Readings for July 9, 2017

The Islamic Road to the Modern World

Malise Ruthven JUNE 22, 2017 ISSUE

The Islamic Enlightenment: The Struggle Between Faith and Reason, 1798 to Modern Times

by Christopher de Bellaigue

Liveright, 398 pp., $35.00

Freedom in the Arab World: Concepts and Ideologies in Arabic Thought in the Nineteenth Century

by Wael Abu-‘Uksa

Cambridge University Press, 235 pp., $99.99

Château de Versailles

Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt; painting by Louis-Charles-Auguste Couder, 1840

Soon after Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, Bashir Shihab II, the Maronite ruler of Lebanon, sent his court poet Niqula al-Turk to Cairo to see what the French were up to. Al-Turk noted that after the French had defeated the Mamluk rulers of Egypt (in a battle in which they slaughtered some one thousand Mamluk knights wearing magnificent turbans and armed with jeweled scimitars, while losing just twenty-nine of their own men), they erected a “long decorated pillar” in Cairo’s Azbakiyya park near the Nile where the Mamluks had their palaces. The French, al-Turk wrote, called this pillar “the tree of freedom, but the people of Egypt said: this is the sign of the stake that impaled us in the occupation of our kingdom.”

The poet’s observation encapsulates the dilemma that has faced Muslim peoples since the middle of the eighteenth century, when Islamic states headed by the three “Gunpowder Empires” of Ottoman Turkey, Qajar Persia, and Mughal India proved incapable of resisting not just European arms, but changes in ideas and social institutions that followed Western conquest. Napoleon claimed Egypt in the name of “freedom and equality,” but the Cairene chronicler Abdul Rahman al-Jabarti took exception to the assumption that all people are equal, stating: “This is a lie, ignorance and fatuity. How could that be right when God favored [certain] people over others.”

In Mamluk Egypt, the idea of “freedom”—hurriya—had been associated with the manumission of slaves, which was recommended by Islamic teaching (though slavery was still in place) and seemed less challenging than the idea of equality. In The Islamic Enlightenment, Christopher de Bellaigue gives an absorbing account of Napoleon’s conquest—which, he argues, shattered contemporary Muslims’ “fiction of Christian deference to Muslim superiority”—and of al-Jabarti’s relation to it. Al-Jabarti, he writes, “finds it impossible to appreciate freedom of the political and social kind that the French claim to have established in their nation, while the idea of stretching hurriya to mean emancipation from God—atheism—is too horrendous even to consider.”

De Bellaigue takes Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt as the point of departure of his book, which aims to address a bias he perceives among general readers about the history of Islamic political liberalization. According to widespread assumptions, efforts to transform Islamic nations into modern societies were mainly imposed “from above” by Western-leaning autocrats—such as the Albanian autocrat Muhammad Ali (1769–1849) or his nominal sovereign, the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II (reigned 1808–1839)—the underlying premise being that the Enlightenment was an exclusively Judeo-Christian (or post-Christian) movement that had no parallel in Islamic societies. This “historical fallacy,” in de Bellaigue’s view, has led “triumphalist Western historians, politicians and commentators, as well as some renegade Muslims who have turned on the religion of their births,” to insist that “Islam [still] needs its Enlightenment.”

By contrast, de Bellaigue argues convincingly that efforts to bring modern political ideas to the Muslim world had a “natural constituency” among the educated minority and that, despite opposition, they slowly gained general acceptance:

Although the principles of modernity and progress were introduced to the Middle East from the West, the fact that they had originated elsewhere was not in itself an obstacle to their adoption in this new environment. Contradicting assumptions of willful Muslim backwardness, Islam did not show any more opposition to modernization than Judaeo-Christian culture had done to its earlier iteration in the West….

The sovereignty of the individual, the usefulness of hygiene and the fallibility of a crowned head (to name but three [ideas originating in the West]) carry no brand of exclusivity but can be understood by all. In fact, the Muslim world adapted itself to these values and many others much more rapidly than the West had devised them, albeit with changes of emphasis.

Embracing the ideas of liberty and equality together, concepts that derive variously from the writings of Hobbes and Locke, Voltaire and Rousseau, would doubtless have been challenging in most parts of the world at the time of the Napoleonic invasion. As de Bellaigue points out, there had been no Gutenberg revolution in Ottoman lands. The literacy rate in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran at the turn of the nineteenth century was around 3 percent, compared with England’s rate of 68 percent for men and 43 percent for women, with much higher figures in places like Amsterdam. In the Muslim world, the small class of scholars known as the ‘ulama (learned men) had rejected the printing press on the grounds that “making the Quran accessible would only enable the ignorant to misinterpret it.” Printing in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa was a capital crime, and there were no newspapers to report on such world-changing events as America’s rejection of British rule in 1776 and Ireland’s 1798 “Year of Liberty.”

But the ideas that came to Egypt during the brief and turbulent months of the French occupation of Cairo were planted in fertile ground. After defeating the Mamluks, Napoleon introduced an administrative crash program in the form of a council, or “Diwan,” that included sheikhs, notables, and ‘ulama. More ambitiously, he went on to organize a General Diwan with representatives from different provinces. Engineers cleared canals, built windmills, and improved defenses against flooding along the Nile. In Cairo construction began on new hospitals and libraries, and the streets were cleared of garbage. De Bellaigue shows how disruptive yet enticing these changes must have been in part through the story of the cleric Rifaa al-Tahtawi (1801–1873), who spent five years in Paris in the late 1820s teaching religion to a group of Muslim students. Al-Tahtawi’s account of his sojourn, which proclaimed the benefits of “civilization” and “progress,” was widely circulated in Ottoman lands.

