Review: The Pitfalls of Palestiniology
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BOOK REVIEWS

THE PITFALLS OF PALESTINIOLOGY

Review Essay by **Ibrahim Abu-Lughod**

Neil Caplan. *Palestine Jewry and the Arab Question, 1917–1925*. London: Frank Cass, 1978. $25.00.

Frank Hardie and Irwin Herrman. *Britain and Zion*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1980. 118 pp.

R. I. Khalidi. *British Policy Towards Syria and Palestine 1906–1914*. London: Ithaca Press, 1980. 412 pp.

M. Mossek. *Palestine Immigration Policy Under Sir Herbert Samuel: British, Zionist and Arab Attitudes*. London: Frank Cass, 1978. 180 pp. $25.00.

Ann Mosely Lesch. *Arab Politics in Palestine 1917–1939: The Frustration of a Nationalist Movement*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979. 257 pp. $19.50.

Taysir N. Nashif. *The Palestine Arab and Jewish Political Leadership*. New York: Asia Publishing House, 1979. 128 pp. $10.50.

Dov Ronen. *The Quest for Self-Determination*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1979. 144 pp.

Marie Syrkin. *The State of the Jews*. Washington: New Republic Books, 1980. 368 pp. $15.95.

I

It may not be wholly inaccurate to state that over the past twenty or so years a new science whose basic concepts and methodology are derivative yet readily identifiable has developed. That science is Palestiniology. It has some basic laws. Law number one is that it is virtually impossible to study the historical evolution of Palestine as a country or as a culture unless that is done in relation to different communities and powers. Law number two is that one cannot study the historical development of the Palestinian Arab

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community at any particular point in modern times without taking immediate cognizance of the presence—effective or fictitious—of the Jewish community as represented by the Zionist movement. Law number three is that the study of Palestine realistically entails the study of Zionist effort to transform the basic characteristics of Palestine over time and that, therefore, reference to others—minimal as it might be—is relevant only in the way others either assisted or impeded the Zionist effort. Law number four pertains to methodology: to study the evolution of modern Palestinian history one must first examine the archival material of the British Public Record Office and other official documents representing the Mandate period; second, one must exhaust the Zionist archives and, third, one consults other sources—official and unofficial—in European languages. All such sources combined presumably not only inform us about the efforts of the Zionist movement, but, more significantly, are supposed to yield a view of the Palestine Arab community that was being victimized by the process of Jewish colonization under the aegis of British imperialism.

The cumulative effect of such a science is evident today. While much is known about the history of the Zionist movement, its factions, its seemingly differing programs, its diplomacy, etc., not much is known about the evolution of the Arab national community in Palestine itself. We know precious little about the evolution of the labor movement, about the peasantry, about the transformation of Palestinian social structure, about Palestinian arts, industry, crafts, etc. Even the politics of the Palestinian community which commanded some attention remain fixated on the presumed maneuverings of a traditional elite that was highly competitive. While an occasional reference will be made to the challenge which this traditional elite faced, in actual fact that challenge has not been seriously examined by anyone.

It is of course difficult to disentangle Palestinian history and culture from the endemic conflict between Palestinian and Zionist and Palestinian and British imperialist. But even as we concede the need to pay attention to the entanglement, we must surely be aware that Palestinians led some kind of life, educated themselves for purposes other than fighting Zionists, composed works of art and literature, transformed their views of themselves and the world, created an economy, loosened some social bonds, created others, built houses, farmed their lands, and exported their produce and so forth. To make that possible, they organized themselves for purposes other than fighting imperialist and Zionist; they created cooperatives, established banks, organized literary and social clubs, labor unions, teachers' unions, etc., as an aspect of their endeavor to create a modern society capable of meeting their varied social, cultural, economic, and political needs.

