

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- Israeli State Terrorism: An Analysis of the Sharett
 Diaries *Livia Rokach* 3
- Prisoners For Palestine: A List of Women Political
 Prisoners *Soraya Antonius* 29
- The PLO and the Euro-Arab Dialogue..... *Abmad Sidqi al-Dajani* 81
- The Development of Palestinian Entity-Consciousness
 (Part III) *Issa al-Shuaibi* 99

SPECIAL FEATURE

- The Right of Return *W. Thomas Mallison and*
 *Sally V. Mallison* 125

RECENT BOOKS

- Said: The Question of Palestine
 *reviewed by Hilton Obenzinger* 137
- Flapan: Zionism and the Palestinians
 *reviewed by Mark A. Bruzonsky* 142
- Al-Azm: The Sadat Visit and the Futility of a Just Peace
 *reviewed by Fouad Moughrabi* 148
- Kazziha: Palestine in the Arab Dilemma ... *reviewed by Jamil Hilal* 154
- Shorter Notices 157

FROM THE ISRAELI PRESS

- News, Articles and Comment 159

ARAB REPORTS AND ANALYSIS

- Selections From Arab Periodicals and Newspapers 167

VIEWS FROM ABROAD

- Analytical Articles on Palestine and the
 Arab-Israeli Conflict 181

DOCUMENTS AND SOURCE MATERIAL

- Arab Documents on Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict 192

SPECIAL DOCUMENT

- Arab Victims of Recent Israeli Raids 201

PERIODICALS IN REVIEW

- The Arab-Israeli Conflict in Periodical Literature 210

ZIONIST CONTRITION?

Simha Flapan. *Zionism and the Palestinians*. London: Croom Helm (New York: Barnes and Noble Import Division), 1979. 361 pp., indexed.

Reviewed by Mark A. Bruzonsky*

Simha Flapan's latest of many significant contributions to Israeli-Palestinian interchange is both a substantial academic accomplishment and an important political statement. As the latter, Flapan's motivations and perspective are best summed-up in the book's concluding two sentences:

Today the Palestinian people, though without a state, an army, or an economy, are the most important factor among the powerful Arab states, for one reason — because they alone hold the key to real peace in the Middle East. The Palestinians are a more decisive factor today than they were in 1948, and without a settlement with them on the basis of mutual recognition it will be difficult if not impossible to achieve a comprehensive and durable peace settlement in the Middle East. (p. 354)

Flapan remains today a dedicated socialist Zionist — his place on the

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Israeli political spectrum can be described as the far left of Mapam.¹ He carefully notes in the book's preface his "belief in the moral justification and historical necessity of Zionism," an existential reality for Flapan which "remains unaffected by my critical reappraisal of the Zionist leadership" (p. 13). Yet Flapan's critique of the early political leaders of modern Israel is devastating when it comes to their failures to recognize the changing world around them and their "disdain" (p. 78) for the Palestinians whose lives and dreams were being uprooted by Zionism.

Weizmann, Flapan points out, "betrayed a nineteenth-century mentality — a faith in Europe's civilizing mission among backward people. He firmly believed that the Zionist cause was a fight of civilization against the desert, the struggle of progress, efficiency, health and education against stagnation" (pp. 25-26). Weizmann "was insensitive to the nature of imperialism and the struggle of colonial peoples for national liberation" (p. 25), Flapan continues. His "perspective assumed the continuation, unchanged, of classical European imperialism based on the direct physical control of colonial countries, at a time when such ideas were under attack all over the world" (p. 28).

