

CONTEXTUALIZING CONFLICT

Israel and Palestine: Reappraisals, Revisions, Refutations, by Avi Shlaim. London: Verso, 2010. xvii + 372 pages. Notes to p. 380. Acknowledgements to p. 382. Index to p. 392. \$34.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

Reviewed by Haim Bresheeth

Avi Shlaim, the Oxford-based historian, is well-known to readers of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*. His oeuvre includes the seminal *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (2001), *Lion of Jordan: The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace* (2008), *War and Peace in the Middle East: A Concise History* (1996), *The Politics of Partition: King Abdullah, the Zionists, and Palestine 1921–1951* (1998), as well as many other influential books and articles.

The collection under review is aptly subtitled. The book is made up of articles, book reviews, and shorter essays published mainly in the *London Review of Books*, the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, and a number of edited anthologies, in which Shlaim returns to recurrent themes in his leading research on Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East. Capturing themes of past research, he presents a panoramic view of the conflict's many facets—a kaleidoscope of topics and perspectives.

Of special interest is the introduction, which sets out his positions on the conflict and contextualizes the research in the 1980s and 1990s that resulted from the opening of new Israeli archives. He maps the divisions in what became well-known as the New Historiography (a phrase coined by Benny Morris, in an article of the same title) arena of research, as well as the academic *zone of conflict* of the historians involved—their varied interpretations of the responsibility for the continued conflict. Shlaim sees the dividing line as passing between himself and Ilan Pappé on one side, and Benny Morris on the other, noting the change after the outbreak of the second intifada: “He

[Morris] began to lay virtually all the blame for the failure to reach a political settlement at the door of the Palestinians. Ilan Pappé and I, on the other hand, held on to our belief that Israel bears the primary responsibility for both the persistence and the escalation of the conflict.” While his description of Morris’ position is accurate, this presentation may be glossing over some finer detail, which one would have hoped to see discussed in this volume.

The spectrum covered is naturally wide (and cannot be fully outlined in a review), ranging across some decades and organized under four headings: “1948 and After,” “To Oslo and Beyond,” “The Breakdown of the Peace Process,” and lastly, “Perspectives.” These very titles illustrate the boundaries of discourse, starting in 1948, Israel’s year of foundation following the fateful UN Resolution 181. It makes this a volume about Israel, rather than the history of Zionism in Palestine, a history which is crucial to understanding the conflict. The neat division is modified by a number of pieces on pre-1948 junctures, hence covering, to a degree, the earlier history of the conflict.

The four parts of the book include thirty chapters—many of which are short essays, peppered amongst the longer, footnoted articles—making for a variable reading experience. Some may prefer a different structure, with some shorter pieces fully developed into articles, but I found the experience illuminating, as it retains a temporal, dynamic dimension, with writings spread over two decades, related to specific events, positions, or historical junctures.

The first part is of special interest, especially the articles on the Balfour Declaration, the All-Palestine Government in Gaza after 1948, and the Civil War in Palestine. While published previously, they gain from being read together, enhancing each other. The article on the Balfour Declaration of 1917 exposes the very odd set of influences that pushed the British elite to issue the declaration, which, as a political document, is almost unique. The discussion of the declaration and the demons it freed—essentially creating a Zionist mandate—offers a clear historical judgment.

Haim Bresheeth is a filmmaker, photographer, and a film studies scholar at the University of East London. His books include *Introducing The Holocaust*, the anthologies *The Gulf War and the New World Order*, *Cinema and Memory: Dangerous Liaisons*, and a co-edited volume with Haifa Hammami titled *The Conflict and Contemporary Visual Culture in Palestine & Israel*, special double-issue of *Third Text on Palestinian and Israeli Art, Literature, Architecture and Cinema*. His latest film is *London is Burning*.

The second and third parts deal with the Oslo process and its demise, and represent a shift in the debate, leaving other key stages of the conflict untreated. The focus on Oslo is obviously of great importance, but in so doing, Shlaim seems to have adapted an Israeli perspective of the resolution to the conflict, even as he resists and opposes Israel's practices and choices. He moves from understanding of the 1967 war and the beginning of the occupation of Palestine as a watershed moment in the conflict, then shifts sharply to the later Oslo events. Thus, the occupation and its iniquities become secondary in this volume, with diplomatic and political processes gaining prominence.

Arguably, this also affects the fourth part, "Perspectives." By concentrating on the procedural conflict resolution aspects, and less on the underlying causes, the essays may support an instrumental reading of the conflict, though this was certainly not the intention. Nonetheless, the entire collection is a welcome and timely addition to the continuing debate on the Palestine-Israel conflict and its possible resolution.