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## **The Israel-Palestine Conflict: The View From Jerusalem**

Review Essay by Simon A. Waldman, King's College London, [simon.waldman@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:simon.waldman@kcl.ac.uk)

Hillel Cohen. *The Rise and Fall of Arab Jerusalem: Palestinian politics and the city since 1967*. London: Routledge. 2011.

Menachem Klein. *The Shift: Israel-Palestine from Border Struggle to Ethnic Conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010.

The form of the Israeli-Arab/Palestinian conflict has seen many mutations and changes over the years. From its early stages (in which the first Zionists settled in Palestine in 1882 and in which the 1917 Balfour Declaration was made, stating Britain's intention to build a Jewish national home in Palestine) to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Arab-Jewish tensions could be broadly defined as a dispute between two ethno-religious nationalisms competing for the same small stretch of land. The Arab-Israeli conflict took the form of a state-on-state dispute following the Arab invasion of the newly proclaimed State of Israel on May 15, 1948 and lasted until Israel's 1979 peace treaty with Egypt following the successful conclusion of the previous year's Camp David Accords. The defining moment of the conflict was Israel's lightning-fast victory against several Arab armies during the 1967 War to gain possession of not only the Egyptian Sinai and the Syrian Golan Heights but also the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, where the Palestinian national movement would stake its claim for the heartland of its future state. However, from the perspective of the Palestinians, the conflict with Israel was always a "zero sum game between two national movements struggling for exclusive ownership of the same piece of land." This was, however, only until the first Intifada of 1987 and the Oslo peace agreement of 1993, which started a process that would lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state, thus promising to turn the conflict from an existential struggle to a border conflict. Or so argues senior lecturer in political science at Ben Gurion University, Menachem Klein, in his fittingly entitled *The Shift: Israel-Palestine From Border Struggle to Ethnic Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Klein's central contention is straightforward. After the outbreak of the second Intifada of 2000, Israel expanded its settlements in the territories and conducted security operations that changed the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (p.3). During that time, political negotiations were scuppered, particularly as the US, under George W. Bush, allowed Israel to put Arafat under siege and "dismember" Arafat's Palestinian Authority, thus creating enclaves subject to de facto Israeli control. By the time Barack Obama assumed the US presidency, a new reality was on the ground, with Israeli settlement activities and security operations stripping political negotiations of any real value. Most importantly, this returned the conflict to its "original status," says Klein, as an ethnic rather than territorial dispute (p.4). Klein elaborates on this in four main sections of his short book. He explains that as an operational body, the Palestinian Authority is completely dependent upon Israel. Meanwhile, Israel's settlements have expanded, and the authorities have tightened control of the Palestinian population. Ultimately, Klein argues that a de facto single state exists, whereby Israel rules the Palestinian Authority by proxy and operates under an "ethno-security" regime in which Israel perceives security as being related primarily to its identity (which is based on the combination of Jewish demographic anxiety and the need to control the Palestinians) (p. 141). This has eroded the two-state dynamic of the conflict, thus fundamentally changing the conflict from a border dispute into an ethno-national struggle within a single state. Klein's

argument is only partially valid. The reality is more multifaceted. More importantly, Klein's argument is not new.

