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Review

*The Land Beyond Promise: Israel, Likud and The Zionist
Dream, by Colin Shindler*

&

*Palestine/Israel: Peace or Apartheid
by Marwan Bishara*

reviewed by
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I

In *The Land Beyond Promise* Colin Shindler provides an historical perspective on one of Israel's main political movements, namely, the Nationalistic-Right. In particular, Shindler traces the development of Israel's biggest political party, the Likud. His account is even-handed and dispassionate. Nonetheless, it could make readers rather pessimistic (if they aren't so already) with regard to the possibility, arising lately, that Ariel Sharon could break with a long tradition of "rejectionism."

The book covers a century of political activity, analyzing different right wing factions that eventually formed the Likud. Its ideological roots are traced back to Zev Jabotinsky but Shindler demonstrates that Likud was infused with other ideas that were often inconsistent with Jabotinsky's vision. Shindler shows that radical influences were absorbed especially from "Yair" Stern and the Lehi underground (later headed by Yitzhak Shamir). Nonetheless, these streams shared more or less the same core conviction, namely, a Zionist ideology of a particularly fierce kind. A more recent development is Likud's ideological association with the religious-Zionist movement.

All these factors turn the Likud into a fascinating object of study for social scientists, historians, and anyone interested in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Two-thirds of the book ably relates how the tragic events of the Middle East evolved. The final third deals illuminatingly with particular issues, such as the Shamir plan for a solution to the Palestinian issue and how Zionist propaganda is designed. Since Shindler focuses on the Likud, he inevitably

provides a partial account of events (because Labour, the Palestinians and other actors are absent). Still, the book cogently explains the way the right in Israel thinks and accordingly, acts. In this respect, the book is an important contribution to a deeper understanding of the roots of the conflict. It can help us realize the responsibility that Likud governments bear for the vexing condition Israeli society finds itself in these days as well as the repercussions for other Middle East nations and peoples, and in particular the Palestinians.

This book could be read as a litany of shortsighted acts of political incompetence. Some historical examples that the author provides are dismaying, and readers (those who are aware of the realistic possibilities of the time) could be incensed. These events include “Yair” Stern’s contacts with the Nazis in order to secure support to fight the British, Menachem Begin’s insistence on the east bank of the Jordan as “absolutely necessary,” Sharon’s lies during the Lebanon war, and Benjamin Netanyahu’s irresponsible incitement during Yitzhak Rabin’s abruptly terminated premiership. These nasty examples pile up to a point where it seems that the Likud is incapable of doing one reasonable thing, with the exception of the 1977 peace with Egypt. From the persuasive evidence the author provides, Likud is still based on discouragingly dogmatic notions. Yet, from the standpoint of a follower steeped in Jabotinsky and Begin, Likud policy could be deemed successful. Although reluctant acknowledgement that the Greater Israel doctrine is failing is growing today, the way Likud leaders doggedly drag out the process of giving up this dream is, on its own terms, rather impressive.

The Greater Israel doctrine and the militaristic approach that different Likud leaders espouse are the sources of the various policies the right advocates. “Security” is the justification for every policy, and on that basis almost any policy can be acceptable. The fear that the Arabs will “throw us to the sea” is invoked regardless of the strength of the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) or of the Arab armies. This becomes even more bizarre when looking at the danger posed by the Palestinians. Any peace agreement, Likud says, is a ploy by the Arabs to achieve their goal of Jewish extinction. This refrain was exploited to a point far beyond mere counter-productiveness, as the second Intifada shows.

Shindler provides striking examples of how the security argument was employed. Those familiar with a nationalistic rhetoric would not be surprised by the way the Likud behaved not only toward the Palestinians in the

territories but also toward the Arab-Israeli population and toward the Jewish left. All were, at different stages and to different extents, deemed threats to national solidarity and security. A particularly interesting example is the Begin government's change of language used in the Israel Broadcast Associations; reporters were ordered not to use phrases like "administered territories" but to call them by Hebrew proper names. Employees who resisted were dismissed (p. 100). Many similar examples stem from Sharon: his merciless operations against Palestinians, referring to Israeli-Arabs as "foreigners," and statements comparing the Israeli left to the racist parliament member, the late and unlamented Meir Kahane (pp. 101, 111, 132, 205).

