

INTRODUCING PALESTINIAN VOICES TO ISRAELIS

Jewish and Palestinian translators work together at Maktoob, a series of books bringing Arabic-language and Palestinian literature to Hebrew-language readers – and telling them things that most Israelis aren't willing to hear

Joy Bernard

In the tragic but rather educational tale of the Tower of Babel, which originally appeared in the biblical Book of Genesis, a united human race that spoke one language arrived at the land of Shinar, where they agreed to build a city with a tower whose top would reach the sky. God, who watched people attempting to reach his heights, punished them for their hubris by confounding their speech so they could no longer understand one another, scattering them around the world.

In 1985, French-Algerian author

Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstruction – a set of approaches to understanding the relationship between text and meaning – published the essay “Des Tours de Babel,” a scintillating short treatise in which he addressed the problem caused by translation. Upset by the confusion of language and its numerous potential meanings, Derrida used the parable of Babylon as an example of this confusion. He began his account by deconstructing the words in the title of his essay, asking whether the word “Babel” signifies the proper name of a place or a noun.

Derrida then went further to suggest that God actually punished the people for wanting to create a universal genealogy

for themselves. By deconstructing the tower, he wrote, the need for language to be translated was born, and with it, the challenges of translation. The act of translation, he concluded, is therefore a “movement of love.” The act itself “does not reproduce, does not represent” but rather “extends the body of languages, it puts languages into symbolic expansion.”

Wind the tape almost 40 years ahead to the present day, and you'll encounter a joint Jewish and Palestinian translation project operating against all odds right in the heart of Israel, a contested territory whose conflict-riddled and violent trajectory can sometimes make the city of Babylon and its sparring denizens pale in comparison.

The project, a book series operating under the auspices of Jerusalem's Van Leer Institute since 2017, consists of a team of Palestinian and Jewish writers, translators, and editors who work together to render Arabic-language and Palestinian literature accessible to Hebrew-language readers.

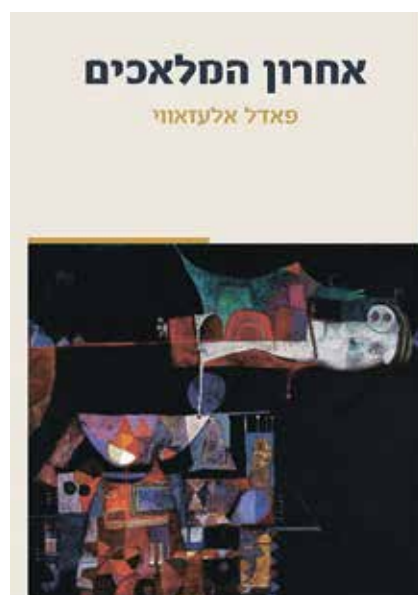
The series is titled Maktoob, a name deriving from the Arabic verb “to write” and the expression for something “already written.” This is a nod to the Is-



lamic concept that at the time of birth, everything that is supposed to happen to an individual and how it will happen is already decided and written. The series was launched by the late Palestinian Salman Natour together with current chief editor, Prof. Yehouda Shenhav, an Israeli sociologist and critical theorist known for his research on ethnicity in Israeli society and its relationship with the Jewish-Palestinian conflict.

This ambitious translation initiative can be seen as a contemporary “movement of love,” to borrow Derrida's wording. It is also, and perhaps primarily, perceived by its core members as an act of resistance to the Israeli and Hebrew-speaking hegemony and to what they view as a concerted regimel agenda to sideline and silence the Arabic language in the country.

Jokingly paraphrasing the euphemism, “If the mountain won't go to Mohammed, then Mohammed must come to the mountain,” Eyad Barghuthy – Acre-based writer, translator, editor, and deputy editor of the Maktoob series – tells Haaretz that he and his team understood that “if Moses won't come



“The Last of the Angels” by Fadhil Al Azzawi, left, and “The Cage” by Fida Jiryis.



‘CLEARLY THERE IS AMPLE NEED FOR OUR PROJECT, WITH LESS THAN 0.4 PERCENT OF ISRAEL’S JEWISH POPULATION CAPABLE OF READING A LITERARY TEXT IN ARABIC.’



From left: Eyad Barghuthy, Kifah Abdul Halim and Prof. Yehouda Shenhav.

Thomas Dalla

to the mountain, the mountain will be translated into Hebrew.”

Jokes aside, Barghuthy stresses that “clearly there is ample need for our project, with less than 0.4 percent of Israel’s Jewish population capable of reading a literary text in Arabic. Personally, this is the most effective kind of cultural resistance I know. I speak on behalf of our entire team and for myself as a Palestinian writer, translator, and academic when I say that I view our work as a sort of agency, and view it as my personal duty to erase and break down the linguistic barrier that has been erected in this country.”

