
The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy, the 2006-2007 article / book by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt became both a cause célèbre and a controversial incursion into the everyday, taken-for-granted assumptions of contemporary Middle Eastern politics. Mearsheimer and Walt knew what they were getting themselves into when they argued for a perspective on US-Israel relations that did not mask the special relationship between the two nations. In contrast Heroes and Martyrs offers a quotidian rendering of everyday Palestinian aspirations which is a secret to almost nobody. While Mearsheimer and Walt's evidentiary approach was stunningly direct in its criticism of the Israeli lobby, pointing out its poisoning impact on US political life and culture, Heroes and Martyrs shows that Palestinians comprehend the challenges of facing up to the great powers. The result of Mearsheimer and Walt's book was outright opposition, ridicule, threats to their professional and personal well-being and intense scrutiny, all of which became part of an animated public discourse.

Why is this important? It is because their truth-telling refused to pretend that the liberal smoke screens of media coverage of Palestine could be sustained. Their book represented a moment that one hopes will come to be seen as the time when the story of Palestine and Palestinians began to be fully exposed to public scrutiny.

Mearsheimer and Walt offered a fresh perspective on terrorism. Their working definition and critique of the prevailing view of terrorism set the stage for my own reading of Heroes and Martyrs:

Terrorism is not an organization or a movement of even an “enemy” that one can declare war on; terrorism is simply the tactics of indiscriminately attacking enemy targets – especially civilians – in order to sow fear, undermine morale, and provoke counterproductive reactions from one's adversary. It is a tactic that many different groups sometimes employ, usually when they are much weaker than their adversaries and have no good option for fighting against superior military forces. Zionists used terrorism when they were trying to drive the British out of Palestine and establish their own state – for example, by bombing the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1948, among other acts … (pp. 62-63).

That two established US academics would adopt such a position suggests that a change is underway in the flow of information about Palestine and Israel. To read Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine after The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy was a way of preparing for the perspective that is in tune with the shifts in coverage of Palestinian culture.
As its title suggests, Laleh Khalili’s study examines the variety of methods of commemoration that have emerged in and around the Palestinian community in greater Palestine. But a full engagement with terror was not what Khalili’s book offered. This was a disappointment given that Mearsheimer and Walt established a new baseline for a political debate about national struggles in the Middle East. Curiously, there’s not so much about Israel in *Martyrs and Heroes*, which means that there is little about the “collective punishment” of Palestinians by Israel and more about the structuration of Palestinian responses to their struggle for a homeland. This makes the book appealing because it refuses to operate along the singular trajectory of Israel’s wrongs and search for explanations about the Palestinian national question within a finely grained assessment of everyday life in the Palestinian communities that are spread around the Middle East. For a scholar to take cultural studies into this terrain is of course to do exactly what cultural studies should do in its finest political moments: identify the way the cause of justice can be identified and constituted in specific national contexts.

The challenge is to document a case that pursues justice, without falling into the ideological jaws that dominate popular discourse with negative narratives of Palestinian life. And it is not only popular discourse. Academic work, even within cultural studies, provides no guarantee that justice for Palestinians will be pursued in the face of a constant barrage of statements that demonize Palestinians and Arabs in general. This is why Mearsheimer and Walt’s book was a circuit breaker – it offered a sympathetic perspective from within establishment universities in the US – Harvard and Chicago – throwing caution to the wind in order to tell the truth.

Khalili accepts what I characterize as the “justice challenge” of cultural studies in the extensive interviews and first-hand observations she used to collect information for the book. At times this seems to have been personally risky and there are times when the degradation and apparent hopelessness of refugee camps seem to lift off the pages.

The sobering story of Palestinian cultural survival is well conveyed through the claims that are made by different stakeholders in the story. And what a diversity of stakeholders there is at work in making the Palestinian nation, including the contemporary ones with which most well informed Middle East watchers would be aware – the PLO and Yasser Arafat, Abu Nidal, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps in Lebanon, and so on.

Fundamentally, Khalili sets out to explain how a narrative of nationhood is embedded in the cultural artifacts of everyday life for Palestinians. This is a daunting task which is not always effectively conveyed in line with Khalili’s