

Dr. M. Shahid Alam is a Professor of Economics at Northeastern University, USA, and a public intellectual, recognised for his scholarly challenges against judgements on Islam in the mainstream Western intellectual circles and media. The Daily Star here prints, as a special, a review by Prof. Ahrar Ahmad of Dr. Alam's highly acclaimed book, "Israeli Exceptionalism: The Destabilizing Logic of Zionism."



AHRAR AHMAD

Dr. Shahid Alam is primarily an economist and an educator. But he is also a public intellectual, and often a lively polemicist, who writes with great insight and conviction on issues dealing with culture, identity, religion, globalisation, imperialism, and terrorism. But nothing stirs his passions as intensely as the issue of the Palestinians -- their dispossession, marginalisation, and anguish.

His feelings are ardent, his language combative, his intellectual engagement prickly and zealous. It is largely this pre-occupation that has earned him a place in David Horowitz's book on the Hundred Most Dangerous Academics in US (an ignominy that he probably wears as a badge of honour). His latest book distils, clarifies and deepens much of his previous thinking on Zionism, the creation of the state of Israel, and the injustices inflicted on the Palestinians.

The trope along which this book is organised is the concept of "exceptionalism" that is often claimed by the state of Israel, and sometimes by Jews themselves. To Alam this is nothing other than a rhetorical device, and a moral posture, to ensure the West's indulgence and support, to protect Israelis from any criticism, and exempt them from standards and behavioural norms that apply to other peoples.

This "exceptionalism" is derived from their Biblical covenants and the belief in their inherent "chosen-ness," their history of suffering and persecution, their considerable achievements in science, philosophy and philanthropy, and their current status as people allegedly besieged by Islamic fundamentalists, anti-Semitic bigots, and the barbaric and self-destructive Arabs.

To question anything about Israel is tantamount to denigrating every aspect of its special status.

But, perhaps, this sense of "exceptionalism" is buttressed most impressively by the incredible process through which the state of Israel came to being established. In just about 50 years (from the Basel Convention in 1897 to the declaration of independence by Israel in 1948), the Zionists took on insurmountable odds -- quelling Jewish sceptics both from the left and the right who challenged the idea of a Jewish state; gaining the acquiescence of European governments not known for their interest in, or support for, Jewish causes; convincing the Jewish diaspora to migrate to this inhospitable environment; and finally, constructing the institutional and attitudinal framework, and a military infra-structure, that would sustain a viable state.

The courage, vision, tenacity, energy, and discipline, the "audacious imagination," and indeed the sheerchutzpa of the Zionist project, provides a most compelling narrative of success and vindication. Even Alam is moved to admiration. However, one aspect of this endeavour is less uplifting, and more morally problematic -- the effect of all this on the Palestinians directly impacted by it.

Initially, the slogan "a land without a people for a people without land" was

skillfully employed to encourage Jews to migrate, and to allay western discomfort. Alas, as Alam points out insistently, this struggle for a Jewish homeland ignored the Arabs, who had been there for centuries, and who significantly exceeded the number of the migrated Jews there during the entire 50-year period.

In fact, even in 1948, they constituted almost two-thirds of the population, and occupied almost three-fifths of the land, in the mandate territories. Consequently, what the Zionist logic demanded was to delegitimise, indeed dehumanise, those Palestinians as nothing more than a pesky nuisance that merely complicated their own grand designs and obvious triumphs.

The Arabs were dismissed as people unworthy of basic human dignity, devoid of moral agency, and incapable of having nationalist aspirations. Herein lies one of the most poignant ironies in the modern era -- those who were not a nation (at least in Alam's telling), because of the "twin deficits" of lacking a land and a distinctive identity, became one, and the Palestinians who were a nation, or could have been one, were denied its full expression.

The fact that the Zionists believed in their national destiny and their entitlement to a land not legally theirs is not remarkable, but the way in which the Western world was snared into this myth, and ultimately became complicit in it, is nothing less than, well, "exceptional." Alam's blistering critique is levelled primarily at this aspect of the Zionist project.