One need not return to ancient history to back up Barghuthy’s statements. As recently as 2019, the Israeli parliament passed the Nation-State Law. It defines Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people and gives superiority to Hebrew over other languages spoken in the country, despite the Arabic-speaking demographic making up about 20 percent of Israel’s population.

“We want to start a revolution, but not only within the confines of our team at Maktoob. We want this revolution to spread to the entire country,” says Kifah Abdul Halim, a translator, editor, writer, journalist, and producer who lives in Haifa. In addition to her editing and translation for Maktoob, she also oversees media relations and copyright work as well as

the design of the book covers, on which she opts to feature predominantly Palestinian art. “It’s very strange that Jews in Israel don’t speak Arabic, despite the fact that they live in a region where this is the lingua franca,” she says. “In my opinion, the most political act Jews living here can do is to go and learn Arabic. It’s even more important that they do so than voting in the elections. If people learn Arabic, then suddenly the language won’t sound so scary to them, and they will hear other sides of the story that are almost entirely absent from the public discourse. Language is an incredible tool for communication; if people here will be able to communicate with us in our mother tongue, half the conflict will be resolved.”

Translating in dialogue

Until that day comes, Barghuthy, Abdul Halim, and their colleagues are hard at work translating numerous books. They’re constantly improving and experimenting with their translation method, a system that’s entirely unique to Maktoob.

“We work in a dialogue-based, bina-tional, and bilingual system and try new formats all the time,” Barghuthy explains. “This means that in the main team working on the translation of each book, there’s both a Jewish and Palestinian translator working together. Sometimes

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the translator is Palestinian and the editor is Jewish; other times it’s the opposite.”

“Most often in the world of translation, translators translate works into their first language, but we don’t work this way in Maktoob, because we’re trying to break up this notion of exclusivity over the language. Palestinians can also translate books into Hebrew, not only Jews,” adds Abdul Halim.

This approach, says Barghuthy, is based on notions expounded upon by Prof. Shenhav in his 2020 book “Laborers and Actors in Translation: From the Individual Turn to Bi-National Translation.”

“The idea that a translator is sitting all alone at his table, poring over heaps of dictionaries while entirely disconnected from the culture and space in which the language of the text continues to develop, is outdated,” Barghuthy says. “In his book, Shenhav explains that the image of

the translator as a lonely laborer is often the result of a national and ideological standpoint, which seeks to separate the act of translation from its collective nature. Historically, translation used to be an act of sharing, of moving information throughout spaces and cultures.”

Abdul Halim says that this approach sets Maktoob apart from most of the other book series and publications that work on Arabic-to-Hebrew translations in Israel. “It’s not rare at all for you to see entire books translated from Arabic into Hebrew without a single Palestinian professional getting involved in the process,” she laments. “The results speak for themselves: These books contain multiple errors, stereotypes, and racist nuances that find their way into the translation.”

Abdul Halim identifies this phenomenon as a political problem, not just a literary one. “Many Jewish translators who work in this field have learned literary Arabic but don’t know spoken Arabic well enough, so they miss out on jokes or common expressions that authors use in their original texts.

“That’s why at Maktoob, if one of our Jewish translators works on a book, he or she will be matched with a Palestinian translation editor who makes sure nothing will be lost in translation,” she says. “This doesn’t mean that you have to stick to the original text word by word, but that you ensure the spirit of the text is kept intact in the transition between languages.”

As part of their mission, Maktoob invites individuals to train with them. It also holds annual translation workshops for young Palestinian translators in which they explain their translation model, teach it, and offer an opportunity to connect with their network of translators. Abdul Halim, who has translated books for Maktoob, shares that “it’s daunting to translate a book into a language that isn’t one’s own first language. With our system, you can rest assured that there will be an editor by your side who can support you in the process.”

Sounding the voice of the unheard

The egalitarian approach reflected in their work process is also evident in Maktoob’s selection of titles, which Barghuthy is in charge of choosing and cu-

rating. “We try to provide a platform for diverse writers and stories,” Barghuthy says. “It’s important to emphasize that Arab literature is rich and diverse, so once you begin exploring it, it’s like stepping into a wonderful maze. That’s the main experience I want to give readers.”

The series is divided into subcategories, which include fiction and historical accounts. “When we select which historical journals to translate, we choose them based on their historical value to the readers,” Barghuthy says. “One such important book we have translated is ‘The Day on Which the Laws of Nature have Changed.’ In this book, historian Abd Al-Rahman Al-Jabarti writes from an Egyptian viewpoint about the French occupation of Egypt that Napoleon and his army did at the end of the 18th century.”

