



## ביקורת ספרים BOOK REVIEWS

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למחקרי מדיניות  
  
Ariel Center for  
Policy Research

November 2008 • Cheshvan 5769

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on

### ***Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917-1948***

**by Hillel Cohen, UC Press, 2008, 268 pp + notes, bibliography and index**

At a time when Palestinian “collaboration with the Zionist enemy” has reached its lowest ebb of condemnation and resentment among Palestinians, following the various Israeli withdrawals which either abandoned the collaborators or has tried – unsuccessfully – to resettle them in friendly territory in return for their past services, this timely and welcome volume which recounts the story of collaboration might fill in the large gaps of our knowledge on this otherwise unpleasant and embarrassing issue.

It is embarrassing, because any turncoat against his nation, whatever his loyalties and whoever his enemies, leaves us with a sense of contempt and suspicion, no matter how great his service to our cause. For one is always bound to fear that those who betrayed their own people could certainly, and even more likely, betray others when their reward, or perceived interest looms larger on the horizon. To be sure, the deeds of the collaborators in our favor greatly mitigate some aspects of their otherwise odious acts, and it is easy to be tempted by the illusion that they aid us due to the justice of our cause. In reality, a whole range of considerations such as jealousy, political competition, family feuds, personal vendettas, economic gain, seeking favor with the enemy, a sense of adventure or tribal loyalty which has always been superior to national commitment in Arab society, come into play.

The picture which Cohen deftly paints for us is nuanced, composite and balanced. For, if there were large numbers of Palestinians ready to sell their land to the Jews and to report on Arab militants, and sometimes even to fight their fellow Arabs who were locked into a life or death battle with the Jews, there were other Palestinian Arabs who were willing to condemn and actively scuttle land sales and cooperation with the Jews, and to kill Jews and their Arab collaborators. Can we dub all those profiteers “collaborators” and all their opponents “patriots”? It is very doubtful, since often, the land sales or the trading of information with Zionists, far from being motivated by ideological commitment which would be the landmark of collaboration, had

strictly emanated from personal gain or competition with rivals. Conversely, those who adamantly stood in opposition to what seemed to them as national treason, were often motivated by personal jealousies or rivalries with the “collaborators”, while their “patriotic” rhetoric did nothing more than justify their blood-letting rifts with others.

Sometimes, the very same people, at the very same time or within a short span of years, played the double role of hotly denouncing Zionism and, at the same time, secretly helping the Zionists. What are we to make of those contradictions? Cohen’s meticulous and detailed study of this matter of “collaboration”, throughout all the regions of Palestine during the Mandatory period, leaves little doubt that we ought to conceive of this matter in quite different molds of thinking than we are accustomed to in other parts of the world, for example, the pro-Nazi collaborators during war-time Europe. It seems that following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire during World War One, all the lost identities of the newly emancipated Arabs, who had been wont to divide their local and universal loyalties between their village and the Empire, found themselves without a Sultan or his Pashas to bow in awe before, so they directed all their allegiance to their tribes. Hence, the very loose definitions of patriotism and its corollary – treason. When the overreaching imperial-Islamic identity of Istanbul tottered, all the alternative local loyalties which began to emerge, including the local Arab national-patriotic movements (*wataniya*), stood in competition with each other, by definition, and therefore allowed much leeway to individuals, families, clans, villages and tribes to take a stand; to give primacy to their own interests over the “national” one which had not come into being as yet, and to refute the accusations by others that they were “traitors” to the “national” cause which was virtual at that point.

Moreover, we are essentially talking about the era of the British Mandate over Palestine, where the Mandatory Power was sovereign, and therefore, there was no clear violation of any national Arab sovereignty. The Arabs, though much more numerous than the Jews, were only one of the communities; admittedly the prevalent one, which sought to strengthen its positions in the country without necessarily submitting to the Husseini’s yardsticks as to what constituted loyalty and treason. One could even assume that the continuation of Arab collaboration with Israel after 1948 (which is beyond the purview of this masterpiece of research), at least partly emanated from the lack of a Palestinian independent entity which mitigated any act of treason against it. Only following the Oslo Accords of 1993, when such a sovereign Palestinian entity loomed on the horizon, were the definitions of the border lines between patriotism and collaboration clarified. The punishments meted out to the “traitors” become more accepted in the Palestinian public, and presumably the volume of collaboration shrunk considerably, though it could not be totally eliminated, as we learn from the sorry stories of the Palestinian (and Lebanese) collaborators.

