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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

The Palestine Deception, 1915-23: The McMahon-Hussein Correspondence, the Balfour Declaration and the Jewish National Home

J. M. N. Jeffries and William Mathew (ed.)

Washington and Jerusalem, Institute for Palestine Studies, 2015, 194 pp., £6.55, Paperback
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The past and present of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have become so inextricably intertwined that one could be forgiven for assuming that the only solution is to somehow escape history, to overcome the divisions imposed by two separate historical narratives and to seek refuge within a common future. To return to history is, upon this understanding, to return to the source of past enmities, hatreds and divisions. Upon reading *The Palestine Deception*, I was repeatedly struck by the insufficiency of this proposition. History cannot be blithely disposed of in this way; it impacts upon, and is consequently implicated within, the contemporary in a variety of ways. The parallels are always there, even if we choose not to recognise or acknowledge them.

In *The Palestine Deception* the British historian William Mathew edits a range of articles that were published in 1923 by the war correspondent J. M. N. Jeffries in the *Daily Mail* over the course of the aforementioned period. Jeffries's articles, while an important source of historical reference in their own right, are also important because they frequently served as a point of reference during parliamentary debates (although the speaking parliamentarians did not always explicitly reference him while invoking his articles). Aside from highlighting clear parallels and continuities, *The Palestine Deception* also brings clear differences and discontinuities to our attention. First consider David Cameron's 2014 speech to the Israeli Knesset, in which the incumbent British Prime Minister said:

From the early pioneers, the men and women of the Palestine Exploration Fund, who saw the Jewish history in this land and the possibilities for the future, to the Balfour Declaration, the moment when the State of Israel went from a dream to a plan, Britain has played a proud and vital role in helping to secure Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people.¹

It is particularly instructive to compare this open celebration of mendacity and deceit with the view of Lord Northcliffe, the then editor of the *Daily Mail*, who visited Palestine in 1922 and openly criticised the 'disastrous consequences' that would ensue as a consequence of Britain's support for a Jewish homeland. Similar views were also expressed by members of Parliament during debates in the British Parliament over the course of 1923.

Indeed, in retrospect it is striking to reflect upon the degree of controversy, and opposition, which the Zionist project generated during the period in question. This was also true within the Jewish community itself – Jeffries references the tensions which emerged between émigré and established communities. Clear reservations were voiced, in a variety of forums, about the political implications of government policy. This is shown by the fact that the British government's stated commitment to a Jewish state had yet to claim clear bipartisan support – this meant that the Zionist project was effectively, to an extent which seems implausible now, subject to the turbulences and vicissitudes of the domestic British

¹ David Cameron's speech to the Knesset in Israel, Gov.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/david-camerons-speech-to-the-knesset-in-israel> (accessed 29 May, 2015).

political process. In his introduction to *The Palestine Deception* Mathew accordingly observes that:

It seemed, therefore, that the whole issue of British Zionist commitments was still up for serious debate, with some prospect that the undertakings could be significantly modified. Strengthening such expectations was the replacement of the Lloyd George coalition in October 1922 by a Conservative government staffed by individuals who had a much weaker attachment than did most of their predecessors to the idea of a Jewish national home in Palestine (p. 3).

The contrast with the situation today, when the British political establishment essentially offers uncritical and unconditional support to Israel, is stark. The opportunistic conflation of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism by Israel's apologists has consolidated positions which might otherwise have been open to challenge and contestation. Benjamin Netanyahu's 2014 speech to AIPAC (The American Israel Public Affairs Committee) implicitly acknowledged the actual and potential utility of this particular political tactic:

So you see, attempts to boycott, divest and sanction Israel, the most threatened democracy on Earth, are simply the latest chapter in the long and dark history of anti-Semitism. Those who wear the BDS [Boycott and Divestment and Sanctions against Israel] label should be treated exactly as we treat any anti-Semite or bigot. They should be exposed and condemned. The boycotters should be boycotted.²

It appears that Jeffries anticipated this conflation (which has, after all, only subsequently assumed its full significance and appearance within Israel's alarming political swing towards the right). In similar terms, a letter from Lord Beaverbrook, the Conservative statesman and newspaper tycoon, to the editor of the *Daily Express* sought to reiterate the essential distinction. He wrote:

They [Palestinian Muslims and Christians] vehemently object to the obligation imposed by this article of the mandate on the British Government in Palestine to accept the advice of the Zionist organisation. They are not anti-Semitic, but they cannot accept Zionist domination (p. 152).

Subsequent to a meeting with British Jews who were opposed to Zionism, Beaverbrook would similarly observe that:

Today in our opposition to Zionism we are unjustly branded as anti-Semitic. Our opposition is not inspired by any hostility to the Jews. It is due to the sheer injustice and utter folly of the Zionist policy in operation in Palestine (pp. 154-55).

