

Brokers of Deceit: How the US has undermined peace in the Middle East

Review Number:

1593

Publish date:

Thursday, 15 May, 2014

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ISBN:

9780807044759

Date of Publication:

2013

Price:

£22.50

Pages:

208pp.

Publisher:

Beacon Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.beacon.org/productdetails.cfm?sku=4475>

Place of Publication:

Boston, MA

Reviewer:

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Early in his single-term presidency, Jimmy Carter dismissed as ‘just semantics’ a flap that arose after he extemporaneously echoed Israel’s position that any peace settlement with its neighbours required ‘defensible borders’.⁽¹⁾ In fact, as his aides quickly clarified, Carter had *actually* meant a return to Israel’s pre-1967 borders with minor adjustments for security – a position officially held by previous U.S. administrations.⁽²⁾ Carter’s apparently off-the-cuff remarks had gone beyond the language of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which called for ‘secure and recognized’ borders for Israel, and statements made by American presidents since 1973. The term ‘defensible borders,’ for Israel, suggested it could retain control of virtually all of the territories it seized in the 1967 war. Nevertheless, reporters, Israel and Israel’s American supporters immediately seized on Carter’s misstatement, regardless of subsequent White House clarifications, leading to some confusion in the negotiations.⁽³⁾ As Carter soon came to realise, not least during his marathon negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin at the 1978 Camp David Summit, language matters deeply in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Indeed, it is that very phrase – ‘peace process’ – that Rashid Khalidi assails in *Brokers of Deceit: How the US Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* as all ‘process’ and no ‘peace,’ with the American role as a ‘dishonest broker’ as the central culprit.

Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies and director of the Middle East Institute at Columbia University, has along with Avi Shlaim recently set the standard for perceptive and incisive scholarship of the erstwhile Middle East conflict. Khalidi, New York-born but descended from a prominent

Palestinian family, has authored some of the most meticulously researched analyses of Palestinian politics in the 20th century, including *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking During the 1982 War*, *Palestinian Identity: Construction of a National Consciousness* and *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*.⁽⁴⁾ More recently, his *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* allowed him to step back from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to offer a fierce analysis of American policy in the region.⁽⁵⁾

Since his move from the University of Chicago, where he was a faculty colleague of a young law professor named Barack Obama, to Columbia University, Khalidi has emerged as a public intellectual in the United States – a rare voice for the Palestinian cause amid a cacophony of pro-Israel sentiment. Accordingly, he often appears on cable news shows to offer commentary, while his opinions appear as frequently in the pages of *The New York Times* and *Foreign Policy* as his scholarship in peer-reviewed academic journals. The recent decision by the head of a prominent Orthodox Jewish school in Manhattan to rescind an invitation made by a student group to Khalidi to speak about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because it would not be ‘an appropriate or balanced dialogue’ to have at a high school is a case in point.⁽⁶⁾

Brokers of Deceit is less a product of the deep historical research that characterises Khalidi’s earlier studies on Palestinian identity and politics so much as it is the work of a public intellectual with extraordinary knowledge at his fingertips. This slender volume does not represent a deep dive into the archives but rather serves as a vehicle for a passionate, highly critical analysis of American policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Serious scholars of United States foreign policy and the Middle East may not discover much fresh primary material here. Nor is Khalidi’s argument that American mediation has focused too much on ‘process’ at the expense of ‘peace’ wholly new.⁽⁷⁾ Rather, the full-throated urgency with which Khalidi argues his point warrants attention. Khalidi has clearly long felt passionately about this argument, but apparently only now has he taken the opportunity to articulate it.

How is it, Khalidi wonders, that the most powerful country in the world has failed for decades to mediate an equitable, lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians? The answer is simple. The United States, too busy acting as ‘Israel’s lawyer’ in negotiations, has never made a good-faith effort (p. 93).⁽⁸⁾

Khalidi begins the book with a quote from George Orwell and continually returns to the idea that the ‘reality’ of American-backed Israeli policy ‘is concealed by a veil of deceitful, Orwellian verbiage, as feeble thought corrupts language, and dishonest language corrupts thought’ (p. 28). The slippery ways in which ‘terms and tropes’ such as ‘peace process,’ ‘terrorism,’ and ‘occupation’ are wielded in negotiations, Khalidi argues, ‘are the essential building blocks of a lofty and solid edifice of denial of an entire narrative, of the existence of an entire people (the Palestinians), which is basic to the affirmation of a formidable counterreality’ (p. 120).

