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## **Book Reviews**

# **A Century of Zionist-Arab Conflict: Prospects for Peace?**

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## ***Series (Book Reviews)***

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*A Century of Zionist-Arab Conflict – Prospects for Peace?**Author: Dr. Maher Al Sharif**Publisher: Dar Al Mada; Damascus, Syria.**Pages: 463 pages (standard size)**Edition: 1<sup>st</sup> 2011***Introduction**

In his recent book, Al-Sharif poses the following questions: Why has the Arab-Zionist conflict remained open, and why has peace failed to materialize? Are there still prospects for peace? The author asserts that the current impasse should be attributed to the Zionist movement and its project, which crystallized in the late nineteenth century, in addition to the attitude of successive American administrations towards the so called “peace process” in the Middle East, especially after the Israeli aggression against Arab states on June 6, 1967. The matter was further complicated due to the transformations that took place in the Israeli society in the last decades and the accompanying challenges, as well as the perpetual weakness that the Palestinians and their Arab brethren have suffered since the beginnings of this conflict. This review has been divided into three sections, each containing several chapters of the book.

**Roots of the Conflict**

The first section of the review pertains to the roots of the Arab-Zionist conflict; it traces the historic antecedents that preceded the birth of the modern Zionist movement and currents that fell under its wing. The author also traced the historic attitude of Zionism towards Palestinian Arabs and the manner in which the Zionist project to control Palestine and cleanse it from its original inhabitants took shape. The book recounted the stages of the ethnic cleansing project that caused the expulsion of the majority of the indigenous population. As a result, the Palestinian refugee question emerged as the most important component of the Palestinian cause. The author notes that the notion of a Jewish state in Palestine took hold in French and British

colonial circles long before the birth of the Zionist movement at the hands of Theodor Herzl in the end of the nineteenth century.

For the abovementioned colonial powers, the importance of establishing a Jewish state consisted of the fact that it created a buffer separating the Levant from Egypt. The author notes that the Zionist movement revealed a close linkage with the nationalist ideologies and the accompanying colonialist projects that flourished in Europe during the nineteenth century. According to its founders, the movement emerged as a reaction to the rise of the phenomenon of anti-Semitism that engendered these nationalist ideologies. The pioneers of Zionist thought believed that its objective was the repatriation of the Jews in the “land of Israel” and reclaiming sovereignty over that land. Zionism came out of other movements that mainly emerged in Europe; its spiritual father was Theodor Herzl, and its official launch took place during the first founding conference in Basel, Switzerland, in late August 1897.

Britain assisted in achieving the main objective of the Zionist movement as it paved the way for Jewish migration to Palestine, allowing their numbers to reach 650,000 Jews at the time of the declaration of the state of Israel on May 15, 1948 on about 78 percent of the historic land of Palestine, which amounted to 27,009 square kilometers.

### **Seeking Separate Solutions**

In the second section, the author attempts to document the events of the Arab-Zionist conflict after the establishment of the state of Israel, and the aggressive expansionist trend that governed its policies during the 1950s. The author stops at the 1967 June war and its fallout, especially with regards to the shift in the Arab stance towards accepting Israel as a reality in the region, and the attempts on the part of Israeli leaders to thwart all political reconciliation initiatives. The author then refers to the 1973 October war and its effects, especially the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s adoption of an interim policy, and the means of transforming this war into a separate solution between Egypt and Israel, arriving then to the Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993, in addition to the political and security developments that followed this agreement.

In this section, the author also narrates the developments in the Israeli position towards the peace process with Arabs since 1948, when Israel refused the borders of 1948 and instead prepared to expand deep into Arab land. Peace was not on the priority list for Ben Gurion, the first president of the Israeli government; Ben Gurion and General Moshe Dayan both went further by asserting that the 1948 war should end in the occupation of all of Palestine. On many occasions, several Israeli politicians and military generals, including Moshe, expressed their hope that one day Israel would succeed in completing the expansion of its borders.

All this was seen as a prelude to Israel's possession of a hefty military machine and the nuclear option in order to wage war against the Arabs at a later stage. This approach has helped the American bias towards Israel, as well as its support in political, financial, and military fields.

#### **Factors that Hindered the Achievement of Peace**

The third and last section sheds light on the factors that prevented the peace process from reaching its goals; the author observes three main factors, which are:

1. The means by which the successive American administrations deal with the peace process that it launched.
2. The political, social, and demographic transformations witnessed within the Israeli society over the last three decades, within the background of a deep identity crisis, which made it shift ever closer to the radical, nationalist, and religious right.
3. The weakness of the Palestinian national movement since its establishment in the early twentieth century, which contributed to a malfunction in the balance of power in favor of Zionism and Israel.

The author stops at two constants that controlled the American policy towards the Zionist-Arab conflict; these are the current and strong alliance between the United States and Israel, and the immense influence of the Israeli lobby within the United States and the effect it holds on American decision makers. The author also points out that the large transformation in

American-Israeli relations occurred only after the June 1967 aggression; this aggression reflects the size of American aid to Israel.

After an annual assistance of 63 million dollars between 1945 and 1965, 95% of which came in the form of economic and food aid, this amount increased to an average of 102 million dollars between 1966 and 1970, and quickly rose to 634.5 million dollars in 1971, 85% of which came in the form of military aid. In 1971, Israel became the primary beneficiary of American foreign aid. It began to receive the equivalent of 3 billion dollars each year as direct aid; this represents a sixth of the total American foreign aid budget, amounting to 2% of the total Gross Domestic Product. In more recent years, military aid amounted to about 75% of the entire value of annual aid to Israel. In this regard, various studies point to the fact that the cumulative sum of US aid between 1951 and 2011 amounted to 130 billion US Dollars.

The author indicated that Israel garners additional deals in various forms, especially from Washington, and it is the sole recipient of US aid that is not required to present a detailed report on the manners in which the aid money has been dispersed. The author also noted that the United States has furnished Israel with hundreds of millions of dollars to support the developments of Israeli military projects – with over three billion dollars supplied to help develop weapons' systems such as the fighter aircraft (Lavi), the Merkava tank, and the Arrow missile.

Israel also receives the most modern American arsenal of developed weapons, and was granted wide access to intelligence information; this in addition to America's "looking the other way" when it comes to Israel's possession of nuclear arms. Israel also enjoys constant diplomatic support from Washington; since 1982, the United States has vetoed more than 32 Security Council resolutions.

### **The Limits of Success and Failure of the Zionist Movement**

Although this research includes various important chapters, it did not use sufficient facts and information to answer questions regarding the extent of success and failure of the Zionist movement. In this regard, both the Zionist movement and Israel achieved strategic gains at

the demographic level; they have been able to attract about 5.7 million Jews from all over the world to Palestine; however, the Israeli institution could not attract all of the Jewish people in the world (13 million Jews).

Demographically speaking, despite the expulsion of the majority of Arab Palestinians from their land, about 5.4 million Arab Palestinians remain on their own land; 4.1 million of them in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and about 1.3 million inside the territories occupied in 1948. After one hundred and thirteen years since the first Zionist conference in Basel (1897-2011) and more than sixty-three years since the establishment of the state of Israel, the pillars of this project are not yet complete, whether in its human or material construction, referring to land. There are several missing links that have not been completed despite achievements in the different pillars of Zionism. The most severe forms of settlement and the budgets allocated to it are the best evidence. Palestinians are pursued on their own land, whether in the land of 1948 occupied Palestine or the land occupied in 1967, by making their life difficult, or imprisoning them, or marginalizing them in his ancestral land. Pursuit to this, Palestinian land will remain at the heart of an open conflict in the coming centuries.