

# Half-Apology for Apartheid?

February 4, 2022



A striking recent trend in regard to Israel and Palestine—one of very few positive developments in an increasingly dismal pattern—has been the growth of pro-Palestinian awareness in the overall U.S. population, particularly in the younger sectors of the Democratic base and Jewish youth in particular. The Israeli Knesset’s passing the “Jewish nation-state” law has accelerated the visible alienation of much of the U.S. Jewish community from its previous unquestioning support for anything Israel does.

Changes in public sentiment of course take much longer to penetrate the corporate-, military-, and lobby-infested halls of Congress, where Rep. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan was verbally assaulted in vicious terms for her courageous one-minute speech against the billion-dollar supplemental appropriation for Israel’s Iron Dome system.

(The Iron Dome appropriation passed in the House by a 420-9 vote and was supported *by every Senator*, with the sole exception of the semi-isolationist Rand Paul, who blocked “unanimous consent.” I’ve discussed the attack on Tlaib and the Democratic leadership’s silent complicity on the Solidarity website<sup>1</sup> and in *Against the Current* 215, November-December 2021. Disclosure: Rashida Tlaib is *my* representative, both in her home Congressional district and in the values she fights for.)

Nonetheless, the shift in U.S. Jewish sentiment has reached the point where Ron Dermer, former Israeli ambassador in Washington, opines that Israel can no longer view American Jews as its unshakeable allies but needs to rely instead on the support of evangelical Christians. Yet even in that sector, recent polling indicates young evangelicals showing pro-Palestinian sympathies in line with the overall U.S. public.

For those interested in the changing climate among American Jews, Stanley Heller has summarized it on the *New Politics* website.<sup>2</sup> Norman Finkelstein addressed the trend years ago in *Knowing Too Much: Why the American Jewish Romance with Israel Is Coming to an End* (2012).

Peter Beinart has eloquently stated that the two-state solution is a dead letter and that American Jewish identity must be separated from loyalty to the Israeli state. The growth of the vibrant organization Jewish Voice for Peace and its political action arm JVP Action, as well as If Not Now and various local groupings, and even mainstream Jewish irritation over the Orthodox rabbinate’s

monopoly over marriage and conversion in Israel, further illustrate the trend.

Against this backdrop, Susie Linfield's *The Lions' Den* reads like an intervention toward holding back this encouraging tide. Partly a defense of progressive aspirations that were ostensibly embedded in traditional Zionism—in contrast to what she perfectly well knows to be Israel's acts on the ground—it's been widely praised in outlets from the liberal *Moment* to the neocon *Commentary* and advertised on the its cover as “co-winner of the fall 2019 Natan Notable Book Award, sponsored by the Jewish Book Council.”

With those credentials, it may come as little surprise to readers of this journal that it's an irritating, often infuriating book—so much so that this reviewer had to put it aside several times to get enough distance to assess it fairly. In brief, here's why:

1) *The Lions' Den* purports to be a critical dissection of the left's problematic relations with Zionism, but its most interesting chapters (see below) are almost entirely irrelevant to discussions on *today's* actual left, about which Linfield seems to know or care little.

2) Where she does directly address the present left, in a 37-page polemic against Noam Chomsky's writings on the Middle East (“The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” 262-298), she manages to entirely ignore Chomsky's *most important point*.

3) While critically praising, in particular, I.F. Stone and Fred Halliday, Linfield misses a crucial part of what they actually said and meant—characteristic of her myopia with which I'll conclude this review.

### **What Is Zionism Anyway?**

Linfield begins with recognizing the existence of “many kinds of Zionists; unless otherwise noted, I generally take this to mean those who support a democratic state for the Jewish people” (4).

Say what? By this absurdly constrained definition, “Zionism” must be virtually extinct, particularly in Israel where the overwhelming Knesset majority, as well as the courts, enact measures placing the state's “Jewish” character above anything formally democratic about it.

Topping that is the mystification of a “state for the Jewish people,” privileging non-Israeli Jews over the state's non-Jewish citizens. How that can be “democratic” is something Zionist liberals don't address. This isn't to disparage Israeli democracy entirely: It's possible there to indict a sitting head of government for corruption, unlike the situation in one close-to-home democracy we could mention—but that's a different matter.

Remarkably, to be fair to Linfield, she knows what's happening, as she states explicitly: “Israelis—not all, but a seemingly overwhelming number—have told themselves that the Palestinians are not a people, or that this people does not desire or deserve national sovereignty. ... Israelis have told themselves that they can oppress another nation without wreaking havoc on their own democratic institutions” (300).

