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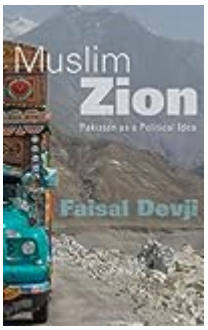

Faisal Devji. *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 288 pp. $21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-07267-1.

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Though much has been written on the subject, the nature of âPakistan as a political ideaâ remains a subject of wide interest and controversy. Faisal Devjiâs aim in this study is two-fold: first, to bring the subject of Pakistanâs meaning solidly within the realm of serious intellectual history, and second, to do so by mobilizing specifically the concept of âMuslim Zionâ as a frame for doing this. As he explains his usage of the term, âZion serves to name a political form in which nationality is defined by the rejection of an old land for a new, thus attenuating the historical role that blood and soil play in the language of Old World nationalismâ (p. 3). Devji thus provides a very distinctive frame for thinking about the nature of Pakistan as a national idea. In the process, he gives us a book that is both engaging and very strange: brilliant, self-absorbed, and deeply troubling by turns. Indeed, the book provides an occasion for thinking not only about the âidea of Pakistan,â but about the role of intellectual history in the writing of the history of the subcontinent more broadly.

Devjiâs guiding argument is that the âidea of Pakistanâ can be compared with the idea of Israel as a type of âZion,â an idealized national homeland. Exploring the thought of a number of thinkers, Devji traces the emergence of the idea of a Muslim homeland as a new type of entity, its attraction lying precisely in its projection of the nation as a pure *idea*, transcending and negating the specificities of history and geography. Devjiâs specific comparisons to Jewish Zionism, and to the creation of Israel, are used to highlight the critical international context for such ideas. Though he notes a few important, concrete references to Zionism in the models appealed to by Indian Muslim leaders in the twentieth century (notably in the writings of the Aga Khan), Devjiâs invocation of Zionism is far less important as a specific model for Pakistan than it is in calling attention to the critical context for the Pakistan idea defined by the broad intellectual currents of the early twentieth century, an era when empires were under challenge, yet remained a powerful model, shaping a variety of explorations in new political forms. This is, perhaps, the greatest contribution of Devjiâs book.

But the value of Devjiâs book is at the same time severely diminished (in my view fatally diminished) by his own self-conscious refusal to link this intellectual history seriously to the politics of the era that produced it. Devji explicitly proclaims as a virtue his own lack of interest in such politics, that is, in what ââactuallyââ happened in the run-up to Pakistanâs creation. âI am interested,â he says, âin the forms of argumentation and lines

of reasoning that both transcend and survive such intentionality [by which he means the âmotivesâ and âintentionsâ of groups and individuals] to shape the prose of historyâ (p. 9). It is as if Devji wishes to emulate in his own work the stance of those who projected Pakistan as an idea transcending politics and geography (and seemingly human âintentionalityâ). While the book thus gestures in its references to Zionism to a broader international political context for the Pakistan idea (a worthy goal), it in fact makes virtually no effort to provide material for any serious comparison of Israelâs and Pakistanâs creations as historical events, or even of the roles that ideologies and ideas played in relation to those events. The title âMuslim Zionâ serves far more as a provocative teaser than as a frame for serious historical analysis of the comparison it implies.

No doubt there is some attention in the book to the structural background to colonial politics in British India (through a discussion of the well-trodden stories of âminorityâ politics, census numbers, and separate electorates). In practice, Devji is hardly as totally inattentive to historical causes as he makes himself out to be. But he pays scant attention to the political dialogue shaping relations and divisionsâand competing ideasâamong Indiaâs Muslims (apart from some intriguingâbut overstatedâobservations on the prominent roles of Shias and Shiism in the Pakistan ideaâs conception). Indeed, he seems to be self-consciously dismissive of virtually everything that has previously been written on such politics, apparently because such work is too concerned, as he puts it, with the âcausal relationship between interests, ideas and events,â which Devji proclaims himself not to be (pp. 8, 246). This is evident, to take just one example, in his treatment of the scholarly work on Muhammad Ali Jinnahâs conception of the Pakistan idea by the historian Ayesha Jalal. Devji is hardly the first to notice the highly idealized (and geographically unmoored) character of the Pakistan demand. Jalalâs book on Jinnah as âsole spokesmanâ underscored Jinnahâs imagination of a unified Muslim community that transcended any concrete geographical mooring, thus distinguishing it from the geographically bounded Pakistan that finally emerged. But for Devji, Jalalâs exploration of Jinnahâs âmotivesâ in framing the Pakistan idea in this way, which were linked to the ongoing structures and conflicts of contemporary politics, amounts to something appropriate only to those mired in the âconspiratorial nature of political thoughtâ in Pakistan (p. 7). Any attention to âinterestsâ and âmotivesâ, he astonishingly implies, can only be seen as an invitation to hidden conspiracy theories, and ought to have no place in serious intellectual history.

