

## PALESTINIAN HISTORY

**Impossible Peace: Israel/Palestine since 1989**, by Mark LeVine. London and New York: Zed Books, 2009. xii + 182 pages. Notes to p. 208. Bibliography to p. 215. Index to p. 222. \$25.95 paper; \$85.95 cloth.

**The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A People's War**, by Beverley Milton-Edwards. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. xii + 205 pages. Chronology to p. 209. Bibliography to p. 222. Index to p. 228. \$39.95 paper; \$140.00 cloth.

*Reviewed by Helena Cobban*

Pity the poor writer who sets out to write a book about the "recent" history of the Palestine question, because this question continues to be dynamic and, like time and tides, stands still for no one. In the first sentence of *Impossible Peace: Israel/Palestine since 1989*, cultural historian Mark LeVine tells us, "As I began writing this book, the Israel Defense Forces had just removed the last Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip," placing it in September 2005. The writing evidently took some time because in later chapters LeVine refers (albeit in a less than satisfactory way) to events of 2007 and early 2008. For her part, political scientist Beverley Milton-Edwards brought her historical survey up only to 2005. Both books were published in 2009, in the aftermath of yet another landmark regarding the Palestine question: the lethal assault that Israel launched on Gaza in late 2008 and, even more significantly, the ability that Gaza's elected Hamas rulers evinced to survive that assault.

Clearly, given the exigencies of most existing models of book publishing, we could not expect the authors of either of these books to have explained or even prefigured the details of the events of

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December 2008–January 2009 in a book published in 2009. Yet those events did mark a key turning point in Palestinian history; and they therefore provide a helpful measuring stick against which we can gauge the percipience and utility of analyses of events that had come before. If we want to understand the many dimensions of the events around Israel's so-aptly-named Operation Cast Lead, how useful would it be to have read either of these two books, or any others covering the history of the antecedent months and years?

Using this measuring stick, neither of these books fully delivers the kind of fact-based analysis so sorely needed by those numerous Western readers who have had their view of the Palestine question so deeply skewed by lengthy exposure to the half-truths and blatant dishonesties of the mainstream media. Milton-Edwards perhaps gets closest to providing a useful frame in her subheading, "A People's War"—and also in the three main "historical" chapters in her book. Those chapters, chapters 1–3, take us in a manner that is at once brisk, fair, and lucidly presented, through the history of the Palestine question (and of the related Jewish question, in Europe) from the times of the pre-Zionist Ottoman Empire to the birth of Israel. From chapter 4 on, her book assumes a more thematic organization, with separate chapters covering, respectively, the internal political dynamics inside Israel; the Palestinian refugees; the challenge of Israel's post-1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; the first and second intifadas; the international dimensions of the Palestine question; and the sorry record of attempts to resolve (or might we say "continually process") the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Under this organizational design, the whole record of Oslo and its shortcomings is left to a five-page portion of the very last chapter. And while I am not one of those who seeks to idolize the whole memory of Oslo, both the conclusion of that interim accord in 1993 between the State of Israel and the PLO and its subsequent unraveling and repudiation certainly need to be given a lot more consideration, a lot earlier in this book, than they are. For without understanding the deep problems inherent in the design of the Oslo deal, the effects that its signing had on internal politics within both Palestine and Israel, and the miserable record of the Clinton

administration in pandering to Israel throughout all the "Oslo years," a reader is left little able to understand the political and strategic dynamics of the present era.

Whereas Milton-Edwards gives short shrift to the political/diplomatic history of the Palestine question in the post-1993 era, LeVine's book purports to be wholly about "Israel/Palestine since 1989." Why 1989, you might join me in asking? The answer lies with the whim of the publisher, since LeVine's book has been published in a series called "Global History of the Present," all the titles in which are "since 1989." In this context, "1989" seems to act as a synecdoche for the end of the global cold war, but LeVine barely mentions that development in world affairs. Indeed, his book is much more a prolonged reflection on Oslo and its aftermath than anything else; its purview ranges deep back into the pre-1989 years whenever LeVine sees the need to—as in, for example, the explanation he provides of why Likud's arrival in power in Israel in 1977 marked such a turning point in the history of Israel and Zionism.

