

# Education in East Jerusalem

Cliff Jones

Samira Alayan, *Education in East Jerusalem, Occupation, Political Power and Struggle*

As well as being a good book this is also a necessary book. Not long ago a British MP stood up in the House of Commons to attack the education of Palestinian schoolchildren for being biased. Clearly she had not read *Palestine in Israeli School Books, Ideology and Propaganda in Education* by Nurit Peled-Elhanan or any number of learned articles by serious Israeli academics.

And clearly she had not read any of the masters dissertations in education written by my Israeli and Palestinian students, most of whom were schoolteachers. Capturing and recreating the narrative communicated to school children is important for governments all over the world but especially for those whose existence also depends upon the suppression of a narrative with greater historical authenticity.

Samira Alayan's book raises many questions. It also provides deep knowledge on a subject I thought I knew something about. Politicians ought to read it before pontificating about Palestinian education. The government of Israel decides on the textbooks used in Jewish schools and it censors those in under-resourced Palestinian schools who are under constant pressure to adopt the official Israeli curriculum.

I found that to teach Palestinians and Jewish Israelis in the same room was a great experience and it was lovely to see them swapping books and

sharing experiences. They are not the problem.

As in Britain, particularly England, it is government that is the problem. While Thatcher was privatising services she was also nationalising the curriculum and sending traffic wardens into schools to ensure that it was delivered in the approved manner. In East Jerusalem they are called supervisors and, just like Ofsted, they squeeze the pleasure out of teaching.

Alayan releases the voices of professional educators, parents and former students. We learn about the tensions, anxieties, concerns and ambitions of a wide variety of educational stakeholders. We could do that anywhere, but East Jerusalem presents unique problems that are both internal and external.

Two of my Palestinian students, mother and daughter, wrote excellent dissertations on how changes to internal management structures could provide a better educational system. Reading their work I had the same feeling that I had in the UK and other countries, that the voice of the professionals is not what officialdom, in this case Palestinian and Israeli, wants to hear.

It is, however, Israeli officialdom that has the upper hand. Alayan illustrates her book with lots of pictures of censored school books, sometimes with whole pages blanked out, and if a Palestinian school wishes for more money it must adopt the Israeli curriculum and promote the official historical narrative.

Israel really does not like the word Palestinian and, in order to emphasise otherness, it refers to Palestinians as Israeli Arabs. This also belittles claims that Palestinians are indigenous. Samira Alayan deals with this issue and mostly uses the word Palestinian.

A feature of the stories told by the professional educators that she talked to is that they often prefer clear hierarchical management. As you might expect, this impinges on some gender issues. Must we assume that management is masculine and to be managed is feminine? Does it mean that when a woman becomes a manager she must adopt so-called masculine attributes?

Including the index the book is one hundred and sixty five pages long and yet it is full of well-researched detail. Samira Alayan carefully explains her methodology and provides thirteen and a half pages of references. That does not mean that her writing is over saturated with citations but it ought to convey a sense of the serious scholarship on which the book rests.

Here I have attempted to simply provide a flavour of the book. Open almost any page at random and there will be so much of interest, especially, perhaps, those censored blank pages that shout so loudly.

It is an expensive book but I am sure that the House of Commons Library can afford it. Even then I can think of certain MPs that would read it with their eyes wide shut.