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Fredrick A. Lazin, Gregory S. Mahler, eds. *Israel In The Nineties: Development and Conflict.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996. viii + 254. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1452-4.

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This book makes a worthwhile contribution to the considerable amount of literature that already exists concerning contemporary Israeli society, politics, culture and economics. This collection of articles is well-written, clear and comprehensive. The authors are creative and erudite, and the quality of the essays uniformly high.

Given its breadth of analysis, its richness of detail, and its abundant supply of advanced scholarship, this volume is hardly for the layperson. It will be particularly helpful to specialists in the field. The various chapters might also serve as reading assignments for upper-level undergraduate seminars and might be applied in a variety of relevant graduate courses. This review will focus primarily on the political issues assessed in this book.

This compilation of articles grew out of their presentation at a scholarly conference held at the Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba, in the Negev desert, in southern Israel, in January, 1994. It is thus largely removed from the centre of political and academic gravity in the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv-Haifa triangle.

BGU is Israel's youngest university; it is also often its most maverick. In BGU ranks are to be found many Anglo-Saxon faculty members who are steeped in Western culture and perspective, making this a natural forum for the points of view presented in these papers, which were later developed into this book. It is decidedly in the left-wing of the political spectrum, allocating commanding roles for the U.S. and for the widely-perceived Americanization of Israeli politics in recent years.

The content of the various pieces epitomizes the spirit of promise obtained in progressive intellectual circles and among many members of the business community in Israel at the height of the Oslo Peace Process. In this respect, this nuanced text was a testament to a distinct, and perhaps forlorn, era in Israeli history–the mid-1990s.

This long-gone honeymoon lasted just over two years. It began with the historic handshake on the White House lawn between Israel's Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and the Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yassir Arafat, on September 13, 1993. After that mind-boggling breakthrough, it seemed as if the sky were the limit, as rosy visions for the future pullulated everywhere. The architect of this deal, Israel's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, termed it "The New Middle East," as he seriously wanted Israel to become a member of the Arab League, its heretofore sworn enemy.

The hope for permanent reconciliation, regional collaboration, multilateral prosperity, and the end of intense animosities seemed tangible, durable, and genuine. This prospect was accentuated by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Rabin, Arafat and Peres as well as by the implementation of a Palestinian autonomy and a largely non-controversial peace treaty between Jordan and Israel.

The ten thought-provoking articles collected in this volume are logically divided into four parts that explore distinct subjects: the first analyzes domestic political issues, the second addresses external relations, the third examines cultural questions, and the last investigates economic themes.

In Part I, Martin Edelman and Gideon Doron write about domestic political issues, highlighting the role of religion in society. Edelman's " 'Protecting the Majority': Religious Freedom for the Non-Orthodox Jews in Israel" sets the tone for this book in many of its aspects.

This chapter was a clarion call for a considerable improvement in the condition of secular Jews, who constitute the majority in Israel, by public action and (at least implicitly) through pressure to be brought to bear

by American Jews and by American officials. Edelman hoped that the accomplishment of a peaceful conclusion for the Arab-Israeli conflict would enable a harmonization of Israeli laws with the standards of religious freedom prescribed by international law.

Edelman deftly analyzes the roots and the evolution of Israeli law, correctly focusing on the disproportionate influence of the religious parties, who often had the balance of power, and on the Supreme Court's role in reviewing Israeli laws. His research is broad, his information is well-presented, and his proposals for legislation to enshrine religious liberty in binding constitutional instruments are quite compelling.

The problem with Edelman's argument is that his vantage point is visibly embedded in his American experience. He over-emphasizes the acuteness of the relations between the state and the civil society. The inhospitable conditions that secular Jews endure in Israel are and will be the staple of personal conversations and of private solutions, but rarely do they reach the stage of amounting to massive public outcries or of viable collective activism.

"Traditional" Jews are those who uphold some religious customs as a testament to their strong Jewish identity. By some definitions they constitute as much as half of the Jewish population in Israel. They often support (and either passively endorse or refrain from punishing politicians with proclivity to) concessions to the Orthodox minority. Impositions by this minority deny the rest of the Jewish population rights that in Western countries are understood as being the most basic. Examples of these controversial prerogatives are the lack of access to civil marriages, to non-kosher food, and to public transportation during religious holidays.

The minds of most people are aimed first and foremost at confronting security concerns; the rest is frequently seen as being quite secondary and therefore as being quite tedious. Parties that positioned religious freedom in particular and civil liberties in general as the mainstay of their platform have never garnered more than twelve percent of the popular vote. Even the elevated presence of secular or non-ecclesiastical Russian Jews has not caused a noticeable shift in this trend.

