

# REVIEW ESSAYS

## Politicide Revisited

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The July 2004 issue of *Contemporary Sociology* featured a review essay on Baruch Kimmerling's (2003) book *Politicide: Ariel Sharon's War Against the Palestinians*. The essay emphasized that Israel cannot remain both Jewish and democratic if it continues to occupy the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and that Israel's far right is an obstacle to a two-state solution to the conflict. I endorse these claims, but I am troubled by other aspects of Kimmerling's book that are uncritically reflected in the essay. First, Kimmerling provides a one-sided analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that places all or most of the blame on Israel and little if any on the Palestinian side. Israel's far right is an obstacle to peace, but it is hardly the only one. Second, I question Kimmerling's identification of Sharon with Israel's far right for reasons outlined below. Third, and most important, Kimmerling's book goes far beyond criticism of current Israeli policies or Sharon's government. He demonizes Israel as a "Herrenvolk republic" like "South Africa under Apartheid" and a "semi-fascist regime." (A few pages later he drops the qualifier and posits a full-blown "Israeli fascism.") Moreover, Kimmerling rejects the entire Zionist enterprise as racist, colonialist, and thoroughly illegitimate. The book's subtitle is therefore misleading since Kimmerling argues that "the politicide of the Palestinian people" began long before Sharon's election. He views Israel's 1948 war for independence (a war that Arab countries started by invading Israel) as a campaign of ethnic cleansing, and he argues that politicide is partly a consequence of "the very nature and roots of the Zionist movement." One suspects, as Shalom Lappin (2003) recently argued, that many of Israel's opponents are motivated by a similarly fundamental "hostility to the very idea of a Jewish state" that has deep historical roots. They deny to the Jewish people a basic

*Right to Exist: A Moral Defense of Israel's Wars*, by **Yaacov Lozowick**. New York: Doubleday, 2003. 326 pp. \$26.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-385-50905-7.

right to political sovereignty that they freely accord to other nations.

Fortunately, in *Right to Exist*, Yaacov Lozowick addresses many of these problems. Lozowick is a historian, the director of archives at Yad Vashem, and a longtime leftist and peace activist. Combining normative argument with historical and sociological analysis, his book aims to assess Zionism from a moral perspective. "Since the story of Zionism is intertwined with the history of its wars," Lozowick writes, "an attempt to evaluate Zionism must be anchored in assumptions about the morality of war" (p. 27). Drawing on Michael Walzer's work, Lozowick embraces the "just war" school of thought, which distinguishes between "*jus ad bellum*, or justice in going to war, and *jus in bello*, or justice in waging war." *Jus ad bellum* concerns whether one is justified in going to war in the first place. Just war theory generally condemns wars of aggression, but considers self-defense and efforts to halt aggression as permissible or even obligatory. *Jus in bello* requires that one "attempt to wage war according to a [moral] code." From these premises, Lozowick develops the following thesis: "What I found in my review of Israel's wars was that Zionism has mostly tried to be moral. Sometimes it made mistakes, from which it generally (but not always) learned. While being continuously at war, it was surprisingly, though not fully, successful at all sorts of other projects, such as the building of a reasonably healthy society out of widely diverse communities" (pp. 29–30).

Lozowick reveals that Israel has usually, though not always, met the standards of *jus ad bellum*, using military force in response to Arab invasion, provocation, or violence. The major exception, he argues, was Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, a war that was neither justified nor fought justly. He concludes that the invasion was a war of choice, an exercise in regime change, not a war of self-defense as in 1948, 1967, or 1973. Consequently, the 1982 war generated widespread public opposition in Israel. Lozowick also finds failures to meet the standards of *jus in bello*. For example, the author condemns the terrorism of Irgun Z'vai Le'umi in the 1930s, the Deir Yassin massacre that Irgun and Lech'i perpetrated in the 1948 war, and massacres committed by Israeli troops in 1948 (al-Dawayima) and the 1950s (Kibiya and Kfar Kassem). However, Lozowick emphasizes that these war crimes were rare aberrations rather than "the centerpiece of Israel's policy"; they were condemned by Zionist leaders, and often triggered a process of political and moral learning. For example, the Israeli army incorporated the 1953 Kibiya massacre into the training of Israeli soldiers, using it to instruct them about the importance of protecting civilians even in "the heat of battle" (pp. 122–23). Furthermore, Lozowick shows that the worst criticisms of Israel—that its creation entailed ethnic cleansing and the creation of a massive refugee problem—are simply unfounded or exaggerated. Bolstering his argument by relying on the work of historian Benny Morris—one of Israel's revisionist "New Historians" who set out to "critically reexamine the Zionist myths in order to uncover their falsity" (p. 50)—Lozowick refutes Kimmerling's allegation that Israel was engaged in a premeditated campaign of ethnic cleansing in 1948. Lozowick also contrasts the fate of the 700,000 Palestinian refugees generated by the 1948 war to that of the 800,000 Jewish refugees displaced from Muslim countries. While Arab countries perpetuated the plight of the former for political reasons, Israel welcomed and integrated the latter.

