

## Ben-Gurion Revisited

Avi Shlaim

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responsibility for their own people . . . . There is more than a little suspicion that Syria is a headquarters for terrorism that is condoned and probably financed by Saudi Arabia and perhaps Libya. And although Arafat and the mainstream constituents of the PLO . . . have renounced terrorism and explicitly recognized Israel as a part of the Middle East, only Egypt and Jordan have, with some consistency, provided public support for these declarations as contributions to a possible peace" (p. 238).

Those who wish to understand the origins of the continuing Middle East dilemma would do well to consult this important book by Elmer Berger, a man who has spent most of his life attempting to understand religious nationalism and where it can lead.

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#### BEN-GURION REVISITED

**David Ben-Gurion, *Medinat Yisrael, veHaolam ha'Aravi, 1949-1956*** (David Ben-Gurion, the state of Israel, and the Arab world, 1949-1956), by Zaki Shalom. Beer-Sheva: The Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press for the Ben-Gurion Research Center, 1995. 298 pages. Notes to p. 284. Bibliography to p. 291. Index to p. 298.

Reviewed by Avi Shlaim

No other Middle Eastern leader has written as much or been written about more extensively than David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founder and first prime minister. Yet he remains a deeply controversial figure. Traditional Israeli historians have written about the man and his achievements in the most glowing terms. His Israeli biographers, Michael Bar-Zohar and Shabtai Teveth, have produced multivolume hagiographies. In recent years, however, revisionist Israeli historians have subjected Ben-Gurion, and especially his policy toward the Arab world, to a critical reexamination.

Zaki Shalom, a researcher at the Ben-Gurion Research Center, clearly belongs to the former group. But his aim in writing this book is not so much to defend or criticize Ben-Gurion as to give a detailed and

accurate account of his attitude toward the Arab world in the period between 1948 and the Suez War. Shalom recognizes at the outset the distinction between actual policy and statements. He is concerned with Ben-Gurion's views, attitudes, and statements regarding the Arabs.

The book is based on careful and comprehensive archival research, and nearly every statement is fully documented. Shalom uses the whole panoply of primary sources available at the Ben-Gurion Research Center, including Ben-Gurion's diaries from 1915 to 1963, correspondence, speeches, publications, and protocols of meetings of the countless policy-making bodies of which he was a member.

Although the book deals primarily with Ben-Gurion's worldview, it provides essential background for understanding his policy toward the Arabs. In this view, the Arabs, and especially the Palestinian Arabs, posed a permanent threat to the Jewish community in Palestine, its aspiration to statehood, and the survival of the fledgling Jewish state. As Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary on 23 October 1950: "Before the establishment of the state, I lived for several years with the nightmare of the possibility of our extermination. . . . The danger was actually made more acute by the establishment of the state and by our military victory."

For Ben-Gurion, the root cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict was the cultural gulf that separated the two sides, in terms of values, norms, and aspirations. "We live in the twentieth century," he said on one occasion, "they—in the fifteenth." On another occasion he said, "Israel is not a state of the Middle East, but—of the West." In every respect, he saw Israel as the antithesis of the Arab world. Deep-rooted forces in the Arab world will not be satisfied, he believed, until Palestine's entire territory is recovered and its Jewish population destroyed. Consequently, the campaign that Israel had to wage was not about land, or borders, or spheres of influence, but about survival, about the very right to exist in the Middle East.

Ben-Gurion's pessimistic appraisal of the chances of real peace between Israel and her neighbors followed logically from this analysis of the sources of Arab antagonism and the uncompromising character of Arab aims. The implicit conclusion was that Arab society would have to change beyond recognition for peace with Israel to become a realistic possibility. Israel, ac-

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Avi Shlaim is a professor of history at Oxford University's St. Anthony's College.

ording to Ben-Gurion, had no way of changing the Arab position because any map it offered as a basis for a settlement was bound to be rejected by the other side as inadequate. The only realistic option left in this harsh environment was to build up military power in order to deter the Arab states from launching a second round and in order to cope with the manifold challenges to everyday security.

Some scholars view Moshe Sharett, foreign minister until June 1956 and prime minister in 1954-55, as the antithesis to Ben-Gurion's distinctly deterministic view of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Shalom does not agree. He sees no significant difference between the two men in terms of a peace settlement: both were opposed to territorial concessions and to the repatriation of Palestinian refugees. The only real difference between Ben-Gurion and Sharett, argues Shalom, was over the policy of military reprisals as a means of preserving Israel's security. Ben-Gurion favored hard-hitting reprisals, whereas Sharett wanted to limit the scope, frequency, and intensity of force.

The importance of the debate on reprisals should not be underestimated since they were the crux of Israel's strategy in the early 1950s. Another significant difference overlooked by Shalom concerns the territorial status quo. Both Ben-Gurion and Sharett were very willing to conclude peace with the Arab states on the basis of the territorial status quo enshrined in the 1949 Armistice Agreements, and this was indeed the official policy of the Israeli government. The difference was that Sharett was consistent in his commitment to the Armistice Agreements, whereas Ben-Gurion was not. Ben-Gurion made a distinction between the borders of the Land of Israel and the State of Israel, and he harbored ambitions to push the latter to the limit of the former. Although Ben-Gurion did not advocate going to war to expand Israel's territory, there was a persistent expansionist streak in his thinking. In a scarcely veiled reference to his senior colleague, at a meeting on 1 October 1952, Sharett stated that seeking opportunities to extend Israel's borders was not a peace policy: "Maybe it is the good and right policy, but it is not a peace policy." Maybe the real difference was that Sharett was adverse to any action that diminished the prospects for peace, which he knew to be slim anyway, whereas Ben-Gurion felt that Israel was entitled to act as it pleased

given the state of no-war, no-peace imposed by its Arab neighbors.

One of the merits of Zaki Shalom's approach is that, for the most part, he allows the protagonists to speak for themselves. With a great wealth of material, much of which used for the first time, he illuminates every aspect of Ben-Gurion's thinking about the Arabs and about Israel's relations with them. While basically sympathetic to Ben-Gurion's point of view, he makes a conscious effort to be objective and his scholarship is certainly of a high order. The result is an important contribution to the literature on one of the leading protagonists in the Arab-Israeli conflict, a contribution that would be all the more useful if translated into English.

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#### COLONIALISM'S LAST GRASP

**Genealogies of Conflict: Class, Identity, and State in Palestine/Israel and South Africa**, by Ran Greenstein. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press and University Press of New England, 1995. ix + 275 pages. Bibliography to p. 293. Index to p. 307. \$48.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Mark Marshall

Ran Greenstein, an Israeli-born and -educated sociologist now at South Africa's University of the Witwatersrand, has written an ambitious, wide-ranging, and impressive sociological comparative history of South Africa and Palestine as models of settler colonization. The book started out as a Ph.D. dissertation that was finished in 1991. As a comparative study, it is a good complement to Stanley Greenberg's *Race and the State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). As a study of colonization, it complements Gershon Shafir's *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

The two stated goals of the book are first, to contribute to historical understanding of the origin of the conflicts in the two countries; and second, "to address theoretical debates on the operation of class, identity (nation, race, ethnicity),

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Mark Marshall is a Ph.D. candidate in Middle East and Islamic studies at the University of Toronto.