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Review of *The Near East Behind the Scenes: Memoirs of a Diplomat and Journalist (1952-2012)*

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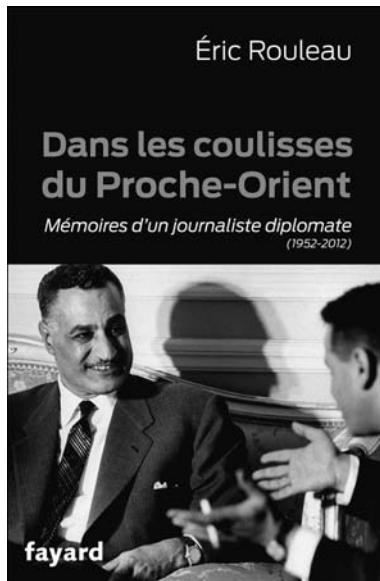
Review of *The Near East Behind the Scenes: Memoirs of a Diplomat and Journalist (1952-2012)*

Comments

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Dans les coulisses du Proche-Orient: Mémoires d'un journaliste diplomate (1952–2012) [in French], by Eric Rouleau. Paris: Fayard, 2012. 433 pages. €22.00 paper.

REVIEWED BY NUBAR HOVSEPIAN

Several friends and colleagues have approached publishers in the United States imploring them to issue an English translation of Rouleau's memoir. "There is no interest"—or "He is passé"—are the most frequent responses. A quick search on Wikipedia (in English) shows zero results. Readers in the United States are thus denied the luxury of entering Rouleau's world. Born Elie Raffoul, an Egyptian Arab Jew, he migrated to France in the early 1950s, where with time he became the most influential and accomplished French journalist covering the Middle East, writing mostly for the prestigious daily *Le Monde*. He also served two stints as France's ambassador to Tunisia (1985–86) and Turkey (1988–91). I met Eric several times and despite the difference in our age, we embraced each other as "*baladiyat*," and exiles from our place of birth, Cairo.

Rouleau's memoir is structured chronologically, divided into an introduction and sixteen successive chapters. It is only in the introduction and in chapter 1 that Rouleau offers insights into his background as an Egyptian Jew, but he does not dwell on the subject. This connection is made clearer in the preface written by Alain Gresh, editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique* and son of Henri Curiel, an Egyptian communist who was assassinated in Paris on 4 May 1978. Rouleau affiliated with the Egyptian Left in his youth, and participated in the Democratic National Movement and its forum, which was founded by Curiel. Along with other activists, he participated in efforts to oppose the British occupation of Egypt. Before his self-exile from Egypt, Rouleau had the occasion to interview Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, two years before the latter's assassination in 1949. The interview was published in the *Egyptian Gazette*. From there he eventually became the star reporter for *Le Monde*. In this capacity he met and interviewed (some would say interrogated) many of the principal leaders of the time, crafting striking portraits of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Levi Eshkol, Moshe Dayan, Golda Meir, Anwar Sadat, Yasir Arafat, and Abu Iyad, to name a few.

A year after being appointed *Le Monde's* chief Middle East correspondent, Rouleau's prominence in the region grew when Nasser invited him to Cairo for an interview in 1963. Rouleau was known for his support of decolonization, but he had doubts about some of the authoritarian tendencies of Nasser and others. Nasser divulged his intention of releasing all political prisoners before the end of the year, which occupied the headlines of the European press including *Le Monde*. In Rouleau's reporting Nasser emerges as a complex and paradoxical man who rendered Egypt to its citizens (chapter 2).

Rouleau covered the various Arab-Israeli wars and most importantly the 1967 war. In a 1968 interview with former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, the latter conveyed his belief that Nasser did not want war. Rouleau identifies the internal tensions between the Left and the Right, but finally as the war came to an end Nasser favored the "realists," who promoted the need for a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict (p. 184).

Rouleau reported on Israel and the Palestinians and their national movement from the 1950s onward. In chapter 5 he adopts the revisionist rendition of the circumstances that led to the 1948 war and identifies Walid Khalidi as an important interlocutor. Rejecting the David versus Goliath dichotomy, he underscores the Israeli colonial policies that intended to alienate Palestinians from their land. Rouleau made a point to meet figures of both cultural and political significance, including the late Palestinian poet Rashed Hussein and former Israeli military officer turned dovish, Matti Peled. He served on the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, and covered the developments of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon and elsewhere. His interest in the Palestinian movement occasioned the writing (with Abu Iyad) of the book *My Home, My Land: A Narrative of the Palestinian Struggle* in 1978 with the English edition (Times Books) appearing in 1981. In the 1980s he was interested in cowriting George Habash's story with me, but Habash declined to cooperate with the proposed project, a decision that to this day leaves me perplexed.

Early on we detect Rouleau's interest in seeking common futures between Arabs and Jews. With Paris as his base he met Curiel, a fellow Cairene and a non-Zionist Jew. Curiel organized a network, Solidarité, in support of third-world national liberation movements. Prior to Algerian independence, Curiel clandestinely organized solidarity with the National Liberation Front (FLN)

in Algeria against French colonial domination. Curiel also served as a catalyst (p. 394) in advancing openings for Israeli-Palestinian dialogues, introducing senior PLO member Issam Sartawi to international personalities (for example, Pierre Mendès France, Olof Palme, Bruno Kreisky, Willy Brandt, and Nahum Goldmann). In public talks in the United States (particularly at Art D'Llugoff's nightclub, the Village Gate), Rouleau observed that peace is made with one's enemies, and not pliant tools. This is what former French president Charles de Gaulle pursued in bringing an end to French colonial rule in Algeria. Of course the FLN had a key role in this denouement.

Rouleau's description of Curiel fits him as well, but I wish he shared more of his background, something that as an exile (and *baladiyat*) like him, I was hoping to see more fully developed. He unfortunately does not write on his reporting from Iran during the 1979 Revolution, which was rich in insights, as compared to the shoddy reporting of U.S. journalists. Instead his memoir is mostly anchored in deciphering the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the plight of the Palestinian people.

Rouleau's recounting of this third-party diplomacy is very useful. But its limits then and now are the delinking of diplomacy, in this case Palestinian diplomacy, from the national struggle. Such delinking ultimately led to the Oslo Accords, leading the late Edward Said to view the Palestinian leadership as the equivalent of the Vichy government. This period of failed Palestinian diplomacy needs to be reassessed by scholars and activist alike.