Devjiâs book certainly provokes thought. He asks critical and challenging questions in many parts of the book that force rethinking of the Pakistan idea as it operated in the thinking of a range of different thinkers. But his style is one that largely operates by exposing the unexpected and contradictory in the thinkers he considers rather than by analyzing the historical groundings of their thinking. His most memorable passages are ones in which he identifies the unexpected meanings associated with the Pakistan idea by men like Jinnah and Muhammad Iqbal and then uses such associations to open the idea itself to rethinking. Jinnah, he thus notes, though projecting himself as the leader of the Muslim community, hardly identified with Muslims in âany conventional sense, and even seems to have disliked and had contempt for themâ (p. 145). His style of leadership was marked, Devji argues, by improbable satanic associations, linked to his steadfastness and negation, his refusal to accept the normal constraints of politics, and his âsatanic solitude,â which gave the âPakistan ideaâ many of its distinctive ahistorical, apolitical features (pp. 144-48). Similar contradictions marked the rhetorical positions of Iqbal in Deviâs account, among them Iqbalâs unexpected invocation of Shia themes, âperhaps because he realized the fundamental Shia character of modern Islam as a categoryâ (p. 222). Perhaps. These are intriguing speculations about Jinnahâs and Iqbalâs thinking, but they are of course assertions of a sort that can in no way be proved. Devji uses them to surprise and engageâand prompt new questionsâoften in a virtuoso rhetorical style.

As a historical account of âPakistan as a political idea,â however, the book is not only disappointing, but even, in a few respects, insidious. This is perhaps most evident in the bookâs implications for thinking about the different meanings that the âPakistan ideaâ may have held in the Muslim-minority provinces that remained in India as contrasted with the Muslim-majority provinces that came to constitute the new Pakistan. Analysis of the differing implications of the âPakistan ideaâ for Muslims within these contexts has of course long been a preoccupation of historical work (including that of Jalal) and there is perhaps no cause for Devji to dwell on such questions at length. But, in Devjiâs account, such questions are not only given short shrift as a dynamic element in shaping the Pakistan ideaâs âactualâ evolution in India, but they are treated almost as an unfortunate distraction in the process of framing Pakistan as a âMuslim Zion,â the vision of a radically new and socially un-

moored homeland. The result is that, without actually addressing the issue, Devjiâs account comes very close to implying that the Pakistan project was *entirely* a project of those outside what became Pakistan, who projected it on a ânewâ land. There is, no doubt, a grain of truth to the story that support for the Pakistan idea came late to the Muslim-majority areas, particularly to the Punjab (pp. 45-46). But it is important to note that this is only a *grain* of truth, for support in Bengal came earlier, and without eventual support in the Punjab Pakistan would never have been created. To see the âPakistan ideaâ as the projection of a ânewâ homeland, a âMuslim Zionâ detached from history and geography, while ignoring almost entirely the politics and ideas of thinkers from the areas that ultimately became part of the new country (as Devji does) leaves an impression of the Pakistan movement that could only be characterized as bizarre. Pakistan was of course nothing like Israel in this particular respect, for the areas that became Pakistan were already occupied by tens of millions of the Muslims in whose name the state was created. That these may have been viewed by some Pakistan ideologues of the new state as not fully developed as Muslims is of course a subject that some historians have explored. But to ignore this population and their own thinking about the meaning of Pakistan, while projecting the story as one of a Muslim Zion, like a settler colony, amounts almost to historical erasure, and with profound implications for how we think about Pakistanâs subsequent history.

In the end, however, the most important issues raised by Devjiâs book are not so much about the nature of the Pakistan idea as about the nature of intellectual history itself (or, to put it in a different way, the modern history of ideas). Devjiâs technique is to trace the inner logic and contradictions in the writings and speeches of a range of historical figures as they developed the âidea of Pakistan.â The history of the particular form of âMuslim nationalismâ that produced Pakistan, thus âends with Pakistanâs founding, its anti-historical and anti-geographical themes leading a life there that is disconnected from any coherent political projectâ (p. 248). In highlighting this, he focuses on what was undoubtedly a very important strand in the conception and development of Pakistan, which Devji is hardly the first historian to identify. But his account is important in giving a fuller and more sustained treatment of this central strand in the meaning of Pakistan than in any previous account.

Yet what sort of treatment do we get and what context is provided for it? His technique is largely to confront ideas through their inner essences, made manifest through their juxtapositions and contradictions, rather than through their connections to the politics of the societies in which they appear or, by and large, through their intersections with other ideas with which they are in interaction. The idea of Pakistan as a âMuslim Zionâ is thus one that is largely abstracted from narratives of Pakistanâs historyâa history that Devji admits to finding âtediousâ (p. 244). As the emergence and career of the âPakistan ideaâ is undoubtedly one important not only to the story of Pakistan, but also to the history of the Indian subcontinent more broadlyâand indeed to the history of Muslims in the modern worldâthe nature of the writing of its intellectual history should give historians pause.

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