

*The Balfour Declaration: Empire, the Mandate and Resistance in Palestine*

Bernard Regan

London and New York: Verso, 2017, £16.99

ISBN 13 9781786632470

*Gaza: An Inquest into its Martyrdom*

Norman G Finkelstein

Oakland (California): University of California Press, 2018, £27.95

ISBN 9780520295711

*Moment of Truth: Tackling Israel-Palestine's Toughest Questions*

Edited by Jamie Stern-Weiner

London and New York: OR Books, 2018, £18.00

ISBN 9781682191149

**John Booth**

**I**n the swirl of controversy over 'Labour's anti-Semitism problem' that has followed Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader in 2015, the complex subject of Israel and Palestine has rarely featured in popular discussion. These three books offer those who wish to move beyond this largely faux confection more understanding of an issue that has dogged international affairs since the foundation of Israel in 1948.

Bernard Regan's book, written on the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, takes us back to the imperial rivalries and the conflicts that led to the First World War from which the British Foreign Secretary's letter via Lord Rothschild to the Zionist Federation originated. This was a world not only where British imperialism coloured much of the globe red, but one where the Ottoman empire stretched south from the Black Sea to the Red one and from the Mediterranean in the west beyond the River Tigris to the Persian Gulf and not far short of the Caspian Sea.

Regan writes:

'The British had, for several decades before 1917, been a preeminent colonial power in the Near East, demonstrated most vividly by their invasion and occupation of Egypt in 1882. From the 1890s onwards dramatic changes began to take place in the nature of imperialism. Whilst colonisation and colonialism would continue to exist, imperialism metamorphosed as a consequence of the rapid growth of monopoly finance capital. This phase of imperialism characterised by the expansion of finance capital typically resulted in fierce competition for the monopolisation of markets, control over valuable raw materials and domination of the lines of communication.'

This framework is fundamental not just to Regan's work – a book developed from his doctoral thesis – but to any effort we make to understand all that followed in the subsequent century.

While Regan has moved into academic endeavor from political activism on the international committee of the National Union of Teachers (now National Education Union), Norman Finkelstein has largely gone in the opposite direction, valuable as his political contribution is to Israel/Palestine campaigners. One reason for that is the sheer thoroughness of his research and his ready ability to draw upon it and then deploy it. The preface to his new book begins:

'This book is not about Gaza. It is about what has been *done* [author's italics] to Gaza.'

He continues:

'What has befallen Gaza is a human-made human disaster. In its protractedness and its starkness, in its unfolding not in the fog of war or in the obscurity of remoteness but in broad daylight and in full sight, in the complicity of so many, not just via acts of commission but also, and especially, of omission, it is moreover a distinctly evil crime.'

He then details Israel military operations against the citizens of what in 2010 Prime Minister David Cameron called an 'open-air prison'. In a section on efforts that year to bring relief to Gaza's blockaded inhabitants – half of them under the age of 18 – he describes the killing of those on board the flotilla flagship Mavi Marmara by Israeli commandos.

Finkelstein is harsh on many of the international human rights organisations in the way they report on Israel's activities in the territories it occupies. He devotes two chapters to its treatment of Richard Goldstone, who the year before headed the UN Human Rights Council investigation into the Gaza conflict. Anyone surprised by the three-year stream of venom directed at Jeremy Corbyn by Israel Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his British and American allies should read the treatment dished out to Goldstone – himself a Jewish, Zionist, South African jurist – after his critical verdict was published. So personal and hostile were the attacks on him, Goldstone subsequently published what Finkelstein calls a recantation in which he 'effectively disowned the devastating UN report of Israeli crimes carrying his name'.

Dual British-Israeli national Jamie Stern-Weiner includes Finkelstein in his broad-ranging collection of writings and responses on the future of Israel and Palestine. A book with contributions by dozens of specialists on Gaza, the West Bank and the international context in which the conflict has played out since Israel's foundation is difficult even to summarize in a brief review.

His format is to choose one topic, divide it into manageable sub-topics led off by one writer and then followed up with alternative views by way of response. For example, the section of the book on Palestine, Stern-Weiner has one part on the West Bank in three chapters. The first, 'Can the Current

Palestinian Leadership and Its Institutions End the Occupation?’ is led off by Nathan J Brown with responses by Diana Buttu and Glenn E Robinson. Subsequent chapters on Gaza follow the same formula, one chapter asking if Hamas can be part of the solution.

In the final section on the international dimension of the conflict, Finkelstein seeks to draw lessons from Jimmy Carter’s Middle East diplomacy with one response from another name familiar to those of with only a passing acquaintance with the subject: John J Mearsheimer.

This impressive collection offers a rich source of expertise to those who seriously wish to engage with the complexities of the issue.

This number has to increase rapidly if we are to move forward from what passes for informed reporting and political argument in the United Kingdom on matters relating to that highly troubled region of the world. These three fine books can help us shift a little more in that direction.

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