Applying the same moral standards to Zionism's Arab adversaries, Lozowick finds greater and more frequent failures to meet the standards of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. A key theme of his book is the persistent and violent opposition among Arabs to the

very idea of a Jewish state, stretching back to World War I. Turning Kimmerling's thesis on its head, he argues that Jews were very nearly the victims rather than the perpetrators of politicide and ethnic cleansing in 1948 and 1967: "The only way the Palestinians could have prevented the founding of the state of Israel was by killing its civilians, destroying their homes and communities, and somehow deporting hundreds of thousands of Jews" (pp. 88–89). Likewise, during the build-up to the Six Day War in 1967, "there were solemn discussions in the Western media of evacuating the Israeli populace should their country be destroyed. That was the extent of the human solidarity and historical responsibility the international community could drum up for the Jews." The "specter of a second destruction" thus haunted Israel's Holocaust survivors "with a horrifying sense of *déjà vu*" (pp. 127–28). Furthermore, Lozowick shows that the murder of Jewish civilians (Zionist and non-Zionist) has been a persistent feature of Arab rejectionism, as evidenced by the pogroms perpetrated by Arab mobs in the 1920s and 1930s, Arab war crimes in 1948, the activities of Palestinian fedayeen in the 1950s and the PLO from 1964 onward, and suicide bombings today (recognized by Human Rights Watch as war crimes and crimes against humanity). The major exceptions to this dismal pattern were the 1956 and 1973 wars; because they were fought in largely uninhabited areas, they left "little room for war crimes on either side" (pp. 125, 151–52).

One of Lozowick's most important contributions is to refute the pernicious claim that Zionism is a form of European colonialism. First, this claim rests on the assumption that Jews are a foreign presence in the Middle East. It therefore ignores the historical ties of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and forgets that Jews were long regarded as an alien presence in Europe. (Immanuel Kant [1774], for example, referred to Europe's Jews as "the Palestinians living among us.") Furthermore, the perception of Jews as a European presence in the Middle East ignores "the history of Jews from Muslim countries" (p. 101). Most Israeli Jews are Sephardic, largely descended from the Jewish refugees displaced from Arab countries after 1948 rather than Jewish communities in Europe. In addition, many Palestinians may

be no more indigenous to Palestine than Jews. Demographic evidence suggests that Arabs as well as Jews were immigrating to Palestine during the British Mandate, contributing to the doubling of Palestine's Arab population between 1900 and 1947 (pp. 78–79). Second, the claim that Zionism is a form of European colonialism misconstrues the relationship between the Zionist movement and Europe's Great Powers. Most of the Jews who came to Palestine from Europe "came from Eastern Europe and had nothing in common with either the goals or the methods of the imperial colonists of Western Europe" (pp. 110, 184). Moreover, Europe did not create Israel for the Jews: "Zionism predated the European presence in Palestine and took advantage of it, but its very staying power and longevity belie the claim that it was part of an imperial European plan to divide the Arab world" (pp. 58–59). This is evident in regard to both the British Mandate and the United Nations partition plan. "Whether [British policy] was pro-Zionist, anti-Zionist, or indifferent—and at various points it was all of these—it was never actively Zionist. At best, the British created convenient circumstances for the Zionists to operate in. . . . In any case, there was very little they were doing during the years of the British Mandate that the Palestinians couldn't also have done, and if by its end the Jews were better poised to take control of their destiny, this was not the doing of the British, but the result of Zionist determination" (pp. 58–59). Likewise, if the U.N.'s 1947 partition plan "was Western civilization's gesture of repentance for the Holocaust, it was quite stingy and not clearly viable; more than anything else, it simply acquiesced in what the Zionists had already created on their own in some sixty years of intense effort" (p. 88).

