

Book Review

## Canada and Israel: Building Apartheid

by Yves Engler. Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2010. \$15.95 CAN.  
ISBN: 978-1-55266-355-4. Pages: 1-168.

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Canada's policy towards Israel constitutes a minefield of contentious issues which historians of Canadian foreign relations seldom directly address. Among the accounts that are most visible, few diverge from the nationalist narrative that represents Canada as historically favouring peace-keeping over militarism. This positive portrait of Canada, as suggested by Paul Heinbecker and Bessma Momani's, compliments a somewhat more critical stance that imagines Canada's role as a less consequential, neutral player in Middle East affairs.<sup>2</sup> In *Canada and Israel: Building Apartheid*, Engler problematizes the claims of current analysts, such the former Canadian Ambassador to Israel Michael Bell,<sup>3</sup> who would like to see greater Canadian involvement in the Middle East. Engler takes issue with the perception of Canada's suitability as an "honest-broker" in the Israel-Palestine conflict. He argues that a consistently pro-Israel attitude has characterized Canada's foreign policy towards the conflict from the nineteenth century onwards. Perhaps no other study makes as strong a claim as Engler does for historical consistency in terms of Canadian complicity in the Zionist expansion of Jewish settlements.

Building on the foundation of leftwing revisionist readings of Zionism as a form of colonialism, Engler implicates Canada in the controversial expansion of the state of Israel and the current Apartheid conditions by considering the domestic and international events that have supported these developments. Following a tradition that traces Canadian interest in the region back to the anti-Semitic Christian political

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2 Heinbecker, P. and B. Momani (Eds.). *Canada and the Middle East: In Theory and Practice*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University.

3 Bell, M., M. Malloy, D. Sultan and S. Shaker. Practitioner' Perspectives on Canada-Middle East Relations. In Heinbecker, P. and B. Momani (Eds.). *Canada and the Middle East: In Theory and Practice* (pp.7-24). Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University.

culture of the nineteenth century, the first chapter of this book attempts to develop a historical trend by assuming continuity between disparate time periods. Engler represents the general tone of entire decades with single statements that demonstrate a “fortuitous political climate” for the Federation of Zionist Societies of Canada (p.13). Considering the scope of the study, these leaps are likely made to allow Engler to address the present-day consequences of Canada’s support for Israeli expansionism. Nevertheless, his less-than-precise treatment of Zionism conflates various versions of the movement and misleadingly overlooks participation by Canadians in anti-expansionist Zionist organizations, such as the Union of Progressive Zionists (UPZ).

Engler’s larger point is that historically, Canadian society has facilitated Israel’s expansion by conjuring its own justifications for sustaining nationalist aggression, and not by simply borrowing the arguments of political Zionists. Through salient case studies, he highlights some of the advantages that Canada has gained throughout various stages of its support for Israeli expansionism, including such economic benefits as might result from the sale of weapons by Canadian manufacturers to Israeli buyers (p.10). A more thorough exposition of this thesis occurs in chapters 2, 3 and 4, which focus on the ways in which Canadian policy has been influenced by broader international relations and a tendency to remain “preoccupied with the great powers,” namely Britain and America (p.24). However, Engler derives this trend from a reading of various media sources without comparing coverage of events, and this, along with his reliance on secondary sources that are often considered polemical, detracts from the credibility of this section. His humanitarian convictions and his motivation to mould his argument along these lines leads to a somewhat univocal interpretation of events. By not considering the subjectivity of his own accounts, Engler consistently eschews the academic integrity necessary to persuade opponents of this perspective.

These early chapters are balanced with a final section that is derived from a leftist, politically-conscious reading of present-day Canada. More convincingly, chapters 5 and 6 document how Canada’s supportive attitude for Israel has been consistent with the activities of intelligence agencies, lobby groups, and major Canadian corporations and charities. Engler exposes aspects of Canadian society that function to directly support Israel’s expansion but which are, interestingly enough, unknown to most Canadians, supporting the idea that “Israel is highly dependent on North American financial, military, ideological and diplomatic support”

(p.145). Key to Engler's claim is the connection he draws between the charitable status granted to Israeli expansionist organizations in Canada, such as the Jewish National Fund, and the support for Canadian industries active in Palestinian territory that falls beyond the Green Line.

Engler suggests the anti-Semitic nature of explanations exaggerate the role of Canada's Jewish communities. Carefully distinguishing between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in chapter 9, he highlights the extensive efforts of anti-Zionist Jewish organizations and warns against the use of anti-Semitism to discourage anti-Zionist values (p.146). Canadian complicity in Israel is, according to Engler, the outcome of a discourse that has developed while most Canadians have been "shut-out of the discussion" (p.147).

This political commentary is supplemented with Engler's own experience as a political activist. His skill in researching economic connections to foreign policy (see his *Black Book of Canadian Foreign Policy*) lends this book greater weight as a counter-narrative, despite his failure to follow academic conventions. Throughout *Canada and Israel*, Engler insists that the relevancy of the current conflict in Palestine and the suffering of Palestinians must be defended based on Canada's role in that conflict and "Canadian complicity with that suffering" (p.142). According to Engler, failure to adequately defend the prioritization of this issue to Canadians will not only sideline the problem but will risk insinuating anti-Semitism (p.142). Ingraining his argument in the thick fabric of controversy, Engler's book is a welcome contribution to the sparsely populated field of critical studies of Canadian-Israeli relations.