Although the Likud began as a secular movement and to a certain extent is still one, the religious-Zionist extremists are a natural ally. Both advocate that the West Bank is a part of "Eretz Israel" and should never be handed to the Palestinians "at whatever cost." The grounds for these claims are religious yet the Likud's version of them is a nationalist one. The Likud is as adamant as the religious zealots that "Eretz Israel" belongs solely to the Jews. This is conveniently couched in security arguments. The situation that Jews and Arabs face today results, to some extent, from the fact that these religious and nationalistic ideologies successfully displaced all other interpretations of what it means to be a patriotic Israeli (Jew). This is their overwhelming success and, as I believe and as seems apparent, the origin of the eventual downfall of this ideology.

Shindler's discussion of the case of the Jewish underground is illuminating (p. 187-201). Jewish Underground members were arrested in 1984. Its attacks had maimed and killed innocent civilians as well as political figures (all Palestinians). The "understanding" of their actions as expressed by Shamir and Sharon highlights the moral basis on which the Likud is operating: any act done in the name of the nation is not immoral but "courageous." Polls show that a considerable part of the population "understood," if not endorsed, the Jewish Underground. The judges who sentenced the Jewish Underground members were denounced by Likud spokesmen. Recently there are reports of a revived Jewish Underground operating in the Occupied Territories. The way the Israeli government and the Israeli public will deal with this issue could well indicate which direction the crisis is heading.

The activities of the Jewish underground, and other extremist organizations, reveal all too well the right's mindset and its ideological commitments. The fantasy of a Greater Israel is illustrated by slogans: "Jordan is Palestine" or

“Lebanon as the North Bank” (pp. 159, 193, 221). They refuse to grasp that the West Bank was taken by force and that its population legitimately seeks national self-determination. Moreover, the Likud has manipulated much of the Israeli public to accept that the Palestinians are a threat and will always be, that the territories are essential for security, that Israel can impose law and order in them, and above all, that holding these lands is a patriotic act. The price of this doctrine is very high for Israelis, too.

The book highlights the “stark” choice Israel must make between a commitment to democracy and equal rights, or to an unchecked nationalistic ideology. The ideology of the Likud, and its more unruly associates, heavily influences the way many Israelis perceive reality and thus the nature of the conflict and its solution. Shindler’s account conjures a strong sense that a fear-driven fantasized perception is guiding Israel. This perception not only underpins Israel’s defense policy but increasingly its internal social policies, which are hostage to defense expenditures. Shindler’s book provides many valuable insights and could even be utilized as a guide on how to approach and handle the volatile sensitivities of Likud leaders. Understanding their core convictions, and addressing them appropriately, can help when seeking a just resolution to the conflict, especially when it appears that for the foreseeable future the Likud will dominate Israeli politics.

II

IF THERE IS ONE THREAD THAT RUNS through Marwan Bishara’s book *Palestine/Israel: Peace or Apartheid*, it is that all diplomatic efforts in the “peace process” were a mask for continued control of Israel over the Palestinians and the territories. He states: “Palestinian dissatisfaction aside, the central problem in the region before and after the Intifada has not been Palestinian *per se*; it is an Israeli problem. Israel is not ready for a decolonization that will end its military control of the Occupied Territories.” This might well be true, and it seems true for many Likud voters.

Yet, too many of Bishara’s claims are advanced without setting them in an adequately comprehensive context. He does not mention so much as one error that the Palestinians made in the “Oslo period.” Palestinians act out of good and peaceful intentions while everyone else, including the Americans, are deceivers. Bishara argues the “Palestinians have been ready for almost three decades to reach a historic reconciliation based on the 1967 borders

and the recognition of the Right of Return.” (p. 135) Well, this might be the case, but, as far as even reasonable segments of Israeli society go, it is widely seen as a doubtful one. My aim here is not to justify any party to the conflict; the quote only stresses Bishara’s argumentative intent.