After returning from Paris to Cairo with the encouragement of Muhammad Ali, who had made himself all-powerful as the official Ottoman viceroy of Egypt after massacring the restored Mamluks, al-Tahtawi became head of the new school of languages. There, he embarked on what amounted to an intellectual revolution by initiating a program to translate some two thousand European and Turkish volumes, ranging from ancient texts on geography and geometry to Voltaire’s influential biography of Peter the Great (the archetypical reforming autocrat), along with the “Marseillaise” and the whole of the Code Napoléon. (Happily al-Tahtawi may not have been aware of Voltaire’s play Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète (1741), a coded attack on the Catholic Church designed to mislead the French censors, in which the Islamic prophet is depicted as a scheming, ambitious, and wicked tyrant, an impostor motivated by lust.\*) As de Bellaigue explains, the translation program initiated

the biggest and most meaningful importation of foreign thought into Arabic since Abbasid times [750–1258]. These translations made a huge impact on the engineers, doctors, teachers and military officers who were beginning to form the elite of the country; they were the forerunners of the secular-minded middle classes that would dominate public life for much of the next two centuries. To them ancient history expanded the meaning of the instructive past, which had hitherto been confined to the Islamic period. Reading about the feats of the infidel suggested an alternative story of talent and achievement, disregarding conventional faith-based partitions.

In France al-Tahtawi had been struck by the way the French language he had mastered was constantly renewing itself to fit modern ways of living. Yet Arabic has its own sources of reinvention. The root system that Arabic shares with other Semitic tongues such as Hebrew is capable of expanding the meanings of words using structured consonantal variations: the word for airplane, for example, has the same root as the word for bird.

In his new book, Freedom in the Arab World, the scholar Wael Abu-‘Uksa of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem offers a much more detailed examination of the work of al-Tahtawi and his successors. His monograph is aimed at specialists in political thought rather than general readers, and its arguments require some sensitivity to fine points of Arabic. Abu-‘Uksa shows how the sacred language of the Koran and other Muslim scriptures came in these years to accommodate new concepts such as freedom, progress, science, and civilization, sometimes by adopting neologisms, but often by expanding formerly religious usages. “By breaking the monopoly” of religion over knowledge, he writes, the new language of science could absorb the modern disciplines.

‘Persian lady in indoor costume’; from Ella C. Sykes’s Through Persia on a Side-Saddle, 1898

The process was carefully calibrated. For example, during his time in Paris al-Tahtawi observed that people were free to practice any religion they chose, without any constraints, but it is significant that in the Arabic text of his travelogue he uses the word yubah, “permitted,” rather than hurr, “free,” exposing what Abu-‘Uksa calls “a vast conceptual gap” between a notion of authority lying outside the individual’s will, usually possessed by rulers or clerics, and the Enlightenment concept of “right” that “stemmed from the civil perception of the individual’s status in a polity.” Despite his lengthy sojourn in the French capital, al-Tahtawi’s notion of freedom was closer to al-Jabarti’s than to Rousseau’s:

What they [the French] desire and call freedom (al-huriyya) is precisely what we [the Muslims] designate as justice and that is because the meaning of freedom is equality before the law in which the rulers do not discriminate between human beings but apply the state of law [as the highest value].

De Bellaigue writes that “the logic that lies behind such equivalences”—whereby Islamic justice is seen as identical to the French idea of liberty and religious zeal is understood as a form of patriotism—“seems contrived and unconvincing.” Such efforts appear to be aimed at showing that principles now considered “modern, such as pluralism, freedom and rights, existed in embryonic form in early Islam.” This tension between French Enlightenment notions of equality and Islamic conceptions of justice anticipates the political and constitutional struggles in Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and elsewhere, in the centuries that followed.

In Paris al-Tahtawi had witnessed the July Revolution of 1830, when the restored Bourbon autocracy of Charles X was replaced by the constitutional monarchy of Louis Philippe. The monarch’s title changed from “King of France,” who occupied his throne by right of inheritance, to “King of the French,” whose title embodied the principle of popular sovereignty. Al-Tahtawi used new terms to explain the rivalry between the royalist camp (malakiya) and their antagonists, the proponents of freedom (hurriya). Abu-‘Uksa suggests that the use of hurriya “gains considerable stability in Arabic during this period” as an indicator of liberal political orientation. In time the concept of hurriya and its linguistic siblings developed into the liberal constitutionalism of Egypt’s Wafd Party, which sought independence from British authority after 1919, and the more radical Free Officers Movement (Dubat al-Ahrar), which seized power in 1952 in order to expel the British from their stronghold in the Suez Canal.