Khalidi sets out two primary objectives. First, he seeks ‘to reveal how closely entwined have been the respective policies of the United States and Israel toward the Palestinian people over recent decades’ (p. xii). Second, he examines the consistency of ‘certain key elements’ of American policy toward Palestine since before Israel’s establishment (p. xii). He subsequently identifies three major patterns in American policy dating back to Harry S. Truman. First, American policymakers paid ‘exaggerated attention to domestically driven political concerns as these were ably articulated by the Israel lobby.’ Second, Washington has faced no genuine pressure for a policy shift by the oil-rich Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, whose own survival instincts led to dependency on American patronage that trumped their public rhetoric on the Palestine question. Finally, United States policy has been characterised by ‘an almost complete unconcern about the fate of the Palestinians, by contrast with a consistent and solicitous devotion to the welfare of Israelis’ (p. xxxii).

To achieve this, Khalidi focuses on three ‘moments’ that in his analysis ‘constituted moments of relative clarity in the fog of obfuscation that has surrounded US policy on Palestine for more than three decades’ (p. xi). They consist of the 1982 ‘Reagan plan’ and the final breakdown of the Palestinian autonomy talks, the Madrid-Washington-Oslo negotiations from 1991–3 (in which Khalidi took part as an advisor to the

Palestinian delegation), and finally the trajectory of Obama's first-term policy toward Palestine. These moments all represent missed opportunities by the United States to leverage major regional upheaval to push forcefully for a permanent Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

Khalidi's first 'moment' is the 'Reagan plan' and its subsequent disavowal by the American government.⁽⁹⁾ Khalidi contends that Reagan had an opportunity to stake out a robust American position on Palestinian autonomy – to challenge Begin's insistence that any 'Self-Governing Authority,' as prescribed in the 1978 Camp David Accords, would be toothless. However, motivated in part by an ideological antipathy toward the PLO and a corresponding neoconservative-led affinity for Israel, Reagan's aides failed to seize the opportunity. Instead, Begin's rigid and limited definitions of Palestinian autonomy won the day. Moreover, Begin successfully convinced the Reagan administration that Israel represented a strategic asset for the United States amid a turbulent Middle East – a bulwark against communist expansion, radical Islamism and the spectre, never far off, of international 'terrorism'. For example, from Lyndon B. Johnson to Carter, the administrations of all American presidents had officially maintained that Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was illegal under international law.

However, Reagan offered a great gift to the Israeli settler movement, Begin's government and, indeed, its successors when he watered down the language, insisting merely that the settlements represented 'an obstacle to peace'. This has been the public position of each subsequent president, even though none has officially repudiated the earlier post-1967 United States position that settlements were illegal under international law.⁽¹⁰⁾ Indeed, what became enshrined under Reagan was less a pro-Israel policy – that already existed – but rather a complete American unwillingness to challenge Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, and especially on settlements, in any meaningful way.

For his second 'moment,' Khalidi focuses on the 1991–3 Madrid-Washington-Oslo talks. This analysis constitutes the strongest section of the book; it features the freshest original research and the fiercest critique of American and Israeli policy. The key point here is that despite various protestations by President George H. W. Bush and his secretary state, James Baker, about Israeli settlements, ultimately Washington allowed the opportunity presented by the historical convening of the 1991 Madrid Conference to vanish. Instead, the United States did not stand up to the Israelis, who continued to build settlements even while negotiating, thereby dragging out the possibility of any progress while increasing their advantage on the ground. 'Final-status issues' supposedly stood at the heart of these talks, but American-Israeli teams did not negotiate in good faith.⁽¹¹⁾ 'Indeed, process became a substitute for real movement toward peace', he writes (p. 65).

American inability or unwillingness to act as an 'honest broker' in the Madrid-Washington-Oslo process, or the Camp David Accords that preceded it, allowed its ally, Israel, to perpetuate the status quo on the ground. That status quo, of course, dramatically favoured Israel and allowed it to further entrench its control over the occupied territories. 'By indefinitely delaying a resolution of any of these core issues, while allowing uninterrupted expansion of Israeli settlements and of Israel's control of the occupied territories ... these accords gravely exacerbated the deepest problems between the two sides', he writes (p. 65).