Edelman also (albeit implicitly) presumes the continued dominance of a centre-left coalition–a bloc that is not subordinate to the votes of religious parties in carrying through crucial decisions in the Israeli Parliament, and, just as importantly, able to secure a moral majority of that Jewish public opinion, considered by many politicians to be necessary. We now know that such a proposition cannot be supported.

The legitimacy of a peace-seeking coalition, moreover, has been dependent (and will be in the foreseeable future if and when the Labor Party returns to office) on at least passive support by moderate religious parties. That is the case even if their numerical power is not required for every roll-call.

The religious parties were not about to vote themselves out of their power-brokering role and their political relevancy (that assures budgets for their educational and welfare institutions, hence potential existence). Quite the contrary: The higher-than-average birthrate among religious groups, the emergence of stronger parties, following the change of the electoral system into a dual process of separate ballots cast–one for a prime minister, the other for a party–seems to guarantee their position in this supremacy-minority equilibrium for at least a generation.

Finally, Edelman also over-estimates the influence of judges on public opinion, the interpretive power of the judiciary and the persuasive force of foreign conventions. Judges are appointed by the state. They frequently tend to not interfere in public policy issues or to be as conservative as the polity they represent. Unlike their American counterparts, most Israeli judges are not typically as creative, as rule-setting, or as politically-minded; they simply find simple solutions in individual cases.

These concerns notwithstanding, Edelman's essay is sophisticated and informative. Its comparative scope is useful. Scholars in the field of religious freedom–and conceivably politicians and jurists in Israel–would find it an excellent launching pad for a dialogue on the issue.

Doron's "A Different Set of Political Game Rules: Israeli Democracy in the 1990s" offers a fine presentation of many of the contemporaneous changes in Israeli politics. His analysis is steeped in his thorough knowledge of Israeli society, Israeli politics, and comparative perspectives from other countries.

Unfortunately, his history, too, is a Whig one, in the sense that his interpretation delineated the march of progress from what he defined as "an orthodox nonliberal democracy" to a pre-determined goal of a liberal system in which more equitable norms and individual rights will play a much larger role. But this perceived procession is, at least in part, reversible, which was predictable even at the time at which this article was written.

Doron is astute in his understanding both of Israel's formative period as well as that of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. He explores such important developments as a more open economy with a larger degree of private ownership, a weaker control by the state, a more pluralistic society, enhanced media scrutiny, more independent political activists, a stronger network of local government, and a more accountable, responsive and efficient party system.

Indeed, all of these advances fostered the growth of a civil society. While these developments transformed Israel and affected a change in its political culture, the social contract at the base of the Israeli polity has not yet been rewritten. The traditional forces–and their conservative power bases–are not in retreat. In fact, they have reared their heads again. The recasting of Israeli politics is far from complete, its results still being in doubt.

Articles by Ziva Flamhaft, Peter Demant and Robert O. Freedman comprise Part II, on external relations. Flamhaft's "Israel and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process in the 1990s" surveys the multifaceted events that brought forward the Declaration of Principles of Oslo fame. Her focus on grasping the large picture of a Palestinian-Israeli dialogue that progressed thanks to individual work, changing conditions and outside diplomatic help, while investigating the eclectic manner in which this relationship evolved, is most useful.

Demant's "Unofficial Contracts and Peacemaking: Israeli-Palestinian Dialogues, 1967-1993" is perhaps the most impressive piece in this book. Demant eloquently charts the totality of levels of discussions between a growing number of Israelis and their neighbors. He quite properly attributes to intellectuals and fringe elements in both camps much of the credit for preparing the eventual common ground that led to the conclusion of the Oslo Accord in 1993. Demant also focuses on how a combination of arduous negotiations, exhaustion from hostilities, and politically-expedient chance occurrences worked both sides toward reaching a public consensus, or at least a working majority, culminating in a mutually-satisfying agreement.

In Part III, three articles are offered on cultural issues: Harriet Hartman's cleverly titled "The Changing Roles of Israeli Women (Or: Are Israeli Women's Roles Changing?)," Ilan Avisar's "Israeli Cinema and the Ending of Zionist Ideology," and Joan Roland's "The Preservation and Transformation of Indian Culture and Identity among the Bene Israel in Israel." These articles provide insight into those three dimensions of changes in the Israeli society. Rolan's presentation of group often-neglected is particularly insightful.

In Part IV, two essays address economic issues–Shimon Avish's "Institutionalized Discrimination in Democracies: The Case of Israeli Agriculture" and Allan Lichtenstein's "The Organization of Industrial Production in Israel: From Diversity to Convergence? "–provide cutting-edge analysis of how Israeli politics and economics have intersected. Avish's detailed analysis accentuates the need for equality between the Jewish and Arab sectors within Israel, and the role that the government would have to undertake to transform existing disparities, especially in agrarian policies.

