

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

September 22, 2015

Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Gaza: A History*, trans. John King, Oxford University Press, 2014, 440 pp., \$29.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780190201890.

The distinguished French historian, Jean-Pierre Filiu has produced a magisterial overview that recounts the ebb and flow of Gaza's fortunes from ancient times up through the present. Although a member of the faculty of Sciences Po in Paris, Filiu is not a typical academic historian, having earlier served as a diplomat in Jordan, Syria, and Tunisia, published two novels, and even written popular songs, including one devoted to Gaza. Filiu's pedigree training and scholarly contribution have earned him a deserved reputation as one of the world's leading Arabists, and someone particularly expert on political trends in contemporary Islam. He has published several well-regarded books on the Middle East including *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (2011) and *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadist Legacy* (2015). The latter book poses the haunting question as to whether the political destiny of the peoples in the Middle East is to remain entrapped in the ongoing struggle between tyrannical leaders and Muslim fanatics. More than most commentators on the regional developments, Filiu perceptively realized that the democratizing hopes of the "Arab Spring" in 2011 would be short lived, and likely would be soon overwhelmed by a variety of counterrevolutionary forces intent on restoring an authoritarian *status quo ante*, however high the costs of doing so. The main motive of these counterrevolutionary elites was to avoid the twin fates of secular democracy and radical Islam.

Filiu's authoritative treatment of Gaza starts with a useful background summary of its role as a trading center in the ancient world of the Middle East with a past traced back to the Hyksos people of the eighteenth century BCE. Readers are helpfully informed that Gaza, situated between Sinai and Negev Deserts and the Mediterranean Sea, became a major site of struggle for warring neighbors over the long arc of history, including Egyptian pharaohs, Persian kings, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Fatimids, Mamluks, Crusaders, and Ottomans. Filiu emphasizes the rivalry between Baghdad and Cairo with respect to Gaza as contributing to the frequent changes of fortune confronted by the city and region. A second chapter is informative about the generally unappreciated relationship of Gaza to hallowed figures in Islamic tradition. For instance, one principal mosque in Gaza is built to honor the memory of the great grandfather of the Prophet and another is dedicated to one of Muhammad's close followers who accompanied him on his sacred journey from Mecca to Medina. Both of these men were prosperous traders who brought caravans of goods from Arabia for sale in

the markets of Gaza. After presenting this early history, Filii devotes the remainder of *Gaza* to Gaza's experience in the continuing struggle over Palestine's future that began in a serious way with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the British Mandate established after World War I under the auspices of the League of Nations lasting until 1947 when Britain turned over responsibility for Gaza's future to the United Nations.

The remaining fifteen chapters of *Gaza* narrate the tortured and tormented experience of Gaza, the scene of many dreams of liberation and peace, but also a place of frequent carnage and a continuing ordeal of massive suffering. Gaza, which covers 140 square miles, the size of several middle sized American cities, still plays a central role in the unfolding Israel/Palestine conflict. In this fundamental respect, *Gaza* is a detailed historical narrative of past and present, which also underscores the totally unresolved future of Palestine as a whole, leaving readers free to contemplate Gaza's future through the sophisticated optic that Filii provides.

Filii has produced, in a manner that I find extraordinary, a study of Gaza's history over this incredible sweep of time that manages to exhibit at each phase of the narrative an astonishing mastery of detail. Filii presents us with the dizzying interplay of dominant personalities interweaved with accurate depictions of the many defining incidents that give substance to the complex history and experience of Gaza. Such a *tours de force* of scholarly achievement does not make for easy reading given the density of the material. As a whole, *Gaza* is somewhat overwhelming in its cumulative impact as a result of its long succession of unfamiliar names and recitation of one detail after another that are difficult for a normal reader to keep in mind. At the same time, beyond the weight of Filii's facticity is a wealth of interpretative knowledge that imparts an unprecedented understanding of the contemporary experience of Gaza and the part it has played for both Israelis and Palestinians in the unfolding conflict.

Despite this challenge posed by this seeming surfeit of names and events, a kind of pre-digital example of information overload, Filii facilitates comprehension of the main narrative motifs by framing his central interpretative analysis through reference to illuminating conceptual themes. He proceeds chronologically assessing the unfolding Palestinian ordeal in three clusters of four chapters each: "1947-1967: The Generation of Mourning," "1967-1987: The Generation of Dispossession," "1987-2007: The Generation of the Intifadas." The book concludes with a final chapter entitled "The Generation of the Impasse?" as if the currently blocked situation in the underlying conflict between Israel and Palestine that has dominated the lives of the Gazan people for several generations seems likely to continue to be their fate for the indefinite future. Filii ever so slightly lightens this gloomy prospect by putting a question mark at the end of the chapter title, perhaps acknowledging that not even a master historian should pretend to foretell Gaza's future with confidence or indicate with confidence hopes and fears that the impasse will be broken at some point.

