

Uri Ben-Eliezer. *War over Peace: One Hundred Years of Israel's Militaristic Nationalism*. Translated by Shaul Vardi. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 328 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-30434-5.

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Published on H-Diplo (February, 2020)

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In *War over Peace: One Hundred Years of Israel's Militaristic Nationalism*, Uri Ben-Eliezer offers an insightful and comprehensive analysis of one hundred years of Israeli conflicts from late nineteenth-century Zionism to current-day Israel. The major contribution and strength of Ben-Eliezer's work is its ambitious combination of militarism and ethno-nationalism to produce a bold conceptual argument and a tool to analyze Israel's history. This boldness, though, is also the book's main challenge and where its limitations are most evident.

War over Peace identifies militarism and ethno-national ideology in Zionist and Israeli culture, among both elites and the masses, as a significant contribution to Israel's conflicts with its neighbors. Ben-Eliezer defines militarism as "the tendency of a society to solve political problems by military means and to legitimize and normalize this approach" (p. 25). He describes ethno-nationalism as a collective perception that is based on three characteristics: the definition of the nation in ethnic (rather than civic) terms, the emphasis on a clear and strong differentiation between members of the nation and all other people, and the sense of superiority of one's nation over other groups. The book carefully examines the effects of the interaction between militarism and ethno-nationalism on the social and political relations of groups from

the late Ottoman Empire's Palestine to Israel in the present. This toxic combination, it argues, produced a tendency among military officers and like-minded civilian leaders to consistently prefer war over peace and systematically and consciously push for policies that make war more likely.

The book does not stop there, however, and offers an intriguing account of changes in the format of both Israeli militarism and nationalism. Ben-Eliezer sees a shift in Israeli militarism, over time, from a "nation-in-arms" model to a more instrumental and professional militarism. In the former, "a population composed mainly of recently arrived Jewish immigrants was turned into a nation, and more specifically into a fighting nation, in which the military and war formed a central project" (p. 88). In the latter, the military "encourages military solutions based on technological superiority" (p. 190). The author also observes a parallel shift in Israeli national ideology—from an ethno-nationalist approach, albeit a secular one, in Israel's early days, to liberal nationalism in the 1990s, and again back to ethno-nationalism, this time infused with religious meanings, after the Second Intifada of 2000. In addition, the book also explores changes in Israeli civil society and its voices, which, from the early days of Zionism to the present, offered an alternative reading of reality—one that is less married to the exclusivity of the

military means and is more open to collaboration, coexistence, and compromise with the Palestinians and all of Israel's Arab neighbors. In these respects, *War over Peace* is significantly more nuanced, and hence stronger, than the author's previous book, *The Making of Israeli Militarism* (1998).

War over Peace makes a significant contribution on two levels. Conceptually, the author argues that it is the interaction between militarism and ethno-nationalism that results in an aggressive, expansionist, and exclusivist toxic foreign policy (or intercommunal policy within the state). Militarism by itself is unlikely to lead to such results because it lacks the driving force of ethno-nationalist ideology. Ethno-nationalism by itself is unlikely to lead to similar results either, because it lacks the singularity of emphasis on military might and war as the sole instrument to achieve political goals. I find this argument compelling and on the whole well supported by evidence. When militarism is not accompanied by the ideological underpinning of ethno-nationalism, it takes on a very different shape than the one espoused by Israel. For example, militarism in parts of Latin America in the second part of the twentieth century was not combined with ethno-nationalism to the same degree and hence did not result in a similar pattern of international conflicts. Historically, the book's contribution is in tracing this unique combination of ethno-nationalism and militarism as a major driving force of the protracted conflict between Israelis (and their Zionist forbearers) and their Arab neighbors. Other scholars have studied the effect of some aspects of militarism on this conflict before, but the systematic and comprehensive way in which Ben-Eliezer uses his analytical lenses to redraw the history of Zionist and Israeli policy is both unique and impressive.[1]