The shifting meanings of Europe and European freedom in the Muslim world can be seen in the history of Cairo’s Tahrir Square. The square was formerly named after the Egyptian viceroy Ismail Pasha (reigned 1863–1879), who brought his country to bankruptcy after invading the Sudan, digging the Suez Canal at vast human cost, and recasting Cairo as a brand new city, inspired by Haussmann’s Paris, which he boasted was “now part of Europe.” In 1952 the Free Officers, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, overthrew the monarchy and installed an authoritarian military state, renaming the square, with unconscious irony, Tahrir, “liberation.” When George W. Bush, in a famous speech in September 2001 after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, said, “They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other,” and followed it with the “shock and awe” of invasion, Middle Easterners were more likely to recall the Lebanese poet’s “stake [of] occupation” than the tree of liberty.

In arguing his case de Bellaigue takes his readers on a fascinating journey through the summits and valleys along the Islamic road to the modern world. One of the summits is the study of anatomy—a vitally important subject, not usually considered in discussions of the “coercive modernization” imposed on the Arab world by reforming autocrats. During the French occupation Hassan al-Attar (1766–1835), a scholar and polymath who is one of the heroes of de Bellaigue’s book, may well have seen the room for animal dissection in Napoleon’s pop-up Institute of Egypt, which “boasted an aviary, a botanical garden, an observatory, various small museums, as well as workshops for the production of a wide range of scientific tools, from precision instruments to sword blades and microscopic lenses.”

Al-Attar in any case became persuaded of the necessity of studying anatomy—despite formidable religious opposition that was partly the result of the widespread Muslim belief that “the dead feel every incision inflicted upon them” and that on the Day of Resurrection bodies must be intact. When the French surgeon Antoine Clot (1793–1868) was hired by Muhammad Ali to improve the health of his subjects, he was fortunate that al-Attar, who was by then the Sunni world’s most prestigious cleric, had the clout to overrule the entrenched opposition of his conservative peers at Al-Azhar University. But it was a dangerous undertaking. As Clot reported, “We carried out [the first] autopsies without knowledge of the public, and surrounding the amphitheatre with guards who perhaps would have been the first to attack us if they had known what was going on.”

“Who imitates another people becomes one of them” runs a proverb that reflects anxieties about loss of identity that may be as strong among Muslims today as it was in the 1890s, when the Qajar ruler Nasser el-Din Shah (reigned 1848–1896) “decreed that the women of the harem should abandon their traditional attire of long, loose, embroidered trousers in favor of a kinky pastiche of the costume” that had entranced him on a visit to the Paris ballet. Absurdities such as these, however, should not detract from the impact of the real transformations in social attitudes, such as the shift from it “being socially unacceptable to educate one’s daughter to unacceptable not to do so.”

De Bellaigue is particularly insightful about the constant tension in these societies between what he calls “a progressive despotism and a benighted popular will.” For example, when plagues devastated Ottoman lands (including Egypt) prior to the 1840s, the ‘ulama cited hadiths to the effect that plagues were the work of djinns (of which there are numerous Koranic references), and that it was therefore impious to interfere with God’s will by combating their spread. Muhammad Ali set up quarantine stations in Cairo as early as 1813, ordering people to sprinkle the streets with water and to air their clothing. In the 1830s he started a campaign in collaboration with European consuls to attack the breeding grounds of the plague bacillus by filling stagnant pools, burning garbage, and monitoring foodstuffs for freshness and quality. The reduction in mortality was dramatic. In 1841 the death toll in Alexandria was nearly six thousand; only four years later the figure was zero.

De Bellaigue observes, “With the suppression of the plague, of course, the obscurantists fell silent. Islam came onto the side of prevention, and the selfsame sanitation measures that had been denounced as heretical entered the routines of life.” The theological impact was significant, with the sheikh al-Islam—the Ottoman Empire’s highest-ranking cleric—declaring in 1838: “When a town has the plague it is permitted to avert it from the wrath of God and take refuge in the bosom of his mercy.” A government report issued the same year legitimizes the two-track epistemology underpinning the sheikh’s fatwa:

All arts and trades are products of science. Religious knowledge serves salvation in the world to come, but science serves perfection of men in this world…. Through science one man can now do the work of a hundred. Trade and profit have become difficult in countries where people are ignorant of these sciences. Without science people cannot know the meaning of love for the state and fatherland.

In sum, de Bellaigue suggests, “an Islamic Enlightenment did indeed take place, under influence of the West, but finding its own form.” It occurred “through innumerable small measures and advances, fudges and elisions” that brought the “modern principles of empiricism, observation and analysis” to some of the leading centers of the Muslim world. “The new thinking had shown itself first in military mechanics, before leaping to medicine and education.” In time “statistics, modern sociology, agricultural innovation and political theory” would all be guided by ideas of utility and progress. Certain features of the Enlightenment, he argues, are universal, such as “the defeat of dogma by proven knowledge, the demotion of the clergy as arbiters of society and the relegation of religion to the private sphere,” as well as, finally, “democratic principles and the emergence of the individual to challenge the collective to which he or she belongs.” These ideas, he insists, are “transferable across all systems of belief, and they have also entered the Islamic one. They are at work right now—even if they have suffered rebuffs.”

This is an optimistic view, suggesting that in time the power of the religious establishments in Iran and Saudi Arabia—two countries where religious authority reinforces sectarian rivalries—must fade before the logic of change. (Notably, the developments that de Bellaigue describes did not much affect the Arabian Peninsula.) At a time when anti-Muslim feeling is rising in Europe, and a US president wants to bar immigrants from a number of Muslim-majority countries on grounds of national security and has a chief strategist who is an anti-Muslim extremist, de Bellaigue’s message could not be more relevant and urgent.

