

Blind Spot: America and the Palestinians, from Balfour to Trump by Khaled Elgindy. Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2019. 345 pages. \$25.99.

In an era of punitive measures by the US government against the Palestinians, from the closure of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington to the defunding of the United Nations Relief Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA), the concept of a “blind spot” towards the Palestinians might seem less applicable than willful retribution. But as Khaled Elgindy argues in this perceptive, well-written and thoroughly detailed study of US policy over the last century, there are historical antecedents that gave rise to the harsh approach of the Trump administration. By carefully tracing this history from its origins to the present day, Elgindy provides a sense of continuity and links contemporary developments with the earliest government debates over Palestine.

The central argument of Elgindy’s book is that there is a “systematic blind spot in America’s stewardship of the peace process” which has emerged in the two areas of “power and politics” (p. xiii). Since the 1990s, the US has operated with two “interrelated and flawed assumptions”:

First, that a credible peace settlement could be achieved without addressing the vast imbalance of power between Israel and the Palestinians, and second, that it would be possible to ignore or bend internal Palestinian politics to the perceived needs of the peace process (p. xiii).

Unlike many other books on the peace process and the dynamics of U.S. policy towards the Palestinians, Elgindy offers an assessment of antecedents that date back to British policy in the early twentieth century. The depth of the blind spot affected American politicians who were dismissive of Palestinian anger over Zionism in the 1920s, and to the uneven treatment of Arabs and Jews during the Mandate era, which “foreshadowed many of the problems that would later hamper American peace efforts” (p. 8).

In recounting little known episodes of US officials discussing the Palestinian question before 1948, the early chapters of *Blind Spot* illuminate how a policy of sidelining and ignoring claims of Arab self-determination first took hold. One 1922 exchange in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US House of Representatives reflected a deep-seated aversion to the national rights of Arabs in Palestine, and Congress soon endorsed the goal of establishing Jewish “national home” as laid out in the Balfour Declaration (p. 18-19). By the 1930s, US political attitudes towards the Palestinians “increasingly aligned with those of the Zionist movement” (p. 32) including tolerance for violence within the movement through the 1940s. As the US began to eclipse Britain as a global superpower, the question of how to navigate territorial partition emerged as a central debate in Washington.

After the 1948 War, President Harry Truman’s earlier equivocations on Palestine gave way to support for the new state of Israel, and the possibility of a political solution was replaced by a focus on conflict management and economic peace. The Truman administration—like Eisenhower and Kennedy—appointed Middle East peace envoys with distinct economic mandates, often sidelining the political roots of the problem (p. 58-59). There were warnings from US diplomats that this approach would not work, but the Palestinian issue was fundamentally misunderstood as a regional Arab affair without a distinct national hue. This was underscored by a broad focus on the refugee problem, a cause that the Israeli government sought to undermine during Lyndon Johnson’s presidency. As Prime Minister Levi Eshkol told Johnson in 1964, Palestinian refugees “really are not people

within the classic meaning of refugees. They are used by the Arab nations to develop enemies against Israel” (p. 70).

If the period between the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon laid the “basic foundations of the current peace process” (p. 76), it was also the moment when the Palestinian question rose to international prominence and was first taken seriously in the US. Elgindy’s focus on this period in the middle chapters revolves around the influence of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who sought to keep the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) out of negotiations. By drawing attention to the internal factional rivalries within the PLO, and the complex process of moving away from violence and towards diplomacy, Elgindy ensures a sense of Palestinian agency in the story that he tells. At the moments when domestic political space seemed to be opening in the US on the Israeli-Palestinian front, however, there was an absence of a more accommodating policy. Even under President Jimmy Carter, when efforts at engagement with the PLO and an interest in the political fate of the Palestinians moved to the center of US policy, the legacy of the blind spot and the strictures of earlier policies (like Kissinger’s 1975 ban on engagement with the PLO) remained dominant.

The irony of growing recognition of the Palestinians by the late 1980s was the exclusion of the PLO from the political process; a phenomenon Elgindy aptly calls “abnormal normalization” (p. 105). The consequences of this phenomenon reached their apogee with the Oslo Accords of 1993, a process that “helped to accelerate the decline of Palestinian institutional politics that began in the 1980s while reinforcing the exclusionary and authoritarian impulses of the PLO leadership” (p. 145). It is not surprising, therefore, that the peace process “often became a platform for reforming, and occasionally even re-engineering, Palestinian politics and governing institutions to align with American or Israeli preferences” (p. 5). Aside from the diplomatic maneuvers, however, there is also a need to account for the wider cultural and social forces that abetted this asymmetrical pattern of negotiations.

One strength of Elgindy’s book is to highlight the mutually reinforcing interplay between US policy and internal Palestinian politics that yielded such damaging outcomes. Another is the use of the author’s own notes for detailed coverage of events that he himself witnessed as an adviser to the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah during the early 2000s. Along with revealing interviews and extensive examination of relevant US government documents, especially the FRUS records, Elgindy connects 20th century precedents with the collapse of the peace process in recent years. The result is an uncanny sense of déjà vu, as blind spots recur and more punitive measures take shape. Against this backdrop, the regressive policies of the Trump administration were not entirely new, but the “culmination of the old approach” (p. 249).

Given these failures, a question hovers over Elgindy’s epilogue, where he traces a shifting progressive political landscape in the US and waning support for a two-state solution among Palestinians. Why should the US “resume its preeminent role as a peace broker between Israelis and Palestinians” (p. 262)? While power may be seen to reside in Washington, the presumption of American centrality to resolving the conflict can also mask the possibility of real leverage in other corners, especially Europe. If the US cannot overcome its persistent blind spot, perhaps new paradigms can begin to fill the vacuum.

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