



**Amos Elon.** *A Blood-Dimmed Tide: Dispatches from the Middle East.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 332 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10742-6.



**Reviewed by** Zouhair Ghazzal (Loyola University Chicago)

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## The Future of Zionism

It is no secret that Theodor Herzl's *Judenstaat* (1896)—“a country for Jews,” rather than the more familiar “Jewish state” as proposed by Amos Elon (p. 132)—preached for a secular Jewish nationalism in which religion would play only a minor if not ambiguous role. Herzl was indeed no great champion of religion and was neither interested in ancient Judaism as such nor in its more modern nineteenth-century messianic evolution. Herzl was in fact thinking more in terms of a practical solution to anti-Semitism in both eastern and central Europe, even though the distinction between the two Europes (supposing he was aware of the political implications of such a distinction) did not seem to have mattered that much to him; nor did he operate between various brands of nationalisms for that matter. In addition, he was also thinking of the urgent need for a territorial state to the Jews of the world, which all by itself would be enough a measure to contain anti-Semitism. Zionism thus became the de facto ideology of the secular Jews who were looking for territorial nationalism as a way out to anti-Semitism.

In fact, Herzl's nationalism probably owed much more to the state formations of the large empires of

eastern Europe than to the nation-states of central Europe. Thus, in the nationalistic tradition of the large empires and in particular the Austrian-Hungarian empire to which Herzl belonged, the full integration of all citizens on the basis of a combination of political, linguistic, and territorial loyalties was not expected. This seems to have been the luxury of the ruling Austrian-Hungarian elite (or Russian in the case of the Russian empire, or the Turkish ruling elite of the Ottoman empire), while the other dominated ethno-linguistic-religious groups were only supposed to manifest their overt “loyalty” to the ruling group polity, while maintaining their internal cohesiveness on their own (by means of their own patriarchal and authoritarian social structures).

It is no surprise therefore to realize that the bulk of Russian and east European Jewish immigrants (among them Ben-Gurion) were the ones who felt the most at home in Herzl's secular nationalism—but the ultra orthodox pious Hasidic Jews had their roots in eighteenth-century eastern Europe too, and they were among those who were overall not terribly excited about Zionism. The group of immigrants commonly referred to as the

Ashkenazim—the Western Jews—and who worked out the association between socialism and secular Zionism were to dominate the Israeli political scene from 1948 and for three consecutive decades. In fact, it was only the election of 1977 that brought Labor down, and Menahem Begin, then at the head of the Likud, became prime minister. Since then, the Israeli political scene has proved even more uncertain, with the popularity of the two biggest parties wavering to the benefit of much smaller radical parties making their way to the Knesset and forcing coalitions with Labor and the Likud, and thus imposing their will on Israeli politics.

It is the ambition of Amos Elon's *A Blood-Dimmed Tide* to cover this post-1977 complex Israeli political scene and analyze how it changed lately with the advent of the peace process and its stumbling. The book is drafted in the form of "dispatches"—twenty-one in total, ranging from such diverse topics as the six-day war, a portrait of Moshe Dayan, visits to Egypt and Alexandria, the intifada, a meeting with Arafat in Tunis, and, of course, the aftermath of the Oslo agreements. The book borrows its title from the seventh dispatch, a reflection on the non-charismatic but ambitious Shimon Peres who for a long time "has been looking for his main chance" (p. 103) and seems to have always missed it. The dispatches, originally published between 1967 and 1995, were mostly aimed at the American audiences of *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*.

What brings all twenty-one dispatches (or chapters) in the book together into a coherent whole is probably a single concern (even though Elon does not explicitly state his problematic as such): What is the status of present day Zionism, and what significance should be attributed to the process of fragmentation of Israeli society? Such concerns are probably best expressed in Elon's lengthy introduction, which attempts to bring coherence to the chapters that follow. Elon looks at Zionism with a tragic irony: now that Zionism has "successfully achieved most of its purposes," it has become "in its current interpretation by nationalist hardliners and religious fundamentalists" a stumbling block towards peace (p. 2). In short, the problem with Zionism is that it has become a "state-ideology," and, paraphrasing Karl Kraus, one which could eventually gravitate toward war.