Anyone familiar with Israeli political discourse over the past three decades would be aware of the lengthy public discussions in Israel about the dangers of the continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The nature of Israel's relations with the Palestinian Authority and the occupation of disputed territories has been the subject of many studies by academics, newspaper articles, and reports by NGOs. One only needs to look at Klein's footnotes for examples of such works. Klein not only cites them, but he also bases his whole argument on them while offering no original research himself. Worse still, he has taken to reproducing these studies and reports in paragraphs which easily take up half a page, sometimes more. Perhaps this might be acceptable if used sparingly, but Klein's use of verbatim is extensive, lengthy, and present on multiple occasions in each chapter. Klein's central thesis that the nature of the Israel-Palestine dispute has shifted is flawed. Take his assertion that the first Intifada and the Oslo Agreement of 1993 turned the dispute into a border conflict. In making such an assertion, Klein assumes that by signing the Oslo Agreement, the Palestine Liberation Organization abandoned its "phased strategy," which had been in place since the 12th PNC in Cairo on June 9, 1974. This strategy sought to accept any territory Israel was willing to concede, not as an end in itself, but as a launching pad from which to make further territorial gains, ultimately leading to the "complete liberation of Palestine." Thus, arguably, for the PLO, which considered itself in a battle against a colonial oppressor, the conflict has always been ethno-nationalist in nature, only now with a territorially defined battlefield. Throughout the Oslo period, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat would refer back to the phased strategy. For example, Arafat declared in a 1995 radio address, "The struggle will continue until all of Palestine is liberated." In an interview with Egyptian Orbit TV on April 18, 1998, Arafat made an analogy between his agreement with Israel and the "inferior" peace brokered by Mohammad, which the prophet used as a means to gain strength in order to later launch another attack.

Even if one were to reject the validity of the argument that the PLO never repudiated the phased strategy, the Palestinian Authority throughout the Oslo period and beyond has stuck firm in demanding that the refugees of 1948 and their descendants be allowed to return to their homes in Israel. If permitted, this would essentially mean the end of Israel as a Jewish state because the influx of millions of Arabs would alter its Jewish character. By its very nature, such a negotiating position by the Palestinians highlights the ethnic character of the conflict, even during the period when Klein believed a "transformation" to border dispute was taking place. It also shows that Israeli settlement activity and security operations are only a small part of the ethnic conflict. Ultimately, what Klein fails to recognize is that despite the various mutations of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, it has always been, from the PLO perspective, an ethnic conflict, a border dispute, and anti-colonial struggle. Holding on to the refugees' right to return is just as lethal to the two-state solution as the Israeli settlements are. Klein also appears oblivious to the ideological stance of Hamas, which never accepted the legitimacy of the Oslo Accords and rejects outright Israel's right to exist. For Hamas, the conflict is a religious war with nationalist overtones. One needs only to consult its charter, which declares Hamas a "distinguished Palestinian movement, whose allegiance is to Allah, and whose way of life is Islam." Further, Hamas "strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine" (Article Six: Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement, August 18, 1988). The Hamas rejection of Israel is crucially important because not only is Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip, from where rockets are fired into Israel, but the Hamas movement is arguably the most popular movement among the Palestinian population. Hamas also possesses the most potent military force in the Palestinian territories. Israel fears that if it were to cease its support of the Palestinian Authority's security services in the West Bank,

Hamas could take control of the area in months. The religious emphasis of Hamas threatens the very notion of a two-state solution. Worryingly, the rise of Hamas represents the real shift in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one which embodies a religious dimension.

While it must be conceded that Israeli settlements do threaten the two-state paradigm (as does Hamas' rejection of Israel's right to exist), the "shift" Klein describes has not deterred serious Israeli-Palestinian bilateral peace talks. Serious discussions took place after the 2007 Annapolis Conference between Palestinian negotiators and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and PA President Mahmoud Abbas. The seriousness of these talks is evidenced in the release of the Palestine Papers by al-Jazeera and reports of Israel's offers leaked in Israeli newspapers such as Haaretz. Overall, the failure of Klein's argument is that it simplifies the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute when, in reality, it is not just a border dispute, anti-colonial struggle, ethnic conflict or religious war, but an amalgam of all of the above, and that is what makes the dispute so intractable, complicated, and difficult to solve.

There are some useful parts of Klein's book. His overview of the expansion of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and beyond into the extended Jerusalem municipal boundaries is effective (p.58-69). Klein also offers descriptions of different categories of Palestinians in the context of their territorial and legal rights (pp. 96-103). He characterizes East Jerusalemites as one rung below Arab Israelis, who enjoy the right to move and work in Israel and benefit from healthcare and national insurance yet have fewer rights than Israeli citizens (pp. 99-100). This is where research fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, Hillel Cohen's *The Rise and Fall of Arab Jerusalem: Palestinian politics and the city since 1967* (London: Routledge, 2011) makes an interesting and absorbing read. Incidentally, Cohen's take on the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is that the Palestinian armed struggle is a conflict against an occupying power but not a classic anti-colonial struggle because the dispute is between two peoples over the same land (p. 42).