Lichtenstein would like market-forces rather than ideology and national goals crafted by the state to form the agenda of the business community in Israel. Indeed, further privatization and a more dispassionate incentives to capital investments (as opposed to allocation of land and of resources founded in a Zionist agenda more fitting for the 1950s) would be a boon to the over-regulated, quasi-statist Israeli economy, making it even more competitive in international markets.

Unfortunately the era described in this book ended with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995 by an Israeli national-religious zealot, Yigal Amir. This act, referred to in the introduction of this book, terminated what now looks like a naive, temporary euphoria. The sad reality is that the peace process was founded primarily on a pact between affluent, insular, exclusive elites in both Israel and the Arab world. Thus, the peacemakers have inspired political and violent actions by many enemies among the outcasts throughout the Middle East.

Much of the prolonged conflict has been between various fundamentalist (often impoverished and socially peripheral) groups. An all-inclusive solution was (and perhaps is) elusive, possibly beyond the reach of even the most visionary of statesmen. The obstacles to regional harmony in this clash between cultures, maybe even between civilizations, have been enormous.

They combine rational fears for security and of contrived intimidation, not the least of which is the fear of many Israeli Jews of Middle Eastern origins that they would be relegated to the bottom of Israeli society if the Palestinians were to be legitimized through the peace process. In addition, numerous proprietary political interests, power bases, and leadership aspirations have been at stake on both sides of the faultlines.

A panoply of strong emotions and a myriad of bitter memories of cruelty, concerning a number of ancient state symbols and sacrosanct territories, have been a part of the matrix from which identity formation in both the Jewish State and the Arab nations has sprung. Hostility is often couched in terms of opposition to American hegemony, a sentiment prevalent among the Arab masses.

It is shared by extremist Israelis. One of them, Baruch Goldstein, slaughtered Palestinians while they were praying in the Cave of the Patriarch in Hebron, in March 1994, a mere two months after the scholarly conference that gave rise to this book was held. Himself American-born, he was hoping to start a violent backlash against the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the "City of Our Fathers" and the possible removal of settlers such as himself from the West Bank. His failure was only partial, although he did die during the attack.

This complex situation precludes the conclusion of satisfying, comprehensive compromises, although the gradual strategy of incremental accords has accomplished tentative agreements. Pessimism is warranted. Skepticism has proven more realistic than visionary words and multi-faceted projects.

Even the best intentioned, good-faith negotiations could not have addressed the full range of the problems. Suicide bombers have inflicted their terror upon Israeli civilians. Their activities have proven to be very costly in human lives. This violence has been calamitous to the moderate elements within Israel which lent their countenance to the concession of land to the Palestinians, for the policy remedies offered were incomplete. The consequences have been disastrous for the peace process.

The right-wing victory in the May 29, 1996 general elections in Israel transpired already after this book was submitted for publication. Peres ran a campaign of hubris, neglecting his electorate. While this book was meant for the intellectual elites, Peres's somewhat similar discourse had to reach the masses. It did not.

Peres opened himself to poignant criticism of living in a self-created bubble, detached from reality. The opposing platform confronted the viability of his policies of reconciliation for insufficiently buffeting the new with the old–a strong degree of security projected regionally. His message failed to impress a majority of Israelis. His vain attempts to equate himself to Rabin–the mythical hero of war AND peace–were particularly ridiculed.

Binyamin Netanyahu became Prime Minister. His conservative coalition brought together the traditionally weaker elements in Israeli society: working-class Middle Eastern Jews, Orthodox Jews, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, the newly-arrived immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, and the more traditional elements of security conscious centrists. It is a frail coalition, but he may yet win re-election.

While pledged to reaching peace with security and to an open economy, this regime has proved to be much more confrontational in its relations with its Arab neighbors, straining in the process the friendly relations developed during the Rabin-Peres era since 1992, whereas from reading these essays, one might have hoped that such a reversal of fortunes was unlikely. The damage seems irreparable, but this perception, too, might be undone.

The reaction to the more assertive policies of the Netanyahu government has virtually ground the peace process to a halt, interim measures notwithstanding. It has also practically ceased Israel's integration into the Middle East, while giving even more voice to the disenfranchised echelons within Israeli society and to the militants in the Arab camp. The Revolution of the mid 1990s would have to re-invent itself.

So while this book was meant in many ways to be a blueprint for imminent developments, and although it might serve as a mark for the future given the cyclical nature of Middle Eastern politics, much of its content will best serve as a relic of the immediate past.

This collection offers a perspective on thought in and about Israel in the mid-1990s with respect to agendas that reflect in the main the concerns of the progressive groups that supported the peace process. The authors, moreover, focus on a geopolitical alignment of the Middle East that was largely obsolete by the time that this treatise was published, let alone (belatedly, due to my own fault) reviewed by this author.

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