

Rashid Khalidi, *Brokers of Deceit: How the US Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon, 2013).

by Mark Braverman

“Language matters greatly.” Palestinian American historian Rashid Khalidi opens his most recent book with these words, and in so doing he goes to the heart of why there is no peace for Israelis or justice for Palestinians. At this writing in July, 2013, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators have gathered in Washington DC under the guidance and sponsorship of the U.S. administration, and herein lies the problem, submits Khalidi. He describes the history of U.S. involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as “a carefully constructed realm of obscurity, a realm in which the misuse of language has thoroughly corrupted both political thought and action.” Khalidi returns again and again to the way that language functions to obscure the reality of a colonial settler project that has resulted in the dispossession of the indigenous Palestinians and the ongoing abrogation of their rights. This same language, submits Khalidi, is used instead to maintain the destructive illusion of a process of negotiation between equal parties, rather than the reality of a powerless, stateless, occupied people at the mercy of a highly militarized state supported by the world’s only superpower. Despite the futility of this approach to peacemaking, Khalidi points out, our government has pursued it doggedly, bowing to domestic political pressures and to Israeli stubbornness and persistence. He is unsparing in his critique of this state of affairs: “Feebleness,” Khalidi charges, “becomes complicity.”

Rashid Khalidi holds the Edward Said chair of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University. He comes from one of Jerusalem’s most distinguished families, one that has provided another eminent historian, Walid Khalidi, author of *All That Remains*, the story of the more than 400 Palestinian villages destroyed or depopulated by Jewish forces in 1948. What we have in both Khalidis are scholars who do not hold back from communicating a narrative -- one could call it a witness -- rooted in their personal histories. I could not avoid the feeling that this book has been brewing in Khalidi for some time, certainly since the dashing of early hopes for an Obama administration that would break free of the failed policies of the past, an Obama who would stand up to Israeli intransigence with respect to expansion and illegal settlement building. To the contrary, Khalidi documents, despite efforts to reach out to the Arab world in the first months of his administration and indications of sympathy with Palestinian aspirations, Obama has fully embraced policies in line with the Israel-centric narrative that has dominated U.S. involvement over the past four decades.

These fundamentally flawed policies, which, Khalidi maintains, have doomed the so-called “peace process,” are founded on several erroneous assumptions. The first is that the U.S. is an “honest broker” between parties working toward the establishment of a sovereign, independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Not at all, writes Khalidi. Rather, since the 1970s when the Likud government under Menachem Begin took power, every successive U.S. administration has acted not as a neutral party but as “Israel’s lawyer,” acceding to and in fact actively supporting the lines drawn by Begin, and followed by every successive Israeli government, terms that have effectively ruled

out the possibility of a viable Palestinian state. This brings us to the second assumption: that Israel is interested in and willing to accept a sovereign, independent Palestinian state on its borders. Israel's terms in every negotiation, as well as its actions on the ground, have been based on the primacy of Israeli security (the attendant assumption of Israeli vulnerability has been challenged, but this is beyond the scope of this review) and the achievement of control over, if not outright annexation of, the entire territory from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. Negotiations have ignored Palestinian rights with respect to territorial sovereignty, return of refugees, treatment of prisoners, access to natural resources, and freedom of movement. As this fruitless, and, some would maintain, diversionary process plays out on the political stage, Israel's policies of annexation, settlement and control continue in violation of multilateral agreements and international law, rendering the two-state outcome virtually impossible. To quote Jeff Halper of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, "the two-state solution is dead, buried under settlements and infrastructure too massive and interlinked with Israel to detach, especially given the lack of will among international governments, led by the U.S. and Germany, to exert the pressures on Israel needed to force such massive concessions."

