



Review of *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* by Rashid Khalidi *Saminaz Zaman*

Increasingly, the question of Palestinian statehood has become a paramount concern for American foreign policy. Already in the Muslim world, the Palestinian plight provokes acutely visceral responses. Such emotional responses may make writing about the conflict uniquely frustrating for an historian uninterested in polemics. Rashid Khalidi acknowledges this difficulty in his latest book, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*. In a preface entitled, "Writing Middle Eastern History in a Time of Historical Amnesia," he connects the predicament in Palestine to last summer's battle between Israel and Hezbollah. Khalidi blames the United States for adopting an "ahistorical" approach that ignores the specificities of Palestine, Israel, or Lebanon and relies instead on a monolithic picture of the Middle East viewed through the lens of terrorism and conflict. He argues that instead of succumbing to this historical amnesia, the history of Palestine must assume center stage.

That history, Khalidi maintains, often becomes subsumed under the more compelling and more widely known saga of Israel. Palestine, then, becomes only of interest as the source and/or the potential solution to the persistent conflicts in the Middle East. For Khalidi, the Palestinian narrative appears almost as a secret history buried under the palimpsest of competing mythologies and security studies-driven analyses. Khalidi's contribution to Palestinian history does not intend anything as ambitious as composing a national history for a stateless nation.

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Instead, *The Iron Cage* examines pre-Mandate and Mandate-era Palestine in order to analyze the actions and sometimes inaction of Palestinian leadership that prevented them from building the structures required to facilitate statehood. *The Iron Cage* covers the period between the 1919 Balfour Declaration and the most recent elections in Palestine, concentrating on the decade before the 1948 creation of the state of Israel. He chooses this time because he believes the Palestinians squandered their opportunities and strengths until the odds were incontrovertibly stacked against them. He considers the role of Israel, the United States, Britain, and neighboring Arab states. Ultimately, Palestinian actors dominate Khalidi's stage.

By critically assessing the Palestinian role in the failure to establish an independent state, he gives the Palestinians agency over their fate. Indeed, Israel enjoyed numerous economic, educational, and military advantages as well as the crucial support of the U.S. and Europe which created a highly uneven playing field. However, Khalidi also acknowledges that Palestine had strengths which leadership from the first Mufti of Jerusalem to Yasser Arafat failed to mobilize. Khalidi likens Palestine and Israel in 1948 to David and Goliath, but details a scenario in which David and Goliath curiously switched places from a decade earlier. In less than a year, the Arabs of British Palestine went

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from a majority population, who owned 90 percent of private land, to an embattled minority, many of whom were forced to flee and continue to live as refugees in neighboring states.

Khalidi attributes this event, the *al nakba* when half of Palestine's Arab majority were expelled from their land, to a combination of British duplicity and Palestinian complicity. Decades before the establishment of the state of Israel, the British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour stated in 1919, "Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far greater import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land."¹ Khalidi uses this statement from Balfour's confidential

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1919 memo and other remarks in a similar vein to shatter the illusion that Britain played a neutral, intermediary role in the Mandate.

In fact, Britain pursued the same "divide and rule" communitarian policies in Palestine that it did in other areas under its colonial rule, such as India or Egypt. Britain co-opted Jerusalem's leading Palestinian families and created new structures of power to prevent the Palestinians from forming their own national institutions. The single most illuminating section of *The Iron Cage* details the British invention of new Islamic institutions in Palestine. As with Anglo-Muhammadan Law drafted and enacted in India, these new institutions nominally upheld tradition but actually "had no precedent in that country's history, or indeed in the entirety of Islamic history."² For example, the British created a *Shari'a* court system and network of religious charities that did not exist in Ottoman times. Khalidi argues that the creation of these structures showed how the British could only view colonized cultures as motivated by religion over nation.

Most significantly, the British created the new position of "Grand Mufti of Palestine," endowing the role with a power and prestige that contradicted Islamic law and custom. Traditionally, this role offered prestige but no power over other *muftis*. In Islamic jurisprudence, a *qadi* judges cases while a mufti just advises. Khalidi devotes a substantial portion of his book to the young Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Britain's unlikely choice of *mufti*, and scion of one of Jerusalem's most prominent and wealthy families. The selection of al-Husayni as *mufti* involved an implicit agreement whereby Palestinian elites would not criticize the Mandate and the incipient Jewish state that prevented the possibility of any form of top-

down opposition. Al-Husayni did not have the religious education or background usually required for such a position and he did not have the charisma or public persona to lead the masses.