De Bellaigue sets the scene for intellectual engagement between the Islamic and Western worlds in three chapters on the cities of Cairo, Istanbul, and Tehran, where the encounter with Enlightenment ideas served to generate both modernist-oriented nationalist movements and the eventual reaction to modernism he calls the Counter-Enlightenment (more usually referred to as Islamism). This is brilliantly done with fascinating details and insights. But after reading the city-based chapters one wonders: Why not add Delhi to the list? After securing Egypt, Napoleon had intended to ally himself with Tipu Sultan, ruler of the southern principality of Mysore and the most effective foe of the British in India at that time.

The collapse of Muslim power in South Asia was formalized by the deposition of the last Mughal emperor in 1858, encouraging innovative approaches to received Islamic tradition, as had the defeats suffered by the Ottomans in Europe and by their Mamluk vassals in Egypt. The moral turbulence in India caused by the failure of the great rebellion of 1857, which the British patronizingly dismissed as a “mutiny,” initiated an intellectual and theological chain reaction every bit as far-reaching as defeats suffered by Muslim powers in Iran and the Ottoman West. The Indian reformer Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), a former employee of the East India Company, had witnessed the devastating effects of the reprisals, when troops under British command massacred up to 30,000 people in Delhi, the Mughal capital, and demolished nearly half of Lucknow, South Asia’s largest city at that time.

Realizing the extent of colonial power, Sayyid Ahmad concluded that a military struggle against colonial rule would be hopeless and opted for reform of clerical leadership and engagement with the British occupiers. In his commentaries on the Koran and the Bible, and in numerous papers and articles, he would argue that Islam was fully compatible with progress and knowledge of science, and that Muslims must engage with this knowledge like their forebears in the golden age of kalam, Islamic philosophy. Sayyid Ahmad’s decision to work with the British brought about the founding of the Anglo-Muslim college of Aligarh—upgraded to a university in the 1920s—to train a new generation of secular-minded Muslim elites.

Comparable developments were also unfolding in Central Asia, where Russian expansion generated a reassessment of Islamic tradition by leaders such as Ismail Bey Gasprinski (1851–1914), a Tatar from Crimea who founded the reformist Jadid movement, which influenced Muslim communities from Crimea to the Fergana Valley in Central Asia. A school instructor and onetime mayor of Bakhchyserai, his native city, Gasprinski saw the adoption of scientific knowledge from the infidel West as a prerequisite for cultural renewal. In this respect he shared the same vision as Sayyid Ahmad and other advocates of Islamic Enlightenment, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897) in Iraq and his disciple the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), who feature in both of these books.

The process of broader reform in the Islamic world lies beyond the scope of Abu-‘Uksa’s work. By contrast, de Bellaigue’s title, The Islamic Enlightenment, suggests a larger theme, and the absence of figures like Gasprinski and Sayyid Ahmad may seem significant omissions. This would not matter if different regions (the Ottoman west, the Persian center, and India, with its distinctive legacy of Muslim–Hindu interaction) had been insulated from each other. But in the nineteenth century, driven by imperial competition, the process we have come to call globalization was already well underway, particularly in the growing exchange between South Asia and the Middle East.

A fuller account of the “Islamic Enlightenment” might also include the Indian poet and philosopher Mohamed Iqbal (1877–1938), who had studied in Britain and Germany, loved Goethe and admired Nietzsche, and wrote poetry in Persian that helped inspire the 1979 Iranian revolution. Likewise the Indian journalist and scholar Abu’l Ala al-Mawdudi (1903–1979), founder of the Jamaat-i-Islam, the Islamist movement that Pankaj Mishra calls, without exaggeration, “the first Leninist-style revolutionary vanguard party anywhere in the Islamic world,” drew on Western political ideas.

Al-Mawdudi is, arguably, the true founder of modern Islamism. His virulent opposition to secular nationalism as well as to colonialism drew on the communal anxieties of India’s Muslims in the years leading up to Partition. They were confronted with a movement that al-Mawdudi saw as tainted by Hindu influence, a view that came to be shared by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a former member of All-India Congress who, despairing of Hindu–Muslim unity, became the founder of Pakistan. Ayatollah Khomeini translated al-Mawdudi’s Urdu texts into Persian, and Sayyid Qutb, author of Milestones (1964), arch-exponent of modern jihadism and intellectual forefather of al-Qaeda and other radical groups, was powerfully influenced by his writings.

Just as the struggle for Indian independence was sharpened by Western political concepts, the modern jihadist discourse reveals a raft of borrowings from radical Western thought. As the British philosopher John Gray has noted, “Islamic fundamentalism” is not a wholly indigenous growth, but rather “an exotic hybrid bred from the encounter of sections of the Islamic intelligentsia with radical western ideologies”—and, one might add, with the new opportunities for propaganda and recruitment made available by social media. The Islamic Enlightenment, and the reactions it generated, were phenomena that extended far beyond the Middle East.

