

The Glass Wall

Jonathan Cook, *Blood and Religion: The Unmasking of the Jewish and Democratic State* (London: Pluto Press, 2006). Paperback. Pp. 222.

Starting an MA course after spending a summer in a Galilee village with a family living under demolition order, I was eager to learn more about the situation for Palestinians living in Israel. However, I would soon discover that the preferred label was 'Israeli-Arabs', and that their predicament would be discussed not as a central part of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but boxed away in the 'Minorities' seminar at the end of the course.

It is a pity that Jonathan Cook's new book was not available to pass around the department. *Blood and Religion: The Unmasking of the Jewish and Democratic State* considers Israel's attitude towards a million Palestinians living within 1948 borders, but rejects the traditional approach of merely detailing legal, social and educational discrimination. Instead, the author uses detailed analysis of 'the conduct of the majority towards the minority', to draw far broader conclusions about the direction of the Middle East conflict and the nature of the Jewish state itself. Far from being a side issue, Cook argues that a study of the situation for Palestinians inside Israel is integral to a wider understanding of the conflict. Far from being a 'passing symptom' of the conflict, Israel's opposition to creating a truly democratic state, which would overcome discrimination against Arab citizens, is conceived as 'part of the root cause'.

The book opens by introducing the metaphor of a 'glass wall' to symbolise Israel's success in separating its Palestinian citizens from the Jewish majority, while at the same time convincing the world, and Israeli citizens, that a 'Jewish democratic' state is open to everyone. The image is taken directly from reality: during the façade of an investigative commission established in the wake of the October 2000 police killings of 13 Palestinian citizens, families of the dead were separated from the rest of the court room by a glass panel. While keenly felt by the bereaved, the glass panel remained unseen by those following television news footage.

In 1923 Vladimir Jabotinsky (leader of the Revisionist Zionist movement and intellectual inspiration for the Israeli Right), laid out his philosophy of the 'Iron Wall' – that only harsh physical force would keep Arabs at bay. From the land mines littering the Golan Heights to the walls of concrete and steel zigzagging across the West Bank and Gaza Israeli policy makers today pay tribute to Jabotinsky's theory.

This book, however, presents a cohesive argument, backed up by detailed evidence, that, despite appearances, the glass wall presents an even greater obstacle to Middle East peace than manifestations of the 'Iron Wall' in 1967 occupied territories. Cook writes:

The glass wall ... is designed to intimidate and silence its captive Palestinian population; but unlike the iron wall it conceals the nature of the subjugation in such a way that it is seen as necessary, even benevolent. By understanding the glass wall, we can know what really matters to Israel: not just the use of unrelenting force to guarantee its control of the region and its Palestinian inhabitants, but also the protection of its image as an island of enlightened democracy in the Middle East.

Six chapters take the reader at a rattling pace across the fundamental issues, from demography to disengagement. Why did Arab voters choose to boycott Ehud Barak in an election which secured Ariel Sharon's place as prime minister? And if indeed they have the vote and Arab MKs are in the Israeli parliament, how can they complain that Israel is not a democracy? These important issues, which both university courses and media largely fail to address, are taken head on.

With its recent publication date this is one of the first books to explore the sham of Israel's unilateral action in Gaza, the so-called 'disengagement'. As with Barak's negotiations at Camp David, Israel has successfully projected a media image of offering the Palestinians a good deal, which they have ungratefully returned with their kitchenmade Qassam rockets. After undermining Israeli accounts that the Second Intifada was somehow a planned one-sided assault from the Palestinian leadership on the Israeli state, Cook goes for the jugular of 'disengagement'. Rejecting the idea that unilateral action to tighten walls around Gaza is a step in the direction of a lasting peace, *Blood and Religion* highlights the dangers of promoting ethnic

separation which creates: ‘a staunchly chauvinistic Jewish state searching ever more ruthlessly for ways to maintain its ethnic purity and exploit its Palestinian neighbours behind their glass wall’. As Israel turns inwards, the pressure on the ‘outsiders’, Palestinian citizens, is sure to mount. Noting the increased role of the internal security services (Shin Bet) in monitoring Arab citizens, the author contends that Israel is increasing its ideological battle to merge the image of the ‘terrorist’ outside with the Arab enemy within.

In less than 200 pages, Cook succeeds in the task he set himself, convincing the reader that a focus on Israel’s treatment of its Palestinian citizens is central to understanding the obstacles blocking a peaceful resolution to the conflict. He is not afraid to make bold claims in a subject area where all too many writers are frightened publicly to join up the dots. This deliberate choice to support analysis almost exclusively with words of Israeli politicians, academics and media, rather than Palestinian or international critics, makes his disturbing conclusions even harder to dismiss.

Read here what you are unlikely to read in the features pages of ‘liberal’ national newspapers (for one of whom Cook was a former staff journalist). *Blood and Religion* has something to offer for interested researchers new to the area, as well as offering new reflections to the hardened academic who has devoted a career to the conflict.

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