Khalidi does not lay the blame completely at the feet of the United States. He serves up a good measure of disappointment, one might even say bitterness, for the current Palestinian leadership that "exists essentially to serve Israel's occupation and to help maintain it." In the famous 2002 handshake on the White House lawn, Khalidi documents, PLO leader Yassir Arafat accepted terms that did not depart from Begin's inflexible position set out at Camp David almost two decades earlier. In so doing he enabled Israel, massively supported diplomatically and financially by the United States, "to create for the Palestinian people a unique and exquisitely refined system of exclusion, expropriation, confinement, and denial. Above all this system is buttressed by a robust denial that any of this is happening or ever happened."

Khalidi's emphasis on the power of denial is central to his argument. Rather than continue to accept comforting but catastrophically flawed assumptions, he argues, we must act in response to the way things really are, which is that since its establishment in 1948 and increasingly today, many of Israel's actions violate both U.S. and international law, its policies a barrier to peace and a liability to U.S. global interests. Furthermore, U.S. government policy has been largely instrumental in creating and maintaining this condition. Khalidi issues an urgent summons to U.S. citizens to provide a "domestic...counterweight to the formidable combination of a determined Israeli government and its energized supporters within the American political system."

Khalidi writes from a political perspective and the issue of religion does not arise in the book. However, his call for a "domestic counterweight" should prompt a consideration of the key role that can be played by a powerful constituency – churches in the United States. Influencing domestic and foreign policy is something the churches have done before, notably in the cases of the civil rights movement and in the struggle against South African apartheid. A renewed and energized church, on congregational, denominational and ecumenical levels, played a crucial role in changing U.S. laws in the first instance and U.S. foreign policy in the second. Today, even in the face of opposition from their

own ranks as well as from some in the Jewish establishment, U.S. churches have taken up the issue of Palestinian rights. A recent example is the public letter of October, 2012 in which the heads of fifteen Protestant denominations and several Catholic orders call on Congress to make U.S. military assistance to Israel contingent on the Israeli government's compliance with applicable U.S. laws and policies governing human rights, citing "the deteriorating conditions in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories which threaten to lead the region further away from the realization of a just peace." "Unfortunately," the letter continues, "unconditional U.S. military assistance to Israel has contributed to this deterioration, sustaining the conflict and undermining the long-term security interests of both Israelis and Palestinians." Concerns about being labeled anti-Semitic tend to mute criticisms of many of Israel's policies and actions by many churches and individual Christians. This book should help spur action in line with the U.S. church's proud record of support for equality and human rights.

A criticism of the book would be not on the substance but the tactics. Khalidi's readership has been well schooled in the beliefs and narratives that he deconstructs. For the book to realize its goal of helping to create a constituency that will positively influence U.S. policy, it would benefit from a discussion of how effectively these beliefs have been promoted by our government and in the media, our religious establishments and the academy. They include: a powerless Israel mortally threatened by implacable enemies, eternal hatred and struggle between Jews and Arabs, a wall that keeps Israel safe from terror attacks, and, for many, a biblical promise that amounts to a deed to the territory. In the absence of an acknowledgement of the pervasiveness and power of these beliefs, some readers will consider the book biased because the author is Palestinian. This may be accompanied by an appeal for "balance:" doesn't Israel exist because of the Holocaust, and yes, Palestinians have been treated unfairly, but what about Palestinian violence?

But perhaps it is time that we entered into the mind of a Khalidi, in fact into the perspective of the Palestinians, who today are those who are suffering, demonized, and rendered powerless, much as the Jews were for much of their history. Ultimately we must honor Khalidi's work as a *cri de coeur*. His book should speak loudly to the increasing number of Americans for whom the realization is dawning that the story they have been told is a distortion and that the policies they have been accepting and supporting are bad, not only for the Palestinians, who have now brought their case before the world, but for the citizens of Israel, who have spent their entire history fighting wars and living in a state of insecurity and fear. Near the end of the book Khalidi observes that whereas the rest of the world is outraged by the injuries suffered by the Palestinians and the ongoing trampling of their rights, only Americans appear unaware of or inured to this human rights situation. As Americans we need to be reminded of our foundational commitment to put principles of human rights, equality and dignity above political expediency, for the sake not only of the Palestinians but for a future of peace and dignity for the citizens of Israel.