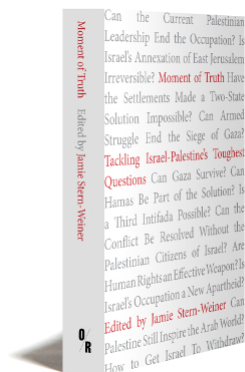


Hard Questions in Israel-Palestine

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Jamie Stern-Weiner, ed. *Moment of Truth: Tackling Israel-Palestine's Toughest Questions*. OR Books, 2018. 518 pp.

The fact that, after fifty years of Palestinian support efforts, the Israeli occupation is more entrenched than ever should inspire some intellectual humility among those hawking solutions to the conflict, notes Jamie Stern-Weiner in the introduction to his edited collection *Moment of Truth: Tackling Israel-Palestine's Toughest Questions*. It is humbling as well to read through the volume, with more than seventy essays and rejoinders by more than fifty different authors, from almost every one of which something new can be learned.

The book is organized into fifteen chapters, most of them containing contending views on crucial questions regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict. Stern-Weiner acknowledges up front that his own political views influenced his choice of questions to explore. He believes that “an end to the occupation would represent an important milestone” in the Palestinian quest for freedom, that “the occupation’s demise is a prerequisite for more far-reaching, if still always and only partial, advances toward justice,” and that the occupation “is at present the most ambitious objective around which Palestinians and their supporters might effectively organize.” But he has not insisted on ideological uniformity: many of his contributors disagree with his assessment of the occupation.

Obviously, one cannot include coverage of every controversy in a single volume. Regarding one omitted topic, the Palestinian right of return, Stern-Weiner writes: “of all the issues at the core of the dispute, the refugee question is the one on which least concrete debate has unfolded, and there does not at this point appear to be much new to say about it.”

This seems an unfortunate choice, given that there are contending views on the scope of the right of return as well as on the practicality of implementing it (with, for example, Salman Abu Sitta having offered an argument in favor of feasibility). In addition to questioning this editorial decision, there are times when one wishes that a contributor to one of the debates had offered her or his views on a different controversy.

But the range of topics covered in the book is broad and engaging: the role of the Palestinian authority, East Jerusalem, whether the settlements make a two-state solution impossible, Gaza, armed struggle versus nonviolence, the role of Hamas, lessons of the intifadas and the possibility of a third intifada, the role of Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinian economic development, whether human rights are an effective weapon, whether apartheid is a useful comparison, whether Palestine still inspires the world, and what lessons can be drawn from the most relevant historical case of Israeli territorial withdrawal (featuring an extended essay by Norman Finkelstein on the Sinai pullback during the Carter administration).

The exchange on the settlements between Shaul Arieli and Gideon Levy was particularly thought-

provoking. Levy, a one-state advocate, states: “The two-state solution was and remains the most reasonable, just, and sensible historic compromise. Two peoples fighting for one piece of land: justice mandates partition. There is only one problem with this solution: it can no longer be implemented.”

The reason it cannot be implemented, argues Levy, is the settlers: “The settlers have won. One needs to recognize this, however painful it may be. More than 600,000 settlers will not now or in the future be removed from their homes. Yet without such mass removal, there is no viable Palestinian state, and more important, there is no justice.”

Why no justice? To “leave a single settlement intact ... would amount to rewarding those who have undermined international law and violated it so crudely.” After all, “[i]f the settlements are a violation of international law, as they are, then they should be undone, to the last one. Crimes are crimes. There is no retroactive legitimation—not for murder, not for rape, and not for land grab.”

But there is a major problem with Levy’s argument. Won’t the same injustice prevail under a one-state solution? If the settlers cannot be removed to achieve two states, how will they be removed for one state? And if they are left in place for one state, won’t that be inherently unjust?

Jessica Montell, former executive director of the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, in her chapter cites a report by the Palestinian human rights organization Al Haq arguing that any land swap in the context of a diplomatic agreement violates the international law of belligerent occupation. But would a democratic unitary state that permitted the settlers to remain be any more consistent with the law of belligerent occupation?

To be sure, some one-state advocates would urge expropriating the settlers once the single state has been established, just the way you would restore property taken by any other thief. But is it plausible that BDS and other pressure would *not* be strong enough to get Israel to remove 600,000 settlers, but *would* be strong enough to get Israelis to accept a solution that leads to the removal of the same 600,000 settlers, as well as giving up their state?

Under Arieli’s two-state scheme, fewer than 150,000 settlers would need to be removed; the rest would stay in place, with their land swapped for land of equal quality inside the Green line. This is obviously a more achievable goal than removing all the settlers. But there are two serious problems with his proposal.

First, while he calls for the evacuation of the Ariel settlement, which is far from the Green line and protrudes deeply into and renders unviable any Palestinian state, he retains Ma’ale Adumim, which wreaks similar havoc in the greater Jerusalem area, denying the Palestinian state contiguity in its most important urban area. (Jan de Jong’s essay emphasizes the importance of the urban core to a Palestinian state.)

