

Misguided fellow travelers

Jewish thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Noam Chomsky don't deserve their reputation as astute observers of Israel, a new book proves

By Tibor Krausz

DURING A visit in 2012 to Hebron with the New York-based left-wing Zionist group Partners of Progressive Israel, Susie Linfield recalls witnessing the heavy Israeli security required to keep the small beleaguered enclave of ultra-nationalist Jews safe in the midst of a hostile Palestinian population.

To the Jewish American academic, the self-contained ghetto of “fanatical settlers” seemed like an atavistic throwback to a religiously insular mindset secular Zionism had set out to eradicate. The experience, Linfield surmises in her book *The Lion's Den*, made her “ashamed to be a Jew.”

That is a curious sentiment. Whatever the merits of maintaining a Jewish presence in Hebron, Linfield is hardly responsible for the views, deeds and lifestyle choices of settlers there. By professing to be ashamed because of other Jews she doesn't even know, she inadvertently reinforces the old antisemitic trope that Jews are a monolithic entity burdened with collective guilt for the actions of a few.

Barely the first page into her book we appear to be standing on shaky ground. Read on, however, and things begin to look up.

The Lion's Den is an intellectual history of several prominent left-wing Jewish thinkers' animus toward Israel. For it, Linfield, a cultural theorist at New York University, set herself a laborious task. In a political exegesis of sorts, she subjects to rigorous scrutiny the words and ideas of such celebrated lions of academe as Hannah Arendt, Arthur Koestler, Isaac Deutscher, I. F. Stone and Noam Chomsky. Linfield brings plenty of panache and perspicuity to the endeavor.

Pedantic philippics the likes of Arendt and Chomsky have long been seen to lend highbrow heft to the cause of anti-Israel advocacy. Yet in their substance, if not necessarily their style, their arguments were often indistinguishable from the manic outpourings of dime-a-dozen demagogues, firebrands and rabble-rousers.

Running through Linfield's book is a recurrent insight into the mindset of her chosen leading lights: they could not help but see the realities of the Arab-Jewish conflict through the tinted prism of their political convictions and ideological preferences. Often, they chose outright to ignore history and facts on the ground. As a result, in their voluminous writings on Zionism and Israel, both got distorted beyond recognition. Likewise, they invariably opted to view Israel's actions in the worst possible light while ignoring or downplaying Arab aggression and intransigence.

One of the worst offenders has been Chomsky, a linguist-turned-social commentator who has long been lionized in leftist intellectual circles with an outsized influence in academia. There are few anti-Israel calumnies to which Chomsky will not readily subscribe. He has warned of Israelis' sinister “Judeo-Nazi tendencies,” labeled Gaza a “concentration camp... under a vicious siege,” and insinuated Israeli Jews are edging closer to ethnically cleansing Palestinians. And he did all this in just one book of many on Israel, *Gaza in Crisis*, a collection of his essays published in 2010.

Meanwhile, Chomsky patronizes Palestinians, whom he often treats as mere extras in a reductive Manichean morality play of evil oppressors and their innocent victims. To Chomsky, Palestinians are “unconstrained in their search for peace,” as Linfield puts it, while Israelis are incorrigibly belligerent expansionists. He refuses to take homicidal Islamism among Palestinians seriously, choosing instead to see its purveyors as peaceable souls brutalized into resisting Israel violently.

In *Gaza in Crisis*, for instance, he posits Hamas “has long been calling for a two-state settlement in accord with the international consensus.” In fact, Hamas has never deviated from its stated aim, duly spelled out in its charter, of eradicating Israel. Chomsky's countless other essays and books on Israel

and the Palestinians are similarly tendentious as he turns actual realities on their heads.

Chomsky obfuscates, distorts and fudges the facts. In a dubious form of scholarship, he frequently cites himself as the source for his own statements in a self-referential loop of rehashed claims that usually were not true the first time he made them. “Israel, he contends, is an ‘ugly’ and ‘sadistic’ society defined by ‘criminality,’ ‘utter hypocrisy’ and ‘moral depravity,’” Linfield writes apropos of Chomsky's views on the Jewish state. “The shame, and the crime, is that he has misled generations of young people who know little if anything of Israeli, Arab or Middle Eastern history.”

That's not to say Israel's actions and its treatment of Palestinians have always been beyond reproach. Far from it. Yet by failing to provide anything remotely resembling an honest appraisal of them, Chomsky peddles a caricature of the conflict that no informed observer can take seriously.

Linfield is charitable about Chomsky's obsessive anti-Israeli activism, arguing “some of his most deeply flawed ideas about Israel stem from his fears about its survival.” Is Chomsky a latter-day Jeremiah who castigates wayward Israeli Jews for their own sake in his vituperative jeremiads? That's debatable, to say the least.

Chomsky hasn't been alone in passing off ill-tempered diatribes as learned commentary. In fact, what often differentiates intellectuals from garden-variety kooks is that the latter are not lauded for their reflexive prejudices and crackpot ideas. Thinkers like Chomsky are widely regarded as fearless truth-tellers. Yet on issues like Israel and the Palestinians they are often so hopelessly biased that their views are essentially worthless as anything other than partisan hucksterism.