Khalidi's critique of Obama's Israel-Palestine policy is slightly more nuanced. Nevertheless, the author expresses deep disappointment with the current president. In this, Khalidi's analysis bears some resemblance to other recent works, especially that by Fawaz A. Gerges, whose *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* argues that Obama's presidency might coincide, and even hasten, the relative decline of American influence in the region after many decades of pre-eminence.⁽¹²⁾

Ultimately, Khalidi faults Obama for a lack of policy imagination or, perhaps, courage. 'Like other presidents, when Obama faced tenacious opposition on this issue, he eventually did the politically safe thing,' he writes. 'A pragmatic, cautious politician, he was not willing to risk his limited stock of political capital to appeal over the heads of these forces to the American people' (p. 103).

This argument puts Khalidi on less solid ground, however. He wisely chooses not to embrace Mearsheimer and Walt's argument that an 'Israel lobby' inside the United States bears overwhelming responsibility for

U.S. backing of Israel.⁽¹³⁾ Instead, he indicates that blind support for Israel and concomitant lack of concern for the plight of Palestinians has become entirely consistent with American strategic and corporate interests in the region. But any move by an American president ‘to appeal ... (directly) to the American people’ on this issue would almost certainly fall flat because the United States public has never shown any particular sympathy for the Palestinian cause. The reason for this lack of sympathy remains less than clear, but is likely intertwined with the same strategic and corporate interests cited by Khalidi, along with a jaundiced American media narrative that has long portrayed Israel as the plucky underdog facing off against overwhelming Arab might. The weight of these combined factors, indeed, largely explains the failure of United States policy to shift toward any accommodation for Palestinian interests.

Nevertheless, Khalidi offers a creditable critique of Obama’s Israel-Palestine policy. The president made early gestures toward changing course, but in the final analysis did not have the political capital to affect a discernible shift. Moreover, in Khalidi’s analysis, Obama’s decision to place such erstwhile pro-Israel negotiators as Dennis Ross in key foreign policymaking positions further precluded policy innovation. Obama’s attempt to change the American policy direction on Palestine ‘was defeated in part because of circumstances beyond his control, partly by his own mistakes and flawed assumptions, and largely because the basic political dynamic in the United States as seen from the Oval Office had not changed since the mid-1940s’ (p. 103).

Nor does the Obama administration look likely to change anything on this front in its remaining months. True, Secretary of State John Kerry has done yeoman’s work toward trying to bring the parties together. However, Obama has reversed the trend of most two-term presidents. Foreign policy featured prominently in the early part of his first term, but in his second term he appears more focused on his domestic agenda. Health care, the United States economy, equal rights for minorities and women – these are his political imperatives now.

Although Khalidi clearly places the onus for the stalemate in the ‘peace process’ on the United States and Israel, he does not spare completely Arab actors from criticism. ‘The disunited and weak Arab regimes’, particularly in the Gulf, have been primarily concerned with retaining power and staying in Washington’s ‘good graces’ (p. 114). As a result, they have failed to take a bold and unified stance on Palestine.

The Palestinian leadership also bears considerable blame. For too much of its recent history, it has concerned itself disproportionately with consolidating political power, often at the expense of state building. ‘If the Palestinians do not help themselves, and transform that part of reality which is largely in their own power, nothing can begin to change in their situation, nor can anyone be expected to act on their behalf’, Khalidi argues (p. 119). The leadership has also failed the people it seeks to represent by not insisting on certain baseline conditions before entering into negotiations with Israel – ‘such as guarantees for self-determination, statehood, the end of the occupation, and the removal of the settlements’ (p. 117). Here, however, the Palestinians run into the buzz saw of the dual Israeli insistence that ‘everything is negotiable’ and that all negotiations should be held ‘without preconditions’. Reasonable – and even innocuous – as those phrases may sound, in truth their ambiguity have allowed Israel to drag out negotiations interminably while perpetuating the status quo on the ground, which is manifestly to its advantage.

Nevertheless, one could quibble with the ‘moments’ that Khalidi has chosen. For instance, what about the Johnson administration’s failure to address the Palestinian refugee crisis more forcefully immediately after the 1967 War, which laid the foundations for the political and security stalemate that exists today? Or Carter’s inability to override Begin’s extremely narrow definition of Palestinian ‘autonomy,’ described by a former American ambassador to Egypt as a kind of ‘bondage’ status?⁽¹⁴⁾ Finally, what about Bill Clinton’s failed Camp David Summit in 2000 between Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat? The answer seems to be frankly that Khalidi did not set out to write a comprehensive account of American mediation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and these areas were relatively untouched by contemporary historians.

The book lacks a bibliography, perhaps because it is aimed as much at a general audience as a specialist one. The publisher may believe that that will make the book more attractive to the general reader, for whom a list

of so many books might be intimidating. Regardless, the omission is unfortunate for readers specialising in United States foreign policy and the Middle East. Perhaps as compensation, however, Khalidi engages in a lively discussion with the source material in his own footnotes.

