

TITLE

Rashid Khalidi, The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017

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JOURNAL

Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies

DATE DEPOSITED

12 November 2020

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The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017

Rashid Khalidi, (New York. Metropolitan Books, 2020)

Pp 321. ISBN: 9781627798556

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Rashid Khalidi is a respected historian and his contribution to the corpus of Palestinian history is well recognised beyond even the realms of those engaged with the subject. Through his works he has chronicled and analysed the experiences of the Palestinian people and their protracted quest to assert their right to self-determination. His most recent work is *The Hundred Year's War on Palestine, A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917 – 2017*.¹ Whilst the book recounts the major events of the century, they are intermittently illuminated by insights drawn from family involvement at significant moments in that history. It is a fascinating account of the Palestinian experience by someone whose family were centrally engaged with the political processes throughout that time.

As Khalidi intimates in an absorbing introduction, his family could be described as relatively privileged *a'yan* or “urban notables”, to use Albert Hourani’s term.² They were families who through social, economic or religious pre-eminence constituted a layer, which assumed leadership roles in society. The Khalidis for example “were religious scholars holding more or less hereditary posts in the *Sharia* courts”³. Notwithstanding their relatively privileged position as a group, the Notables as a whole along with Palestinian society in general, faced obstacles to their aspirations for national independence as a result of the combination of the British occupation and the expansion of the Zionist led colonising project.

Uncovering information, through a combination of archival retrieval and authenticated memories he weaves together the history of Palestine and that of his own family. One of these interesting vignettes is that about the role of his great-great-great uncle, Yusuf Diya al-Din Pasha al-Khalidi, the author provides a fascinating account of his ancestor which destroys the orientalist image of the Arab which still prevails in many areas today. His brief pen portrait of Yusuf Diya reveals his ancestor as an educated, somewhat cosmopolitan man of the early twentieth century corresponding in French, amongst others, with Theodor Herzl, the leader of world Zionism. In one of his letters he warns Herzl of the tragedy that would befall Palestine if the colonising aspirations of the leader of Zionism were to come about. The tone of Herzl’s reply, as the author comments, has echoes of imperialist figures, like Cecil Rhodes who claimed that colonisation would bring benefits to the indigenous peoples of the

¹ Khalidi, Rashid, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (New York. Metropolitan Books, 2020) Pp 321. ISBN: 9781627798556

² Hourani, Albert, “Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables”, in Hourani Albert, Philip Khoury and Mary C. Wilson, *The Modern Middle East Reader* (London. I. B. Taurus, 2011) 86-87.

³ Regan, Bernard, *The Balfour Declaration, Empire, Mandate and Resistance. In Palestine* (London, Verso 2017), 85.

lands colonised. This trope, of making the land fertile, did not originate of course with Zionism or even with the Scottish Free Church magazine of 1844 but had its roots in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century writings of Thomas More, Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. It was an imperialist mantra often repeated over the centuries but given a fresh lease of life in the era of Balfour.

The author divides the hundred year history of Palestine into six periods defined as declarations of war: the Balfour Declaration of 1917, the *Nakbha* of 1948, the *Naksa* of 1967, the war in Lebanon of 1982, the 1987 *Intifada* and the period from 2000 -2014. In his book Khalidi has, understandably, used this periodisation to deal with the breadth of time he is addressing. It is however arguable that the first chapter tries to address a stretch of time which is both too long and contains at least two distinct periods of political activity and military repression. The period up to around 1929 to the early 1930s was arguably distinct from the change in Palestine which took place subsequently as a result of the convulsions of the Arab uprising or *Thawra* of 1936–1939 and the shift in demography with the increased settlement of Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi horrors, who were systematically excluded from countries like the United States and Great Britain. This whole period from 1935 onwards certainly represented a rupture with the politics of the *a'yan* signalled by the formation of nationalist political parties which jettisoned the idea of an accommodation with the British. It is arguable that it was in this period that the really decisive shift in the fortunes of the Palestinian struggle took place with the British occupation forces conducting a war against the independence fighters and bombing villages in much the same way that the Luftwaffe were acting in support of Generalissimo Franco at the same time. Although Khalidi makes the judgement that the *Thawra* was largely spontaneous it was true that very rapidly there was widespread social organisation around village national committees which helped to sustain the guerrilla actions and certainly forced the British to bring in increasing numbers of military reinforcements to defeat the Palestinian independence movement.

Khalidi's book throws up a number of questions, not least of which is whether there was a "hundred year's war" or whether it might more accurately be said that there was a "hundred years of wars". It does not detract from the book to ask the question whether there was one continuum of aggression or whether there were in fact a number of distinct conflicts beginning with British imperialism's suppression of the Palestinians during the Mandate period until the late 1920s; followed by the 1936-1939 Palestinian national uprising against the British and then a war waged by the Zionist paramilitary assisted by the British culminating in of the expansionist state of Israel's Plan Dalet in 1948. In all of this there needs to be some reflection on the economic and social impact of British imperialist policies of Palestinian society, the demographic shift that took place as Jews fled the rise of the Nazis and the dislocating impact this had on the development of Palestinian politics.

Throughout the hundred years struggle for Palestinian self-determination it has often appeared as though there is one dominating question that requires an answer and that is the relationship between the Palestinian people and the hegemonic imperial power, be it the British or, more recently, the United States of America. At the outset the quandary was whether to accept the poisoned chalice of the British proposal to set up an undemocratic Legislative Council controlled by London's pro-consul to be followed in later years with the minefield lain by the United States of America with other equally partisan propositions. In the later chapters the author illustrates this vividly with descriptions of his own involvement in the various discussions that took place at Camp David, in Madrid and in Oslo.

At different times throughout the book it is possible to see how this strategic problem has bedevilled Palestinian thinking. The author suggests that there has been a consistent failure of the modern Palestinian leadership to develop an effective lobbying strategy towards Washington and the White House. However, at the same time Khalidi himself provides abundant evidence to substantiate the claim that neither the inhabitants of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue nor the folks on Capitol Hill ever negotiated with the Palestinians with “clean hands”. The Israeli-US position was perhaps most sharply reflected in the 1996 document “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm” produced by a group under the leadership of Richard Perle, former Assistant Secretary of Defence for Global Strategic Affairs to President Reagan, for the then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu which stressed the need for future Israeli governments to be able to be self-reliant, not needing US troops to defend it.⁴ Its tone is unashamedly aggressive encouraging an Israeli policy which would be uncompromisingly assertive in order to “transcend” its foes. What has clearly distinguished the period since the end of the Soviet Union, in the eyes of the author, has been the absence of a countervailing major backer for the Palestinian cause.

Khalidi’s final chapter is almost a personal manifesto expressing his views on what is required for the future. Confronted by the Presidency of Donald Trump and an Israeli government that feels under no compulsion to negotiate but on the contrary is inclined to ratchet up the hostility and annexationist strategy it is not unreasonable to assume that absolutely no progress towards a resolution of the situation satisfactory to the Palestinians is going to be achieved in the near future. The actions of successive Israeli governments have progressively stripped away the credibility of a viable two state solution whilst the animosity to any conception of a single state in which equity can prevail is in reality repudiated by the adoption of the Nation State Law enacted in July 2018. The book is an important contribution to understanding the forces at play in this context.

⁴ Accessed 26 June 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140125123844/http://www.iasps.org/strat1.htm>