A similar characterization is made against Ben-Gurion, whom Flapan quotes from *My Talks with Arab Leaders* telling George Antonius that "Although we were an Oriental people, we had been Europeanized and we wished to return to Palestine in the geographical sense only. We intended to establish a European culture here and we were linked to the greatest cultural force in the world" (p. 133). Ben-Gurion's attitude of "arrogant superiority" (p. 132) even made it possible for him to admit to the Mapai leadership in 1938 that,

When we say that the Arabs are the aggressors and we defend ourselves — this is only half the truth.... Politically we are the aggressors and they defend themselves.... The country is theirs because they inhabit it, whereas we want to come here and settle down, and in their view we want to take away from them their country." (pp. 41-42)

¹ As seems true throughout Western society, ideology in Israel has withered with all Zionist factions tending to blend together into a cohesive whole — especially as viewed through Arab eyes. Thus the very term "socialist Zionism" has considerable more historical significance than contemporary applicability. Nevertheless, the socialist left within Zionism has traditionally viewed the Palestinian issue as a national problem while seeking rationalizations and justifications for Zionism's failures to apply socialist principles in its relations with the Palestinian people. Amos Elon's *Israelis: Founders and Sons* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) provides an easy-reading starting place for those interested in tracing the development of socialist Zionism. Uri Avnery's *Israel Without Zionism* (New York: Macmillan, 1971) also draws attention to the socialist component in Zionism. Far greater depth is available in David Vital's *The Origins of Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

And when speaking of partition in the 1930's, Ben-Gurion candidly outlined Zionist duplicity in temporarily accepting a British-sponsored division of western Palestine. "Peace for us is a means" (p. 143), Ben-Gurion concluded, and "If we can make use of the devil, we will ally with him" (p. 138). Partition was thus little but an expedient ploy "on the assumption that after we become a strong force, as a result of the creation of the state, we shall abolish partition and expand to the whole of Palestine" (p. 265).

Of Jabotinsky – Flapan properly reminds his readers that "It is extremely difficult to underestimate the impact of Jabotinsky and his followers on the action and thought of the Zionist movement" (p. 96) – Flapan points out that "the Irgun established the pattern of terrorism adopted 30 years later by al-Fateh" (p. 116). For Jabotinsky, Palestine as it existed was but a foreign land to be conquered and remade "The East," Jabotinsky once stated, "It is entirely foreign to me." "Mine is a Westerner's mentality," he added, "And the mob! A sort of permanent row of yelling rabble, dressed up in savage-painted rugs" (p. 114).

For Begin's ideological mentor, whom Jimmy Carter became the first American president to honour by laying a wreath at his grave, even the notion of an Arab-Jewish rapprochement was a "dangerous fallacy." "Palestine was the meeting of two cultures which had no common spiritual aspirations, and a genuine rapprochement between them was an organic and historical impossibility" (p. 115).

While a few Zionist leaders – Goldmann and Sharett foremost among them – did profoundly grapple with the moral and political dilemma posed by Palestinian nationalism, the predominant Zionist attitude was a combination of neglect and spite. Considerable thought was even given to "transferring" Palestine's Arab population, though official Zionist history scoffs at the notion. But here too Flapan's honesty is refreshing as he notes that "the transfer idea played a much greater role in Zionist thinking in the Mandatory period than is usually admitted" (p. 82). In short, "non-recognition of the national rights of the Palestinian people has remained an immutable feature of Zionist orientation with respect to the Arab problem" (p. 20). Indeed, Weizmann's nephew, today's defence minister of Israel, spoke about Zionist history and current Israeli diplomacy at the end of December last year to a group of young North American Zionists and never once uttered the word Palestinian throughout nearly two hours of comments! Ezer Weizman may still recall that his uncle once compared the Arabs of Palestine to the rocks of Judea – things to be moved to make way for the Jewish state (p. 56).

On the whole, *Zionism and the Palestinians* is a detailed, painstakingly-researched historical survey of the roots of today's impasse between evolving

Israeli Zionism and resurgent Palestinian nationalism. By uncovering the strategies and aspirations of the pre-state Zionist movement, Flapan successfully illuminates the depths of today's complex conflict between two peoples whose tragedies are so reflected in each other's.