Gershon Shafir, in his recent book *A Half Century of Occupation*, has suggested that Ma’ale Adumim could be retained, but without its hinterland and the Mishor Adumim industrial zone. This, he argues, would not require the evacuation of any more settlers than under Arieli’s plan, but would permit a contiguous Palestinian state.

The second problem with Arieli’s proposal is that he says he designed it by taking account of the positions of both sides and then seeking a compromise between them. But he judges the Palestinian position by what Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas has accepted as if this reflects actual Palestinian sentiment. However, as Diana Buttu notes, “the president rules by decree; the prime minister has never received confirmation; the parliament has not met in a decade and has not passed

a single piece of legislation in eleven years; and the terms of the president, parliament, and municipal councilors expired years ago.”

Nathan J. Brown comments that “few Palestinians regard the PA as anything more than a stale and slowly decaying administrative body.” Palestinian institutions “make little policy, pursue no coherent strategy, expound no compelling moral vision, are subject to no oversight, and inspire no collective spirit.” Basing a peace plan on the positions of such a compromised and unrepresentative leadership is not likely to result in a stable solution.

Of course, divided and autocratic leadership causes other problems for Palestinians as well. As Wendy Pearlman notes in her comment on the exchange over armed struggle versus nonviolent action, whichever approach one follows, it is necessary to have political structures that can support acting rationally, strategically, and effectively — structures that are currently absent.

The armed struggle debate is interesting in its own right. None of the disputants call for unilateral Palestinian disarmament in Gaza, agreeing that Hamas’s weapons do deter Israel to some degree. But several note that deterrence is not enough for Gaza, which needs to end the siege and the status quo. It remains hard to see how an armed strategy as recommended by As’ad Abukhalil — particularly one that eschews civilian targets, as he also urges — can pressure, let alone defeat, Israel.

Bashir Saade argues that nonviolence

can work only in very particular circumstances. It was effective in India because the British Empire had, by that point, a serious deficit of legitimacy both internationally and among certain sectors of British society, creating a moral climate that Gandhi understood and exploited. By contrast, Israel’s existence as a state enjoys broad international legitimacy. Even if nonviolent resistance had the potential to end the occupation and dismantle the settlements, therefore, it would not be able to secure a resolution of the conflict on terms which reflect the full spectrum of Palestinian demands, including the implementation of the Palestinian refugees’ right of return and an end to discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel. The only possible route to such a peace is armed struggle, which might force Israel to reconsider, albeit gradually and incrementally, its ambitions.

I don’t find this very persuasive. Saade says that successful nonviolence is exceptional, but has there ever been a case where outside military force from a vastly weaker party has caused a state to fundamentally modify its domestic structures? Would full-on guerrilla war from outside (or inside) lead Israel to “gradually and incrementally” end its discrimination against its Palestinian minority? South Africa, where the dominant group was less than 10 percent of the population, is not at all analogous.

This book was published before the weekly nonviolent marches to the Gaza fence. Some will argue that those actions prove the futility of nonviolent resistance. But even with very unfocused tactical leadership, the marches — and Israel’s barbaric response — have generated more sympathy for the Palestinian cause than has any military action.

Hamas continues to proclaim its commitment to armed struggle (though Gazan political scientist Usama Antar points out that “its support for armed struggle has for some time been merely rhetorical.” Challenged as to why the organization cracked down on the rocket fire of other groups, Ahmed Yousef, a leading Hamas official, explains:

Who fires the rockets is not important; the rockets' technical and strategic effectiveness is. Hamas rockets are more technically advanced and fired at military targets in response to Israeli aggression or incursions. Salafist rockets are unsophisticated, and although rarely causing damage are recklessly fired without obvious cause or target, outside of the collective resistance strategy.

Given how few Israeli military targets were struck by Hamas's rockets, however, it's hard to see this as anything but an acknowledgment of the futility of all rocket fire from Gaza. That said, Nathan Thrall offers a compelling case that Hamas can be part of — indeed must be part of — any solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The exchange between Daniel Seidemann and Yoaz Hendel on whether Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem is irreversible provides much useful information. But, as Rami Nasrallah and Lior Lehrs note in their contributions, attention should be focused on the "Open City" proposal, first advanced by Faisal Husseini in the 1980s and still the official Palestinian Liberation Organization position, under which, "notwithstanding the political division of the city, Jerusalem would remain a single entity under an 'umbrella authority,' with freedom of movement across the city."

The various contributions on human rights explore the tension between political opposition to occupation and legal defense of human rights. It is interesting to see the evolution in the positions taken by Israeli human rights organizations, almost all of which today consider the occupation itself a human rights violation.

There's much more one could say about the articles in this book, but these brief comments should give some idea of the rich material included here. By encouraging us to eschew glib analyses, the volume makes a real contribution to those working for justice in Israel-Palestine. It deserves a wide readership.

Originally posted at Jacobin.