That, of course, is not the only irony that was contained in this unfolding drama.

- There is the clear indication that Labour Zionism, which provided some of the earliest motivations of the movement, was inherently secular and progressive, but it had to hang its vision on a conservative religious limb in order to mobilise the faithful.
- There is the reality of brutal anti-Semitism, which ultimately led to the perverse horror of the Holocaust, as an essentially European practice, but it was the Arabs who were forced to pay.
- There is the idea that any Jewish person anywhere in the world has the "right of return" to the land of Israel they had never seen, but the displaced Palestinians who had lived there for generations cannot come back to their own houses.
- There is the undeniable truth that while the Jewish people had suffered the pangs of bigotry and humiliation grievously in history, and had usually been in the forefront in the struggle for justice and human rights in the world, may now themselves be treating others with unfairness and prejudice, and may be betraying many of their own ideals and commitments.
- There is the fact that the relationship between Christians and Jews, which had been far more awkward and conflicted both historically and scripturally, somehow, miraculously, became nuanced and supportive, while the relationship between Muslims and Jews, which had been marked by much greater understand-

ing and mutuality (which does not mean that there were never any misunderstandings or conflicts between them, but not on the order of magnitude, consistency or ferocity that divided the Jews and Christians), came to be viewed as entailing struggles which, ultimately, morphed into this supposedly inevitable "clash" between the forces of good (Jews and Christians) and evil (Muslims).

- There is the distinctively odd situation that the West's most powerful nations, particularly US, could be commandeered to serve Zionist purposes, in spite of the fact that it would go against American national interests, its foundational ethos, and

was not the chosen site for domicile, and there was very little movement for 1900 years to reclaim or resettle the Promised Land.

He also indicates that the 19th century was not one in which there was increased oppression of the Jews but, on the contrary, it was period in which their conditions had improved throughout Europe both in terms of economic prosperity and human rights (which does not mean that anti-Semitism had disappeared, but only that it had become moderated).

Thus, this narrative of "victimhood" that is usually presented as a proximate cause for the Zionist demand is probably misplaced. Even the profound inhuman-

However, the argument at the core of the book is that the creation of Israel heralded and cemented a most unlikely partnership between Western Christendom and Zionists because the Jews could have their land, the West would get rid of the Jews from their midst, and both would serve each other's needs. Israel would thus become a "surrogate" coloniser, and eventually present itself as a "strategic asset" in securing the interests of the West.

While colonial regimes crumbled everywhere after the Second World War, this was the last "exclusive settler colony" that would become the final bastion of Western presence "inserted into the heart of the Islamicate" (Alam's preferred terminology), and, therefore, having enjoyed a "privileged" status in Western post-colonial strategies and sensibilities.

Paradoxically, the success of the Zionist project was predicated on the presumption that it would generate Muslim resistance, and the more desperate and unruly the opposition got, the stronger the Zionist case would become, and the closer its relationship with Western Christendom.

Therefore, the creation of Israel not only generated some predictable tensions with the Arabs (over land, resources, control of Jerusalem, and so on), but it also set the stage for the wider conflicts to follow.

For Alam, the continuing and expanding permanent war that is being globally manifested today has its roots in the conflicts over Palestine/Israel in the early part of the 20th century, and in the "ethnic cleansing" that followed with the illegal and cruel occupation as the ultimate result.

Increasing Israeli oppression, and the increasingly radical, extreme and violent Muslim response it generated (it is not terrorism that resulted in the occupation, it was the occupation that provoked terrorism) are both symbiotically related in a self-reinforcing and constantly escalating stimulus-response mechanism that is dangerous not only for the region, but today also threatens the entire world.

The sub-title of Alam's book *The Destabilizing Logic of Zionism* becomes meaningful in this context, and also explains why he thinks that the creation of Israel entails a "tragedy."

Critics may point out that perhaps Alam paints with too broad a brush, and ignores various aspects of current realities. For example, it is uncomfortable but incontrovertible that more Muslims have been killed by other Muslims over the last 60 years than the total number of Muslims killed by Israel, America, or the West combined, and much of the Islamicate remains under arbitrary regimes ruling over unequal and unjust societies.