Cohen's work focuses on East Jerusalem and the political actions and discourse of East Jerusalemites. It is a broad study encompassing themes such as the work of Jerusalem NGOs in matters such as (1) human rights and protection of Muslim structures in the city, as well as their relationship with residents and the Palestinian Authority (pp.81-85), (2) joint Israeli-Palestinian activities against the Israeli establishment and occupation from 1967 to present day (pp. 91-102), (3) the route of the separation barrier (pp 98-100), and (4) urban planning and house demolitions (pp. 101-4). In constructing his analytical narrative, Cohen makes use of both his "intimate knowledge" of his "hometown" and (perhaps more importantly) "hundreds" of meetings with Palestinians in East Jerusalem (p. X). He also uses a vast array of reports from the Hebrew and Arabic press as well as Israeli and Palestinian NGO reports and think tank releases and publications. What Cohen argues is that despite there being several political trends among East Jerusalemites, what unites them is a desire to maintain Arab life and preserve the city's Arab nature (p.133). Israel's increasing dominance in the city, through the expansion of the municipal boundaries and Israeli unilateral moves to accelerate Jewish building while disconnecting Palestinian neighborhoods from the city, only increases hostility towards Israel and does not lead to a Palestinian acceptance of the verdict (pp. 134-5).

An underlying theme present in Cohen's analysis is the centrality of Jerusalem in the Palestinian national movement. He calls it a "capital in waiting" between 1948 and 1967 and a "capital in the making" between 1967 and 1993. The implication is that the Palestinian national movement consistently considers Jerusalem its future capital. (p. 3-12). Cohen also recounts the history of the city from 1917 to 1948, recalling that under the Ottoman period, the city was the capital of an independent district or Sancak and was "directly accountable to the government in Istanbul," an expression of its "unique status and importance in the

empire” (p.1). However, this is not quite accurate. First, the name of the Ottoman capital was Constantinople and not Istanbul. The city’s name was changed only after the founding of the Turkish Republic, where Ankara was made Capital. Second, the Sancak or mutasarriflik (sub-governate) of Jerusalem was only made directly answerable to Constantinople during the end of the nineteenth century not necessarily because of its important and unique status, but also for other reasons such as increased foreign interest in the city as well as it being part of a general Ottoman trend of centralization. Nevertheless, this does not detract significantly from Cohen’s view that Jerusalem plays a historic and, in present day, a central role in Palestinian politics.

Cohen goes on to discuss the Oslo period with a fascinating account of the activities of Hamas cells within the city (p. 20-25) as well as East Jerusalemite reactions to the Oslo Agreement. He discusses the setting up of the Palestinian Authority in nearby Jericho and complications arising from Israeli control of Jerusalem (with increasing Palestinian security infiltration into the city) (pp. 26-33). While during the al Aqsa Intifada, Jerusalem was the main target for Palestinian attacks against Israelis (p. 43), Cohen focuses on the activities of several East Jerusalem based terrorist cells that operated within the city. He notes that not one of the thirteen attacks initiated by Fateh in Jerusalem had drivers who were Arab residents of the city. This is in sharp contrast to the fact that Arab residents did play leading roles in several attacks organized by Hamas (p. 44). Cohen argues that the activity of Jerusalem based terrorist cells did not necessarily represent either deeply religious views or nationalist sentiment, although such sentiment was partly responsible for the activity. It was, rather, financial reward and resentment towards Israel (or simply for the sake of adventure) that assistance was given, Cohen says. (Incidentally, he says, it was due to a similar general apathy toward the terrorist cells that Jerusalemites just ignored them) (pp. 45-6). This is an interesting analysis, as it highlights the difficult relationship between Arab residents of the city and Jewish Israelis, especially as daily interaction between the two groups is more frequent than with other Palestinians living in the occupied territory.