The persistence of the phenomenon of collaboration in our days also begs another question: Why is it essentially unilateral? True, there are isolated cases of Jews who crossed the lines to the Palestinian or Arab side, mainly for ideological reasons and usually with no material gain involved. But the relatively massive, recurring and apparently unaltered by current events collaboration of Arabs with Israel (not necessarily with Zionism), seems to defy expectations that the rise of Palestinian nationalism should gnaw dramatically at the root of the problem. Is it because one seeks to collaborate with the strong and winning rather than the weak and loosing? Is this trend among Arabs related to secular loyalties, such as tribe and family, which show little concern for nationalism, and may entertain different notions of what are loyalty treason, and more restrained among religiously committed factions such as the Hizbullah, the Hamas or Islamic Jihad, which seem harder to penetrate?

Questions in this vein, which rise from each page of this fascinating book, strangely emerge from an otherwise tranquil and serene rural neighborhood, away from the violence of the cities where all the major riots were fomented (1921, 1936 etc.), as if they were mere academic issues raised in an intellectual debate, which had no determining effect on the fate of the conflict between the parties. Even stories of “treason” of one’s own people, and concoctions of plots with the perceived enemy against the interests of one’s own country, are essentially told as human stories that we cannot help identify with. So, these narratives of behind the scenes “treason” become a sub-text in the official history of conflict, violence, killings, competition, uprooting and uncompromising struggle to the finish. For it is otherwise hard to explain how in the middle of a bitter combat led from the Arab Maliha village in Jerusalem against Jewish positions (p. 2), our hero Darwish not only sold land to Jews but also prevented other Arabs from attacking Jewish positions. A Jewish counter-attack forced the Sudanese forces which supposedly defended the village, to flee, together with the defenseless villagers, to be replaced by Jewish new immigrants. Finally, a sprawling upper-class Jewish neighborhood has been built after 1967 on that very disputed land. This is the story of hundreds of others places throughout the country.

All this rich texture of events and sub-events, many of which did not make it into the history books, be they conventional and revisionist, shows us that most of what happened underground and had real and lasting effect on events and developments, passed imperceptibly to the naked and untrained eye of the viewer. This is the great debt we owe to Hillel Cohen for his extraordinary penetration into the small bits and pieces of micro-history and their reconstruction as cornerstones of the great stream of history. For example, we learn from Cohen that the struggle did not superficially consist of two parties – one Jewish and one Arab; but exactly as there were big divergences of view between revisionist-nationalistic circles which occasioned, for example, the Altalena mishap, so were there deep rifts not only between various Arab parties who meddled in Palestine, but also in the midst of the Palestinians, between those, like Darwish, who sought a close relationship to the Jews, believing that an understanding with them could bring prosperity and peace to all, and those who followed the totally negationist and rejectionist approach of the Mufti and his followers which brought misery to the Jews and disaster to the Palestinians.

In this light, or rather obscurity, who is then the “traitor” to the Palestinian cause? Or were the “collaborators” with Zionists the true seekers of peace for their people, which could have prevented the war altogether or end it faster and more favorably for their people than what the *naqba* has produced in its wake? It was this trend of thought which generated during the war local understandings and agreements between reluctant villages which sought their interest by not joining the Kaukji Army in the general onslaught against the Jews in spite of the fact that they were more numerous than the Jews and could have tilted the balance had they followed the aggressive pattern which they judged was not in their interest. Therefore, in the balance of power which decided the outcome of 1948, and possibly the results of subsequent wars between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, one has to take a hard look at the contribution of “collaborators”, or of that alternative viewpoint of accommodation which was pursued by some Arabs, when weighing all the components of those wars. Simply put, the nationalist grip that Husseini exercised over the Palestinians at the initial stages of the 1947-1949 armed conflict was by no means the only trend noticeable among the Palestinians, for many among them did not see the national issue as the preponderant one, therefore they did not see justification to fight against the Jews to the finish, and by necessity came to express their reservations about the Mufti who led that trend.

In previous times, there were Palestinian moderates and pragmatists who realized that collaboration (not individual, but institutional) of the Palestinians with Zionism and then Israel, holds much more promise than the senseless road of murder and terror which was followed then, and is still pursued today by the Hamas, the heir of the Mufti, in its combination of hard politics with religious fanaticism and murderous rage. The most moving document in this book was the memorandum which Hasan Shukri, the legendary Mayor of the mixed city of Haifa, who courageously opposed the Palestinian demand that the British abrogate the Balfour Declaration, thus pulling the carpet from underneath the Jewish claim for a national home in Palestine. (p. 15) He understood that wherever Jews settled, progress and development accrued to the Arabs too, as has been the case with the West Bank before Oslo and Gaza prior to the 1996 eviction of Jews. And the fact that it was Zionist financing which prodded these Arabs to endorse collaboration with the Jews does not in itself turn them into "traitors"; exactly as the fact that the European Union funding the Geneva Initiative did not render its proponents into beyond-the-pale turncoats.

