

The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017¹

Written by Rashid Khalidi

Review by Mehdi Ali

Rashid Khalidi's account of the history of Palestine is a deeply moving and informative story about the plight of the Palestinians throughout the last century. Instead of merely regurgitating important historical, legal, and political developments, Khalidi provides poignant context that makes the story of Palestine feel profoundly personal. This context is drawn in part from his own experiences and family history, beginning with childhood memories of accompanying his father to various United Nations meetings, as well as bringing to life the memoirs and diary entries of his uncle, Hussein Khalidi, the former mayor of Jerusalem, who was exiled by Britain.

Khalidi's own career as a prominent voice in the West for the Palestinian cause also plays an important role in this story, including relaying anecdotes about negotiating on behalf of the Palestine delegation at various international forums, reporting on his meetings with Yasser Arafat and other well-known Palestinian leaders, and providing first-hand observations of the Israeli occupation and bombardment of Lebanon in the 1980s.

The book is divided into six main chapters (in addition to an introduction and conclusion), with each chapter exploring an important moment or period in Palestinian history. At each juncture, Khalidi demonstrates how Palestine and its people have been betrayed by its interlocutors.

The first chapter begins by describing life in Palestine before the

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creation of the State of Israel, including cultural features of the existing Mizrahi and Sephardic Jewish community. Khalidi describes how the demographics of the region began to shift rapidly after the advent of Zionism and the Balfour Declaration. The Balfour Declaration, despite being only a single sentence, was an especially momentous development because it meant that the Zionist project, which ignored the needs of the native Arabs who formed the overwhelming majority of the indigenous population, was now backed by the world's most powerful military force.

Khalidi does an excellent job of providing a sense of the mood at this time by exploring a variety of primary sources, including contemporary Arabic-language news accounts. This mood included intense political opposition to the Zionist movement, including the Arab revolt of 1936-1939 that was suppressed by the British. Khalidi argues that another momentous change occurred with the rise of Naziism in Germany, which facilitated unprecedented levels of Jewish immigration to Palestine.

The second chapter focuses on the creation of the State of Israel, which resulted in the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians. Khalidi astutely documents Israel's ability to build relations with foreign governments and especially to appeal to foreign public opinion in places like the United States, which allowed for the Zionist mission to continue largely unencumbered. Conversely, Arab nations did not give due attention to the Palestinian cause, which allowed them to be further sidelined. In fact, they were often working in direct opposition to Palestinian interests, as evidenced by King Abdullah's negotiations with leaders of the Jewish Agency and his secret negotiations with the British. Khalidi notes that "the Palestinians had not developed effective Arab allies or the apparatus of a modern state."

Khalidi also notes that there were deep differences among the Palestinian leadership, which further hampered its cause. And perhaps most importantly, he believes that a severely limited grasp of global politics by Palestinian leadership was a big reason for the stunting of

the Palestinian cause during this time. The chapter discusses the UN's recommendation to partition Palestine in 1947, which led to the Nakba, during which the ethnic cleansing of Palestine took place, transforming the demographic make-up of Palestine. The resulting Palestinian refugees faced harsh circumstances, many of which continue until today. The chapter also discusses the evolution of Israel's relationship with the United States.

The third chapter explores the Six Day War in 1967, and the ensuing crushing military defeat of the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies. As a result of Israel's devastating first strike, which was aided by the actions of the United States, it was able to occupy the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights, and Sinai Peninsula in short order. A key after-effect of this was Security Council Resolution 242, which "linked any Israel withdrawal to peace treaties with the Arab states and the establishment of secure frontiers." The resolution also had the benefit of "enlarged Israeli borders to meet the criterion of security, as determined by Israel" and to endorse the "1949 armistice lines (since known as the 1967 borders or the Green Line)" and thus "indirectly consenting to [Israel's] conquest of most of Palestine in the 1948 war."