The Palestine of 1948 was a very different Palestine from that of 1917 and the difference is not solely the result of the impact of either imperialist or

Zionist. It is the result of that struggle which the Palestinians engaged in in the latter days of Ottoman control in order to bring about a society that conformed to the views of scores of nineteenth-century reformers who were anxious to transform all parts of Ottoman society and culture. The Palestine intellectual leadership of the twentieth century was part of a larger intellectual leadership in the Arab world that was successfully struggling to create a more effective, progressive, and modern social order. It was also the result of an internal struggle among the Palestinians themselves; struggle between the rural population and the cities, between the rich and poor, between various strata of society, between young and old, between "traditional" and "modern," between the sexes, and so forth.

In short, the social and cultural evolution of the Palestinians in modern times is in desperate need of study. Admittedly, with each passing day that becomes more and more difficult and problematic. For one thing, that which has been written from the perspective of the outside is both abundant and distorting; yet it is available and no study in the future will be entirely free of its impact. Second, the destruction of Palestinian society subsequent to 1948 has rendered the study of Palestinian society almost impossible: the destruction of much of Palestine, the total disintegration of its institutions, Israel's destruction of its cumulative literary sources, its libraries, monuments, archives, and the like will render that task a most difficult one. The fact that Palestinian research institutes such as the Palestine Research Center and the Institute of Palestine Studies engaged in the retrieval of the documentary material simply means that some studies will be possible; perhaps others will not be. If the past is any indicator of the future, it is not unlikely that Israelis and their supporters will increasingly be writing the history of Palestine on the basis of their material as if that is the only valid material for the study of Palestinian history and culture during the Mandate period.

II

The eight books under review in a very important way epitomize the distortions of Palestinian history—either as a territory or as a people. Practically none is devoted entirely to the Palestinian people as a collective national community. None of them is free of the entanglement of Palestinian history with that of others. While the Palestine nationalist movement is obviously the central concern of Lesch's study, even then it is not possible to deal with that nationalist movement in terms of the internal growth and transformation of Palestinian society itself. Arabic sources—Palestinian or otherwise—are utilized minimally when relevant.

Some pertinent facts of Palestinian history and society should be restated.

At the beginning of the British occupation of Palestine, its population was preponderantly an indigenous Arab—Muslim, Christian, and Jewish—one. The European Jewish settlers did not exceed two percent of the total and their total possession of Palestinian territory did not exceed a few thousand acres. Neil Caplan is concerned with the study of the attitude of those Jewish settlers, as they are represented by the leadership of the Zionist movement either in Palestine or elsewhere, toward the Arabs. This is what he chooses to call the Arab "question" that continues to plague the Zionist movement until today.

What Caplan means by that is: what was the policy which the early Zionists formulated to handle the Palestinian Arabs? Did the Zionists take the overwhelming presence of an Arab population in Palestine into account as they pressed for the translation of the Balfour Declaration and for the implementation of the "National Home for the Jewish people"? And if so, how? The answers are not difficult to come by. The Zionists only belatedly, and despite the repeated pleas of Dr. Arthur Ruppin who represented the Zionist movement in Palestine until World War I, recognized that the implementation of their program for the colonization of Palestine would be opposed by the Arabs of Palestine. This was identified as a "problem" that deserved to be looked into. In other words, not only did the Zionists have to deal with the British to work out cooperative arrangements for the transfer of the country to their hands, but they began to recognize the constraints which the Palestinians increasingly imposed on the British. Apparently two approaches commended themselves to the Zionist leadership: one approach, which Caplan calls the "carrot approach," entailed clear demonstration of the "beneficial" effects of Zionist colonization coupled with "bribery" of influential Arabs; the alternative was the "stick" which entailed pressuring the British to deal firmly with the Palestinians and strengthening the Jewish military muscle to handle the Arabs. Caplan, as others before him, calls attention to the important role which the Zionist "expert" on the Arabs, and thus their agent in dealing with the Arabs, Kalvaryski, played in trying to induce a favorable Arab attitude toward the Zionists. On the basis of Zionist archival material, it seems that Kalvaryski was in charge of bribing "influential"—but nameless—Arabs. He seems to have obtained considerable funds to facilitate his approach. Then, abruptly, the Zionists stopped supplying him with the funds in part because his policy was judged to be a failure—what else could it have produced! Yet the whole question is suspect. Arab nationalist sources of the period do not reveal any material that remotely suggests that any of the so-called "influentials" was in the pay of the Zionists. Certainly the latter were unable to produce any statement from any influential that was even neutral toward the Zionist scheme. Is it not possible to suggest that the Zionist agent Kalvaryski was simply an embezzler who