Between those two quotes is Linfield's book-length attempt at squaring the circle, mostly through a trip down memory lane interrogating the works of a series of historical authors. As for “the Left,” she proposes that its switch from Israeli to Palestinian sympathies was not so much “the result of the brutal Israeli Occupation” as “the transformation of the Left itself ... from defining itself as anti-fascist to defining itself as anti-imperialist, and to an identification of the formerly colonized peoples of the Third World as the main agents of social justice” (4).

That paints both “old” and “new” lefts with a pretty broad brush. In any case, regular readers of *New Politics* are attuned, I think, to the shortcomings of “Third Worldism.” More to the point here, however, Zionism’s quarrel with the left since the 1960s is precisely our recognition—thanks in considerable part to the pioneering theoretical work of the Israeli Marxist Matzpen group—that Israel is a product and ongoing expression of what’s called “settler colonialism.”

According to Linfield, this newly anti-imperialist left is largely blind to Palestinian and Arab sins of “rejectionism” and terrorism. That’s why it’s unfortunately necessary here to observe—even though it’s generally bad form for a reviewer to critique an author for the book she didn’t write—that *today’s* left is almost entirely absent from her discussion.

She touches briefly on the important work of Rashid Khalidi, particularly his criticism of the Palestine Liberation Organization’s onetime “armed struggle” fetish (prior to transforming to its present role as a subaltern agent of the Occupation) but not his full dissection of Israeli methods of crushing Palestinian aspirations for self-determination. Aside from brief references to Enzo Traverso’s critique of twentieth-century Marxism’s shortcomings in confronting anti-Semitism and the Nazi genocide, today’s left goes virtually unmentioned.

A very brief list of important current writers Linfield never mentions would include Gilbert Achcar (*The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives*, 2010), Norman Finkelstein (*Knowing Too Much*, cited above, and his many other books including *Gaza: A Requiem into its Martyrdom*, 2018), Moshe Machover (*Israelis and Palestinians: Conflict and Resolution*, 2012), Jeff Halper (*An Israeli in Palestine: Resisting Dispossession, Redeeming Israel*, 2008; *War Against the People: Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification*, 2015; *Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine: Zionism, Settler Colonialism and the Case for One Democratic State*, 2021 [the latter published, of course, later than Linfield’s book]), and many others including the new Israeli historians.

These authors are not obscure, and their works are certainly relevant for a meaningful discussion of today’s pro-Palestinian left. Among historical figures, Linfield’s reading is wide but gap-filled. She focuses on several superstars but appears entirely unaware, for example, of the U.S. socialist Hal Draper who back in the 1950s documented the basic facts of the 1947-49 Zionist ethnic cleansing of Palestine, all hiding in plain sight in a New York YIVO library. (See “The Great Land Robbery,”<sup>3</sup> and Draper’s Winter 1967 *New Politics* essay, “The Origins of the Middle East Crisis.”<sup>4</sup>)

### **Historical Excursions**

The book’s core chapters are a mixed bag, covering “Europeans” Hannah Arendt and Arthur Koestler; “Socialists” Maxime Rodinson, Arthur Koestler, Isaac Deutscher, and Fred Halliday; and “Americans” I.F. Stone and Noam Chomsky. They’re hard to encapsulate in a single review, but they’re most absorbing when the author seems to engage in dialogue across the decades with her subjects.

This requires a certain empathy, best expressed in the chapter “Hannah Arendt. Left, Right or Wrong?” where Linfield works out her own complex relationship with Arendt and the “tortuous saga of Arendt and Zionism” (78). Arendt of course was grappling with intractable antinomies of the mid-twentieth century: the necessity and yet utter futility of Jewish military resistance to Nazism, the desperate urgency of a home for the Jewish refugees and yet the certainty, which Arendt understood all along, that their settlement in Palestine meant an inevitable confrontation with the indigenous population and the larger Arab world. For me this is the book’s best chapter.

On the other hand, Linfield has no affinity with “Arthur Koestler. The Zionist as Anti-Semite,” who

“despised the Jews of the Diaspora” yet “wasn’t fond of the Israeli Sabra either” (80). This chapter (I read it so you don’t need to) is of little interest and even less relevance for today. I don’t understand why it’s there. Readers interested in this (two-time) Zionist and anti-Zionist, Communist and anti-Communist, consistent misogynist, science journalist, and purveyor of several crackpot theories can consult his autobiographical works and novels.