The urban-rural dichotomy in the growth of Palestinian nationalism and its resulting effect on the story of collaboration with Zionism and Israel, found its most dramatic expression in the aid extended to the Muslim National Associations of the rural areas, precisely in order to alienate them from the brewing centers of nationalism in Jerusalem and Nablus. During the 1980s, under the stewardship of Ariel Sharon as Minister of Defense in the Begin administration, the very same idea was revived under the title of the Village Leagues, precisely geared to build an alternative to the then, unacceptable PLO leadership in the West Bank cities, which fomented unrest against the Israeli military government. For a while the move seemed productive, as rural leaders showed more and more openness towards cooperation with the Israelis. But soon the eruption of the Lebanon War and departure of Sharon in disgrace brought that attempt to an end. But the lesson was not lost on either the Arabs or the Israelis, who could not have missed the repetition of the circumstances of the 1930s, half a century later in the 1980s. In both instances it was not a sudden Zionist surge which prompted the Arab villagers to respond, but the perceived self-interests of those shrewd villagers who calculated the perks they could draw from the uneasy situation of military government which did not seem to be changing any time soon.

This volume is divided into three parts: First, it attempts to pin down a definition of allegiance and treason, seen through the kaleidoscope of the various interests which interplayed in the Arab politics in Palestine, essentially prior to the watershed events of 1936-1939 (pp. 1-94); Secondly, the riots of 1936-1939 which brought about major changes of the definitions of patriotism and treason, now that the uprising was directed to the British mandatory power. In that period we also see the rise of the Muslims radicals of Izz a-Din Al-Qassam, who found his death in battle against the British in Samaria in 1935 (pp. 95-170); and thirdly, the shift in Palestinian and world politics after the Peel Commission, the breaking out of World War II, the Mufti's collaboration (yet another kind of collaboration) with the Nazis with a view to embarking on an annihilationist venture of the Jews that would settle the Palestinian problem (pp. 171-268). But beyond its conclusion with the 1948 War, much of the material in the book suggests a multi-layered explanation for the conduct of the Palestinians in their wars against Israel thereafter.

If only for that reason, the modern history of the Palestinian people cannot be essentialized in the history of their nationalism since the late 1920s, nor can their pantheon of national leaders only embrace Husseini, Arafat and their current underlings. Theirs has been a proven record of disasters in which almost one century after their nationalism emerged and 60 years after their Zionist rival has marked stunning achievements of statehood, they still find themselves, for three

generations now, in refugee camps depending on the sacks of flour provided by UNRWA. No other institution has caused them more damage as in educating them to expect handouts instead of rolling up their sleeves, settling their refugees as the Jews have done and embarking on a venture of peace and development. The early “collaborators” who had counseled this vision were shunned and demonized and then silenced and physically eliminated. One wishes that a new generation of similar constructive visionaries of this brand would charter the new way that the Palestinians are so much in need of.

This seminal book, like many others which meet the highest standards of scholarship, has encountered several inaccuracies which could have been evaded: for example, when the Jews are said to have bought only 7% of the land in Palestine (p. 4), the uninitiated reader might conclude that the rest of the 93% were Arab owned. The Western reader does not always understand all the patterns of land ownership in the Middle East, and this sort of obfuscation may lead many to draw hasty conclusions about the ratio of ownership between Arabs and Jews. Or, when Cohen claims (p. 9) that Arab nationalists in Palestine had to educate a new generation to dismiss the old notion of protected Jews as *dhimmis* so as to make them a free prey for persecution, one gets the false impression that *dhimmitude* was a full-proof guarantee of Jews under Islam. The reality was that under harsh or fanatic governments such as the *Muwahhidun* in North Africa or the Mamluks in Egypt, widespread pogroms against Jews decimated many thousands of them, though admittedly their state of protection under Islam was far better than in Christendom. The Hebron massacre of 1929 was itself proof that *dhimmitude* never provided the protection it purported to provide to the Jewish minorities in Islamdom.

But these oversights, though important in themselves, or misspellings like *summud* – instead of *sumud* with one “m” (p. 10), do not retract one iota from this excellent book which is assured to become and remain a unique classic whose shelf-life is assured for years to come. This young and promising scholar has to be encouraged and congratulated for his outstanding achievement.

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