

The Decline of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Middle East Politics and the Quest for Regional Order. By Avraham Sela. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. 423pp.

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Most studies about the Middle East have focused on system analysis of a single state. Few scholarly works have conceptualized the region as a whole. Avraham Sela's book originally dwells on the interactions between states and regional institutions in the context of the Arab-Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It justly presumes that states in the Middle East are juridical rather than empirical phenomenon (p. 4). However, it neglects to investigate how legal definitions of institutions enable to mobilize resources and generate order. Like previous studies Sela attributes significance to elite and their ability to construct states. State construction in the Middle East has been complementary and at the same time contradictory to Pan-Arabism.

A major avenue for states to cooperate and still to exist as separate entities was to externalize tensions towards the Israeli enemy. The book points to the way that Arab states have manipulated the Palestinian problem in order to pay lip service to Pan-Arabism. Hence, Arab regional system played as an institutional actor shaping inter-state relations and contributing to state formation. In the book words: "The common Arab commitment to the cause of Palestine represented both a substitute for the unattained vision of Pan-Arab unity and a continuation of the Arab struggle for national liberation from Western domination." (p. 27). While Sela contributes to the

literature a rather new insight regarding the institutional facet of Arab regionalism it reduces the compound Palestine conflict to a reflection of inter-Arab predicament. Such a view rather ignores cultural and historical developments in Palestine and the endogenous emergence of the Palestinian national movement. In that conjunction the eruption of the Intifada is conceived as the territorialization of the PLO in reaction to increasing state interests on the expense of Pan-Arab inclinations to foster the Palestinian cause (p. 30). Sela ignores, however, crucial endogenous variables- the severe deterioration in the conditions of Palestinians in the territories, and the damage inflicted upon human rights under prolonged military occupation.

The Arab-Israeli conflict was evolved as a symptom to regional inter-Arab aspirations for stability, and state's aspirations for domination. This explicates- as Sela claims- the historical evolution of the conflict since the Great Arab Revolt in 1936. However, obeying his own conception Sela neglects other crucial issues as the severe conflict over labor and land in Palestine in the 40s, which has contributed to the emergence of the brute strife between the two communities. While formally and legally Palestinians and Jews were separate, in practice a great deal of interactions occurred, a principal fact in the fabric of the Palestine conflict.

At the broader level, the book closely follows the struggles for state hegemony between Egypt, Iraq and Syria, Nasir's Pan-Arabism, and the way the Arab-Israeli conflict and primarily the Palestine conflict was used in order to serve those political interests. The book heavily concentrates on Arab summits, which were the main institution to foster cooperation among Arab states, and mirrored Arab cleavages.

Thus, the Egyptian failures in consolidating Egyptian led-coalition in the 60s led to the eruption of the 1967 war (pp. 85-93). Arab summits in the post-1967 period were a reflection of inter-Arab tensions, as the one between the peripheral oil producing countries, and the core resource-poor confrontation states like Egypt and Syria. Those important findings notwithstanding, the book fails to provide ample empirical evidence and theoretical exploration of regional institutionalization, which might have imposed upon different states, various modes of behavior (pp. 100-109).

The exploration of Nasir post-1967 policy and the road to the 1973 war is fascinating. The author denotes a decline in the Arab policy-making through institutionalized inter-Arab forums, and a departure from Pan-Arabism in favor of a more pragmatic cooperation, that produced more Arab and Palestinian prominence in international forums (pp. 111-150). This trend continued after the end of the 1973 war as was epitomized in the strategic alliance between Egypt and the USA. Algiers and Rabat summits established the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinians, a fact that became the only inter-Arab bone of consent (with the exception of Jordan) (pp. 165-170).

The inter-Arab solidarity, by and large, was in decline as reflected in the Lebanese civil war, the increasing polarization between Syria and Egypt, and the opposition to the Egypto-Israeli peace accord. Severe disagreements notwithstanding, Arab summits were the overall interpretative body regarding Arab core values, and the main mechanism of coordinating among rival states. The increase weight of state interests on the expense of regional Pan-Arabism was further expressed in Arab

reactions to the Gulf War and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Arab rulers reacted according to their particularistic interests, while ideological or inter-Arab unity was in clear decline (pp. 221-272). It was principally transparent during the Lebanon War due to Lebanon's immense fragility (p. 272). The same might be claimed as to the dwindling opposition in the Arab world to instrumental, utilitarian negotiations with Israel based on the concept of peace for territories. In the Arab summits following the Egypt-Israel peace accord Egypt was isolated, but it was gradually altered in the 80s, culminating in the Casablanca Summit in 1989 which decided on Egypt's full re-admittance to the Arab League.

While Sela does not specifically demonstrate how the institutionalized mechanisms of regional Arab arrangements have encouraged the acquiescence as to peace with Israel, he has documented such a trend. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was another prominent evidence of the fragmentation of the Arab world. Yet, the American-led coalition also demonstrated the increasing pragmatism and globalization of Arab states (p.332). Without those processes it is doubtful whether the Oslo accord would have been signed. The relative marginalization of the Palestinian problem in the Pan-Arab discourse, on the one hand, and the end of the Cold War accompanied by growing dependency on the USA, on the other hand, have generated the DOP.

Sela concludes that the transformation from Arab collectivity to state interests necessitated the normalization of the conflict with Israel (pp. 341-350). Yet, he admits that Pan-Arabism was always a symbol, not a concrete and autonomous political reality. What has been changed is not the nature of legal and political forums like the

Arab summits, but the nature of state interests as was reflected in Arab summits.

It is unclear, therefore, why the author claims that the Arab-Israeli conflict is in decline. Two issues that the book neglects to systematically explore are fundamentalism, and the possible use of non-conventional and nuclear weapons.

In order to grapple with those issues one need to better analyze the degree of institutionalization of international norms and rules in the region above the level of state interests. Have the Middle East countries internalized norms and rules, which sanctify modern collective values other than state survival and domination? This book deals with the stability seeking nature of most Arab countries but does not go further to explore processes of institutionalization of new norms and rules. My criticism notwithstanding, this is one of the best scholarly and superbly organized books written about the Arab Middle East, and it is a must for students of this region.