

Israelism: Arab Scholarship on Israel, a Critical Assessment

Hassan A. Barari

Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2009, 162 pages.

The author is an Arab from Jordan who stayed in Israel for a time, learned Hebrew, and became acquainted with the country. As a result, he was able to examine the Middle East conflict and its dynamics from a relatively objective point of view, as demonstrated in his *Israelism*. The book consists of five chapters, preceded by an acknowledgments section and an introduction, and followed by an epilogue, a bibliography, and an index. Each chapter has an introduction and a conclusion, and ends with notes providing references and clarifications. The first four chapters begin with a quote from one or more prominent personalities (e.g., David Ben-Gurion, Nasser, and Sayyid Qutb).

In the “Introduction,” Barari explains what prompted him to write this book and provides background information on the Middle East problem; the opinions and approaches of Arab scholars toward Israel; how the outcome of the Six Day War affected scholarly writing about Israel in, for example, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon; and the obstacles that prevent objective writing about Israel. The “Introduction” ends with an explanation of the book’s aims and structure.

Chapter 1, “Conceptual Framework,” presents the lack of objectivity of Arab studies on Israel and describes how the author increased his own awareness of the need to become familiar with Israel from the inside. He shows that Arab writings (e.g., those of Hisham Sharabi and Leonard Binder) are subjective and analyzes the underlying assumptions and principles, among them that Israel is a passing episode; that its presence has the

sole purpose of serving western and imperialist interests; that it only exists thanks to western support; and that the only reason to write about Israel is to incite the masses against it, not to understand it.

Chapter 2, "Pan-Arabist and Leftist Discourses," discusses views on Israel from the perspective of the pan-Arab movement and Arab aspirations for independence and unity after the Ottoman Empire's collapse and the subsequent rise of colonialism. Barari notes that books written by Arabs of every political tendency are practically identical as regards Israel, the Jews, and the Zionist movement. The same themes are repeated time and again: the Jews are not a nation and therefore the conflict is with Zionism, a western movement related to imperialism and colonialism; Israel will suffer the same fate as the Crusaders; the Zionists are colonialist settlers who provide the West with an excuse for continued intervention; the Jews are a cancer inside the Arab world; the Jews are plotting to take over the world and so on. The author demonstrates that the objective of these writings is to shock others and mobilize them for a confrontation with Zionism, Israel, and imperialist forces in the region.

Chapter 3, "Religious Discourses," deals with the rise of religious discourse after the Six Day War. The author, however, opens the discussion with prominent religious thinkers of the first years of the twentieth century (viz., Mohammed Rashid Rida, Hassan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb) who linked the Palestine issue with the belief in an Islamic nation at a time of the nation-state's entrenchment and then claimed that Israel would not survive without outside assistance. He surveys some of the views held by the various Islamic movements and describes events that changed perceptions of the (domestic) enemy, among them Sadat's visit to Israel and the subsequent peace treaty, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the militant jihadist movements that failed to bring change to their own countries and therefore began to operate against more distant enemies, eventually on a global scale.

Barari shows that Muslim Arabs perceive the Arab-Israeli conflict as part of the historical Jewish-Muslim rivalry. Just as Muhammad and his successors fought against the Jews until none were left in the Arabian Peninsula, so now Jews have no right to be in the region. Israel, according to this view (held, for example, by Hamas and Hezbollah), is the greatest catastrophe to ever have befallen the Muslims anywhere and therefore must be destroyed and replaced by a Palestinian state stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. In this chapter, the author also presents, criticizes, and points out the flaws the views of those writers who see Israel as a temporary

entity (like the Crusaders) with very few resources that survives only through assistance from abroad.

In Chapter 4, "Arab Regimes and the Making of a Discourse," Barari shows that Arab regimes have always used the Arab-Israeli conflict and anti-Israel feelings to channel the domestic political and economic situations in a way that furthers their chances for survival. For example, Jordan blames Israel for its economic problems to draw attention away from a corrupt government; Saddam Hussein, who accused Israel of endangering Iraq and then invaded Kuwait instead of liberating Palestine, sought Arab support him by launching missiles against Israel. The author also focuses on writings by Arabs who tried to analyze the Arabs' failure to destroy (or at least defeat) Israel. He criticizes these unscholarly works, which are not based on a critical and objective analysis of the region and the events in question. He also surveys the causes that have turned Palestine into a symbol focusing hatred on Israel and the Jews.

In chapter 5, "Conclusions and the Current Scene," the author summarizes the previous chapters and emphasizes that Arab scholars are prejudiced, subjective, and obedient to the dominant ideology of conflict. He also points to "some good scholars" who have written about Israel with a measure of objectivity. He stresses the importance of learning about Israel and learning Hebrew, repeats the book's objective (to engender a debate on how best to improve research on Israel in the Arab world), attacks the lack of academic and political freedom in the Arab world that makes objective writing impossible, and concludes with some proposals on how this situation can be changed.

In the epilogue, Barari blames both sides for the ongoing conflict. The peace process has failed, he says, because they are fighting over the same piece of territory, have developed negative stereotypes of the other, and have not solved the refugee problem. He ends by stating that peace can be achieved only through cooperation.

The volume is quite repetitious, since it analyzes various books all dealing, more or less, with the same subjects: the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The conclusions at the end of each chapter and in chapter 5 are a bit tiring, but the subject matter is made very clear. The book is intended for anyone with an interest in the Middle East who wants some insight into why the Arab-Israeli conflict has proven so intractable.

Naama Ben Ami
Department of Arabic, Faculty of the Humanities
Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel