



Blind Spot: America and the Palestinians, from Balfour to Trump, by Khaled Elgindy. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019. 345 pages. \$25.99 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOSÉ S. VERICAT

There has never been a more pro-Israeli resident of the White House than Donald Trump. He is the latest link in a chain of U.S. executives who have leaned heavily toward Israel and have progressively denied Palestinians their most fundamental aspirations while stripping them of their basic rights. In this, his first publication of a full-length book, Khaled Elgindy chooses one specific aspect of the relation between the United States and the Palestinians to explain this historical process. The power asymmetry between Israel (with the blind support of the United States) and the Palestinians has been mentioned often as a key obstacle to resolving the

conflict but has probably never received such a thorough treatment as Elgindy's.

Blind Spot has been released when the so-called peace process appears to have reached its logical conclusion. The author traces a steady degradation of the conflict in which the United States has pushed Palestinians to make one concession after another, eroding time and again the basic framework of the conflict—first sidelining UN General Assembly Resolution 194 and Palestinian refugee rights, and then UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the “land-for-peace” formula (p. 250). He sees the reversals of U.S. policy on Jerusalem and refugees under Trump “not so much a ‘new approach’. . . as they [are] the culmination of the old approach” (p. 249).

The book offers a myriad of historical precedents to support its argument. The first part of *Blind Spot* is based on significant archival research, parsing individual testimonies from commissions of inquiry and committee hearings that reveal blind spots in the early years of the conflict (p. 23) and illustrate intense internal debates within U.S. executive and legislative branches, shedding light on deeply held biases. To dissect recent decades, he interviewed officials who were on the ground witnessing the impact of U.S. policies and could cut through

the tightly woven spin of U.S. administration spokespersons (p. 184). Elgindy himself served as an adviser to the Negotiations Support Unit of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from 2004–9 and was deeply involved in the Annapolis negotiations (2007–8).

The State Department cables describing the Nakba are noteworthy (pp. 48–52) because they illustrate how cognizant its officials were of the expulsion of Palestinians. Elgindy cites the then-U.S. consul general William Burdett reporting on Palestinians being “displaced either by force, or terrorism or hav[ing] fled because of their own fear” (p. 50). He discovers revealing pieces of data from later eras, noting, for example, that “it was not until May 1965, a few months after Fatah had officially launched the ‘armed struggle’ against Israel and six years after its formation, that U.S. analysts began to report on the group” (p. 66).

He weighs in on pivotal historical moments, such as the genesis of U.S.-PLO relations. He quotes formal State Department guidelines for dealing with the organization from March 1965 (p. 66) and shows that at first, “the PLO’s pariah status had little to do with terrorism or violence” but rather was entirely political (p. 67). Having said this, he picks his fights carefully and elsewhere endorses U.S. mainstream narratives unquestioningly. Though he consistently presents Yasir Arafat as a moderate among PLO rivals, he takes it as given that he used violence during the Second Intifada to put pressure on Israel (p. 170), when in fact it was for the most part beyond Arafat’s control. He presents Hamas quite plainly as an Iranian proxy (p. 202), caricaturing a movement that is deeply rooted in Palestinian history and society. He doesn’t nitpick the details of the Annapolis talks launched in November 2007 and takes at face value that the “negotiations were highly substantive” and “Ehud Olmert made a far-reaching proposal” (p. 3), failing to underline Olmert’s ambiguity over critical issues, as for example, what West Bank settlements were to be removed and whether the percentage he offered for withdrawal included settlements in East Jerusalem. On the section covering more recent events, Elgindy presents a lively analysis, yet he hesitates to draw conclusions given the freshness of the developments he is referring to.

This reviewer found a few microarguments where the writer’s train of thought appears to lack full articulation, but the book is rich in perfectly coined phrases deftly encapsulating a particular time period. His analysis of “Fayyadism” (pp. 223–26), including a particularly eloquent interview with former Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad (2007–13), stands out. His exposition of the debates around the road map for peace, “the only real attempt to update the [Oslo] process” (p. 212) and his critique of the Quartet (pp. 191–92) are equally perceptive. His summary of the Oslo Accords is lapidary: “The Oslo Accords, which laid out a detailed blueprint of the transition period without defining what it was transitioning to, produced very different expectations on each side” (p. 141).

Blind Spot offers a remarkable approach to the Palestinian search for historical agency, a fundamental quest of any colonized people. It examines in painstaking detail how Palestinians as the far weaker party have lacked agency and have been shortchanged at every step of the conflict.

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