For the fiction line, Barghuthy makes his decisions based on “the quality of the texts, their diversity and the extent to which they offer a continuation of the narrative.” One project he is especially proud of is the translation of “Amputated Tongue,” “which is a vivid example of how we tell the fragmented Palestinian story by sounding the voices of different authors from different generations.” Barghuthy calls the anthology, which contains 73 stories that were written by 57 authors who are Palestinian residents of Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Palestinian diaspora, “the richest and most comprehensive anthology of Palestinian prose in Hebrew.”

Abdul Halim says she is most moved by the unexpected success of certain books the series chooses to translate. “There are books we struggle to sell to Israeli readers, books we translate for ideological reasons without necessarily expecting they’ll be popular, and sud-

denly they become bestsellers. One example of such a book is ‘The Children of the Ghetto: My Name is Adam,’ a novel by the author Elias Khoury.”

The Lebanese author’s novel is a fictional story about a Palestinian man named Adam Danun and his attempt to write a book after immigrating to New York (which is said to be a retelling of Khoury’s own life story). Abdul Halim says it has “sold thousands of copies and was reprinted in a third edition. Who would have thought that a book that discusses the Nakba and the ghetto created around the city of Lud would be so popular with Hebrew readers? We got an outpouring of positive responses and letters by moved readers, including a letter from an elderly Holocaust survivor who loved this book.”

What about the authors themselves? I understand that you translate books from all over the Arab world, including countries that don’t maintain good (or any) ties with Israel. Is it hard to persuade them to let Maktoob translate their oeuvres?

Abdul Halim: “It’s definitely a challenge to get authors to consent to their works being translated into Hebrew. I wouldn’t say the writers we approach are too glad, even Palestinian authors living in Gaza or the West Bank. Despite this challenge, we were able to build connections with many authors.”

“An important persuasive factor is that we’re a project in which Palestinian professionals facilitate the translation process at each step of the way. The majority of the writers don’t speak or read Hebrew, so they’re reassured to know that Palestinian translators like myself and Eyad will work with them. Another strong factor in our favor is that these writers understand that we’re a project



Lebanese author Elias Khoury.

Basso Cannarsa/Agence Opale / Alamy Stock Photo

with a clear political agenda. We’re not only a literary project, we’re working to challenge the Israeli perception of the Palestinian and Arab world.”

So what other efforts do you undertake to challenge the perception of Israeli readers? I assume that your target audience is left-wing academics like myself and the readers of this newspaper, but how do you reach beyond this obvious circle?

Barghuthy: “We’re proactive. Just last year, we launched a community of subscribers who sign up to hear about our publications and receive the new books we publish. This community already includes hundreds of subscribers who are interested in supporting our project. Most are influencers: Academics, activists, researchers, and literary agents. These are the kind of people who are in charge of composing the syllabi at educational institutions, and they add our books to reading lists.”

Abdul Halim: “We also constantly hold events in large cities like Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem and initiate new collaborations to reach new readers. At the events we hold, we don’t read texts in Hebrew but rather in Arabic, because we want people to be able to hear Arabic spoken in a literary and cultural context. I know from experience that people have prejudices toward the language; when they hear Arabic in the public space, they’re threatened. At our events, the purpose is for people to hear it as the beautiful language it is, experience its lyricism, and perceive it in a new light.”

Barghuthy: “We make this literature accessible to Hebrew readers who don’t know how to access the texts, who don’t have the knowledge or the tools to find them. Having said that, the readers also have to want to expand their knowledge. I understand and believe it takes courage and an active decision for Israelis to say: OK, I want to know what

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happened here. I want to understand what’s happening around me right now. I’m willing to disconnect from everything I’ve been told thus far.”

For Abdul Halim, a big incentive in continuing the hard labor is promoting the work of authors she believes represent a Palestinian perspective she and her peers can identify with. “There are writers who describe in their books things that most Israelis aren’t willing to hear otherwise,” she says. But when you’re lounging in your bed and reading a book, it can get to you. The literary context is often a better way to convey things; it’s probably a stronger experience than reading yet another political interview.”

While Barghuthy concurs, he is also quick to assert that readers ought to remember that “every author published by Maktoob is merely describing his or her own experience of life and their own take on history. That’s the beauty of literature. I say this to make it clear to the Israeli reader – it’s not like by picking up a couple of books you’ll suddenly understand the entire Palestinian narrative. Nonetheless, if you start reading the books we translate, you’ll gain an entryway into an infinite journey of Arab and Palestinian culture.”



“Amputated Tongue,” an anthology of Palestinian prose, and “The Secret Language” by Lebanese author Najwa Barakat.