Cohen documents political activity in East Jerusalem in the shadow of the al-Aqsa Intifada. He argues that there was a general impression among East Jerusalemites that the Palestinian Authority was not investing enough in the city. Instead, PA activity was reduced to symbolic and ceremonial activities such as the Palestinian Jerusalem law of October 2002, which stated that the city was the capital of an independent Palestinian state and which resulted in both Arafat bestowing the Jerusalem award on important personages and the setting up of a special twenty-seven member committee for Jerusalem (which almost never convened). However, these efforts failed to influence daily Palestinian life in Jerusalem (pp. 69-70). Because of this, coupled with the political and military superiority of Israel, many Jerusalem Arabs refrained from political activity during the al-Aqsa Intifada.

Most interesting about Cohen’s analysis is the aforementioned apathy among East Jerusalemites in Palestinian politics. Only 30 percent of Jerusalem Palestinians voted in the 1996 PA elections compared to a 75 percent nationwide turnout. A similarly low turnout occurred in 2006, when, as a whole, there was a 77.7 percent turnout but only a 50 percent turnout among Jerusalemites living outside the municipal boundaries and less than 16 percent turnout of those living within its boundaries. This is an interesting reality considering the central role Jerusalem plays in the Palestinian national movement. Cohen explains that the apparent apathy of East Jerusalemites to Palestinian Authority elections is a result of the inability of the PA to entrench itself in the city, Israeli attempts to limit Jerusalemite participation, and, indeed, political passivity (p.33-4). Cohen explains that in the later 2006 election, Israel only allowed 6,300 East Jerusalem residents to vote, meaning that of those eligible, 50 percent exercised their right, which is still below the average turnout. Other reasons Cohen lists include logistical problems such as roadblocks and also rumors that there

would be a severe Israeli reaction against those who decided to vote (pp. 125-6). However, Cohen argues, considering that the PA has no official authority over Jerusalem, and is therefore less important to residents in practical terms, the turnout was quite significant. Just as important was the fact that Hamas got the majority of Jerusalemite votes, (41 percent against Fateh's 35 percent) (pp. 122-3).

However, apathy was not the case of the Haram al Sharif, as it is known to Muslims (Temple Mount to Jews), which became the focal point of hostility between Islamic activities and the Israeli authorities. Tensions occurred when Israeli authorities permitted the digging of tunnels close to the Temple Mount compound and the opening of the Temple Mount to Jewish visitors in the summer of 2003. Perhaps the most well-known example of such tension were the demonstrations and eruptions of violence which followed the then-Israeli-opposition leader Ariel Sharon's visit to the area in the summer of 2000. Not only did the Haram al-Sharif become a political center, but, Cohen argues. There was also the increased impression on the part of Palestinians that within this holy compound, they were able to challenge the Israeli authorities. During the first few years of the second Intifada, Cohen argues that they managed to tighten the Muslim hold over the territory. However, this was only temporary because "neither side intends to give in" over the fight for control of the holy compound, as evidenced by Israeli security forces issuing restraining orders on Islamic activities. (pp.70-76). Cohen identifies four prevalent moods amongst Arab residents of Jerusalem: that of (1) religious belief and fervor, (2) political passiveness driven by a feeling of inability to change the situation, (3) activism displayed by those who would often use non violence or cooperate with sympathetic Israelis, and (4) nationalism "a lá Fateh," which, Cohen argues, is weakened but not weak enough to eulogize (pp. 131-133). Overall, the struggle for Jerusalem continues, and the Arab residents of the city will continue to fight, albeit in divergent ways, to maintain the Arab character of the city.

Regardless of whether one considers the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a border dispute, an ethnic conflict, a religious war, an anti-colonial struggle, or a combination of the above, what emerges from both Cohen's and Klein's studies is that without a fair and satisfactory, mutually agreed upon settlement to the dispute, there can be no end to the conflict. A negotiated two-state solution with an administrative arrangement for Jerusalem to be the capital of both states is the only reasonable possibility, but time is running out. Policy makers have had fair warning.