

Re-Readings

A Microcosm of Palestine: Witnessing the 1967 Fall of Jerusalem

The Fall of Jerusalem. Abdullah Schleifer. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972, 247 pages.

Reviewed by Rana Barakat

If there is a governing style for every culture, in Israel that style is theft. (Abdullah Schleifer, *The Fall of Jerusalem*, p. 47)

While reading *The Fall of Jerusalem* over for this review, I realized how little work has been done by Palestinian historians on 1967, diplomatic and political treatises notwithstanding. This relative dearth of material is due to a number of obvious and some less obvious factors. 1948 is the marker of transformation in Palestine and the historic moment whose shadow hangs over everything, including scholarship, though the *Nakba* is an on-going colonial process of which the war in 1967 is a major aspect. For historians, working on the *Nakba* within the (narrow) lens of 1948 has been a duty of national importance. After all, the mere scope and size of Zionist mythology on the matter has taken decades to counter. If the victor tells the tale, Palestinians have been trying desperately for three generations, and at the very least, to proclaim: we did and do exist here. Within this colonial context it is even more troubling to reflect on Jerusalem in 1967 and think about how the important work of “recording” has taken a back seat relative to our other individual and collective concerns.

First published in 1972, Abdullah Schleifer’s *The Fall of Jerusalem* can be considered a text of primary importance in Palestine studies in general, and studies on Jerusalem in particular. It is both a primary source, as Schleifer, then a journalist for the English-language *Jerusalem Star/Palestine News* and now a Professor Emeritus of Journalism at the American University in Cairo, was an eyewitness to the war in 1967 and recorded the details of the events and their aftermath. It is also a useful secondary source, as Schleifer put the war in its local, regional and international historical and political context. A journalist with a keen political eye, Schleifer wrote a hugely useful and informative book that is now

largely forgotten. A resident of a city under siege, Schleifer also wrote the narrative of Jerusalem as the Arab residents lived it and the few soldiers and many civilians tried to defend it.

Recently, I sat with a friend who lived the turmoil of the war in the village of Bayt Sourik located near the infamous “Radar” in the north-western section of greater Jerusalem Schleifer mentions as part of the “fall of the city.”¹ Perhaps because my friend was a very willing and vivacious story-teller, and perhaps because she and her family found their way back to their home and land, her story was both tragic and exciting. It was full of blame: for the Jordanian army that she did not see let alone hear, for the Israeli army that – in their great numbers – knew exactly where to go and how to get there, and for the Palestinians, who so soon after the first catastrophe in 1948 seemed as scattered and unprepared to deal with unrelenting Zionist aggression as they had been two decades earlier.

Her words resonate with Schleifer’s account of the days of the war. Though her narrative sounded a bit like an adventure novel, most of the stories I have gathered from those who lived through the urban confusion of Jerusalem in June of 1967 read more like desperate tales of resilience in the face of defeat. In fact, I find that many Jerusalemites hesitate to recall those days and do so in great agony. These stories (and silences) put Schleifer’s narrative in fundamentally important literary and historic perspective.

Though reporting on contemporary events, Schleifer was also very much embedded in the rich medieval history of Jerusalem. Throughout the narrative he constantly reverts back to the Crusader wars on the city, relating them to Zionist aggression. In this context, discussions of modernity were not as important to the author as understanding the mentality of aggression and conquest as well as placing the Zionist presence in the city in historical perspective. Although reference to the Crusades is not uncommon in the Arab world, it is important to note here that his tone in doing so was to achieve a sort of historic balance and to reinforce the alien nature of Zionist colonialism in Arab lands. In spite of the undeniable military success of the Zionist army, Schleifer seemed to be suggesting the temporary nature of this aggression on the Arab city.

Historians have the advantage of thinking in the long-term, thereby lightening the burden of total defeat that the author clearly felt in the days of the wars and the years that succeeded it. In his words, “the fall of Jerusalem on June 7, 1967 – 859 years to the day since the Crusader armies first appear before the walls of the Holy City – and the occupation that has followed are a microcosm of the fate of all Palestine and the entire Arab-Israeli conflict.” (p. 7) Moreover, like others witnessing the tragedy of colonial oppression in Palestine, the author was perplexed with how world opinion had somehow not labeled this conflict as such: “here is a clinic for case studies in a still dynamic settler-colonialism of the most subtle sort, successful to the degree that it has evaded the colonialist label (at least in the West) throughout an anti-colonialist epoch. Only in Palestine is it still possible for liberals to cheer cowboys gunning down the Indians or pushing them back into the badlands.” (p. 9)

Schleifer's descriptions of living the aftermath of the war preceded details of the war itself for reasons that become clear by the end of the book. Israel, under its propaganda of "unification" took immediate steps to erase the Arab presence in the city. Recording this attempted erasure that he constantly refers to as "deArabization," Schleifer writes, "there is a difference between the vibrations of a lived city and a cold piece of restoration; between a community that shares and cultivates the values of a way of life which takes concrete form in the shapes of a particular urban style and the distant appreciation of visitors to a museum." (p. 14) An obvious continuation of Zionist aggression, the conquest of Jerusalem was a story that could have easily been foretold decades earlier, but this keen observer noticed what may have passed others by: "the city remains solemn because the Arabs have remained. Because neighborhood life is somehow simultaneously a teeming noisy marketplace and a self-conscious stage governed by an ancient sense of the rituals of politeness and discretion. Because the bombs and dynamite charges of Arab guerrillas shattered suave visions to reassert the more naked truth that this city, though conquered, is Arab." (pp. 14-15)

Almost poetic at times, Schleifer writes of his belonging to the city: "it was with an eye to the past, the visible Arab past, that I first came to this city and struggled to stay on for the peace of Jerusalem ... there is a psychological weight to these old wrinkled stones I love and the massive, intertwined homes they form; to the buttresses that bridge the cobbled lanes turning streets into tunnels as the houses of Jerusalem rise in the air. A seductive psychology, fed also by the security of familiar neighborhood life." (pp. 16-17) He further reveals his placement within this dynamic: "we were Muslims, obviously 'pro-Arab' foreigners allowed to remain in an occupied territory only by the tolerance of the occupiers." (p. 17). A journalist, an intellectual and an American Jewish convert to Islam, Schleifer was actually mandated by his position to write as an observer, but within the pages of this book, it becomes obvious that the imaginary (and false) line between observer/witness and participant was necessarily traversed. Finally in this intricate introduction, he sets forth the over-all mandate of his work: "we are all bound together ... by the fall of Jerusalem, and beyond such personal qualifications the data are fixed and it is well that someone speak." (p. 18)

Beyond this personal and political introduction, Schleifer also offers a concise reading of Zionist settler-colonialist history of conquest that led to the tragedy of 1948, and a reading of the local, regional and global political quagmire between 1948 and 1967. Though not a particularly surprising reading of what now might seem obvious, presenting this information in this context in 1972 and as an explanation for an English-reading audience of the war in 1967 must be noted for both its bold style and as an important scholarly intervention for its time. His political agenda, never far from the pages of the book, is also significant, for although this brief history is one of defeat and conquest, the larger picture remained clear for the author: "there is an inescapable twist to this history, which will keep repeating itself until the name of Palestine returns to everyone's map." (p. 38) Moreover, though his present time was mainly about defeat, Schleifer paid constant attention to the on-going presence of Palestinian resistance: "by refusing to disappear, it is the Palestinian who has most thoroughly

frustrated Zionist ambitions despite the periodic flashy Israeli military triumphs.” (p. 56) To historicize this assertion, Schleifer explains the politics of the 1950s and 1960s through the lens of resistance.

Offering an adequate reading of Arab politics at the time, from the “progressive” politics of Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Ba‘thists to the conservative policies of the kingdoms from Jordan to the Gulf, Schleifer placed all of these political maneuvers within the context of growing Palestinian revolutionary parties and politics. Of particular importance is his critique of the resistance movements. Although he presents them as the best hope for Arab Palestine he also asserts that their actions and programs demonstrate a lack of the basic knowledge of what he continually refers to as “revolutionary theory.” He never, however, fully explores what revolutionary theory means or shows how its use would make the resistance more effective. Nevertheless, what he describes as “fedayeen activity” is an important reminder for an audience in the post-Oslo era of the basic theoretical foundations of the Palestinian parties, movement, and leadership. An “indigenous revolt,” in this sense, can be read within the anti-colonial perspective that once existed, far from the complicity of all of these players that embody an “Oslo Palestine.”