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Israel’s Irrational Rationality

David Shulman JUNE 22, 2017 ISSUE

The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East

by Guy Laron

Yale University Press, 368 pp., $28.00

The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine

by Nathan Thrall

Metropolitan, 323 pp., $28.00

In Search of Modern Palestinian Nationhood

by Matti Steinberg

Tel Aviv University/Moshe Dayan Center, 503 pp., ₪100.00 (paper)

Kingdom of Olives and Ash: Writers Confront the Occupation

edited by Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman

HarperPerennial, 434 pp., $16.99 (paper)

A Half Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine, and the World’s Most Intractable Conflict

by Gershon Shafir

University of California Press, 283 pp., $26.95

Corinna Kern/NurPhoto/Getty Images

Israeli policemen removing a protester during the eviction of Jewish settlers from the illegal settlement of Amona in the occupied West Bank, February 2017

This June, Israel is marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Six-Day War. Some Israelis, including most members of the present government, are celebrating the country’s swift victory over Egypt, Jordan, and Syria as the beginning of the permanent annexation of the entire Palestinian West Bank; others, like me, mourn it as the start of a seemingly inexorable process of moral corruption and decline, the result of the continuing occupation of the West Bank, along with Israel’s now indirect but still-crippling control of Gaza. As it happens, my own life in Israel coincides exactly with the occupation. I arrived from the US in 1967, not as an ideological Zionist but as a young student who had fallen madly in love with the Hebrew language. Sometimes I think it is my passion for the language that has kept me here for five decades, although I would now want to add the strong feeling that it is my fate and my good fortune to be able to fight the good fight.

The country I came to live in fifty years ago was utterly unlike the one I live in today. It was no utopia, but its society was broadly moderate and humane, a mildly Mediterranean version of a modern European social democracy. Despite what some would say, it was not a colonial settlers’ society. There was widespread fear and even hatred of Arabs, including Arab citizens of Israel, but it was nothing like the rampant racism one now hears every day on the radio or TV. Shame, sincere or not, had not yet disappeared from public life.

In those early years, most Israelis regarded the occupied territories—which included the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula as well as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—not as providing an opportunity for enlarging the boundaries of the state through colonization but as bargaining chips in an eventual and hoped-for peace settlement with the Arabs. There were as yet no Israeli settlements in the territories and hence no fanatical, messianic settlers; the Israeli army could still claim, with some justice, to be an army of defense, not a police force sent to ensure that the project of seizing Palestinian land take place without too much resistance from the local population.

Not surprisingly, a number of new books have appeared in this grim anniversary year, some of which attempt to make sense of how the Israeli state was hijacked by the settlers and how the occupation of most of the territories captured in 1967, not counting Sinai, was made permanent. Those who want to understand the conditions that led to the Six-Day War will find a good account, better than most earlier ones, in Guy Laron’s The Six-Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East.

Laron examines the shifting configurations that preceded, and in some ways determined, the outbreak of the war: these included Lyndon Johnson’s stark turn away from John F. Kennedy’s policy of dialogue with and strong economic support for Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt (Nasser had promised Kennedy to keep the Israeli–Arab situation “cool” as the quid pro quo) and Israeli Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin’s increasingly belligerent moves toward Syria. Rabin, according to Laron, wanted to go to war with Syria and took every opportunity to push the Israeli cabinet in this direction in the critical months of spring 1967.

By far the most cogent of the new books, however, is Nathan Thrall’s The Only Language They Understand, which surveys the last five decades and comes to a remarkable conclusion: the only way to produce some kind of movement toward resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is to apply significant coercive force to the parties involved, and in particular to Israel.

No amount of coddling and reassuring, no increased bribes in the form of more money or military aid, will have any effect on Israeli policy for the simple reason that Israel considers any sacrifice that would be necessary for peace far worse than maintaining the current situation. As Thrall writes, “no strategy can succeed if it is premised on Israel behaving irrationally.” In this reading of the worldview that has driven all Israeli governments—right, pseudo-left, or center—over these decades, “it makes no sense for Israel to strike a deal today rather than wait to see if…imagined threats,” such as an apartheid state ruling over a Palestinian demographic majority, and thus the end of Israeli democracy, “actually materialize.” The assumption that Israel genuinely wants a peace agreement is simply wrong; the costs of such an agreement are tangible, immediate, and perhaps overwhelming, involving the loss of territory, an end to colonization, and potential political collapse, whereas the costs of maintaining the status quo are for many Israelis, if at times unpleasant, eminently bearable.

I think Thrall has got this right. Endless discussions of why this or that initiative or attempt to mediate failed are shown to be superfluous. We can stop wondering why the whole process of negotiations, beginning in the late 1980s, has remained so barren. Was it because Ehud Barak was not very courteous to Yasser Arafat at Camp David in 2000? Or because Ehud Olmert was burdened by scandal and political crisis when he finally made an offer to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in 2008? It has been clear for many years that the very notion of peace negotiations between the two parties has been little more than a device to perpetuate, not to end, the occupation. As Thrall writes:

The United States has consistently sheltered Israel from accountability for its policies in the West Bank by putting up a façade of opposition to settlements that in practice is a bulwark against more significant pressure to dismantle them.

What would make a difference? According to Thrall, only coercion by those who have the power to coerce. This was effective during the Carter administration, which pushed through the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel in 1979 partly by threatening to cut off all aid to Israel, and in a more limited way under George H.W. Bush and his secretary of state, James Baker, in 1991, when a very reluctant Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was forced to attend negotiations in Madrid; these eventually led to the Oslo Accords in 1993 between the Israelis and the Palestinians and a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan in 1994. Baker was the first—and until now the only—American secretary of state to say clearly that Israeli settlements in the territories are the main obstacle to peace; Bush refused to approve loan guarantees of up to $10 billion that Israel badly needed. Cornered, Shamir gave in and went to Madrid. In the case of both Carter and Baker, US officials took a strong stand despite pressure from the powerful pro-Israel lobby in Washington. Their successors, Thrall notes, have rarely tried.