opportunistically milked the Zionist movement to help solve the so-called Arab problem?

Caplan's study is important, though redundant and quite dull in presentation. While Simha Flapan's study *Zionism and the Palestinians* is more comprehensive and analytical, Caplan's study of the Zionists' attitude toward the Arab problem in that early period is both more detailed and reasonably well documented from a host of Zionist sources. But certainly one would not learn much from this book about the Palestinians themselves or the nature of the problem which the Zionists had to deal with.

One will not learn anything about the Palestinians from Hardie's and Herrman's pithy study either, but a good deal of detail is provided on the growing entanglement between the British and the Zionist movement, particularly when the latter was led by Weizman in the two crucial decades of 1902–1922.

While it is true that the United States has been the principal power that has enabled Israel to sustain itself, to expand and acquire further Arab lands, it is Britain that must assume the primary and major role in bringing about that State. The question that has been often asked is why did the British undertake that role? What underlied British motivation to support Weizman, support that eventually materialized in the Balfour Declaration, a commitment which Herzl failed to obtain when he tried to sell his scheme to British imperialists? Several answers have been given: wartime propaganda, reward to Zionists for certain war contributions, etc., etc. The most sustained explanation, however, has been related to imperialism. But how and in what way? Some have suggested that the alienation of Palestine was in part related to the scheme of permanently dividing the Arab world. Perhaps there is no single explanation that is satisfactory to all. Hardie and Herrman examine, in meticulous detail, the various "minutes" of cabinets and memoranda written by hosts of individuals in the foreign office, in the colonial office, and other British departments, exchanges between Zionist leaders and British politicians, and so forth. They note the struggle within the Zionist movement, among its leadership and in Britain, France, and Germany, and they view that struggle as crucial to the kind of links that were established between certain Zionist factions and like-minded British cliques seeking a particular solution to the fate of Palestine as a province of the Ottoman Empire. The authors suggest that the British objective was to secure British control of Palestine rather than French control and that the Balfour Declaration itself was simply a by-product of that British motivation to acquire Palestine for purposes of Empire. While not wholly convincing, the enormous detail which the authors provide on the exchanges between officials and organizations is perhaps more significant in elucidating British attitudes toward the Jews and the Zionists. While not entirely startling, one discovers anew how the Zionists were able to benefit from the anti-Semitic attitudes of various British officials to obtain

the British promise of support for the Jewish National Home.

Hardie's and Herrman's thesis was anticipated by the important work of Rashid Khalidi, who contends that practically all British wartime decisions had already been anticipated and perhaps worked out in the crucial period of 1906–1914. But unlike Hardie and Herrman, Khalidi examines British policy in that period in the Middle East proper and identifies its major preoccupations and assumptions. The British, through their agents in the provinces of the Ottoman Empire, became aware of the centrifugal tendencies of the populations that had come increasingly under the influence of various nationalist movements and perceived the possibility of forging an alliance with these nationalist movements against a presumed common enemy, namely the Young Turks. The British increasingly accepted the eventuality of a war with Turkey and thus had to devise a scheme to absorb its various provinces when that war was concluded. Khalidi points out quite persuasively that the British were determined to keep Palestine for themselves, in part to secure their hegemony in Egypt and to "protect" the Suez Canal. But equally significant is Khalidi's assessment of the Arab attitude in Palestine and elsewhere toward Zionism. While naturally he finds the Arab nationalist movement to have been both aware of the potential danger of the Zionist scheme and hostile to it, he also shows quite clearly that the British (and the French) apprehended these hostile attitudes from the very beginning. While they may have feigned "surprise" at the extent of hostility which Arabs exhibited toward the impending Jewish National Home, the reports which their agents in the region had dispatched prior to 1914 clearly pointed to those hostile expressions. By the time they issued the Balfour Declaration, the British must have decided that the hostility was either of no real consequence or could be dealt with appropriately in due course.