After establishing the political backdrop to 1967, Schleifer then details the prelude to war. In his description of two significant events, the reader is taken back not only to the politics of pre-war 1967, but also to the emotional drama that preceded the war. This is quite significant as it takes the reader into a world that seems nearly as distant as Schleifer’s descriptions of the eventual defeat of the Crusaders at the hands of Arab armies. This distance has been created by years of political malaise and a Palestinian national movement that has replaced anti-colonial resistance with pointless and complicit diplomacy. Schleifer reminds the reader of Mahmoud Bakr Hijazi, a freedom fighter who infiltrated the colonial borders from Jordan on a resistance mission and was subsequently caught and imprisoned by the Israeli army. According to Schleifer, Hijazi’s trial was a sign of things to come as it was “an indication of the seriousness of the Fatah challenge to the Israeli military establishment only five months after the launching of their first raids.” (p. 80). Put within the context of fear of Palestinian resistance along with the clear Zionist plans for the conquest of all of historic Palestine (as well as their economic crisis), Israel’s need for war in retrospect seems quite obvious. Moreover, rather than dwelling on the causes and effects of defeat (though certainly that is a part of the narrative), Schleifer’s reading is one that takes Palestinian resistance as a fundamental factor in juxtaposition with the paralysis of the surrounding Arab states to adopt or even support any kind of resistance to Zionist occupation and aggression.

In a chapter aptly titled “The Trap” Schleifer carefully details the beating of the drums of war. In line with the rest of his argument, he counters Zionist and American myths regarding the causes of the conflict. Describing the Israeli war machine, and Arab (in particular Egyptian) miscalculations, Schleifer negates the Zionist narrative of David and Goliath in 1967. As he recounts the diplomatic maneuvers and manipulations in the months and weeks leading up to the war, it seems almost

painfully obvious that Zionist intentions towards war and the complete occupation of Palestine were the overall battle plan and it was just a matter of time and opportunity for them to implement it. Though, like other aspects of Zionist mythology, the lies about the war have perhaps had more resonance, this chapter tells the tale as it happened and as he witnessed it.

Imperial connections and comparisons to previous wars dominate this section of the narrative, for 1967 ushered in a new era of imperial patronage as the United States took the baton from the British and became the real site of pre-war planning and post-war *carte blanche* support for Israeli colonial expansion. In the context of Israeli military belligerence prior to the start of the war, Schleifer remarks that “the Israeli threats and troop movements in this period are of particular importance, not only in the obvious sense of understanding the immediate historical development of the crisis, but in the way they were comprehended by conventional American public opinion.” He further elaborates on Americans forgetting the Israeli active military push towards war in April and May: “by the first week of June, these events of late April and early May no longer existed in conventional American comprehension, which only ‘understood’ that Abdul Nasser had closed the Straits of Tiran in a calculated gesture to ‘strangle’ Israel while the Arab wolf pack closed in for the kill. The rest was strictly Miracle.” (pp. 101-102). For this alone, this book can be considered a valuable contribution that benefits both contemporary scholars and general readers.

Though politics and diplomacy have dominated historical narratives of the war, people’s experience, particularly that of Jerusalem’s residents, is perhaps the most valuable part of Schleifer’s account. Through his contemporary observations, the author manages to combine the bitterness of defeat with the hope of renewal via resistance. Within defeat, the Palestinian population confronted a new era of their history. The author’s descriptions of the city as it was invaded and as the residents in the city held the strongest line of defense are as captivating as they are enlightening. Jerusalem’s extended neighborhoods and the Old City, as a contained entity, were the sites of the fiercest battles in the short days of the war. Local residents wanted weapons – that the Jordanian army promised – and eventually it was the people of Jerusalem, most of whom did not receive these promised arms, who stood as the last and strongest line of defense against the conquerors. These are the stories that have been largely ignored in the historiography of Jerusalem. Because of the incredible importance of the experiences of the people of Jerusalem in the war, the reader is left wanting much more. Schleifer affords some space for these stories, but not nearly enough for the reader to fully understand both the devastation of defeat and extraordinary resilience of the people. Because of this, the story of Jerusalem in 1967 is yet to be written.

As Schleifer describes it, the complicity of Arab states (in particular Jordan) can be read as the backdrop for the resistance that began almost immediately in 1967 and defined the subsequent era. The story of this war was also the story of what the post-war atmosphere brought about regarding a “peace process.” As in the other sections of the book, Schleifer breaks down the situation both from the perspective of Israel and

that of the surrounding Arab states. Not holding back punches, he writes of the Arab political elites' inability to read Israeli and American intentions and their subsequent inability to react. He reinforces this argument by reading *defeat* as that of official Arab politics and *promise* as that of the power of the Palestinian people and of guerilla warfare (or what he calls the work of the "*fedayeen*") by Palestinian parties and movements, in so doing he returns the narrative of Palestine to Palestinians.

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Endnotes

- 1 Radar is a hill fifteen kilometers west of Jerusalem where the British military installed anti-air radar. It was turned over to the Jordanian army in 1948, occupied by Israel in the 1967 War and now is the site of an Israeli settlement named Har Adar.