With this framework Filii brilliantly portrays the Palestinian ordeal as it has tragically played out during the 67 plus years since Israel came into existence as a sovereign state. There is no attempt by Filii to write this contemporary history of Gaza from a detached point of view, that is, by suspending empathetic feelings and ethical judgments. The tone of the narrative and the spirit of Filii's personal engagement with the Palestinian tragedy is clearly conveyed on the dedication page: "To the memory of the thousands of anonymous who died in Gaza before their time though they had a life to live *en famille* and in peace." In effect, without sparing Palestinians and their leaders harsh criticism for failures of competence in the course of his narrative, including their embrace of brutality and

corruption, Filii laments Palestinian victimization and decries Israeli oppression. With such a perspective it is not surprising that Filii is generally sympathetic with Palestinian resistance activities over the years.

In discussing partition, the plan proposed by the UN General Assembly to overcome the tensions between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, Filii makes clear that the Zionist movement was pushing the British hard to endorse such a division during the latter stages of the mandatory period. For Zionist leaders partition seemed *at the time* the only available path leading to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, thereby achieving the basic Zionist project in accord with the Balfour undertaking. In angry contrast, the most representative Arab voices in Palestine were early united in their fervent opposition to partition ever since it began to be seriously considered by the British government, increasingly aware of rising tensions between the resident Arab population of Palestine and the successive waves of Jewish immigration. Already in 1937 Fahmi al-Husseini, the mayor of Gaza, warned British authorities against partition and any related attempt to promote the emergence of Jewish statehood. Filii quotes al-Husseini to illustrate this depth of opposition: “It would be better for the British government to consign the inhabitants of Palestine to death and destruction, or even to envelop them in poison gas, than to inflict upon them any such plan” (46). As we know, such Palestinian wishes were ignored not only by the British, but also by the organized international community acting under the auspices of the United Nations. In response to the mounting tension in Palestine between Jews and Arabs, Britain went ahead and proposed partition, which was consistent with their typical colonial endgame and legacy in many other parts of their collapsing empire (for instance, Ireland, India, Malaya, and Cyprus). When the UN in 1947 did finally propose partition in General Assembly Resolution 181, the British surprisingly abstained, perhaps feeling that there was nothing to be gained at that point by further antagonizing the Arab world, especially given the persistence of British interests in the region, epitomized by the retention of the Suez Canal.

The focus on the complex dialectics of victimization and resistance in Gaza is at the core of Filii’s interpretative standpoint. This emphasis likely represents the most enduring contribution of the book to our appreciation of both the scholarship and policy relevance of the Gaza Strip to the overall story of the Israel/Palestine struggle. What Filii does convincingly is to challenge the mainstream view that Gaza is but an ugly sideshow of the main Palestinian dramas, generally regarded by both sides to be the West Bank and Jerusalem. Of course, the centrality of Gaza’s victimization has become internationally recognized, especially after the imposition of a blockade in 2007 when Hamas took over the government in Gaza and during the last seven years when Israel launched savage attacks in 2008-2009, 2012, and 2014 that eroded the carefully orchestrated public image of Israel as a benevolent political actor. What Filii significantly adds to this image of Gazan victimization is the understanding that the broader movement of Palestinian national resistance has been centered in Gaza since the onset of the conflict with the Zionist project, and that this pattern of resistance continues in Gaza more than elsewhere in Palestine despite the severe and prolonged forms of collective punishment imposed by Israel on the Strip over the course of decades.

Even more challenging is Filii’s controversial insistence that a sustainable peace between Israel and Palestine can only be achieved if Gaza will be accorded a decisive role in the process. Filii underscores this belief in his drastic revision of thinking surrounding the peace process in the closing sentences of *Gaza*: “It is in Gaza that the foundations of a durable peace should be laid...The Gaza Strip, the womb of the fedayin and the cradle of the

intifada, lies at the heart of the nation-building of contemporary Palestine. It is vain to imagine that a territory so replete with foundational experiences can be ignored or marginalized. Peace between Israel and Palestine can assume neither meaning nor substance except in Gaza, which will be both the foundation and the keystone” (340).