These new lenses that the book applies to understanding Israel's conflicts from the combination of militarism and ethno-nationalism are not without challenges. For one thing, it is not always

clear that one needs the two components in combination to understand events on the ground. Two sections of the book demonstrate this point. First, Ben-Eliezer's analysis of pre-state Palestine as an interplay between the tactical restraint and strategic expansionism of the mainstream Zionist leadership is fascinating. Yet ethno-nationalism might provide sufficient explanation on its own here. Once Zionism took to imagine the Jewish people as a nation, an "imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"—it was well on its way to collision with the Arab Palestinians.[2] In other words, there were no non-military means by which the movement could have achieved a sovereign Jewish entity, and therefore militarism at this stage could be thought of as a derivative, rather than a driver, of the conflict. Second, the author describes the drive to expand the borders of the Jewish state during the 1948-49 war as a function of militaristic instinct to fulfill the full territorial vision of the ethno-nationalist state. However, we must think about such policies in the context of their time, and territorial expansion was still the rule, rather than the exception, for states that were victorious in war in the late 1940s. Despite the restrictions on conquests in the UN Charter, the notion that borders should be fixed did not become a prevailing international norm until the mid-1950s.[3] Therefore, Israel's territorial expansion in 1948-49, while perhaps driven militaristic, has only tenuous connections with its ethno-nationalism.

The book's attempt to be comprehensive, while fascinating, exposes it to another set of challenges. One of these challenges is that *War over Peace* is a book about Zionist/Israeli policy and the effects of ethno-national perceptions and militaristic approaches on that policy. As a result, it does not seek to explain all the aspects of the conflict or the causes of outbreak of any particular war. The author explicitly acknowledges this analytic limitation in the book. Yet, in many places, the book still forcefully asserts the central role of Israeli militarism in creating and expanding a con-

flict, without due consideration of the other side's actions.

This singular focus on the Israeli side results in some omissions, and (more frequently) in very cursory coverage of processes and issues that are of much importance. For example, the intervention of Egypt, Trans-Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon in the 1948 civil war between Jews and Palestinians elicits very minimal reference. The Arab siege of Jewish Jerusalem and the occupation and eviction of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem, as well as the Jewish villages of Gush Etzion in the Jerusalem hills, are not mentioned. Arguably, these incidents were on a much smaller scale than the massive Israeli ethnic cleansing of Palestinians which the book discusses at length. Yet the existence of these incidents may create some doubt about the argument of the uniqueness of the Zionist militaristic ethno-nationalism as the sole explanation for such atrocities (neither the Palestinian nor the Jordanian societies were militaristic, even though they included significant ethno-nationalist elements). In other places, more consideration of inter-Arab and superpower relations could have buttressed the analysis. For example, in discussing the 1955 Egyptian "Czech arms deal," the book rightfully points to the Israeli Defense Force's (IDF) Gaza Raid as a motivation for President Gamal Abdel Nasser to initiate the deal. Yet Nasser's counterbalancing of the Baghdad Pact was arguably a larger consideration. Similarly, the author points to the 1967 escalation between Israel and Syria as a trigger to Egypt's moves that ultimately resulted in war. Although he mentions the Soviet alarm over this escalation, he does not probe the reasons and consequences behind the Soviet Union's false information of Israeli force concentration (which made the threat of war imminent). Adding some of these details could be important not to balance the blame game, which the author rightfully argues is unimportant. Instead, it could have strengthened the book further by pro-

viding a better understanding of the effects of Israeli militarism within a broader regional context.

The tendency of *War over Peace* to quickly gloss over events and processes that do not neatly sit with the argument of the book is more problematic with respect to its treatment of peace agreements and territorial withdrawals. One example is the 1947-49 tacit understanding between David Ben-Gurion and King Abdullah of Trans-Jordan to avoid a war over the West Bank.[4] Importantly, this understanding fits the actual division of Jerusalem, for which Israel subsequently fought a diplomatic battle for recognition at the United Nations.[5] If the Israeli military and civilian decision-makers, enmeshed in ethno-national militarism, were so hell-bent on territorial expansionism, why did they agree to leave these territories under Arab control? The 1979 peace treaty with Egypt and the withdrawals in 2000 from Lebanon and in 2005 from Gaza, similarly, are awarded very short discussion in the book, whereas the earlier expansions into these territories is discussed at length. On its face these territorial retractions need further elaboration: if militarism and ethno-nationalism lead to territorial expansions, what can explain its opposite? There may be a good answer to this question, but the seemingly short shrift that these events receive in the book does a disservice to such an explanation.

