

Cook, Jonathan: Blood and Religion. The Unmasking of the Jewish and Democratic State. Pluto Press, London – Ann Arbor 2006. 222 pp. ISBN 0 7453 2555 6

Reporting reality in Israel is the most challenging task because it can get you into deep trouble. That is why Jonathan Cook, who lives as the only foreign correspondent in Nazareth, is very careful which language he uses. As he shows simple words show “where you stand in a debate”. Should he happen to use the phrase, he will be accused of “anti-Semitism”.

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He illustrates the absurdity and Orwellian talk about Israeli politics in regard to the “barrier” which is being built around the Palestinian people. If he had used the word “wall”, he would have been labelled pro-Palestinian. The term “fence” is the Israeli word, otherwise Cook could have used the more anaemic word, “barrier”. Perhaps German political visitors see in cities like East-Jerusalem, Qalqilia, Tulkarem and Bethlehem a “fence” where there is an eight meter high wall with twelve meter high watchtowers. And even if indeed they see a wall, they may still talk about a “fence”.

Cook has written a solid and fair analysis of the situation of the Israeli Palestinians, who are usually referred to in Israel as “Arabs”. In front of the readers the author unfolds a broad spectrum of political initiatives by the Israeli government against its Arab citizens which are purely discriminatory or even racist.

“My general argument ... is that Israel is beginning a long, slow process of ethnic cleansing both of Palestinian non-citizens from parts of the occupied territories it has long coveted for its expanded Jewish state and of Palestinian citizens from inside its internationally recognised border.”

Cook thinks that the Israelis are building their “Jewish fortress”. Sharon’s famous disengagement plan was not originally his idea, its foundation was laid by his predecessors Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, both members of the Labour Party.

The author presents an interesting idea: Israel is not only building an “iron wall” which is made out of concrete, but also a “glass wall”. This type of wall “is designed to intimidate and silence its captive Palestinian population”. Unlike the “iron wall” it

“conceals the nature of the subjugation in such a way that it is seen as necessary, even benevolent”.

The “iron wall” is a metaphor: the phrase was coined by Zeev Jabotinsky, the revisionist Zionist, who thought that the Arabs could only be controlled by military force, which meant an “iron wall”. Jabotinsky and other Zionist leaders like David Ben-Gurion never thought that the Arabs would ever make a compromise with the Zionists who took their land.

The Israeli Palestinians suffered severe discrimination from the foundation of Israel in 1948 till May 1967. They could not move from village to village without a permit given to them by the Israeli military. Since the siege was lifted, the discriminatory policies have continued until today. 1.3 Million Palestinians are second or third class citizens. During a demonstration in October 2001 in Nazareth, 13 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli police. Twelve of these victims were citizens of Israel, the thirteenth a Gazan. This demonstration, held in solidarity with Palestinians who were being brutally oppressed in the occupied territories, was in fact the result of silent discrimination that had been perpetrated against the Palestinian Israelis for decades. A Commission of inquiry was set up led by former Supreme court judge Theodor Or. This commission shed some light on the foundation of the Jewish state.

The “glass wall” is not only a metaphor for the unseen discrimination against the Israeli Palestinians, it served also as a means to deceive the public. Justice Or

“demanded that a glass partition be built between the public gallery, where the Palestinian families sat, and the rest of the courtroom. ... On the TV news and in newspaper photographs, however, it looked as if all the participants to the inquiry were sitting in the same room. The inquiry appeared to be treating all the parties equally when in reality its Arab participants were outsiders, excluded and largely ignored.”

This “very Israeli solution” provides Cook with a readymade image for the plight of Palestinian Israelis (curiously, he consistently uses the unpopular term “Israeli Arabs”) and this in a self-proclaimed “democratic and Jewish state”. The glass wall is

“an even greater obstacle to a Middle East peace than its walls of concrete and steel”.

The author analyses the political basis for the probable future consequences of this discrimination. Most Israelis, so Cook, feel uncomfortable by the idea that Israel is simply a “Jewish” state; it sounds a little too like an Afrikaner state or a Catholic state. So the “democratic” is added as a kind of public denial that Israel is an ethnic or religious state. The Jewish and democratic idea is crucially important to Israelis, so Cook.

In a lengthy introduction consisting of four chapters and a very interesting conclusion the author devotes about a third of his book to recounting Israel’s short and horrible history as a sustained struggle against “the demographic demon”. Cook gives the impression that the Israeli political elite is obsessed with the demographic issue. Even the so-called “new historian” Benny Morris turned into a ardent Zionist again following the second intifada and the demographic “threat”. The ruling class fear the discrepancy in the birth-rates between Jews and Arabs because it may mean in the long run that the growing numbers of Israeli Palestinians will become so powerful as to overthrow the anti-democratic Law of Return from 1950, or to force a re-definition of Israel as “a state of all its citizens” – something in a normal democracy which is regarded as a foregone conclusion. In Israel, however, this phrase, which was coined by Azmi Bishara, a member of the Israeli parliament (the Knesset), transforming this demand into political reality would mean Israel in its current form being terminated.

“Israeli Jews, aware that a detailed explanation of their reasons for rejecting a state of all its citizens might hint at a racist logic at the heart of the ‘Jewish and democratic’ project, have remained coy about engaging directly in such debates. A state of all its citizens is dismissed, mystifyingly to outsiders, as a ‘threat to Israel’s existence’, or even as a part of the ‘ideology of terror’. One must read between the lines, decoding what is meant when Israelis deploy these terms.”

The Israeli Palestinians are seen as the “Fifth column”.

Israel’s defenders worldwide have tied themselves up in knots trying to explain how an “ethnic democracy” can still “operate within the parameters of democratic behaviour”. The shame is that so many supporters of Israel have gone along with such a contortions. How can Israeli political geographer Oren Yiftachel from Ben-Gurion University define Israel as an “ethnocracy,” being

“neither authoritarian nor democratic Ethnocracies, despite exhibiting several democratic features, lack a democratic structure”?

Cook stresses the consensus between secular and religious Jews in Israel:

“it will be around the principle that the Other, the enemy, is the Arab”.

The Palestinian Israeli is the

“unwelcome guest, the intruder, the saboteur, the terrorist. And therefore he must be the one to leave, or made to leave.”

On September 11th 2006 the Israeli daily Ha'aretz reported that Knesset member Effi Eitam, a former “tourist minister” under Ariel Sharon, asked for the expulsion of the vast majority of Palestinians in the West Bank,

“and that Arabs should be ousted from Israeli politics as a fifth column and ,a league of traitors”.

These remarks were broadcast the same day on Army Radio when Eitam made at a Sunday speech at a memorial service for a soldier killed in Lebanon. “We will have to expel the great majority of the Arabs of Judea and Samaria”, so Eitam. And about the Israeli Palestinians he said:

“We will have to take another decision, and that is to sweep the Israeli Arabs from the political system. Here, too, the issue is clear and simple. We have raised a fifth column, a league of traitors of the first rank. Therefore, we cannot continue to enable so large and so hostile a presence within the political system of Israel.”

Jonathan Cook has written a well documented book on the democratically institutionalised injustices of Israel which the West permanently ignores. The image of the “beautiful Israel” which so many Western liberals are trying to sell to the public in the United States and Western Europe is a fata morgana, for the Israeli Palestinians it is a nightmare. The outcome will be gloomy: A “pure state. Their Jewish fortress.” The findings are very impressive but not surprising. It is a must read.

Ludwig Watzal