Linfield’s engagement with more-or-less-traditional Marxism is her chapters on Maxime Rodinson and Isaac Deutscher. Regarding the former’s critical support of Arab nationalism, she charges that “Rodinson repeatedly stated that the Arab states had recognized Israel ‘in practice’ after the 1948 and 1967 wars, though he must have known this was untrue” (132).

In fact, serious Middle East historians like Avi Shlaim and Rashid Khalidi, among many others, know it is true and that the bloody (and useless) rhetoric of Arab regimes covered up peace initiatives that Israel consistently rejected—because its acceptances of the 1947 UN partition plan and 1949 armistice lines were only tactical.

Rodinson, says Linfield, “often evaded the nefarious and unique aspect of Palestinian and Arab nationalists: their desire not only to build their own state, which is legitimate, but also to eliminate a neighbor, which is not” (132). To whatever extent this is true, it is hardly a “unique” sin among nationalist movements, as is clear from the example of political Zionism *from its very inception*.

At the same time, Linfield recognizes that “[t]hough he [Rodinson] did not believe in the reality of a Jewish people, he believed in the reality of an Israeli people; though he deplored the founding of the Israeli state, its sovereignty was a fact” (135). Here as elsewhere, I don’t think that Linfield recognizes that this distinction is both crucially important and entirely consistent with democratic and socialist principle.

In discussing Isaac Deutscher, Linfield traces his responses to the emergence of genocidal Nazism, the overwhelming tragedy of the destruction of European Jewry, and his shifting attitudes toward the Israeli state culminating in his post-1967 revulsion, all in her view “intimately tied to his conflicted feelings about the Jewish world of his childhood” (155). It seems to me that Deutscher’s changing positions are much more straightforwardly explained in political terms.

Space doesn’t permit here a discussion of a problem that’s not directly related to the Zionist-Palestine conflict: the difficulty of Deutscher, along with many secularists including “classical Marxists,” to account for the persistence of Jewish identity, with its ability (like other cultures) to evolve in multiple directions rather than remaining an ossified relic—not only because of anti-semitism. (For a detailed treatment of Deutscher’s problematic stance in this regard, I recommend Samuel Farber’s *New Politics* essay.<sup>5</sup>)

Linfield is strongly sympathetic to Albert Memmi and Fred Halliday, and to I.F. Stone, although after 1967 he allegedly “ignored the role of Palestinian terror and the agonies of Jewish history on the Israeli psyche” as well as “the irredentist strain of the Palestinian movement and the larger Arab world” (260). (She seems oblivious to Noam Chomsky’s observation: That “strain” never seriously threatened Israel, while Palestinian or Arab peace initiatives endangered Israeli-U.S. rejectionism and needed to be suppressed at all costs.)

Linfield praises Memmi for his dual anti-colonialism and critique of nationalism. Fair enough as far as it goes, but too comfortable. In favorably quoting *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, she doesn’t come to grips with the stark challenge Memmi posed from the standpoint of his own dual indigenous Tunisian and Jewish identities: “Once he has discovered the import of colonization and is conscious of his own position [vis-à-vis] that of the colonized and their necessary relationship, is he going to

accept them? Will he agree to be a privileged man, and to [merely] underscore the distress of the colonized?" (Memmi quoted by Halper, *Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine*, 8).

Halper takes this as his own challenge to be the "colonizer who refuses" privilege. As I previously noted, he's one of *today's* writers of whom Linfield takes no notice, which is a shame.

As for Fred Halliday, Linfield salutes his critical Marxist intelligence but is most laudatory where sharp critique is most required: his despairing embrace of imperialist so-called humanitarian intervention after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. For a more balanced assessment, I recommend Phil Hearse's 2002 review, "Fred Halliday and Pax Americana."<sup>6</sup>

The most infuriating of Linfield's chapters is on "Noam Chomsky. The Responsibility of Intellectuals," finding that the key to Chomsky's worldview and its "weakness" is that "[h]is loyalty to principle has morphed into a crippling ideological rigidity that prevents him, time and again, from apprehending what is happening in the world around him" (297).

Many among Chomsky's admirers, in fact, would criticize his "rigidity" in clinging to the two-state solution mantra long after it's become a mirage in the waves of Israeli settlement during these miserable decades after the Oslo Accord. That, however, is definitely not Linfield's critique.

It would be unbearably tiresome for this reviewer, even more so for *New Politics* readers, to enter into a point-by-point dissection of her contentions that Chomsky ignores Palestinian and Arab rejectionism, reactionary nationalism, brutal regional regimes, and the general reality that "the Middle East is not Chomskyland" (298). Chomsky himself is capable of that slog if it's worth his time.