In Thrall’s view, “contrary to what nearly every US mediator has asserted, it is not that Israel greatly desires a peace agreement but has a pretty good fallback option. It is that Israel greatly prefers the fallback option to a peace agreement.” The fallback is a continuation of the status quo, which allows the settlement enterprise to go on; protects the government from political chaos, including insurmountable challenges from the extreme right; assumes the useful security collaboration of the Palestinian Authority, or what is left of it; and comes with enormous amounts of US aid. Only a credible threat to diminish or cut off that aid, or a move toward serious sanctions against Israel by the UN or other major powers, could produce the kind of change within Israel that would make a peace agreement possible.

Israelis, of course, love to blame the Palestinians for the impasse. And while the Palestinian side has plenty to account for, above all a long history of violence, it requires an impressive degree of willful blindness for Israelis to ignore what is happening under their noses and with their collective collusion. A major component of this obtuseness is the failure to notice or understand the changes that have taken place among Palestinians in recent decades. The Hebrew-language news media largely inhabit a mythic realm in which Palestinian hostility to Jews is seen as absolute, eternal, and entirely independent of Israel’s own actions. Most Israelis are only too happy to subscribe to this distorted view.

Deeper insight is to be found in Matti Steinberg’s In Search of Modern Palestinian Nationhood, a magisterial study by the leading Israeli scholar of Palestine. Steinberg served for many years as a senior adviser to the heads of the Shin Bet, Israel’s main intelligence agency, and to several prime ministers. His book traces the history of Palestinian “conscious collective thinking” about the conflict, roughly from the Yom Kippur War in 1973 to the present. He offers a picture of striking heterogeneity and relatively rapid evolution: his readers, he says at the outset, “will find that the Palestinian attitudes went further and further from the original unanimity [that Israel should be destroyed and replaced by a Palestinian state on all the land west of the Jordan River] as far as means and aims are concerned.”

Steinberg discusses critical moments such as Arafat’s “Palestinian Declaration of Independence” speech to the Palestinian National Council in 1988, in which he made a clear distinction between the borders of the “historic homeland”—that is, all of Palestine—and those of the Palestinian state to be established on part of that land. The speech was written for Arafat by Mahmoud Darwish, who was considered the Palestinian national poet. In 1998, when another fifty-year anniversary was marked—that of the nakba, or Palestinian national disaster of defeat and exile following the 1948 war—Darwish, an early member of the PLO and probably the most articulate voice in the Palestinian mainstream, called for “eliminating all trace of the nakba by means of a permanent agreement based on the concept of two states for two peoples.” At that time, not long after the Oslo Accords, a full peace agreement seemed to be possible, even imminent. Three years later, during the second intifada, Darwish published another manifesto suffused by despair and by the fear that the Palestinian people faced annihilation. Israelis might do well to note the unhappy symmetry between this and their own enduring anxiety about being driven into the sea.

Steinberg is no less interested in Palestinian extremists than in pragmatic centrists, if such a word is appropriate in a polity so weakened and diffuse. He never underestimates the power of Hamas and the militant factions. Again and again he shows the diabolical interplay between such groups and the dominant Israeli policy of strengthening the occupation:

Neither “targeted killing” [the assassination of Hamas leaders by the Israeli army] nor Israel’s overwhelming military and technological superiority is the sworn enemy of Hamas. Its archenemy is the political settlement with Israel.

In a more general formulation: “It is a common wisdom that when pragmatism fails, then the way is paved, by default, towards radicalization.” Steinberg has nothing but scorn for the rationale put forward by Israeli prime ministers, from Ehud Barak to Ariel Sharon to Benjamin Netanyahu, that Israel has no Palestinian partner. Such a claim is self-serving, factually wrong, and above all self-fulfilling; it will, no doubt, be loudly trumpeted in Israel (and perhaps by Trump’s White House) in the event that Hamas takes over the West Bank, as if Israel had no responsibility for such an outcome.

Particularly trenchant in this respect is Steinberg’s analysis of the effect of the Saudi-led Arab Peace Initiative (API) of 2002, in which a pan-Arab consensus supported comprehensive peace with Israel in return for full Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders. The support of Arab governments for the API has remained remarkably consistent despite recent turmoil in the Middle East and was reaffirmed yet again at the Arab League Summit in Amman in March of this year. Steinberg argues that the very existence of a realistic peace plan served to stoke hypernationalist positions in both Israel and Palestine, as if the looming prospect of a solution were simply too awful to contemplate. The whole thrust of his book could be summed up as: Things could have been different, and maybe they still can and will be, though time is running out.

Steinberg’s view converges with a stark statement by Thrall:

When peaceful opposition to Israel’s policies is squelched and those with the power to dismantle the occupation don’t raise a finger against it, violence invariably becomes more attractive to those who have few other means of upsetting the status quo.