Finally, Khalidi's focus on the corrosive power of dishonest language in the United States-mediated Israeli-Palestinian 'peace process' is intriguing (and, this reviewer believes, valid) but insufficiently sustained throughout the book. It features prominently in the introduction and conclusion, but his core critiques are of American policy failure, both in development and consistency. Khalidi believes the language that denies, for instance, that such a thing as the 'occupation' or even the 'Palestinian people' exist is 'in some ways ... the worst part of the system, constituting a form of collective psychological torture' (p. 119). He is absolutely correct to argue that these are not 'just verbal indignities' but rather that 'language matters' (p. 120). In this context, language shapes the way in which the American public, media and policymakers conceive of the Israel-Palestine dilemma. However, an exploration of such a dynamic might require a different sort of book, one that employs methodological approaches from anthropology, sociology or media theory.

Those minor issues aside, Khalidi has produced a cogently argued, timely and highly readable book. Moreover, his prominent position in the United States public space comes as a welcome change to the simplistic, politically charged rhetoric that too often characterises American political discourse on foreign policy generally, and the Middle East specifically. For many decades, Americans have found it virtually impossible to have an open debate on the Israeli-Palestinian question – even compared to Israel itself, which has a lively, even raucous, tradition of democracy and free speech. Changing the ways in which Americans talk about the Middle East might be just the first step toward affecting policy change. Still, although he appears pessimistic, Khalidi seems to hope that Washington can affect policy shifts soon enough to prevent more bloodshed, hopelessness and instability in Israel/Palestine. As he amply demonstrates, when it comes to United States policy toward an entire nation of people, it is never 'just semantics'.

Notes

1. Jimmy Carter, 'The President's News Conference', 9 March 1977, *The American Presidency Project*, ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Wooley <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7139> [2]> [accessed 28 April 2014]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bernard Gwertzman, 'Carter Causes Stir by Seeming to Back Israel on Borders', *New York Times*, 8 March, 1977. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Don Oberdorfer, 'Carter View on Borders Buys Rabin', *Washington Post*, 8 March 1977; 'Carter for Defensible Borders', *Near East Report*, XXI, 10, 9 March 1977. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Rashid Khalidi, *Under Siege: P.L.O. Decisionmaking During the 1982 War* (New York, NY, 1986); *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York, NY, 1997); *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston, MA, 2006). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Ibid*, *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East* (Boston, MA, 2009). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Jacob W. Sotak, 'Rift at Jewish School in Manhattan Over Canceled Plan for Israeli-Palestinian Talk', *New York Times*, 26 February 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/nyregion/rift-at-jewish-school-in-manhattan-over-canceled-plan-for-israeli-palestinian-talk.html?_r=0 [3]> [accessed 28 April 2014]. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. William Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (3rd ed., Washington, DC, 2005), p. 1. Also see Avi Shlaim, 'Obama and Israel: The Pessimistic Perspective,' *The Hill*, 27 December 27 2010 <<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/135177-obama-and-israel-the-pessimistic-perspective> [4]> [accessed 28 April 2014]. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Khalidi notes that Henry Kissinger originally coined this phrase, though Aaron David Miller has recently repurposed it. See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (London, 1982), p. 620; and Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York, NY, 2008), p. 75. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Ronald Reagan, 'Address to the Nation on United States Policy for Peace in the Middle East', 1

September 1982. *The American Presidency Project*, ed. Gerhard Peters and John T. Wooley, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42911> [5]> [accessed 28 April 2014].[Back to \(9\)](#)

10. However, Carter remains the only president to label publicly Israel's settlements in territories seized in the 1967 War as 'illegal'.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Final status issues' refer to the most intractable points of negotiation, including ending Israel's military occupation, removing settlements from the territories, deals on the control of land and water, the status of Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugee issue, and sovereignty and statehood.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Fawaz A. Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* (New York, NY, 2013).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (London, 2007).[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Hermann Eilts interview, 12 August 1988, *Frontline Diplomacy: Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training*, Library of Congress.[Back to \(14\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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Middle East Monitor

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[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/nyregion/rift-at-jewish-school-in-manhattan-over-canceled-plan-for-israeli-palestinian-talk.html?_r=0

[4] <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/135177-obama-and-israel-the-pessimistic-perspective>

[5] <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42911>

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[8] <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138997/rashid-khalidi/brokers-of-deceit-how-the-us-has-undermined-peace-in-the-middle>