Another important contribution of Lozowick's book is to refute the charge that Israel is a racist society based on ethnic cleansing or apartheid. First, Israel is an incredibly diverse, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial democracy. It includes Jews with a wide range of backgrounds from all over the world; Arab citizens, who constitute roughly one-fifth of Israel's population; and a growing number of citizens and permanent residents who are neither Jewish nor Arab. This last group includes relatives of Jewish immigrants who are not themselves Jewish

and foreign workers who are raising families in Israel (p. 202). Second, there are no Jim Crow or apartheid laws in Israel. Israel's non-Jewish citizens enjoy full legal equality with Jews, including political rights: "Israel is a democracy, and everyone is equal before the law. . . . Israel's Arabs vote and can be elected and are the only Arabs in the Middle East who participate in fully democratic elections" (p. 204). Lozowick acknowledges that despite their legal equality, Arab Israelis are disproportionately concentrated at the lower rungs of the country's economic ladder, and he explores the reasons for this and possible remedies. However, if this kind of economic inequality is tantamount to apartheid, then Israel is far from alone. In nearly all developed societies, one finds ethnic or racial disparities in employment and income. Third, the situation of the Palestinians in the occupied territories differs from that of Arab Israelis because they are not Israeli citizens and therefore do not enjoy Israeli citizenship rights. Lozowick acknowledges that the occupation generated an "ever growing tension between being a democracy inside the 1967 lines and a nondemocratic ruler beyond them" (p. 161), but he rightly insists that a military occupation is not the same thing as a legally codified system of racial segregation.

Finally, Lozowick provides an incisive analysis of the breakdown of the Oslo peace process and the eruption of the Al-Aqsa intifada. As the memoirs of Dennis Ross, Bill Clinton, and Shlomo Ben-Ami make clear, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak "effectively offered an end to the occupation" at Camp David in 2000, "with Israel to evacuate whatever territory she still held in Gaza and at least 90 percent of the West Bank." As part of this deal, Barak offered to dismantle most of the settlements and "agreed to discuss swapping land in return for the concentrations of settlers he wished not to remove." Barak offered "the Palestinians contiguous territories . . . not 'Bantustans.'" In addition, he offered to divide Jerusalem and allow a limited number of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to return to Israel proper. In short, Barak offered "almost everything Israel could afford to offer if she was to remain a Jewish state" (pp. 7, 214–215, 229).

Why, then, did the Palestinians reject the offer, fail to make a counter-offer, and launch the Al-Aqsa intifada? Of course, terrorist

groups like Hamas, which enjoyed substantial popular support, were dedicated to Israel's destruction and opposed a two-state solution from the very beginning (pp. 176–79). In addition, Arabic media reports and the Palestinian Authority's treatment of the refugee camps it controlled between 1993 and 2000 strongly suggest that it set goals exceeding what Israel could accept: a final settlement based on the 1947 partition plan, control over Jerusalem, and an unlimited right of return for Palestinian refugees to Israel proper (pp. 230–35). The last was perhaps the biggest deal breaker, as it would have obligated Israel, a nation of six million people, to absorb some four million people of Palestinian descent currently spread throughout Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the occupied territories: "even after a sovereign Palestinian state has been created. This position essentially envisions a reversal of the Arab defeat of 1948 or, to be more precise, a replay of that aggression through negotiated means. . . . Ultimately, it bespeaks a continuing Palestinian rejection of Zionism while paying lip service to Israel's existence" (p. 235). An unlimited right of return is thus politicide by other means. When Palestinian leaders failed to extract these concessions in negotiations, they sought to pressure Israelis through violence (p. 243; cf. Morris 2004).

Sharon's election in 2001 and his reelection in 2003 did not signal creeping fascism, as Kimmerling suggests, but rather the emergence of what Yossi Klein Halevi (2004) calls "a new centrist majority." This centrist majority rejects the occupation as untenable because it will "ultimately destroy Israel as a democratic state with a Jewish majority." At the same time, the violent Palestinian rejection of Barak's offer convinced it that "the root cause of the conflict isn't the Israeli occupation . . . but the Arab refusal to accept the legitimacy of Israel in any borders." This new centrism is reflected in

Israel's 2003 election: Both the left and the far right lost seats, while the two "dramatic winners" were the centrist and staunchly secularist Shinui party and Sharon's Likud party (p. 276). Sharon, too, has moved toward the center. He "repeatedly announced that the final stage of negotiations would be a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel, although he demanded that the violence end as a precondition" (p. 301). He is now pushing for a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and at least some of the West Bank—an idea borrowed from the Israeli left—even though his plan divided his own party and generated vitriolic opposition, death threats, and threats of civil war from Israel's far right. While Sharon has used military pressure to effectively reduce terror attacks and make life in Israel more bearable, Lozowick argues that Israel has generally tried to minimize civilian casualties and thereby meet the standards of *jus in bello* (pp. 252–62). This new centrism, Lozowick concludes, "is the almost consensual position of democratic Israel after two and half years of brutal violence aimed at her citizens. Anyone who wishes to achieve peace in the Middle East must take it into account" (p. 276). Scholars, policymakers, and activists would be wise to heed his words.

## References

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