This conclusion, however, casts doubt on the idea that Israeli policy, however shortsighted, is nonetheless rational. Systemic cruelty inflicted over generations on innocent populations will eventually exact a price—probably a terrible price. It is an illusion to believe that large-scale eruptions of violence can be controlled, or their costs and results easily sustained.

Perhaps “rational” is not the word we want. A policy driven mostly by greed, and also to no little extent by sheer malice, such as Israel’s, may be intelligible, but that doesn’t make it rational, and it is certainly far from wise. However, there is another dimension that we miss if we stick primarily to hard-nosed calculations of self-interest and strategic advantage. A fifty-year anniversary invites us to take stock of the moral consequences of our decisions.

No matter how we look at it, unless our minds have been poisoned by the ideology of the religious right, the occupation is a crime. It is, first of all, based on the permanent disenfranchisement of a huge population. Many Israelis seem not to know this. Once I was detained by soldiers in a rocky field in the South Hebron hills (in what is known as Area C, under full Israeli control). These soldiers had just driven several Palestinian shepherds and their flocks of sheep off their traditional grazing grounds. One of the soldiers—hardly more than a boy—was curious about the Israeli activists he had encountered, and he came to talk to us. We informed him that what he had just done was clearly illegal, according to a Supreme Court ruling from 2004. “What do you mean?” he said. “I’m here to protect democracy.” “Really?” we replied. “What democracy do these Palestinians have? For example, do they have the right to vote for candidates who will represent them?” The young soldier thought hard for a moment. He had obviously never considered this problem. Finally, he said, “I don’t know, but there must be someone they can vote for!”

Don McCullin/Contact Press Images

Israeli soldiers interrogating a Jordanian Arab during Israel’s capture of the Old City of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War, June 1967

Even worse is the continuous theft—literally hour by hour—of Palestinian land. There should be no doubt that this is the real point of the occupation; soldiers, policemen, the military courts, the bureaucrats of the civil administration, a majority of the politicians, and most of the Israeli media serve this overriding aim. Recently, we were treated to a truly astonishing national farce, perhaps possible only in Israel: settlers from a place called Amona in the central West Bank, built on privately owned Palestinian land from the villages of Silwad, Ein Yabrud, and Taybeh, were forcibly evacuated, and their homes demolished, in compliance with a Supreme Court order from 2014. This came after a Supreme Court decision in 2006 declaring the settlement illegal and a police investigation that proved the settlers had forged documents in claiming ownership of the lands.

The settlers and their vociferous spokesmen in the government and the Knesset presented this tragedy as something on the order of the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the year 70 or the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Netanyahu, as usual, pandered to the extreme right; he was also quoted as telling the Amona settlers that he could understand their plight perfectly, since he and his wife were forcibly uprooted from their home—the prime minister’s residence—and “thrown into the street” after he lost the election of 1999.

In any case, the Amona evacuees are to be handsomely compensated for this inconvenience (some half a million Israeli shekels—more than $130,000—per family) and resettled a few hundred yards away from their former homes, once again, of course, on Palestinian land. The soldiers who carried out the evacuation were unarmed and under orders to use the utmost delicacy in dealing with the settlers, who had barricaded themselves inside their houses. Such are the melodramas of Israeli politics. The Knesset has recently enacted a law that retroactively legalizes the appropriation by the state of huge chunks of private Palestinian land for Israeli settlements. It is unclear whether the Supreme Court will strike it down.

Let me offer some examples of life under the occupation of which I have personal knowledge. On March 5, 2017, the residents of the Palestinian hamlet of Twaneh in the South Hebron hills woke up to discover fifteen of their olive trees hacked and destroyed, almost certainly by the notoriously violent settlers from adjacent Chavat Maon. If we were to count the number of olive trees uprooted by settlers from the Twaneh lands over the last ten years or so, it would easily reach the low hundreds. Olive trees are the primary source of support for many impoverished Palestinian families. In addition to the decimated trees, two fields of lentils were sprayed with poison.

Two months earlier, on January 7, the same settlers from Chavat Maon violently attacked a group of Israeli peace activists who were accompanying Palestinian farmers seeking to plow a field. I was there with another party of activists, a little farther down the hill, and I witnessed the arrival of the wounded in Twaneh: one hit by a rock on the head, two others badly beaten, still more with contusions, and one with a smashed camera.

Children from the Twaneh area are at constant risk of being attacked by settlers on their way to school in the village; the daughter of a friend of mine, Ali from Tuba, nearly lost an eye in such an attack. The army has been forced to provide a military escort to take them to and from school, but even that is not always enough; there have been occasions when the soldiers stood idly by while settlers beat the Palestinian children with clubs and metal chains.

In the northern Jordan Valley, Bedouin shepherds from a tiny place called al-Hammeh are subject to continuous attacks by settlers from a new illegal settlement that sits on the al-Hammeh land; these settlers have murdered Bedouin sheep, threatened the shepherds with guns, beaten them savagely, invaded their tents, and in general done whatever they can to make their lives miserable.1 At nearby al-Auja, on April 21, a gang of masked Israeli settlers from Habaladim, an illegal West Bank outpost, used clubs and rocks to attack a group of Palestinian shepherds and more than a dozen Israeli activists who were there to protect them. The result: one activist with an open head wound, another with a broken arm, and several others badly bruised.

