

Review - The Two-State Solution

Written by Alaa Tartir

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ALAA TARTIR, FEB 25 2015

The Two-State Solution: The UN Partition Resolution of Mandatory Palestine- Analysis and Sources

Edited By: Ruth Gavison

New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013

The history of the Arab-Israeli conflict is characterised by competing narratives and different assumptions and explanations for the trajectories of tragedies and events. For example, according to the Zionist narrative, the establishment of the state of Israel resulted from the “war of independence”; according to the anti-Zionist narrative, the state of Israel was the outcome of the processes of ethnic cleansing that the Jewish Zionist military groups committed. However, historical and empirical evidence clearly indicate to the crimes, massacres, and acts of terrorism that the Jewish Zionist groups committed in order to deprive the Palestinian people from their lands. This is known as the 1948 Palestinian *Nakba* (1948 *Palestinian Catastrophe*), and arguably that *Nakba* never stopped since then due to the nature of the Israeli settler-colonial military occupation of the Palestinian land.

Prior to the *Nakba*, scholars and practitioners considered the 1947 UN Partition Plan and resolution as major milestones in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The plan and resolution attracted heated debates amongst the multiple local, regional, and international actors and indeed amongst historians and political scientists. The UN Partition Plan and resolution are the core focus of the edited volume by Professor Ruth Gavison, “The Two-State Solution: The UN Partition Resolution of Mandatory Palestine- Analysis and Sources”. Gavison is the founding president of the Metzilah Center of Zionist, Jewish, Liberal and Humanist Thought which was founded in 2005 to “address the growing tendency in Israel and throughout the world to question the legitimacy of Jewish nationalism and its compatibility with universal values”.

A version of this edited volume published in English by Bloomsbury in 2013, was published earlier in Hebrew. The publication is mainly a collection of a number of papers presented at a conference organised by the Metzilah Center in 2007. In its first part, the publication consists of five essays (one of them was published in English in 2009 at the *Journal of Israeli Studies*), and the second part of the book is a collection of sources on the Partition Plan and resolution. The essays occupy less than 60 pages out of the 330 pages’ book. It is argued that the collection of sources represent “an enormous amount of significance” (p.xxiv); however this actually speaks against and harms the original contribution of this publication. Rather, it can be seen as a collection of secondary material introduced by five short essays on the topic. According to the editor, the major objective of the publication is to combine “a historical analysis of the partition resolution with an examination of its relevance today” (p.xiv). However, while the essays tackle the historical context –regardless of the validity or quality of the proposed arguments, the publication fails to draw out the relevance of the history to today’s facts and future visions.

The first essay by Itzhak Galnoor, published originally in 2009 in the *Journal of Israeli Studies*, describes the “origins of the dispute within the Jewish settlement regarding the principle of partition from the beginning of the twentieth century” (p.xxiii). Galnoor argues that “the Zionist movement was willing to consider trading territory for other values, mainly sovereignty” (p.3). However this Jewish attitude toward territory reflect a duality, according to Galnoor. He argues that “on one hand, territorial attitudes were emotional and inseparable from a sense of collective identity, fatherland, motherland, and homeland, leading to expressive positions. On the other hand, territory and boundaries were seen as a tangible resources, a means for satisfying specific needs – security, economic viability, social

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development, and natural resources” (p.3-4). From the reader’s perspective, it is nevertheless vital to problematize a number of the working assumptions of Galnoor, and question some of the fundamental pillars of his line of argumentation vis-à-vis the use of violence to concur the lands of the others and acquire sovereignty.

Alexander Yakobson in the second essay discusses the positions in support of the partition plan and the rationales of the supportive actors. Yakobson argues that the main justification in support of the partition proposal is “the set of realities which the partition proposal sought to address in 1947” (p.17). In turn, Mustafa Kabha discusses in the third essay the attitude of the Palestinian leaders towards the partition plan and resolution from the Peel Commission up to Resolution 181. Kabha argues that the discussion on the Palestinian position regarding the partition plan “suffers from broad generalizations” (p.29), and therefore he aims in his essay to “present the Palestinian side in **all** of its complexity, with **all** the different groups which it included, and the variety of interests and positions which characterized these groups” (p.29- *emphasis added*). Given this grand goal of describing all the complexities surrounding this topic, the 8 page essay falls short to grasp all the complex dynamics of a sensitive issue.

In the fourth essay, Nazier Magally talks about the positions of the Arab leadership vis-à-vis the partition plan and argues that the

Arab Higher Committee’s rejection of the partition plan was a fateful error for the Palestinian people – an error the source of which was that the Arab Higher Committee did not confront the Zionist leadership with responsible Arab leadership, committed to the interests of Palestinians as a people (p.38).

Magally describes the rejection of the partition plan as “an error and a foolish one” (p.38). The fifth and final essay is written by the editor of the publication, Ruth Gavison, and this essay mainly presents the vision of the Metzilah Center. As highlighted in the summary of the essay, Gavison, describes “the erosion in dealing with the ideological justification of Zionism and Jewish self-determination since the foundation of the state, and the growing schisms regarding the use of the state’s power, internally and externally, which have led to misgivings and undermined the faith in the justness of this path” (p.45). It is difficult to see past the use of this essay as a marketing tool for the Metzilah Centre and the Zionist ideology of its founders.

The analysis in the book was dictated by an overall problematic assumption that argues that “Resolution 181 was therefore a necessary condition for the struggle of the Jews, and afterwards of the State of Israel, to be seen in the eyes of most of the members of the UN –including those of Count Folke Bernadotte- as a just cause, while the military struggle of the Arab residents of Palestine (*Eretz Yisreal*) and of the Arab countries (after 15 May 1948) against the Jewish state was considered to be illegal” (p.xx). This assumption did not only dictate the analysis in the five essays, but also the focus of the chosen sources in the second and major part of the book. The editor of the volume argues that the focus of the publication was on “the crossroads at the center of the events which led to the realization that partition was the correct solution to the conflict in *Eretz Yisrael*” (p.xiv). Indeed, what is correct or incorrect within such understanding remain a very subjective issue and very far from objectivity that takes the facts on the ground and the historical evidence as the starting points of any rigorous analysis and judgment.

Gavison, who served as a member in the Winograd Commission which investigates the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006, put this publication together to celebrate Zionism and the “impressive achievements of the state of Israel”. This reflects the core thrust of the book which is about promoting and advancing the Zionist principles or a version of them instead of engaging critically, seriously, and constructively with the academic scholarly production on the matter. Such practice is not exclusive to the Metzilah Center though, but rather it is a characteristic of many of the Israeli academic institutions as was discussed and testified by the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé in one of his latest books “The Idea of Israel: A History of Power and Knowledge”. Professor Pappé argues that Israel as an idea requires evaluating it ethically, morally and politically. Additionally, Israel as an idea, as any other idea, can be marketed and commodified. This is what is happening through many of the Zionist academic establishments, because the idea must be packaged as a narrative, and it requires scholarly consolidation, to be marketed. Within this overall framing and understanding, Gavison’s book is positioned, and should be contextualised and understood.

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