Another potential challenge to the argument made in *War over Peace* is that it sometimes makes sweeping assumptions or arguments, which are not always warranted given existing literature. One example is the book's treatment of territories and borders. The picture depicted in *War over Peace* is that pre-state Zionists and Israeli civilian and military leadership had a fairly fixed understanding of what the territory of the state should be and how far it should stretch. The rightful borders of the state, *War over Peace* argues, have been a direct derivative of the ethno-national nature of Zionism. Yet I would maintain that we have good reasons to doubt this proposition. As with many

other national movements and states, we know that what Israelis of various political stripes have seen as their rightful territory has changed significantly over the years, whether because of geopolitical dictates or because of political expediency. Israelis have not always thought about the land of Israel as the same thing. Even “*Eretz Israel Hashlema*” (the whole land of Israel) acquires different territorial meanings at different points in time.[6]

One way to consider this issue is by looking at discrepancies between the official policy and the stated declaration of public figures. As Ben-Eliezer notes, there was discrepancy, for example, when after the armistice agreements of 1949, Israel officially committed to the boundaries delineated in the agreements as the basis of a permanent arrangement, while at the same time Ben-Gurion and other leaders expressed their continued devotion to a homeland that included the entire mandatory Palestine. Similarly, after the 1967 war, Israeli governments held the official policy that the occupied territories are open to a negotiated settlement, while at the same time making contradictory statements and allowing contradictory action (such as settlements). The author analyzes these instances as veiled and deliberate policies of territorial expansion in stages—instances in which a tactical willingness to compromise is taken as a tool to reach a long-term territorial maximalist plan. Yet one could also understand the same evidence as rhetorical maneuvers designed to avoid explaining a necessary policy shift to a reluctant domestic audience. A similar dilemma of interpretation could be seen in the Palestinian side: in the late 1970s and 1980s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) went through a painful process of moving from an inflexible territorial maximalist position to one that accepted territorial compromise. From the 1974 adoption of the Ten Points Program, which called for accepting the establishment of a Palestinian state in any part of the national homeland possible, through to the 1988 acceptance of UN Resolution 242, the organization officially espoused more moderate official policies,

while at the same time continuing a rhetoric of maximalist territorial claims, directed at an internal audience. Many Israelis indeed interpreted this process as a cunning disguise designed to destroy Israel in planned phases. Yet, here as well, an alternative interpretation could be suggested: the moderates in the PLO, looking for a realist compromise, used the phased plan as a ladder that would allow them to climb down from the maximalist and unrealistic territorial claims of the organization’s charter.[7] In both cases, I tend to side with the interpretation that emphasizes conflictual and complex domestic politics, rather than a coherent and cunning national policy, as the more convincing explanation.

War over Peace is an impressive addition to a growing body of literature that studies the influence of the Israeli IDF and security establishment on the state’s foreign policy. This literature includes works like Yoram Peri’s *Generals in the Cabinet Room: How the Military Shapes Israeli Policy* (2006), Dima Adamsky’s *The Culture of Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (2010), and Yagil Levy’s *Israel’s Materialistic Militarism*, as well as my own book with Wendy Pearlman, *Triadic Coercion: Israel’s Targeting of States That Host Nonstate Actors* (2018). All of these works cover the role of the IDF in Israel’s foreign and security policy decision-making processes. But all of them also emphasize the fact that much of the positions taken by the military and the security establishment more broadly are based on a particular culture that has developed over the years within these bodies, rather than on rational calculations. Ben-Eliezer adds to this conclusion, strengthens it, and elaborates on it. It is a welcomed contribution, which should not only have a lasting impact on the study of civil-military relations in Israel but also contribute significantly to our broader understanding of militarism and its interaction with nationalist ideologies.

Notes

[1]. For example, Yoram Peri, *Between Battles and Ballots: Israeli Military in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Yagil Levy, *Israel's Materialist Militarism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

[2]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2006), 6.

[3]. Boaz Atzili, *Good Fences, Bad Neighbors: Border Fixity and International Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[4]. Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[5]. Bernard Wasserstein, *Divided Jerusalem: The Struggle for the Holy City*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

[6]. See an excellent discussion in Nadav G. Shelef, *Evolving Nationalism: Homeland, Identity, and Religion in Israel, 1925-2005* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 25-106.

[7]. Harris Mylonas and Nadav G. Shelef, "Which Land Is Our Land? Domestic Politics and Change in the Territorial Claims of Stateless Nationalist Movements," *Security Studies* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 754-86.

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Citation: Boaz Atzili. Review of Ben-Eliezer, Uri. *War over Peace: One Hundred Years of Israel's Militaristic Nationalism*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. February, 2020.

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