Filiu’s view of a peaceful solution challenges the view of most Israelis that Gaza, without figuring in Israeli biblical claims, and containing 1.8 million Palestinians hostile to Israel’s very existence, has no place in Israel’s conception of its own final borders or of an acceptable outcome of the conflict. Israelis generally regard Gaza as nothing more than a bargaining chip in any future peace negotiations. From Israel’s perspective Gaza is the one unwanted part of occupied Palestine (in sharp contrast, with Jerusalem and the West Bank), an assessment provisionally expressed by Israel’s “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005, which involved the withdrawal of IDF forces and the removal of Israeli settlers in a plan conceived and implemented by the Israeli hardline leader Ariel Sharon. Gaza continues to be viewed as a threat to Israeli security if ever allowed to become consolidated with the West Bank in a future Palestinian state and is viewed as a threat to Israel’s ethnocratic and democratic claims if incorporated into a single Israeli state encompassing the whole of historic Palestine.

With respect to Gaza, Israelis seem now to prefer either retaining control over a subjugated and devastated Gaza or inducing Egypt to resume responsibility for administering Gaza. The Egyptian government has made clear its unwillingness to accept responsibility for governing Gaza, which makes the unfortunate present situation the most likely scenario for the foreseeable future. In this sense, the whole burden of Filiu’s assessment is at odds with the manner in which Washington framed the “peace process,” which, as might be expected, seems based on an acceptance of Israel’s view of the marginality of Gaza with respect to the final resolution of the conflict.

Filiu’s mode of highlighting Gaza also challenges the views of the Palestinian Authority, with its capital in Ramallah, that gives its highest priority to ending Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, getting rid of as many Israeli settlements as possible. The Palestinian Authority seems to care little about the fate of Gaza, especially since Gaza fell under the control of Hamas in 2007, although its formal position continues to include Gaza as an integral part of a Palestinian state.

In this respect, Filiu’s Gaza-centric interpretation of the conflict between Israel and Palestine is by far the most original and controversial part of his historical account. It rests on a carefully documented narrative of Gaza’s role as the true center of Palestinian resistance and resilience throughout more than six decades of struggle. As Filiu mentions, the most perceptive of Israeli leaders, notably David Ben-Gurion, were nervous about the developing situation in Gaza from the earliest period of Israel’s existence, especially as Gaza became the default option for many Palestinians displaced during the *nakba*, the occasions of massive expulsion and dispossession that caused so many Palestinians to be driven from their homes, and to seek sanctuary in Gaza, the West Bank, and neighboring Arab countries. In Filiu’s view, throughout the war that produced the establishment of Israel as a sovereign state, “...Israeli units were systematically driving the Arab population out of the combat zone even when their villages offered no resistance to the advance of the Zionists” (62). The sadness and desolation of dispossession resulted in Gaza becoming early in the conflict dominated and radicalized by refugees and their profoundly alienating experiences. In the late 1940s Palestinian refugees amounted to more than 75% of Gaza’s total population.

The large refugee camps spread throughout tiny Gaza became focal points of ferment and eventually resistance, taking the initial form of the fedayin insurgent activities from the

1950s on. It was the fedayin fighters that found ways to penetrate Israel and inflict casualties particularly on soldiers and police, and later, on Israeli settlers in Gaza. This type of armed struggle inevitably prompted Israeli reprisal raids that were from their outset deliberately disproportionate. As Filii observes, “[i]t was in Gaza that the fedayin were moulded, and the Hebrew State would soon make Gaza pay for it dearly” (94). This prediction was fulfilled in 1956, Egypt being displaced from Gaza, and Israel occupying the Strip for four months as an aspect of the Suez War, with accompanying massacres of Palestinian civilians being carried out by the Israeli military prior to a UN protective force being inserted to monitor the border. Filii asks this provocative question: “Is there any doubt that the history of Gaza would have taken a different turn had a Palestinian entity been established there, under UN protection, in defiance of Israel, while maintaining special ties with Egypt” (105-106)? Although Filii seems to have meant the question to be *rhetorical*, I am skeptical of any supposition that Gaza might have been spared Israeli fury even if the UN had agreed to sponsor and protect Gazan self-determination and sovereignty within the less crystalized climate of opinion in 1956. The political will to confront Israel has never existed on a global level or within the United Nations except to the extent of adopting a public discourse sharply challenging Israel’s policies and practices that is reinforced by periodic censure moves that were generally softened or opposed by the West.

