

Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East,
Rashid Khalidi, Beacon Press, 2013

Reviewed by Mark Braverman in *The Christian Century*, Oct. 16, 2013

From the Heart of Palestinian Suffering

Language matters greatly.” Palestinian-American historian Rashid Khalidi opens his most recent book with these words, and in so doing he goes straight to the heart of why there is neither peace for Israelis nor justice for Palestinians. Khalidi 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.” This language, submits Khalidi, obscures the reality of a colonial settler project that has resulted in the dispossession of indigenous Palestinians and the ongoing abrogation of their rights. Khalidi argues that this obfuscation perpetuates the destructive illusion that the “peace process” consists of negotiations between equal parties rather than between a powerless, stateless, occupied people and a highly militarized state supported by the world’s only superpower.

Despite the futility of the U.S. approach to peacemaking, Khalidi points out, our government has pursued it doggedly, bowing to domestic political pressures and to Israeli stubbornness and persistence. Khalidi is unsparing in his criticism: “Feebleness,” he charges, “becomes complicity.” Khalidi holds the Edward Said chair of modern Arab studies at Columbia University in New York. He comes from one of Jerusalem’s most distinguished families, that of 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. The Khalidis do not hold back from communicating a narrative—one could call it a witness—rooted in their personal histories.

One imagines that this book has been brewing in Rashid Khalidi for some time, certainly since hopes were dashed early in the Obama administration that the new president would break free of the failed policies of the past and would stand up to Israeli expansionism and illegal settlement building. To the contrary, Khalidi documents that despite efforts to reach out to the Arab world in the first months of his administration and despite 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 are founded on a pair of erroneous assumptions. The first is that the United States 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, argues 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 actively supporting the lines drawn by Begin and followed by every successive Israeli government—terms that have ruled out the possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

This brings us to the second erroneous 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 goal of achieving control over, if not outright annexation of, the entire territory from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. Every set of negotiations brokered by the United States has effectively 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. Says 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 solely on the United States. He expresses considerable disappointment in—one might even say bitterness about—the current Palestinian leadership, which, he says, “exists essentially to serve Israel’s occupation and to help maintain it.” In Yitzhak Rabin’s and Yasir Arafat’s famous 1993 handshake on the White House lawn, Khalidi documents, Palestine Liberation Organization leader Arafat accepted terms that did not depart from Begin’s inflexible position set out at Camp David 15 years earlier. In so doing, Khalidi charges, 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.” Khalidi continues: “Above all this system is buttressed by a robust denial that any of this is happening or ever happened.”

The power of denial is central to Khalidi’s 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 Israel was established in 1948 and increasingly today, many of its actions have violated both U.S. and international law, and its policies are a barrier to peace and a liability to U.S. global interests. Furthermore, U.S. government policy has been instrumental in creating and maintaining this condition. Khalidi urges 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 to current U.S. policy should prompt consideration of the key role that U.S. churches can play. American churches have influenced domestic and foreign policy before, especially during the civil rights movement and in the struggle against South African apartheid, and today they have taken up the issue of Palestinian rights in spite of opposition from within their own ranks and from some in the Jewish community.

A recent example of church action on behalf of Palestinians is the October 2012 public letter in which 15 heads of Protestant denominations and Catholic orders called 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. The letter cites “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.” The letter is one indication of growing awareness and involvement on the part of U.S. churches on both denominational and ecumenical levels. Khalidi’s book can help spur further action in line with the U.S. church’s proud record of support for equality and human rights.

My criticism of the book would be not on the substance but on the tactics. Much of Khalidi's readership is well schooled in the beliefs and the narrative that he deconstructs. For the book to realize the goal of helping to create a constituency that will positively influence U.S. policy, it would have benefited from a discussion of how these beliefs have been promoted by the U.S. government, in U.S. media and religious establishments and in the academy. This narrative includes beliefs about 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 acknowledgment of the pervasiveness and power of these beliefs, some readers will consider the book biased because the author is Palestinian. This objection 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?

Arguments based on these beliefs and attitudes are powerful, exerting influence even at the level of foreign policy, and this is Khalidi's point. The value of his book is that it allows us to enter into the perspective of the Palestinians, who today are suffering, demonized and rendered powerless much as the Jews were for much of their history. We must honor Khalidi's work as *a cri de coeur*. It speaks loudly to the increasing number of Americans who are coming to realize 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 Palestinians 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 catastrophe. As Americans we need to be reminded of our foundational commitment to put human rights, equality and dignity above political expediency, not only for the sake of the Palestinians but for the sake of a future of peace and dignity for the citizens of Israel.