

PALESTINE

EDITED REFLECTIONS 1944-54



Michel Chiha



Palestine in Perspective

By Kate Parker

IN THE English speaking world Michel Chiha remains relatively unknown. A panel comprised of HE Michel Eddé (former Chairman of the Maronite League), Chris Doyle (Council for Arab-British Understanding), Professor Samir Khalaf (American University of Beirut) and Eugene Rogan (St Anthony's College, Oxford University) celebrated the publication of Chiha's *Palestine: Political Reflections, 1945-1954*.

The book is a selection of Chiha's reflections on what he calls the "moral bankruptcy" of the partition of Palestine and its global impact. His editorials chronicle not only his frustration but also stand as a record of his vision of what would follow.

Emotive and in parts provocative, his writings reflect his belief in the merits of a diverse society. As founder of the Lebanese constitution, which was built firmly on a desire to accommodate Lebanon's different groups, Chiha was profoundly shocked by the logic behind the creation of the state of Israel and this is reported in his book.

Doyle notes in the foreword to this edition that Chiha belongs to those Arabs whose thoughts and visions should have been "top-table reading" for Western policy makers. Yet many of the latter consider the term "Arab intellectual" something of an oxymoron. Chiha made prophetic warnings about the partition of Palestine and his successors later warned against the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Chiha's perspective

Chiha saw a hundred year war as a likely outcome of the partition of Palestine: sixty of those years have already passed. Chiha stated on 5 December 1947 that the "decision to partition Palestine by creating the Jewish state is one of the most serious mistakes in contemporary politics...[It] will have its part to play in shaking the world to its foundations" (p. 58).

In the introduction, Khalaf points to Chiha's argument that the state of Israel was born out of other people's suffering. On 5 December 1947, Chiha noted that "under the pretext of providing a home for a wandering race ... what do we see but other peoples' homes shaken, threatened or destroyed, and Jewish sovereignty set up ... at the cost of geographical disintegration and unparalleled arbitrariness" (pp. 58-59).

Chiha observed that Palestine was simply not big enough to house even one tenth of the world's Jewish population, who would be packed into Palestine "like sardines in a tin" (30 April 1947, p. 41).

But his account is not purely a criticism of Zionism: he also decried

the morally incongruous behaviour of the USA and also recognised what Khalaf describes as the "lethargy" of the Arabs (March 1951, p. 116).

Chiha's ideas also moved on as time went on. By the 1950s he recognised that Israel needed to be accepted within its borders. He accepted that Arabs had to look to the possibility rather than the impossibility of peace (p. 168). Chiha distinguishes between Judaism and Zionism. Peace with former is attainable but the latter is a different species (Khalaf, p. 20).

Sixty years on

In many ways, the situation now is worse than Chiha predicted.

The facts speak for themselves. As Doyle pointed out, in 1998, 20% of Palestinians were living below the poverty line. By 2007, this figure had shot up to 87%. UNWRA provided aid to 11,000 Palestinians in 2001 and by 2007 was providing aid to over a million. Settlements, the wall, blockades and house demolitions all negate basic rights of human survival. In addition, Ehud Olmert demanded at Annapolis that the Palestinians recognise Israel as a 'Jewish' state, a demand which does not leave room for a Lebanese style solution to the conflict as Chiha had hoped for.

Critical reflections

In some ways, Chiha's thoughts come across as outrage more than balanced thought, as Rogan commented. The grounds for this are self evident but Chiha does on occasion revert to Zionism as a conspiracy theory. Naming Jews as conspirators is clearly problematic. If his work is viewed within its historical context of colonial occupation then this can be understood. However, this could easily be misconstrued.

Why read it today?

Despite these criticisms, the book still provides a worthy and insightful first hand account of the Arab reaction to the establishment of the state of Israel in the shadow of European colonialism.

The book is polemical and provocative, but nevertheless enlightening.

Palestine: Political Reflections 1945-54, by Michel Chiha, is published by Stacey International, 2008. Price: £25.00.

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