The central point that Linfield can't comprehend is the very title of Chomsky's major work on the subject: *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians*. "The United States" comes first in the triangle precisely because, as Chomsky contends more insistently than on any other point, *it's been U.S. policy and intellectual culture* that has enabled Israel's rejectionism and its authorities' "crimes of persecution and apartheid," in the words of the 2021 Human Rights Watch report.

Linfield takes no note of what Chomsky says about this pivotal issue—nor does she address U.S. policy at all. As I stated at the outset, U.S. political culture is changing at the base—to the alarm and fury of Israel's propagandists—although not yet in the halls of power. Even with her own criticisms of Israel, Linfield represents a good left-wing liberal arm of the very intellectual culture that's been Chomsky's central target—which may help explain why she can't see the point.

### **Missing Crucial Distinctions**

Two examples in particular, for me, strikingly highlight what I call Linfield's myopia. The first is her treatment of I.F. Stone's *Underground to Palestine* (1947 and 1978), a book she knows well (she actually wrote about it back in 2012, in *Dissent*).

Stone's book is a gripping firsthand report for *PM* magazine of a 1946 voyage of Jewish displaced persons, Holocaust survivors, on a boat illegally headed to Palestine. It's a story I strongly recommend to activists trying to comprehend the desperate journeys of refugees—then and now, including the horrors we've witnessed from Afghanistan and Myanmar to the crime scene at the United States' southern border—and why the Zionist dream commanded understandably powerful progressive and emotional appeal in the wake of World War II, at a time when the Palestinian people's own story was essentially untold.

Missing in Linfield's account, however, is the book's contemporaneous fate, as Stone recounted when it was reissued three decades later. It's a story Linfield knows but obviously considered peripheral, yet it's vitally important.

After the harrowing journey, Stone arranges an interview with Arab League leader Azzam Bey and tells him, "Nothing will stop the people I traveled with from rebuilding a great Jewish community in Palestine" (Stone quoted by Linfield, 240).

Stone's dispatches were a sensation in *PM*, and the American Zionist leadership intended to promote the book with high-powered funding and a tour. They only wanted a one-word change: that Stone change "community" to "state" in accounting his conversation with Azzam Bey. Stone declined—"Jewish state" wasn't what he'd said, or what he meant. So there was no promotion or tour, and the book went "underground" until its 1978 republication.

Linfield isn't covering this up—rather, she simply does not recognize the significance of what the Zionist movement's 1940s leadership, and Hannah Arendt in her 1945 "Zionism Reconsidered," already perfectly understood: Zionism had consolidated around an all-out statist program, frontal confrontation with Palestine's Arab society was certain, and other possibilities including non-statist Zionist dissent were to be suppressed.

My second illustration is Linfield's quotation of Fred Halliday's argument that "The Jews of the world are not a nation, but Israelis are not just Jews.

"Israelis ... have a culture, language and history distinct from that of Jews in gentile countries. While Jews do not form a nation, Israelis do" (Halliday quoted by Linfield, 211).

Exactly! It's the same distinction that some of the authors whom she knows, like Maxime Rodinson and Rashid Khalidi, and others she apparently doesn't, such as Hal Draper and Moshe Machover, have clearly laid out. Linfield even goes on to say, parenthetically, "This was not, of course, a Zionist position, which posits that Jews do form a nation." She apparently doesn't notice that the point isn't parenthetical, but *fundamental*.

One is left with a sense that Linfield, like so many liberal Zionists, is caught between living in her version of a bygone dream and her knowledge of the reality that Israel has become, but which she won't name outright: a *Jewish-supremacist state* with all its ugly implications, making mockery of the so-called democratic state for the Jewish people.

Certainly Zionism is hardly the only movement that turned out quite differently than many of its adherents and allies hoped or intended. Far from it, as we socialists and anti-imperialists know too well. But Linfield's much-praised book ultimately reflects a liberal-Zionist entanglement that's not hers alone: They know the truth, but they can't quite handle it.

## Notes

1. David Finkel, "'Threshold Crossed' in Congress: The Assault on Rashida Tlaib," Sept. 30, 2021.
2. Stanley Heller, "We Anti-Zionists Speak for a Quarter of U.S. Jews," Sept. 13, 2021.
3. *The New Internationalist*, Winter 1957, 7-30.
4. Hal Draper (1967), "The Origins of the Middle East Crisis." In *New Politics* Winter 1967.
5. "Deutscher and the Jews: On the Non-Jewish Jew—An Analysis and Personal Reflection" (Winter

2014), 83-96.

6. *Against the Current* (No. 97, March/April 2002).