A diary that kept track of such assaults on Palestinians would run to thousands of pages, with daily, perhaps hourly, entries. And I have not yet mentioned the endless demolitions of Palestinian houses—entire villages, such as Susiya and Umm al-Khair, are in danger of extinction—or the remorseless processes of expulsion and ethnic cleansing that we see everywhere in the occupied territories. The occupation is also a surreal world of denial, where lies mask themselves as truth and truth can’t be uttered, at least not by the officers and politicians who hold power. I recommend the graphic and moving descriptions of the current situation in the West Bank and Gaza in Kingdom of Olives and Ash, a volume of personal essays by well-known writers, including the Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa, edited by Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman and published to coincide with the fifty-year anniversary.

The settlers themselves, however obnoxious, bear only a portion of the blame for the atrocities they commit. They carry out the policies of the Israeli government, in effect maintaining a useful, steady level of state terror directed against a large civilian population. None of this can be justified by rational argument. All of it stains the character of the state and has, in my experience, horrific effects on the minds and hearts of young soldiers who have to carry out the orders they are given. A few unusually aware and conscientious ones have had the courage to speak out; as always in such situations, most people just go along.2

In the end, it is this ongoing moral failure of the country as a whole that is most consequential, most dangerous, and most unacceptable. This failure weighs more heavily on our humanity than any of the concerns mentioned earlier. We are, so we claim, the children of the prophets. Once, they say, we were slaves in Egypt. We know all that can be known about slavery, suffering, prejudice, ghettos, hate, expulsions, exile. I still find it astonishing that we, of all people, have reinvented apartheid in the West Bank.

Has the corruption gone so far that it can no longer be reversed? Or, to state the question in more practical terms, is the Israeli colonial project in the West Bank so deeply entrenched that any mutually acceptable form of partition is already ruled out, as Meron Benvenisti, the former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, has been arguing for years? Gershon Shafir, in his subtle history of the occupation, suggests that while the notion that the settlement project is “irreversible is best rejected…the remaining obstacles to territorial partition, though not insurmountable, are formidable.” Assuming that the so-called settlement blocs, most of them relatively close to the pre-1967 borders, would be annexed to Israel in exchange for more or less equal territory from inside Israel, he calculates that “only” some 27,000 settler households would have to be evacuated from Palestine as part of a workable peace agreement.

Shafir also convincingly cites Shaul Arieli—a former colonel in the army, a member of the prestigious Council for Peace and Security, and an expert on the earlier rounds of negotiation and the feasibility of a future breakthrough—to the effect that the settlement project has, in practice, slowed to a trickle, despite attempts by the government to persuade ever more Israelis to move into Palestinian territory. Unfortunately, this has not caused Israel to give up on the nationalist dream of colonizing as much of Palestine as possible. Reality has a way of puncturing illusions, though usually too late.

There exist other templates for some sort of resolution. The most interesting and creative is probably the Two States One Homeland proposal by Meron Rapoport, Awni al-Mashni, and the group of Palestinians and Israelis they have gathered around them. They envision two states within a single geographical space and a movement toward simultaneous sharing and separation. The blueprint speaks of two independent polities with Jerusalem as their capital; freedom of movement and even freedom to settle on both sides of the border, subject to agreement on the number of citizens of each state who will become permanent residents of the other; a Joint Court for Human Rights, a Joint Security Council, and other common institutions functioning alongside the institutional structures of each state.3

I’d like to think this idea has a chance of coming true. Shafir, however, concludes that, in the absence of a viable plan for a single binational state, “the two sides are most likely to stumble ahead heedlessly.” He may be right, for now. But if I had to guess, I’d say the occupation will eventually collapse under the cumulative weight of wrongdoing, misery, and existential peril that it entails, maybe even in our lifetime—not, however, with a whimper.

One can’t help wondering about the effects of the new American administration on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In March President Trump’s special emissary to the region, Jason Greenblatt, arrived with the apparent aim of generating movement toward a regional settlement. Somewhat surprisingly, people on both sides liked him—including Palestinian refugees in the camps and Israeli settlers on the West Bank. One major exception, it seems, was Benjamin Netanyahu, who, according to reports, was asked by Greenblatt to come up with concrete steps to curtail settlement activity along with some statement of what compromises he would ultimately be prepared to make.

Predictably even under Trump, the old blueprint for partition, along familiar lines, has surfaced again; it refuses to go away. One should never underestimate Netanyahu’s uncanny ability to stall, prevaricate, and eradicate even the slightest glimmer of hope. But maybe the Thrall principle will yet be put into practice.4 The president’s visit to Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Palestinian Bethlehem in May, on his first foreign trip, is, I suppose, meant to suggest that he is serious about pursuing a deal. As several friends of mine, Israelis and Palestinians, have said, if Donald Trump were somehow to impose an agreement, this would prove not that God exists but that, if He does, He has a sense of humor.

—May 24, 2017

1

See my article “Palestine: The End of the Bedouins?,” NYR Daily, December 7, 2016. ↩

2

A number of such statements from soldiers can be found in Our Harsh Logic: Israeli Soldiers’ Testimonies from the Occupied Territories, 2000–2010, compiled by the Israeli group Breaking the Silence (Metropolitan, 2012). See my review in these pages, February 24, 2011. ↩

3

2states1homeland.org/en. ↩

4

See Nathan Thrall, “Trump Chases His ‘Ultimate Deal,’” The New Yorker, May 22, 2017. ↩

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