The British disregard of that hostile attitude was to contribute immeasurably to the triangular conflict that characterized Palestinian life between 1920 and 1948 and beyond. While the conflict largely revolved around the question of self-determination of the Palestinians and their right to independence, it usually surfaced when policies over concrete issues were promulgated. These issues usually were related to immigration and acquisition of land by European Jewish settlers. Now of course we do know that the building of the Jewish National Home meant, among other things, the demographic transformation of Palestine largely through immigration. We do know on the basis of previous studies that immigration of Jewish settlers was neither steady nor unopposed. Mossek's study of Palestine immigration policy under Sir Herbert Samuel (that is, between 1920 and 1925) is not so much a study of immigration as it is a study of the vicissitudes of policymaking relevant to immigration at the beginning of the Civil Administration and the Mandate. Mossek tries to show that the three groups—the British, represented by the High Commissioner and his officers in Palestine, as well as government

officials in London, the Zionist Executive whether in Jerusalem or in London, and the Arab Executive—engaged in serious struggle to determine who had the upper hand in formulating the immigration policy. Mossek's argument is that in the end, Herbert Samuel succeeded in establishing his unquestioned authority on the question and that it was Samuel who introduced the concept of "absorptive capacity" as a criteria for issuing immigration permits to would-be Jewish settlers. That, according to Mossek, was not in line with what the Zionists wished. The Arabs, on the other hand, opposed altogether any immigration and occasionally succeeded in limiting it by resorting to violence.

Ann Lesch's book is one of the very few book-length studies of the Palestinian nationalist movement up to 1939. Here the focus is primarily the political expression of the nationalist movement as it struggled to obtain independence and thereby frustrate the impending Zionist scheme. But unlike practically all other nationalist movements around the world, the Palestinian movement was frustrated, and the term may be an appropriate one since it does not denote finality. Her narration is straightforward and her material is culled from the major known sources, principally in European languages. Her theoretical scheme is conventional elite/mobilization, which is useful. She is basically correct in viewing the political struggle waged by the Palestinians as one that was essentially shaped and articulated by a traditional elite that was highly fractious. She is also correct in identifying the shifting bases of that struggle as the Palestinians became more conscious of the dimensions of conflict with Britain and as a more profound Palestinian polity emerged in the late twenties. It was this development and the corresponding politicization of the majority of the population that accounted for the increasingly militant role which the younger generation began to play and contributed to the onset of armed struggle that culminated in the 1936–39 guerrilla warfare.

The increasing frustration of the Palestine nationalist movement impelled the leadership to seek support from the Arab and Islamic States. While Lesch notes the myriad of problems which these faced in extending adequate support to counter the European assistance which the Zionists were able to obtain, she does not adequately deal with the intended or unintended negative consequences of that Arab support which contributed to the defeat of the Palestinians. For these States, like the traditional Palestinian leadership, were either subservient to British imperialism or had unlimited faith in the fairness and concern of the British with Arab welfare. At no point in the past—or perhaps in the present—did the Arabs realize the objective factors which underlie British—and nowadays, American—policies.

