
Reviewed by Peter Bartu

Rashid Khalidi has written another essential book on Palestine, weaving his own family’s story through 100 years of history. The Khalidi family included religious and legal scholars, functionaries in the Ottoman Empire, and a mayor of Jerusalem. It was a cosmopolitan family at ease in several languages with the means to travel freely. Its members have been quintessential participant-observers of Palestine’s tumultuous history. The Khalidi library—founded in 1899 in the old city of Jerusalem—has manuscripts going back to the early eleventh century. The ruins of the Khalidi family home can still be seen at Tal al-Rish on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. Rashid’s brother Raja Khalidi’s home in Auja, the West Bank, was later bulldozed by the Israeli military.

The family was aware of the first two Zionist congresses in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897 and 1898.

Khalidi begins the book with an account of the correspondence between his great-great-great uncle Yusuf Diya al-Din Pasha al-Khalidi and Theodore Herzl, in 1899, in which Yusuf Diya al-Din warns that a sovereign Jewish state in Palestine would sow dissent among the existing Christian, Muslim, and Jewish populations; it would imperil Jews throughout other Ottoman domains; and the indigenous population would never accept it. Khalidi posits that Herzl’s reply was probably the first “by a founder of the Zionist movement to a cogent Palestinian objection to its embryonic plans for Palestine” (5). Herzl failed to respond to Yusuf Diya al-Din’s main points but asserted that Jewish migration would lift everybody: “no one can doubt that the well-being of the entire country would be the happy result” (7). Regarding the non-Jewish population in Palestine, Herzl blithely retorts “who would think of sending them away?” (7). Indeed. For Khalidi, this exchange captures the essence of Zionism as a colonial enterprise from inception. The Palestinians were not taken seriously and only rarely consulted about their future. Condescension and bromides would cloak the dismantling and deinstitutionalization of Palestinian society and ultimately force the indigenous population “to relinquish their homeland to another people against their will” (9). The book’s central thesis is that the Palestinians have never given up their resistance to this notion, nor will they.

*The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine* is divided into six chapters. Each is framed as a “declaration of war” followed by the timeframe in question. The “First Declaration

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Through it all, Khalidi traces the evolution of Palestinian nationalism and the oft suffocating embrace of its Arab allies, with whom Palestinians have also struggled and directly confronted in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, and vice-versa. In the worst of circumstances, Khalidi sometimes finds a silver lining. For example, in 1967 it was the rout of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria by Israel that resurrected the Palestinians as a proprietary actor in their own cause. The Palestinians’ subsequent political and cultural renaissance was experienced first-hand by Khalidi, in Beirut. Here writers, poets, academics, artists, and intellectuals were able to appeal to Arab public opinion about the injustice done to Palestine over the heads of their authoritarian leaders (115).

Khalidi’s personal experiences during Israel’s invasion of Lebanon and the seven-week siege of West Beirut in summer 1982 are among the most harrowing sections of the book. Israel sought to root out the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon and quell rising nationalism in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Nearly 50,000 people would be killed or wounded, and Khalidi reminds us that the grisly massacres of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps were not the only ones, nor was the Palestinian leadership exempt from responsibility for what happened. US diplomat Ryan Crocker, one of the few Americans to come out well in this period, would personally escort Khalidi and his wife Mona—then pregnant—and their two small children to the Syrian border and safety, where they caught a taxi to Damascus and subsequent flight to Tunis. It was in Tunis where Khalidi developed the ideas for Under Siege, his book on PLO decision-making during the 1982 War.

The eruption of the first Intifada in 1987 brought global empathy for the Palestinian side. In passing, the PLO leadership accepted the two-state solution, recognized Israel, and renounced armed struggle, thereby meeting the preconditions for bilateral talks with the US and later Israel. The US victory over Iraq in the first Gulf War and the end of the Soviet Union also energized US President George W. Bush and his Secretary of State James Baker to engage with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Baker in particular was instrumental in convening the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, which Khalidi attended. He was also present in ten rounds of subsequent talks over 18 months in Washington
DC. Khalidi soberly recounts being blindsided by the secret Oslo back channel between Yasser Arafat and Shimon Perez, which delivered only limited self-government for Palestinians. The Oslo Accords were described by Edward Said as “an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles” (200).

For this reader, the frame of the “4th War” on the Palestinians sits less well for this period as Palestinian agency is present. As Khalidi himself notes, the Palestinians could have been better prepared for—or walked away from—the Oslo and Washington processes because neither dealt with settlements nor a future state. There was a choice. Conversely, proponents of Oslo hoped to exploit the constructive ambiguity over time based on patterns of cooperation that would enable serious discussions on Palestinian statehood. To a certain extent, this did happen with the infamous 2000 Camp David talks and those that came subsequently. But the relentless twin expansion of Israeli settlements and contraction of Palestinian living conditions have surely called into question the very notion of a viable Palestinian state. Thus, the Oslo straitjacket is always upheld by Israel.

The 21st century has been a traumatic experience for the Palestinians. Khalidi also shows how it is becoming more lethal. The three Gaza wars in 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014 saw 3,804 Palestinians killed to 87 Israelis: a 43:1 ratio (222). Palestine is internally divided between Hamas and Fateh, and in Khalidi’s view, both their projects are bankrupt. Israel has moved alarmingly to the right. The Trump administration endorsed an apartheid “peace plan,” which predictably began with a threat—but may yet sink with a tweet. The normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and possibly others has been bitterly rejected by the Palestinians and their leadership. In other words, it looks bad for Palestinian self-determination. But the Palestinians have not gone away.

Khalidi ends his book with some sage advice. Perhaps directed at the next generation of Palestinians. The colonial nature of the Palestine-Israel encounter must be acknowledged. However, there are two peoples in Palestine, and their mutual acceptance based on the complete equality of human, personal, civil, political, and national rights is the only sustainable solution. Khalidi acknowledges that this will be a test of the political ingenuity of all concerned (247). And he predicts that the biggest challenge for Palestinians will be to develop a new national consensus. Could it be that a resurrection may emerge as it did after 1967?

This is Rashid Khalidi’s eighth book on the Middle East and his most self-reflective engagement yet. Scholars from a range of disciplines will find it useful, as will the general reader. It will also appeal to readers beyond those interested in Israel-Palestine, for its perspective on lived history, from inside the resistance.