Looking back at the historical roots of Zionism (a fancier term for "Jewish Nationalism"), Elon sees its success partly in "that there was little evidence of Arab nationalism before 1908, and none at all of a specific Arab-Palestinian variety" (p. 3). The date here seems to re-

fer to a "national" Turkish elite movement known as the Committee of Union and Progress (C.U.P.): having for the first time in Ottoman history explicitly prompted a movement of "Turkification" within the empire, it is generally thought that, within the Arab provinces, a de facto counter-movement of "Arab nationalism" slowly established itself (George Antonius coined the term "Arab awakening" while others described it as a continuation of the *nahda*, a Renaissance movement of the mid-nineteenth century). The problem, however, in such sweeping generalizations regarding the birth of "nationalisms" within a fragmented Ottoman empire is that ambiguous social movements, which erupted at a time of harsh economic and political conditions, are often described in parallel terms to western movements of a totally different nature. Thus Elon does no better than Arab and Palestinian historians, among others, who would like to see "nationalist" movements at any price. (A great deal of research has been completed on the Arab side precisely to show that the Zionist claims, on the non-availability of forms of nationalism among Arabs, as totally unfounded.) Thus, having declared that "Zionism was a resorgimento for Jews," Elon then states that "Zionism was part of the final wave of liberal European nationalism" (p. 12). The problem, however, is that when Zionism becomes purely and simply assimilated to a phenomenon with long and complex "European" roots, its utility as a concept loses a great deal of its significance. It is indeed my intention to argue that the concept of "nationalism," to be of any use in a Middle Eastern context, needs to be narrowed down to its basic—originally, European—constituents: civil society, individual "rights," separation of powers, the public sphere, the rule of law, and the role of the state.

The notion of "nation"/"nationhood" that emerged in nineteenth-century Europe was the outcome of political concepts partly derived from the British and French revolutions. At its most basic level, nationhood implied territorial and/or linguistic integration. Such an assimilation, however, implied a Hobbesian covenant in which the newly formed "citizens" be granted individual "rights" for having delegated to the state the right to monopolize violence. Such a contract—the basis of civil society—legally protects individuals from the coerciveness and abuse of state institutions, and guarantees—at least formally—the rule of law. Thus, besides what the dichotomy state/civil society implies, civil society is "a society of individuals" to be integrated on the basis of subjects whose individual rights are mutually recognized. To be sure, this was no easy process, and the assimilation of "minority groups"

(e.g. the Jews and Protestants in France) led to xenophobia and anti-Semitism, while the legal and political fiction of “individual rights,” and the gradual dissolution of privileged groups and classes into the common bourgeois melting pot, led in turn to fascist and proto-fascist movements in Europe.

Since then, “nationalism” has been associated with all kind of linguistic-religious-ethnic movements claiming some form of territorial sovereignty. Such a generalization, however, proves confusing unless the essential questions are genuinely posed: What kind of “civil society” do such nationalist movements assume? What is the status of the individual in society? Are individual rights granted? Such questions prove to be crucial because many of the so-called “nationalist” movements in eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere in the world, have bypassed individual rights, the rule of law, and a truly democratic public sphere.

As noted earlier, Elon only alludes to the difficulties facing Zionism—or, rather, of what Zionism has become at the turn of the twenty-first century. Having metamorphosed into a state-ideology, Zionism now runs the risk of promoting the collective rights of the Jewish people over individual rights, and of protecting the (Jewish) state over the autonomy of civil society. Consider, for example, what Elon refers to as “the deepening gulf between the legal Israel and the real Israel” (p. 132): more concretely, Elon is referring to the gulf between cities like Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv. Thus, while Tel-Aviv is often described as “the gate of modernity” (*The Economist*, April 25, 1998, survey, p. 18), Jerusalem, in contrast, bustles with orthodox Jews making their way to or from synagogue. In short, “the Sabbath in Haifa and Tel-Aviv today is much as it is in any European or North American city” (p. 132). To be sure, in a relatively new society composed mainly of successive wave of immigrants, such divisions are to be expected: Arabs and Jews, Ashkenazim and Sepharadim, Haredim and secular Jews, to name only a few of the main divisions. The point here is that over the years not only such divisions have tended to manifest themselves more overtly, but more importantly, some new ambiguous ones have developed. One such case in point are the immigrants from the ex-Soviet Union: with more than 700,000 since 1989, and now amounting to more than 15 percent of the population, those immigrants have created their own autonomous party in the 1996 elections (the Yisrael Ba’aliyah, 7 out of the 120 Knesset seats). Moreover, with the Israeli system of proportional representation giving full political representation to any small group, both Likud and Labor saw their seats de-

clining. Coalition governments are now the norm rather than the exception.

