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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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Sanctions campaign. Moreover, Attwell’s narration and interventions, which were clearly designed to make the interviews fit into her theoretical framework, are both intrusive and incoherent. In the conclusion of the book, Attwell strangely attributes some of its shortcomings to the fact that scholar Ilan Pappé was unavailable for an interview: “If Pappé had been one of my dissidents, framing of the other’s agency and experience might have emerged as a much greater theme of examination” (p. 203). This peculiar comment exposes the book’s conceptual gaps, methodological flaws, lack of historical context, and superficial or scarce engagement with critical scholarship on Zionism, including published works not only by Pappé but also by Edward Said, Nur Masalha, Ronit Lentin, and Judith Butler.

In an apparent conflict of interest, Yaacov Yadgar and Joel Kovel, both acknowledged by Attwell as her mentors and cited extensively throughout the text, provide the blurbs on the back of the book, praising its originality and methodological sophistication. I doubt that such praise would be shared by an objective reader, let alone an expert on nationalism in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I rarely reach the end of a book I was extremely interested in reviewing and struggle to find something positive to say about it. In this case, I can think of no reason to recommend Attwell’s book, except for a critical discussion about representation and the relationship between theory and methodology, using the text as an example of pitfalls to avoid.

Simona Sharoni is professor of gender and women’s studies at the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Plattsburgh. She is the author of Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women’s Resistance (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), and coeditor of the Handbook on Gender and War (London: Edward Elgar, forthcoming). Her new book Gender and Resistance in Israel and Palestine will be published by Syracuse University Press.


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, Yasser 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.


**REVIEWED BY OMAR JABARY SALAMANCA**

Wendy Pullan and Britt Baillie’s edited book brings together a series of multidisciplinary essays exploring how cities are shaped by ethnonational and religious conflicts. The focus is on the ways conflict materializes physically and symbolically in and through the urban fabric, particularly as it affects public spaces and the everyday. Important as these contributions are, the volume is marked by a fundamental absence: a sustained engagement with the historical geographical contingencies and structural conditions that generate these conflicts in the first place. In fact, the book tends to take for granted the ethnonational and religious nature of urban conflict without problematizing the forms of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural violence that precede, shape, and sustain these conflicts through time. Further, this collection shies away from critically addressing how research on urban conflicts and contested cities often assumes ideal and possible futures of inclusion and plurality.