Cockeyed views of Zionism have a long history among leftist Jews who have refused to take the Jewish state at face value, deeming

it an aberration rather than a necessity. They often took Israel not for what it was and was intended to be – a small self-governing haven for Jews – but for what they wanted it to be – a pioneering socialist state or harmonious multiethnic entity. Because the Jewish state failed to live up to their lofty expectations they came to despise it.

“Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict are templates upon which the Left has projected all sorts of inapt ideologies, hopes, anxieties, and fears,” Linfield aptly observes.

A case in point is Arendt, who was highly perceptive about several pressing concerns of her time but was far less so on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arendt was ceaselessly conflicted about Zionism and Israel, often to the point of parody. In short order she turned from a militant Zionist during the years of Nazi ascendancy in her native Germany to a vocal opponent of Jewish national sovereignty.

Just as Jews in the Yishuv were facing the prospect of being massacred by hostile Arab militias she kept on advocating for a nebulous form of Arab-Jewish commonwealth without the trappings of an independent state. The reason was Arendt saw ethnocentric states as reactionary. Massacres, terror attacks, murder and mayhem – none of them, Linfield points out, “led Arendt to alter, or even question, her intercommunal prescriptions” for Palestine. “She wished away, rather than grappled with, an existential clash of claims and needs” between Jews and Arabs.

Arendt was also maddeningly mercurial. A few years prior, when Jews were facing unsurmountable odds to their continued existence in Europe, she castigated them for being passive, weak and fatalistic. An up-and-coming political theorist safely ensconced in New York, she rhapsodized about the historical need for muscular Jewish self-defense. Yet once Jews in Palestine set about defending themselves tooth and nail, she had second thoughts.

“The woman who had demanded an imaginary Jewish army now opposed the actual one; the woman who had denounced Jewish submissiveness now opposed Jewish self-determination; the woman who had insisted on the creation of a specifically Jewish political world now opposed the creation of a state to protect that world,” Linfield notes.

In subsequent decades Arendt remained ambivalent about the Zionist project, a primary reason being she “substituted political

theory [for facts], accompanied by a tone of imperious certainty.”

The same applies to numerous other intellectuals. Yet few left-wing Jewish thinkers were as insidious at times as was Arthur Koestler, a prominent Hungarian-born journalist and writer. In some ways a remarkable fellow, Koestler was a tormented soul forever in search of an ideology or political movement to anchor him in his topsy-turvy life during the turbulent decades of the 20th century.

An ardent communist turned fierce anti-communist, Koestler embraced, then discarded, a long series of causes with equal zeal. A self-described “Casanova of Causes,” he flitted passionately from one ideological entanglement to another. Frequently on the move, he was a wandering Jew with a “homeless mind” in the words of historian David Cesarani in his biography of the man.

Koestler was also drawn to far-out ideas and intellectual pursuits, including a pseudoscientific interest in paranormal phenomena. Although he started out as a militant Zionist and an admirer of Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the Hungarian-born author, who disdained David Ben-Gurion, came to wax ambivalent about Israel once it was birthed in blood, sweat and tears. In a diary entry he dismissed the country as a “totalitarian Lilliput [that] is no less totalitarian for the smallness of its people.”

Linfield labels Koestler an antisemitic Zionist, a designation occasioned by his acerbic contempt for his fellow Jews, whether in the Diaspora or in Israel, where he returned repeatedly for longer stays until 1948. (In his defense, Koestler could be no less scathing about himself.) He pooh-poohed Judaism and Jewish culture, belittling them as vestigial “fossilized remnants” of ancient traditions. “Koestler’s smug confidence in dismissing the religion, history, and culture of the Jews was matched only by his ignorance of them,” Linfield argues.

In anti-Jewish circles, Koestler is best known for popularizing the notion most Eastern European Jews, especially in Poland, were genetically descended not from ancient Hebrews but from the Khazars, a pagan tribe of Turkic-Mongolian nomads. A number of Khazars converted to Judaism in the early 8th century before they went on to create a warrior kingdom between the Black and Caspian seas. They disappeared from history in the late 10th century.

The so-called Khazar hypothesis is rou-

tinely trotted out by Jew-haters to deny European Jews’ ancestral claims to Israel. Koestler’s aim in embracing it was, in part, to prove to Ashkenazi Jews, whom he exhorted to assimilate into their host societies, they had little in common genetically with ancient Hebrews.

The Khazar origins of Ashkenazi Jews, he posited, should also put paid to traditional antisemitism, which was fueled, according to Koestler, by Jews’ irksome insistence on being a “Chosen Race.” If European Jews are not semitic in their origin, “then the term ‘antisemitism’ would become void of meaning, based on a misapprehension shared by both the killers and their victims,” he argued.

Make of that specious reasoning what you will.

Linfield does not dwell on Koestler’s take on genetic anthropology, preferring to move along and set about dissecting the often equally questionable views and arguments of French Marxist historian Maxime Rodinson, Polish Marxist writer Isaac Deutscher, Tunisian-Jewish author Albert Memmi and others. She’s a learned guide through a certain subset of anti-Israeli obloquy and her book is a welcome corrective to the reams of hokum that often passes for commentary and scholarship on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Lions’ Den serves as a timely reminder that views held by intellectuals, lionized though they may be, need to be taken on their merits and not on the reputation of those who hold them. ■