Such divisions, eventually leading to a tribalization of Israeli political life, similar in some respects to its Arab neighbors, do not, however, solely operate on notions of territorial gains, for territory is usually the means rather than the end. Different groups fight for their own selfish interests, and, now that the Zionist ideology has been fully actualized, the common target is the state rather than any (real or fictitious) territory. Consider, for example, the public embarrassment that each group of squatters causes to the state, and how much the state is weakened by such actions, a phenomenon which Elon describes so well and reduces to four major steps (p. 66): (1) a fact is established with the squatters imposing themselves on the ground; (2) a compromise comes through whereby the squatters agree to “temporarily” “vacate whatever spot they have occupied;” (3) “The government which first claimed to oppose the settlement, now gives in to these pressures;” and, finally, (4) “Land [is] seized for “security“ reasons [and] turned over to the housing ministry.”

My point is that when all kinds of independent groups and individuals impose their will on the state, a host of consequences are sure to follow: (1) the question to be posed in this context is what has become of “civil society” when the state consumes its energies in managing the affairs of conflicting groups acting on their own; (2) when autonomous groups impose their will on the state (and hence on other groups), the unlawful becomes lawful; state polity is then fated to be articulated on a piecemeal basis, and the state surrenders itself to an internal game of wicked politics rather than to the rule of law. In other words, the major weakness of Zionism as “territorial nationalism” has become even more apparent in the last two decades (since Labor lost its long established monopoly over Israeli politics and society). Having favored territory over civil society, the very foundations of Israeli state and society have thus become even more problematic, and the big risk now is indeed the future of democracy altogether. Elon does point out to a “decline in democratic values” (p. 129) in particular among the young and teenagers (p. 107), but he does not address the issue forcefully enough.

Interestingly, and in spite of a large gap in living conditions, some of the essential problems in Israeli society are becoming remarkably similar to those of its Arab neighbors. For one thing, the surrounding Arab states share in common authoritarian structures whose power-

relations render it difficult, if not impossible, to construct a civil society along the lines outlined above. Even a distinction between state and civil society becomes difficult to operate since the state is literally eaten by sectarian conflicts and the like. In the case of the Palestinian National Authority (P.N.A.), not only a radical Islamic movement like Hamas succeeds in establishing itself as a “society” within the broader Palestinian “civil society,” but even the groups now in support of Arafat and the P.N.A. could eventually fragment into competing factions for obvious reasons. As for Syria, Elon seems certain that “the remaining issues with Syria are more ‘normal’ problems of neighboring states: borders and water resources” (p. 5). I doubt, however, that a society with a per-capita gross domestic product of around \$1,200 (compared to \$17,000 for Israel), and suffering with internal unsafety (to say the least) would be mainly worried about territorial issues—what if the territorial issue is used for other purposes?

Yet, despite all the problems one could foresee, Elon sounds globally optimistic. Not only does he look favorably, albeit with few reservations, at the peace process, but he even postulates post-Zionism as a possible future ideology of the Jewish state. This newly professed after-Zionism “reflects a desire to move ahead to a more Western, more pluralistic, less ‘ideological’ form of patriotism and of citizenship” (p. 11). In Elon’s understanding, post-Zionism even perceives the Law of Return as having become redundant (p. 18). The Jewish state would then become fully secular and would cease to be “Jewish”; citizenship would be granted on the basis of need and merit, and no ethno-religious group would be privileged. Citizens would be finally looked upon as individuals with rights rather than subjects of ethno-religious groups, and they would all be assimilated on this basis. Needless to

say, such a project derives its main impulse from Western notions of the subject, civil society, and democracy. Elon looks at such a possibility as the logical conclusion of early Zionism—even though the early Zionists had never foreseen this. In a fully secular state, as in all Western democracies, there would still be a dominant group with few privileges, and the Jews in this scenario are expected to become the Israeli wasp, but the other less privileged groups would nevertheless fight their rights on the basis of some “affirmative action” principle.

I see two major problems facing the full secularization scenario: (1) Would it be possible for Israeli society to evolve on its own and independently from the problems facing the neighboring Arab states?, and (2) Can a move towards post-Zionism effectively take place without a radical critique of Zionism—a critique more radical than what Elon has attempted, and that looks at the serious shortcomings of Zionism with a cool eye—in particular the emphasis on territoriality and on secular Judaism over civil society, individual rights, and the rule of law.

Elon’s *Blood-Dimmed Tide* definitely suffers serious shortcomings on both counts: Elon can neither fully assess the impact of neighboring societies with authoritarian power-relations and mostly state controlled economies, nor can he see the importance of the damage created by all kinds of groups within Israeli society whose actions are slowly dismantling state authority and the civil society that made it possible. Old Zionism might be breeding a divided society along weakly integrated power-relations.

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