For the Palestinians, Zionism has meant utter devastation of a homeland coupled to a rebirth as the most radical (or progressive) political force throughout the Arab Middle East. And for Zionism, in Flapan's view, the Palestinian dilemma lingers as a defacing moral scar covering a seething, still festering wound to humanistic Jewish values and to the original tenets integral to socialist Zionism. Indeed, Flapan insists,

Israel's problem today lies in the disintegration of these values, due largely to the intoxication with military success and the belief that military superiority is a substitute for peace. Unless the liberal and progressive values of Zionism are restored and Palestinian rights to self-determination within a framework of peaceful coexistence are recognized, Israel's search for peace is doomed to failure. (pp. 13-14)

Zionism and the Palestinians is purposefully divided into two major parts and unpurposefully weakened by repeated indications that the book must have been too hastily prepared from a series of separate research projects grafted together but never fully blended into a single whole.

Part 1 considers five competing Zionist schools of thought during the period from the Balfour Declaration to the creation of the State (1917-1948). Major Zionist personalities — Weizmann, Jabotinsky, Goldmann, and Ben-Gurion/Sharett — are used to illustrate competing approaches then prevalent within the *Yishuv*, especially regarding the Arab/Palestinian "problem." The concluding chapter of this first part deals with the "Bi-Nationalists," with emphasis on Judah Magnes, the chancellor and first president of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

In the second part of *Zionism and the Palestinians* the application of Zionist attitudes throughout the pre-state period to the pragmatic issues of the day provides the overall focus. Here Flapan blends a chronology of conflict with a discussion of "crucial decisions" that have affected Jewish-Palestinian relations throughout this century. First considered in detail is "The Policy of Economic and Social Segregation," with Flapan thoughtfully distinguishing Zionism from more orthodox forms of European imperialism and colonialism. This is followed by a discussion of "The Policy of Partition" as it was debated before and during the period of the Arab revolt in the late 1930's. Finally, the events leading to the war of 1948 are dissected, starting with the Biltmore Programme in 1942, through the intricacies of Zionist diplomacy with the West, and including the inter-Arab struggles which so weakened the Arab front against Zionism that the Jewish state avoided being stillborn.

As Flapan explains in reflecting on these last crucial years that set the pattern for all Arab relations with Israel until Sadat's visit to Jerusalem:

1948 became a decisive turning point in the relations between Israel and the Arab world. Its psychological impact was enormous for the Israelis, the euphoria of victory gave them exaggerated belief in their power; for the Arabs, the trauma of defeat and the complete humiliation led to a deep desire for revenge, rehabilitation, and restoration of lost prestige....

The war of 1948 seemed to vindicate the Zionist policy of non-recognition of the Palestinians, whose intransigent leadership brought upon its people devastation. The Palestinians became a people of refugees, dispersed all over the Middle East and their territory taken over, divided and annexed by Jordan, Israel and Egypt. It seemed at first that the Palestinian people had ceased to exist and only the problems of refugees and frontiers stood between the armistice treaties signed by the Arab states and a final peace settlement with Israel. The Palestinians were deprived of the right to speak on behalf of themselves.

Nearly thirty years had to elapse before it became clear that the continued anomaly of the Palestinians as a politically homeless people had bred a movement of radical nationalists characterized by desperation and terrorism which has become a detonator for internal Arab conflicts and a major cause of an ever more dangerous escalation of the Israeli-Arab conflict. (pp. 343-44)

Throughout *Zionism and the Palestinians* Flapan makes a serious attempt at an objective balance as he weaves his readers through the maze of political strategies, ideological debates, and diplomatic intrigues — of the competing Arab interests as well as of the Zionist movement. On the whole, his effort at scholarly detachment is respectable, though Flapan is the first to acknowledge that a comparable “critical reappraisal of Arab policies and tactics must be undertaken by an Arab historian if it is to be credible and effective” (p. 13).

Yet Flapan's repeated implication that a more conciliatory Palestinian leadership could have worked out some kind of coexistence arrangement with the Zionist leadership of the day seems highly coloured by what might be Flapan's over-reliance on far-left Zionist sources, especially the towering Zionist internationalist personality Nahum Goldmann.