Khalidi provides a highly nuanced perspective on the United States' changing policy toward Palestine and Israel during this time. Yet Khalidi also tells the story of how 1967 sparked a revival of the Palestinian movement, and gives details about some of the resistance organisations that were formed during this time. Most prominent is the story of the PLO, formed by the Arab League to control the resistance, although it often clashed with various Arab governments. Khalidi's description includes details regarding the evolution of the PLO's thinking, most importantly from advocating a single state to eventually accepting a two-state solution. Khalidi notes that "the Palestinian resurgence posed little or no threat to Israel in strategic terms ... [but] it constituted an entirely different kind of challenge on the discursive level, one that was existential." Khalidi also details the limited success of the Palestinian cause in diplomatic circles and in the United States.

The fourth chapter begins with the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, which was ostensibly initiated as a response to attacks by Palestinian militants in Lebanon, although, according to Khalidi, no PLO leaders were ever killed. The commentary in this chapter is especially interesting because Khalidi is narrating from a first-person perspective, including the many atrocities inflicted by Israel on the civilians of Lebanon, including the IDF-supported Sabra and Shatila refugee camp massacres. Khalidi also describes the support by the United States for the massacres that occurred after the Palestinian resistance had been expelled from Beirut.

The fifth chapter focuses on the First Intifada, the spontaneous Palestinian uprising that began in 1987 and lasted until 1995. Khalidi argues that the First Intifada did much to engender sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Khalidi also spends time discussing the problems with the PLO, whose exiled leadership failed to keep up with events in the Occupied Territories. Furthermore, the PLO "allowed itself to be drawn into a process explicitly designed by Israel, with the acquiescence of the United States, to prolong its occupation and colonization, not to end them."

The parts where Khalidi is critical of the PLO are arguably the most insightful parts of the book because he recognises the mistakes Palestinian leaders made which further harmed the Palestinian cause. The PLO made a series of missteps, including supporting Iraq in its invasion of Kuwait, which "made the organization a pariah among the Gulf states on which it depended for financial support." Khalidi also provides a first-hand account of the political negotiations that took place in Madrid, including the important players from the US and Israeli sides. Further, he astutely analyses the Oslo Accords, which were disastrous from the Palestinian perspective.

The sixth chapter discusses developments since the beginning of the twenty-first century, including the continued colonisation of the West Bank and parts of East Jerusalem, which eventually led to the Second Intifada. He also describes the emergence of Hamas as a formidable

rival in an atmosphere of widespread dissatisfaction with the current Palestinian leadership. Khalidi argues that the Second Intifada was a “major setback for the Palestinian national movement” because it led to Israel’s reoccupation of areas that had been “evacuated as part of the Oslo Accords.”

Khalidi argues that the Second Intifada was a public relations failure, as it weakened the sympathy that had been garnered by the Palestinian people. Khalidi describes other developments as well, including Hamas’s control of Gaza, Israel’s subsequent siege and other military incursions, and the indifference of the US, if not outright support, of Israel’s repression of the Palestinians.

This book is a very useful and necessary history of Palestine over the last hundred years. Although Khalidi certainly provides a perspective sympathetic to Palestinians, he is by no means uncritical of the decisions of the Palestinian leadership. He is fully aware that many mistakes were made over the course of the century, including an inability to overcome internal divisions among the leadership. Thus, in addition to being an indictment of Zionism and settler colonialism, this book is also a powerful rebuke to the Palestinian leadership. The reader is left to surmise that perhaps the history of Palestine could have been very different with a more sophisticated and selfless group of leaders.

Khalidi also highlights the role of the United States in preventing a resolution to the Palestine question, a country that likes to present itself as a neutral arbiter but that has done much damage to the efforts to create a fair solution to the conflict.

In the conclusion, Khalidi recognises that one of the resounding successes of Zionism has been its ability to create a powerful national identity. Thus, he refuses to indulge the incredulity of many Arabs, who are unwilling to acknowledge that modern-day Israelis feel a deep nationalistic connection to their country. Instead, he offers a thoughtful vision for the future, where both sides must learn to coexist, and to acknowledge each other’s reality on the ground, if there is any chance for peace in the Middle East.