

Title: Israeli Rejectionism: A Hidden Agenda in the Middle East Peace Process

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Review

Today, a comprehensive and mutually acceptable peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians is more remote than ever. It raises the perennial question of *why* peace is so elusive and why, instead of reaching an amicable accommodation, the two peoples appear condemned to exist in conditions of everlasting violence and suffering.

Zalman Amit and Daphna Levit are Israeli academics and, as such, are able to provide important insights into the Israeli mindset. In their short but highly informative book, they argue that 'there is no peace between Israelis and Palestinians after 62 years because Israel never wanted to achieve peace with its Palestinian neighbours'. On the contrary, they suggest, successive Israeli governments have done their best to avoid a settlement to the crisis. They have achieved this ongoing stalemate through a combination of outright refusal, sophisticated propaganda, the demonization of potential negotiating partners and, all too often, warfare. Israel's leaders appear to believe that, if they persevere for long enough with their very carefully constructed strategy of rejectionism, the 'Palestinian problem' will somehow disappear, the Arabs will 'pack up their tents' and leave.

This is, for many, a controversial argument and one can already imagine the accusations of 'conspiracy', lack of 'objectivity and even anti-Semitism that are likely to be levelled at this book by Israel and its supporters. Nonetheless, as Amit and Levit convincingly demonstrate, unless Israel as the overwhelmingly stronger partner, takes meaningful steps towards peace, or unless the international community compels it to do so, the situation of injustice fuelled by intermittent violence will continue.

This state of affairs is by no means recent. By carefully exploring the roots of the conflict, Amit and Levit reveal how Israel's leaders missed opportunity after opportunity. Their position initially was caused by intense insecurity and the fear that the Arabs were plotting to 'throw them into the sea'. But, as Israel gained in strength, such suspicions became absurd, and one wonders why this powerful country still chooses to exist 'inside a self-imposed ghetto', nourishing 'its own sense of victimhood'.

There are several elements of this complex picture to be considered if we seek a better understanding of what Amit and Levit call a 'Masada complex mentality'. First, well before the foundation of the state, the Jewish people were regarded as a special case; the Holocaust 'increasingly emerged as a ubiquitous justification' for the aggressive actions of the Zionists. The new state 'was indulged and pampered and encouraged to grow up proud' and, as a result, Israelis developed the confidence to believe they could do exactly as they wished, without blame or repercussion; this view appears to be justified as it seems that no international actor dares to challenge Israel's discriminatory behaviour towards the Palestinians.

Second, the Palestinians themselves have been dismissed as inconvenient 'natives'. As Amit and Levit note, Zionist leaders 'did not contemplate any negotiation with the primitive population of Palestine about the future status of a Jewish homeland'. This racist attitude, the inability of Israeli leaders to view the Palestinians as anything other than an obstacle to the establishment of an exclusively Jewish state in the whole of historic Palestine, lies at the heart of the conflict. In this respect, they had the support of the British, who at that time held the mandate for Palestine; in the words of Lord Balfour, whose infamous 'Declaration' is held responsible for much of the ensuing tragedy: 'Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land'. Sadly, opinions appear to have changed very little since that time; if anything, they have hardened, especially with the rise to power of right-wing governments since the 1970s.

Third, facts on the ground increasingly make the possibility of a negotiated peace agreement more difficult to achieve; specifically, since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, Jewish-only settlements have proliferated, making a contiguous Palestinian state almost impossible. Non-violent Palestinian resistance, as practiced in the first *intifada*, has yielded few tangible results and, as Israel has made 'no significant compromise, the Palestinians have [had] no option but violence to end decades of occupation'. Thus, a vicious cycle is established whereby each side responds to violence with further violence, and each accuses the other of standing in the way of peace. Since the late 1980s, political Islam has become a significant player, one that does not shy away from using violence to end the occupation; in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, this form of resistance has been demonized as 'terrorist'. The election of Hamas in January 2006 resulted in the boycotting of the Palestinian territories by Israel, the US and the EU. These 'facts' make it easier for rejectionist Israelis to insist that 'there is no Palestinian partner for peace'.

However, as Amit and Levit emphasize, this is a dangerous way of assessing the current situation, especially as it 'ignores the asymmetry that exists between a country that is independent, prosperous, and possesses one of the strongest armies in the world, and a society or a nation that is and has none of these'. They argue that the original and ongoing wrong done to the Palestinians must be acknowledged although, as they say, this is unlikely.

Much of this book is a straightforward history of the conflict. However, as it is argued from the perspective of Israeli rejectionism, it provides much insightful

information and a fresh analytical approach. The history of failed 'peace processes', as meticulously detailed in the book, is a clear indication of a 'hidden agenda'; Israel may be playing the 'long game', whereby Palestinians who were forced off their land in 1948 will die and their descendants will forget; the deprivations of living under an aggressive occupation will eventually drive many more Palestinians out of the country, and the Zionist dream of a Jewish state in all of historic Palestine will be realized.

Israeli Rejectionism: A Hidden Agenda in the Middle East Peace Process By Zalman Amit & Daphna Levit, Pluto, 2011, paperback, 208 pp. List: \$30; AET: \$23. Reviewed by Andrew Stimson.Â Of course, he failed to acknowledge the fact that any future Palestinian state would be impossible to sustain with existing illegal settlements where only Jews are allowed to live. Statements such as the prime minister's are themselves "ruses" used to distract attention from the truth of Israeli rejectionism.Â The authors ultimately became active members of the Israeli peace movement and in the early 2000s began discussing the need to write a book focused specifically on Israel's long-standing rejection of the entire concept of peace with the Palestinians. "The Palestine-Israel conflict is one of the longest running and seemingly intractable confrontations in the modern world. This book delves deep into the 'peace process' to find out why so little progress has been made on the key issues. Zalman Amit and Daphna Levit find overwhelming evidence of Israel rejectionism as the main cause for the failure of peace. They demonstrate that the Israeli leadership has always been against a fairly negotiated peace and have deliberately stalled negotiations for the last 80 years. The motivations behind this rejectionist position have change