“Palestinian Arab leadership had options that were realistic and more promising, but elected to follow a course which led to perpetuation of the conflict and to national calamity” (p.13), Flapan asserts. And he does so even though a major thesis of his entire effort is that for top Zionist leaders from Weizmann through Begin negation of the very concept of Palestinian nationalism has been “a consistent feature of Zionist strategy,” “a cornerstone of Zionist policy” (pp. 12-13). Rather than “intransigent leadership” (p. 343) being responsible for the Palestinian eclipse after 1939, a convincing argument can be made (and on the basis of Flapan's own research) that it was precisely the naïveté of Palestinian leaders, precisely their willingness to consider deceitful Zionist slogans, precisely their wavering uncertainty over

how to defend Palestinian interests, which ultimately led to the kinds of restraints and compromises that allowed a still weak and crushable Zionism to strengthen and reinforce itself. Both in 1930 and 1939, as Flapan boldly discusses, the Zionist movement was near collapse. But just a few years later it was the Palestinian leadership that was decimated and the resistance largely smothered. Nevertheless, "The years 1943-1946 are rich in Arab proposals and plans for a settlement," Flapan indicates, but "all these proposals found no interest within the Zionist movement which... was determined to achieve full sovereignty at whatever cost" (p. 285).

Flapan's objectivity further suffers from his penchant to use conventional Israeli definitions when describing Palestinian figures as either "extremist" or "moderate." Determined opponents of Zionism are often branded "extremist" while those who cooperated with Zionists are termed "moderate" (p. 65, for instance). Yet more than almost any other Israeli source, Flapan's book truthfully attempts to document the broad-based resistance to Zionism throughout the entire Palestinian society. The revolt in the late 1930's "originated with the Arab masses" (p. 238), Flapan admits. It was a "fully mature national movement" (p. 236).

But the most distressing characteristic of this book is its patchwork quality. Sections were apparently researched and completed at different times and never fully integrated into a single text. Even within chapters the flow is at times ragged. For instance, Nahum Goldmann is repeatedly mentioned and quoted throughout the first part of Chapter 8. Yet in the beginning of the second part of that same chapter Flapan writes, "One of the most distinguished Zionist leaders, Dr. Nahum Goldmann" (p. 295), as if he has hardly mentioned him before.

Another example of the lack of integration within the text is Flapan's reference to Sharett as the only Zionist leader "who showed a deep understanding of the Arab problem.... More than any other Zionist, he understood the nature and problem of Arab nationalism" (pp. 148-49). Yet just a few pages earlier in the preceding chapter, Flapan writes that "Goldmann was the only Zionist leader to grasp the dynamics of Arab nationalism" (p. 125). Furthermore, the entire chapter on Jabotinsky was added to the book after its completion at the suggestion of the publisher — even though Flapan insists in that chapter that the Revisionist movement's influence on Zionist thinking and actions is "extremely difficult to underestimate" (p. 96).

Flapan's book actually began as an introductory chapter to a study of Israel's contemporary problems since the Suez invasion of 1956. "But while studying the pre-1948 documents," Flapan indicates, "I was struck by the unbroken continuity, up to the present, of views and attitudes regarding the Arab problem, and by the relevance of pre-state debates and decisions to the

situation of today" (p. 12). The earlier contemplated book was deferred and with the encouragement and support of a number of individuals and foundations, Flapan undertook a period of research in Israel and London which was completed late in 1978. He is now at work on that follow-up volume covering the post-1948 period.

Unfortunately, as is the case with so many of the activities of people associated with *New Outlook* – the English-language magazine Flapan has edited for 20 years and which is the only Israeli journal consistently to attempt an understanding with the Palestinian people – promotion of this book has been far less successful than the book's numerous merits. In the US, the book is hardly known. And thus Flapan's expressed belief that "a critical review of the past may contribute to loosening the grip of prejudices that obscure the vision of the future" (p. 12) is being tested among a miniscule audience – and one largely composed of the already aware. That liberal, socialist, and at times contrite Zionist research and thinking continues to reach such a minute segment of world Jewish opinion is one of the continuing tragedies of Zionist history.