Consider the title. If there is a regime of unalloyed apartheid in Israel or in the occupied territories, that is a serious matter. Yet, no explanation is offered to back up his analogy between South Africa and Israel and the Palestinian territories. As I am extremely sympathetic to the Palestinian case, I am not claiming that Israel’s actions can be justified. I simply hoped that the author would provide compelling evidence of what he holds to be a parallel situation. Without one, the book is in danger of losing credibility through overstatement. Of course, “occupation,” in some regards, is worse than apartheid and some de-facto policies that go hand in hand with the occupation are indeed racist. However, stating the Palestinian plight with a view to persuade readers with systematically evaluated evidence would have been a more fruitful course.

Bishara says on page 121: “The post-1967 occupation was a clear case of outright colonialism (for profit and exploitation) developed in concert with American policy in the Middle East.” There are no ideological or other historical roots that explain the occupation, only economic factors. This seems simplistic. He mentions “ethnic cleansing” as if it occurs on a daily basis. Again, the reader wonders why aren’t there examples. He refers to the 1948 war, which created the refugee problem. This indeed was a terrible case of “ethnic cleansing,” which will haunt Israel in costly ways until it is remedied. Merely stating that Israel must recognize the Right of Return seems too pat an answer and does not begin to address the issue.

Bishara devotes the middle of the book to the charge that U.S. foreign policy is biased toward Israel. This is a strong and troubling claim. However, his characterization seems overly personal:

This was the most deceptive phase of the entire peace process. [Ehud] Barak went to Camp David in order to make the Palestinians accept his ultimatum, an agreement favorable to Israel, or show Israelis and international public opinion that the Palestinian leadership was not ready for peace. At Camp David, Barak had the full

support of President Clinton and his advisors, almost all of whom were both Jewish and Zionist. (p. 54)

The chapter on the U.S. role stands in contrast to the rest of the book because there is an attempt to provide a serious theoretical analysis. However, I believe this chapter too suffers from overstatement. It does not establish the case convincingly and more crucially, it lacks evidence. Bishara writes: "The Clinton administration consistently lied to the Palestinians and deceived their leadership into believing it understood and sympathized with their frustration and anxiety as the terms of reference shifted and narrowed, especially when UN resolutions were being by-passed or blatantly violated." Regardless of the considerable truth of these claims, the U.S. remains the only party which could pressure Israel to end the occupation. There is nowhere else to go. So Palestinians still can learn from their mistakes and "mistaken trust"; they must improve the ways to deliver their case to the American public and its politicians. In this respect, I guess they have much to learn from the pro-Israeli lobby.

Bishara gets tangled in his own argument. Regarding Rabin's 1994 assassination, he claims that there are grounds to think that Israel's Internal security service (Shabak) was behind it. I doubt this, but he bases his case on the fact that the Shabak recruited extremists to penetrate right wing cells and, as years went by, they rose to occupy senior positions. Fearing that Rabin would end the occupation, they decided to kill him. Yet, if this scenario were so, then the peace process was sincere, after all, which counters Bishara's thesis. Bishara also says that Israeli occupation is more brutal than Palestinian violence and that "a few violent actions by Palestinians should not be compared to the violent and brutal occupation." (p. 134) The occupation is very brutal indeed but Palestinian violence inflicts its own distinct cruelty, which cannot be discounted either. What is the point of the invidious comparison anyway? I sincerely believe that such comparisons do more harms than good for the Palestinian cause and especially when a Palestinian intellectual expresses them.

Finally, virtually out of the blue, Bishara shifts his tone to airy optimism (p. 138): "If they choose to integrate, a democratic Israel/Palestine, liberal or bi-national, could revolutionize the region and reinvent its economic and social relations, allowing both people to partake of milk and honey." The contrast between his relentless grim case and the suddenly sunny outlook is just overwhelming. This is not to say, however, that a solution is out of reach.

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Bishara's energies would have been put to better use addressing a perennial issue, such as the problems posed for everyone else by extremists on both sides, rather than reiterating familiar claims.

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