The British also chose al-Husayni because his older relative, Musa Kazim al-Husayni, the former mayor of Jerusalem, represented the major opposition to the British. By appointing his relative, the British undermined Musa's legitimacy and waged a micro version of divide and rule within the same family. Khalidi clearly presents the Grand Mufti as a cautionary tale to the current Palestinian leadership. Later in his career, al-Husayni did defy the British but not in a way that benefited the Palestinian people. He achieved great notoriety and opprobrium by leaving Palestine for Germany and supporting the Nazi regime. Although Khalidi blames al-Husayni and the British for empowering him, he does gloss over this later chapter in the Grand Mufti's life.

The nature of Palestine's political and religious institutions at this time differed from those of Arab colonial and postcolonial neighbors such as Syria or Egypt. Far from an Arab nationalist, al-Husayni was the only leader at this time in the region whose legitimacy derived from a religious institution, albeit one which derived from an invented tradition. Khalidi argues that, however disorganized, the Wafd in Egypt or the National Bloc in Syria agitated for nationhood. The Palestinian *mufti*, on the other hand, had no incentive to support a nationalist movement that could weaken his unique leadership position.

Palestine did nurture populist movements before 1948, but even these emerged too late as the Palestinians had already trapped themselves in "the fiendish iron cage" of the book's title. Khalidi argues that the British fashioned this iron cage by reducing the Palestinians to religious and communitarian entities, while recognizing and facilitating the Israeli claims to statehood. However, he does not blame the British solely for stunting Palestinian leadership. Through a series of illuminating statistics and anecdotes, Khalidi compares Mandate-era Palestinians to their Arab and Israeli counterparts, a task that Khalidi calls "comparing the incomparable." The *yishuv*, or Jewish community in Palestine, enjoyed immense transnational political and financial support, while Arabs in Palestine clearly lagged behind in terms of educational and economic gain. The influx of Jewish settlers from Europe further exacerbated these disparities. Still, Palestinians in the Mandate compared favorably to other Arab states in terms of literacy, health, and socioeconomic status but Khalidi contends they could not parlay these strengths into escaping the iron cage fashioned by both the British and Palestinian leadership.

According to Khalidi's analysis, the trend of flawed Palestinian leadership continues to the present day. In particular, he blames Yasser Arafat for personalizing the struggle for a Palestinian state to such an extent that his own agenda became conflated with the Palestinian people's aims. Outlining the repercussions of pre-Mandate politics on contemporary Palestine, Khalidi remains remarkably silent on the 1970s and 1980s—the era before Arafat's expulsion from Beirut. Khalidi does not appear optimistic about a post-Arafat Palestine because, after almost sixty years and the de-colonization of most of the world, Palestine remains stateless and without a consensus on what a potential state structure might look like.

To Khalidi, current U.S. foreign policy only exemplifies how obdurate the iron cage has become. The U.S. exhorts democracy in the Middle East but does not sufficiently appreciate the democratic elections recently held in Palestine. The last chapter of *The Iron Cage* examines a new Palestinian dilemma. With the almost unanimous support of the international community for a two-state solution, the Palestinian leadership must decide upon an appropriate structure for an independent Palestine co-existing alongside an independent Israel. Khalidi does not foresee state sovereignty for the Palestinians in the near future. He paints a dour future with no imminent escape from the iron cage. Caught in a potential two-state configuration bound by an increasingly powerful Israeli state, the Palestinian people must formulate new and innovative solutions that take into account this new reality as well as the lessons of the past.

Khalidi cites the lack of understanding enshrined in competing narratives of victimhood as the major roadblock to peace between Israel and Palestine. In his final plea to the current Palestinian leadership, Khalidi's voice changes from the careful Columbia University scholar to the public intellectual who, as a long-time advisor to the Palestinian leadership, seems to palpably feel the frustrations and continued failures of Palestine. In this role, he resembles Edward Said, another Columbia scholar and Palestinian intellectual whose name is present in Khalidi's title. Moreover, like the shamed Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Khalidi belongs to a renowned family of notables. Consequently, he evokes more than foreign policy or national security when he states that U.S., Israeli, and Palestinian leadership must shed their historical amnesia and "look honestly at what has happened in this small land over the past century...and especially at how repeatedly forcing the Palestinians into...an iron cage, has brought, and ultimately can bring, no lasting good to anyone."³

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Work Cited

¹ Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 36.

² *Ibid*, 55.