Much of this is independent of the Arab/Israeli conflict. Some degree of self-interrogation may have leavened his script. Moreover, while the syllogistic pattern he lays out in terms of the relationship between Zionism and Western Christendom is seductive, it imputes to the perpetrators a level of cunning and conspiracy that is of rather

spectacular proportions.

But, one is still not sure if the Jews were manipulating the West, or it was the other way around (and, if it was the latter then it would contradict his point that supporting Israel goes against the national interests of the West).

Finally, the last one-third of the book, in which he details the resources and techniques through which Zionist influences are manifested in the West, follows rather conventional patterns that have been traced by others (Mearsheimer and Walt, Petras, Finkelstein, and so on).

But, ultimately, this is a dark and pessimistic book. Alam contends that for the Zionists any prospect for peace (even the idea of a peaceful Arab or a peaceful Muslim) would be impossible to uphold, for it would jeopardise the entire intellectual edifice of the Zionist project which is constructed around the concept of the "dreadful Other," and would affect the partnerships that sustain it.

One is not sure that Alam himself has not become victim to the apocalyptic vision propagated by the Zionists, and hence has become blinded by its own vicious logic. It is worth noting that even in the Zionist world there are voices of dissent raised by people like Uri Avnery, Avi Shlaim, Amos Elon, Amos Oz, Neve Gordon, Avishai Margalit, or even Justice Goldstone, organisations like B'tselem or Peace Now, "new historians" like Benny Morris (in his earlier incarnation), Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev, and Simha Flapan, newspapers like Haaretz and others, that frequently, often stridently, challenge the policies and the "logic" of Zionist excesses (in a way that the American media would not dare).

The zero-sum calculations of Alam force him into an intellectual cul-de-sac from which there is neither any escape, nor any hope. The expectation that Israel will "wither away" (a rather infelicitous expression) in the face of internal pressures, losing the demographic battle with the Palestinians, loss of nerve among its leadership, and its inability to defeat Hamas and Hezbollah, appears to be thinking that is more wishful than objective.

Israel can no more be unmade than Manhattan returned to the Native Americans, or have Pakistan incorporated into India. This is not defeatism. It is simply a way to reconcile current realities with future possibilities.

There is no doubt that many will consider the book to be controversial, and most will consider it provocative. Nobody will think it as un-interesting or irrelevant. It is novel in insights, keen in analysis, and sharp in its language. The dominant discourse in the West, certainly in US, about the Arab-Israeli conflict is usually simplistic, often cowardly, and almost always tendentious.

Alam's counter-narrative, in spite of its indignant tone and grim prognosis, is a brave and bracing antidote to much mainstream blather on the subject.

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Israeli Exceptionalism
The Destabilizing Logic of Zionism
M. Shahid Alam



its democratic instincts. Exceptional, indeed!

Alam explores many of these issues in his book. He is particularly strong in the early chapters in which he dissects the emergence and progress of the Zionist enterprise. He de-bunks several "myths." For example, he points out that while there has been a consistent Jewish presence in Palestine, it had been rather meagre -- in 1530 only 5,000 out of a population of 157,000, and in 1800 only 7,000 out of 275,000.

Many cities in the Arab world contained more Jews than that (p.52). Between 1882 and 1914, while 75,000 Jews migrated to Palestine, more than 1.7 million left Europe for US. Thus, while Zion may have been the emotional centre of the Jewish spiritual universe, it

ity of the Holocaust could not be claimed as a basis for seeking this new state, because the foundations of the Israeli nation/state had been established before that horrific event.

Alam's point is that it was their enhanced sense of power and influence, and the enormous growth of the Jewish population in Europe -- from 1700 to 1900 world population grew at a factor of 2.7, European population at 3.3, but the Jewish population increased almost 10 fold (p.83) -- that provided the movement with the confidence, the numerical strength, and the resources to pursue its colonial aims.

The demand for Israel did not issue from the depth of desperation and weakness, but from their own perception of potential and possibility.