Upon reading these accounts, I was again returned to the clear parallel with the contemporary politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the contemporary era, even 'Jewish Voices for Peace', the grassroots organisation which openly challenges Israel's repressive and expansionist policies, has not been immune from the (ludicrous) charge of anti-Semitism. Almost a century earlier, Jeffries had, presumably in anticipation of similar criticism, felt it necessary to reiterate that it was the colonial project which was his key and central objection – a point which he sought to reiterate by placing the blame squarely upon the British Colonial Office: accordingly he observed that '[t]he Colonial Office talked so loudly about the "Question" that it concealed cleverly that there was no "Question" till we had made one' (p. 1).

As the original book title and introduction affirms, the editor's recurrent concern is the question of how British foreign policy actors hid their true interests, motives and

² See Netanyahu's AIPAC speech: The full transcript, *Haaretz*, March 4, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.577920> (accessed 1 June, 2015).

strategies and occluded their true intentions with regard to the establishment of a Jewish state. Jeffries, for example, accused the British government of making contradictory promises to Jewish and Arab communities and of maintaining a mandate which was illegal. In developing the implication of this point, Mathew asserts, in the book's introduction, that British support for the Balfour Declaration (of 1917) ultimately derived from 'reasons that were essentially global-imperial rather than local-Levantine' (p. 22). Jeffries himself further reiterates this point when he refers to the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, a communication which many Palestinians were to retrospectively interpret as further evidence (although more evidence on this front could scarcely be required) of the British government's capacity for false promises and double dealing.

Both the Balfour Declaration and the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence were the products of a mind-set which holds that superior cultures and civilisations have an innate right to bestow rights, privileges and entitlements upon subject populations whose very existence as a people is subject to varying degrees of acceptance upon the civiliser's part. This point did not escape Jeffries who observed that, while the Declaration did not recognise Palestinian political rights (while recognising social and economic rights) it did recognise Jewish political claims on this point. A glimpse into the effective denial of the Palestinian's rights was only provided by the Declaration's reference to 'non-Jewish communities' – an 'oversight' which led Jeffries to question whether Lord Balfour would similarly designate the British people as the 'non-foreign community in England'.

These 'phraseological tricks' recall, in many respects, the distortions and manipulations of the Oslo Accords, which similarly concealed the essential political reality within a set of textual and verbal obfuscations. In both the historical and contemporary contexts, a clear variation in language (vague and ambiguous when referring to Palestinian rights, clear and definite when referring to Jewish rights) was to emerge as a key, recurring and defining feature of external mediation. I was repeatedly reminded of Rashid Khalidi's denunciation of instances in which external intentions are 'concealed by a veil of deceitful, Orwellian verbiage, as feeble thought corrupts language, and dishonest language corrupts thought'.³

Aside from bringing out instances in which external and internal programs and interests overlapped and intertwined, Mathew also highlights how these same contingent alliances were prone to tensions and divergences. For instance, after highlighting the close links (which were not solely political) between key officials in the British government and Zionist activists, Jeffries clearly demonstrates how relations between the British government and the fledgling Zionist movement became, over the course of the British Mandate in Palestine, increasingly strained.

Both the Palin Commission Report (1920) and the Haycraft Commission of Inquiry (1921) were to subsequently acknowledge the close relationship between Zionist activities and ongoing political disturbances in Palestine. British Chief Administrators of Palestine (including both Sir Arthur Money and Sir Louis Bols) expressed particular concern about the activities of the Zionist Commission, whose imperious high-handedness imperilled the pretence of mutual regard for the well-being of Arabs and Jews. Bols observed that the Commission 'acted, in fact, as if it was the lord of Palestine' (p. 79).

While key Zionist advocates and activists were able to, at the time when Jeffries was writing, conceal their ethnic exclusivism and colonial designs, both features have, in subsequent years, become increasingly harder to occlude or deny. Recent exclusionary and discriminatory legislation, such as the Nakba Law (2011), Prager Plan (2013) and Jewish

³ Khalidi, Rashid, 2012. *Brokers of Deceit – How the US Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East*. Boston: Beacon Press, 28.

State Law Bill (2014) is, to this extent, within the lineage of a political project that begins from an assumption of Jewish supremacy – a dubious political heritage which, as Nur Masalha's *Expulsion of the Palestinians* demonstrates in convincing and compelling detail, implies and sustains practices of expulsion, transfer and colonial settlement.⁴

While I would have no hesitation in recommending *The Palestine Deception* as an invaluable source of historical reference which would be of clear interest to students and academics with a clear interest in Middle Eastern history, I would also recommend the book as essential reading for those with an interest in the region's contemporary international relations. The story – which is one of deceit, mendacity and imperial arrogance – is by no means only of interest to historians; it is, in all too many respects, a story that has a contemporary resonance and significance.

⁴ Masalha, Nur. 1992. *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies