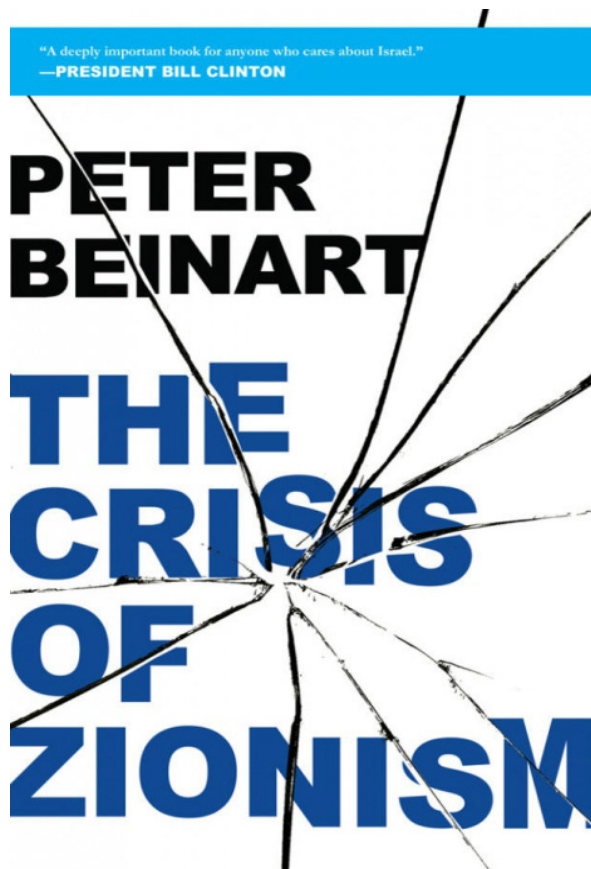


## *BOOK REVIEW*

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### **The Crisis of Zionism**

Peter Beinart

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Review by

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I share Peter Beinart's opposition to Israeli settlements, his apprehension about right-wing religious extremism in Israel, and his concern about Israel's relationship with the Diaspora. Back when I lived in London, and after I immigrated to Israel in the 1990s, I was passionate

and active on all of these issues. My convictions have not changed, but the reality within Israel and the wider Middle East has been transformed.

The Crisis of Zionism fails to grapple seriously with these realities. It plays down the serious and growing threats to Israel's security, while emphasizing what Beinart perceives to be the exaggerated threat perception of American Jewish leaders and the Netanyahu family, born of psychological trauma from centuries of persecution, especially the Holocaust. Ultimately, any stable peace will require the overwhelming majority of settlements to be removed and/or be placed under Palestinian sovereignty. However, the removal of settlements is not a panacea. A sustainable peace requires concessions from *both* sides and a supportive regional environment, neither of which can be guaranteed simply by an Israeli withdrawal.

Beinart presents Israeli expansionism as primarily responsible for the failure to achieve peace. Yet the Palestinians have twice rejected plans that would have given them a contiguous Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem. In 2000, Arafat rejected the Clinton Parameters that included 100 per cent of Gaza, 97 per cent of the West Bank, free passage between the two and control over the surface of the Temple Mount. [1] Meanwhile, in 2008, Abbas rejected Prime Minister Olmert's offer of a deal that would have added up to 100 per cent of the West Bank, including territorial swaps. [2]

Notwithstanding these realities, Beinart contends that Netanyahu remains opposed to such concessions because he is an ideological adherent of the Revisionist Zionism propounded by his father. However, in spilling so much ink to reveal the history of Netanyahu's father's extremism, Beinart has missed the big news in contemporary Israel: namely, that a large chunk of the Israeli centre-right has come to accept partition and Palestinian statehood. Historically, the Likud believed in 'the whole land of Israel' and was only willing to accept Palestinian autonomy in non-contiguous cantons. However, in 2005, Ariel Sharon (then Prime Minister and head of the Likud) initiated a withdrawal of all 8,000 Jewish settlers from Gaza, while in 2009 Netanyahu himself endorsed a two state solution. Moreover, according to, *Ha'aretz*, which is extremely critical of Likud, the Netanyahu government presented a position in talks with the Palestinians, which added up to a withdrawal from 90 per cent of the West Bank. [3]

The key question for Israel is what will it get in return for surrendering territory? In 1947, the UN voted to support the creation of Israel as a Jewish state. In 1967, UN Security Council resolution 242 dictated that any Israeli withdrawal had to be linked to it receiving peace and security in return. These remain Israel's core objectives.

Regarding the issue of Jewish statehood, Beinart is correct when he argues that Israel must ultimately withdraw from the West Bank in order to preserve its identity as a Jewish and democratic state. But this is only half the story. It also requires that a Palestinian state or third countries – not Israel – be the destination for the overwhelming majority of Palestinian refugees

and their millions of descendents. This is why former Foreign Minister and lead Israeli negotiator in 2008, Tzipi Livni, insisted that a peace deal be based on the principle of 'two states for two peoples'. It is also why Netanyahu has insisted that any permanent status agreement must include Palestinian recognition of 'Israel as a Jewish state'. Yet, this is something that the Palestinians continue to reject. Moreover, if the two sides manage to agree that a limited number of refugees be allowed to immigrate to Israel itself, it is vital for Israel that this number constitutes an end to all Palestinian claims. However, the Palestinian position is that the parties agree an initial figure, and then, after Israel has completely withdrawn, the Palestinians can continue to make further claims. [4]

Regarding an Israeli withdrawal being linked to peace, the Israeli public has supported 'land for peace' since the late 1980s. It supported the Gaza disengagement in 2005 and initially supported Kadima's 2006 realignment plan, which would have involved removing around 50,000 settlers from their homes in the West Bank. The public's position changed because in return for full withdrawals from South Lebanon and Gaza, it had to fight two wars against the radical anti-Semitic terrorist groups Hamas and Hezbollah, who launched thousands of rockets at Israeli civilians from Gaza and South Lebanon. Both of these groups have been backed by the radical Islamist regime in Iran, which is developing nuclear weapons and has threatened to wipe Israel off the map. It is small wonder then, that Israelis are primarily focused on dealing with these security threats rather than with settlements. The lesson here is that, to gain the support of Israelis, any future withdrawal from the West Bank must be different – it must guarantee Israeli security.

Yet Beinart almost completely dismisses the security dimension of a peace agreement concerning the West Bank. He quotes the former head of Military Intelligence, Maj. General Aharon Ze'evi-Farkash and the respected professor of strategy, Martin van Creveld to the effect that Israel can safely withdraw. In fact, it is not so simple. Both argue that Israel can only withdraw if certain security requirements are met. Following a withdrawal, Israel will be nine miles wide at its narrowest point and its only international airport and main population centres will be vulnerable to short range rocket fire from the West Bank. This means that Israel has a vital interest in making sure that any Palestinian state is demilitarized and that it is run by people committed to peace and that are able to maintain control. It also means, according to Ze'evi-Farkash, that Israel will require special security arrangements along the Jordan River to prevent arms smuggling, terrorist infiltration and to enable Israel to block any military threat from the east before it reaches Israel's narrow waistline. Van Creveld also thinks that Israel will need a security presence along the Jordan River. The abject failure of international forces in Lebanon to prevent arms reaching Hezbollah has served to highlight the importance of this. Yet so far the Palestinians have spoken of a state with 'limited arms', which they define in such a way as to undermine the whole principle of demilitarization, and they refuse to accept Israel's security requirements in the Jordan valley beyond an international force. [5] Aside from this, Abbas'

attempt to form a unity government with Hamas only serves to heighten Israel's concerns about who will ultimately control the West Bank. Beinart appears to be impressed by changes in Hamas' rhetoric, but the reality is that any pragmatism on their part is the fruit of Israeli pressure, not of genuine moderation.

The biggest problem with the book is the way it effectively de-contextualizes the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel has its issues, but the really big crisis is swirling across the Middle East. The region's chronic instability and radicalism are not caused by Israel or the settlements. Indeed, the Palestinian issue has been completely marginal to the Arab Spring. The protests have all been about failed economies, political repression and corruption. Despite this, the beneficiaries of the revolutions have been Islamists, rather than liberal reformists. Islamists may disagree over tactics in confronting the West, but as the former radical from Britain, Ed Husain, explained in his book *The Islamist*, they all agree on the legitimacy of suicide terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians. The rise of Islamism in Egypt is especially troubling, as it poses a medium-term threat to the cornerstone of the whole peace process: the Egyptian-Israeli peace. Aside from all of this, there is the Iranian nuclear issue, the consequences of which are potentially disastrous for Israel, the Middle East and, indeed, the whole world.

None of this is seriously addressed in Beinart's book. Instead, his chief proposal is a boycott of settlement products. The radical Left and Islamists who constitute the leading proponents of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel are opposed to the existence of the Jewish state. In order to broaden support for their agenda, they seek to blur its true meaning by focusing on the settlements as a first stage, before moving on to a wider boycott. The U.K.'s largest trade unions and the TUC have already adopted a policy of boycotting settlement products. This has had no real impact on the settlements themselves, but it has served to strengthen the political standing of opponents of a two-state solution – the very opposite of Beinart's intention.

In a more fundamental sense as well, Beinart's proposal is wrongheaded. For any peace agreement to be reached, major concessions will be required of *both* sides. And for any peace deal to be sustainable, the overall regional environment will need to be able to withstand the inevitable assault from the many enemies of peace and reconciliation. Playing down this critically important side of the story pushes peace further away rather than bringing it nearer. Not only does it damage the credibility of the peace process in the eyes of 'middle Israel', but it fosters the illusion on the other side that the Palestinians can obtain territory and sovereignty, without having to make the necessary concessions on refugees and security, which the overwhelming majority of Israelis view as vital.

### Notes

[1] Arafat's rejection did not focus on territory. He rejected an international force in the Jordan Valley, insisted on a 'right of return' for millions of Palestinians to the pre-1967 borders of Israel, while refusing to recognize a Jewish connection to the Temple Mount. Israel accepted the U.S. plan. It had issues with some of its elements, but unlike with Arafat, these reservations lay within the parameters of the plan, not outside them. See Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2004); Gilad Sher, *The Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations 1999-2001* (Routledge, 2004); Barry Rubin, *Yasir Arafat* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2] Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor* (Crown, 2011), pp. 723-724. Beinart argues that Abbas rejected the deal because of the size of the territorial swap and because it excluded the settlement of Ariel. Private conversations with Israelis and Americans leads me to believe that Olmert (and indeed Barak before him) would have been prepared to compromise further on the territorial issue, if Abbas had been willing to make concessions on other issues.

[3] Barak Ravid, 'Netanyahu's border proposal: Israel to annex settlement blocs, but not Jordan Valley', *Ha'aretz*, 9 February 2012.

[4] This is also a major flaw in Arab League peace plan; a flaw recognized by Jordan, which tried in vain to get the plan amended. See Joshua Teitelbaum, *The Arab Peace Initiative: A Primer and Future Prospects*, (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2009).

[5] Aharon Ze'evi-Farkash, 'Key Principles Of A Demilitarized Palestinian State', *Israel's Critical Security Requirements For Defensible Borders*, (Jerusalem Center Public Affairs, 2012); Martin Van Creveld, *Defending Israel* (St Martin's Press, 2004) p. 108.

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