LeVine's book is written at a far higher theoretical level than Milton-Edwards's and would thus not be as helpful as an introductory text as Milton-Edwards's would be (at least, for everything leading up to Oslo). It is also not nearly as clearly written or as closely edited. His description of how Israel's continued pursuit of its colonial-settler project in the West Bank doomed Oslo from almost the very beginning is generally helpful and sound, as is the use he makes of concepts like Jeff Halper's "matrix of control"—though for a writer with theoretical aspirations who has quoted Michel Foucault a number of times in this book, I wish he had also brought to bear on the situation in the occupied territories Foucault's very powerful concept of "biopower," or Sari Hanafi's concept of "spatiocide."

LeVine's attempts to describe and analyze the political history of the Palestinian movement Hamas from 2000 on are, however, clumsy and very misleading. In particular, his analysis of Hamas's engagement in politics is marked by serious omissions, muddle-headedness, and a large dollop of the "schizophrenia" that he is so ready to ascribe to the Hamas leaders themselves.

In part, the unsatisfactory nature of his coverage of Hamas might stem from the strange, unsatisfactory nature of the

organization of the book itself. If this work is supposed to be part of a “Global History of the Present,” you would expect it to contain a clear and well-organized narrative of the political history of the period covered, which runs (as noted above) through at least early 2008. No part of the book offers that, however. Instead, the only substantive references to Hamas come—along with considerations of the Israeli settler movement and the Shas Party—in a chapter titled “Religion, Culture, and Territory.”

In any satisfactory history of the Palestinian-Israeli issue “since 1989” we would certainly expect to see described, among other developments in Palestinian—and of course, also Israeli—politics, such significant developments as (a) the momentous decision Hamas took in 2005 to take part in the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) January 2006 legislative elections, unlike the ones that had preceded them in 1996; (b) the rule-abiding way Hamas participated in those elections and the victory they thereby won; (c) the campaign that the Israeli government immediately mounted against the elected Hamas leaders; (d) the affiliated campaign that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and factions within Fatah almost immediately mounted to overthrow the elected Hamas government by force; (e) the formation of the Fatah-Hamas National Unity Government (NUG) in March 2007; (f) the Fatah faction’s June 2007 attempt at a coup against the NUG, which was repulsed by Hamas in Gaza; and (g) the subsequent splitting of the two administrations between Gaza and Ramallah, and President Mahmud Abbas’s installation, at Washington’s heavy urging, of a totally unelected government in Ramallah. But in LeVine’s book we see no mention of any of these developments! It is as if the Palestinians’ internal politics holds no interest or relevance for him—or perhaps he doesn’t even recognize that there is such a politics? We see no mention, either, of the cease-fires that Hamas participated in over the Gaza-Israel frontier—either the short-lived one of 2003 or the longer-lived one in 2005, which was a *sine qua non* for Israel’s ability to withdraw its settlers and military posts from Gaza unmolested.

Instead of showing us this picture of Hamas as a functioning (and extremely important) actor in Palestinian politics

and referring to the many extant works of analysis that chart this functioning, LeVine leaves the reader with an infantilized view of Hamas that—though it patronizingly gives some recognition to the contribution Hamas-affiliated charities have made in several social welfare fields—describes its political stance only in terms that are cartoonish, always violent, and often quite simply wrong. For example: “By early 2008 it was hard to tell who had the ultimate decision-making power between PA prime minister Ismail Haniya . . . and the Damascus-based Khaled Meshal, who is known to be more extreme” (p. 135). This is nonsense, on both counts—and LeVine makes no attempt to document either of these ridiculous claims, though there were plenty of excellent sources available in early 2008 that described both the decision Hamas adopted after Israel’s 2004 assassinations of the Gaza-based leaders Shaykh Ahmad Yasin and his successor Dr. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Rantisi, to keep the movement’s overall leadership in an area outside Israel’s control, and the fact that Khalid Mishal and his colleagues in the diaspora leadership showed somewhat more flexibility on key negotiating issues than any of the besieged Hamas leaders inside Gaza were able to. LeVine even writes boldly that “Hamas remains unable to move beyond rockets or suicide belts” (p. 145).

His book provides little help at all to anyone trying to understand the continuing political and diplomatic dynamics of the Palestine question. Anyone trying to do that would do well to start with Phyllis Bennis’s 2007 primer *Understanding the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Olive Branch Press), and then move to Milton-Edwards’s clear narrative of some of the earlier historical background. For accounts of more recent developments, including the rise of Hamas, I would stick with Paul McGeough’s *Kill Kbalid: The Failed Mossad Assassination of Kbalid Misbal and the Rise of Hamas* (The New Press, 2009) or Jonathan Cook’s *Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair* (Zed Books, 2008).