As dramatic as the fedayin phenomenon, the outbreak of the intifada in 1987 that witnessed an unexpected mobilization of Palestinian civil society in Gaza, later spreading to the West Bank, challenged Israel’s capacity to maintain order in occupied Palestine. As Filii persuasively argues, it was the fedayin and intifada that finally lent credibility and inspiration to the Palestinian national struggle, somewhat overcoming the humiliating failure of the pathetic *international* efforts by neighboring Arab states to challenge the existence of Israel. The failure of these several regional wars, culminating in the disastrous Arab defeat in the 1967 War, which greatly expanded Israel’s territorial identity, resulted in a second and permanent occupation of Gaza, with the war having the geopolitical effect of transforming Israel in American strategic thinking from being a heavy burden on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East to becoming a major strategic asset. Unfortunately for the Palestinians, “the rest is history.”

Filii gives a fascinating portrayal of the rise of Islamism in Gaza, including a depiction of the charismatic leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who was assassinated by an Israeli missile in 2004. What Filii’s discussion shows it that the early Islamic efforts in Gaza, inspired by and derivative of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, were devoted *on principle* to resistance activities within the law, focusing on a long range view of liberation by way of family values and education. It was only as a result of Israeli oppression in Gaza and a growing rivalry for popular allegiance with the secular coalition, the Palestine Liberation Organization under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, that led to the formation of the militant Hamas, and with this development, to extreme violence, highlighted by suicide bombing attacks within Israel in the late 1990s, often directed at the civilian population. Israel, at first, actually encouraged the political emergence of Islam, supposing that it would weaken what was perceived to be its principal adversary, the PLO, but as time passed, and Hamas tactics shifted to suicidal violence, Israel treated Hamas as a terrorist organization, and remains unwilling to back off such a view despite Hamas’ effort to pursue a political track for reaching its national goals since it took part in Palestinian elections in 2006.

Arafat is duly presented as the leading Palestinian liberation figure and international diplomat, but also deeply criticized by Filii for the political innocence of his deferential approach to the United States and accompanying naïve hopes that Washington would deliver

a just peace to the Palestinians after the Oslo Framework of Principles had been agreed upon in 1993. Filii draws our attention to Arafat's reaction to the 1995 assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, which brought tears to his eyes and the tormenting cry "It's over, it's over" (234)—meaning the prospect of a negotiated peace died with Rabin. Although Filii does not evaluate Arafat's reaction, it seems exaggerated, given Rabin's acquiescence in expanding the settlement movement in the West Bank and Jerusalem and his "iron fist" policies in reaction to the first intifada.

One of the several virtues of Filii's historical approach is his willingness to employ evaluative language to describe Palestinian experience of victimization and Israeli tactics of oppression. He repeatedly refers to Israeli practices as imposing "collective punishment," and as resulting in "massacres" of innocent Gazans, and of the experience endured by Gaza's population as trauma, including "collective trauma." At the same time, despite being highly critical of Israel's approach, Filii avoids any condemnations based on international humanitarian law or international criminal law. Filii does not, unlike Ilan Pappé and other critics of Israel's behavior in Gaza, speak of "genocide" or even "crimes against humanity." In general, I conclude that Filii's sense of critical history with respect to Gaza does not accord significant relevance to international law.

In conclusion, Filii provides a reader with a wealth of information, an historical perspective that greatly deepens our appreciation of the importance achieved by Gaza in the past, and above all, depicts the brutality of Israel's behavior toward the people of Gaza and its failure to quell the spirit of Palestinian resistance. At the center of Filii's argument, beyond his assessment that the present period is best characterized as one of "impasse," is the claim that Gaza remains the keystone for a sustainable peace between Israelis and Palestinians, a view shared by neither the formal Palestinian leadership nor by any influential Israeli, American, or European leaders, past or present. However this issue is resolved, Filii is highly successful in making a reader appreciate Gaza's illustrious past and the crucial role that recent generations of its people have played in keeping the fires of Palestinian resistance burning even in the face of Israel's cruel, domineering, and oppressive behavior.

A few final comments on Filii's historiography. First of all, I wonder whether it was necessary to provide so much factual detail in narrating the history of Gaza; it seems to me that the main interpretative lines of assessment could have been developed as authoritatively, and with a gentler reading experience. Secondly, I think that the ethical forthrightness of Filii's approach lent added clarity to his interpretive perspectives, and was valuable as a matter of "full disclosure" of author to reader. If hidden from view, it would have raised questions about integrity and trust. And thirdly, the inclusion of prescriptive ideas in a work of contemporary history gives greater practical relevance to the understanding of the past being set forth. Policymakers on all sides would gain much from Filii's deeply considered argument for the centrality of Gaza to the Palestinian national struggle and to hopes for a sustainable peace that protects the rights of both peoples on the basis of equality.

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Citation Information

Falk, Richard, Review of *Gaza: A History*, *SCTIW Review*, September 22, 2015.
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/745>.

ISSN: 2374-9288