While Lesch identifies, as she goes along, the political leadership of the Palestinian movement and occasionally gives some detail, that task is done more systematically by Taysir Nashif. His study falls more appropriately in that genre of political science known as elite analysis which assumes that an

understanding of the social, economic, and cultural background of the elite has an important bearing on our understanding of the political behavior of society. What Nashif has done is to compare and analyze the political leadership of both the Palestinian and the Zionist movements. To the best of my knowledge this has not been done before. While we all are aware of the profound differences between the two—Palestinian-Arab and Jewish—communities, which to an important extent affected the outcome of the political struggle over the destiny of Palestine, these differences are clearly reflected in the background of the political leadership itself. Nashif's comparative analysis sheds important light on these differences in terms of education, occupation, world view, competence in foreign languages, etc. And while doing so, he provides the reader with some analysis of the political position and attitudes of the leadership.

The Question of Palestine is largely one of self-determination. But whose self-determination and just what is self-determination anyhow? Dov Ronen's study is essentially a theoretical/historical study of the evolution of the concept particularly since the French Revolution. His principal point is that self-determination is today an expression of a dissatisfaction with the modern nation-state which increasingly is viewed as an obstacle to the fulfillment of a particular group's aspirations. Occasionally he departs from his theoretical presentations and provides case studies. One of these "cases" is the Palestinian quest for self-determination. In his view, the Palestinian identity is a recent one directly related to the growth of an Israeli identity and the consolidation of an Arab State system predicated on the territorial principle. While his conclusion is correct in that a strong sense of Palestinian identity is a reality, his historical treatment is open to serious question.

For Marie Syrkin, a long-standing Zionist theoretician and publicist, the Palestinians are simply a group of Arabs whose principal object is to deprive the Jews of their self-determination in their historic homeland. In their effort to frustrate Jewish self-determination, they were assisted by callous British and Arab allies and occasionally by a world insensitive to the long historical and tragic experience of the Jewish people and the Holocaust. Her book, which is a collection of essays on various aspects of the modern Jewish experience as this led to the emergence of Israel, written over the past thirty years, reflects total insensitivity to the disastrous effect which the Zionist movement had on the Palestinians. Perhaps her essays should be read very carefully by Arabs and others to really comprehend the degree to which Zionists are capable of dehumanizing the Palestinians and Arabs. A juxtaposition of Syrkin's book with its myopic vision of Palestinians with that of Edward Said's sensitivity to the Jewish experience in *The Question of Palestine* would reveal the essential contrast between the Palestinian and Zionist visions of the two adversaries locked in battle.

III

At the outset of this review, I pointed out the fundamental problematics of the science of Palestiniology. Excepting Lesch's and Nashif's studies, the Palestinian Arabs figure only incidentally in any narration of the *Question of Palestine*. Two recent publications, that of Sara Graham-Brown, *The Palestinians and Their Society, 1880-1946*, and that of Jonathan Dimbleby, *The Palestinians* [Reviewed on page 422—Editor], alert us to the rich potential that lies ahead of researchers on Palestinian culture and society. For in both, the Palestinian Arab is central to the analysis and narration. That is the way it should be. When scholars begin to address themselves to the evolution of Palestinian history, culture, and institutions in Palestine or in the Diaspora, only then will the reader be in a position to appreciate the dynamics of the struggle of the Palestinians for self-fulfillment.

Maxime Rodinson. *La Fascination de l'Islam.* Paris: Maspéro, 1980. 159 pp.

Roger Savory, *Iran Under the Safavids.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. 227 pp. $34.50.

Muhammad Manazir Ahsan. *Social Life Under the Abbasids, 170-289 AH/786-902 AD.* London: Longman, 1979. 316 pp. $30.00.

Reviewed by **Richard W. Bulliet**

La fascination de l'Islam is sure to become a favorite of American scholars of the Middle East. It is short, succinct, erudite, and greatly reassuring. Set in the context of the debate over Orientalism provoked by Edward Said's book of that title published in 1978, Rodinson's work is composed of three parts: (1) a hundred-page essay entitled "Les étapes du regard occidental sur le monde musulman," which is actually the fully developed French text of his essay "The Western Image and Western

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