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The New York Review of Books

April 7, 2016 Volume LXIII, Number 6

SPRING BOOKS

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A poster of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (left), Aida refugee camp, near Bethlehem, West Bank, 2009; photograph by Josef Koudelka from "This Place," an exhibition of pictures by twelve photographers of Israel and the West Bank, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art run June 5, 2016.

Popular Protest in Palestine: The Uncertain Future of Unarmed Resistance
by Marwan Darweish and Andrew Rigby. Pluto, 211 pp., $28.00 (paper)

Return: A Palestinian Memoir
by Ghada Karmi. Verso, 319 pp., $26.95

Disturbing the Peace: The Use of Criminal Law to Limit the Actions of Human Rights Defenders in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories
by the Human Rights Defenders Fund. 80 pp., available at hrdia.org.il

At the Edge of the Abyss
by Talis Sasson. Jerusalem: Keter, 309 pp., 74.00 shekels

The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert
by Eyal Weizman and Fazal Sheikh. Steidl/Cabinet, 92 pp., $40.00

This Place
an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, February 12–June 5, 2016. Catalog of the exhibition by Frederic Brenner and others. MACK, 191 pp., $50.00 (paper)

Israeli human rights activists and what is left of the Israeli peace groups, including joint Israeli-Palestinian peace organizations, are under attack. In a sense, this is nothing very new; organizations such as B’Tselem, the most prominent and effective in the area of human rights, and Breaking the Silence, which specializes in soldiers’ firsthand testimony about what they have seen and done in the occupied territories and in Gaza, have always been anathema to the Israeli right, which regards them as treasonous.2 But open attacks on the Israeli left have now assumed a far more sinister and ruthless character; some of them are being played out in the interrogation rooms of Israeli prisons. Clearly, Israel has an ongoing coordinated campaign involving the government, members of the Knesset, police, various semi-official right-wing organizations, and the public media. Politically driven harassment, including violent and illegal attacks, interrogation, denial of legal support, visitation restrictions, smear campaigns, even death threats issued by proxy—all this has become part of the repertoire of the far right, which dominates the present government and sets the tone for its policies. There is now a palpable sense of danger, and also an accelerating decline into a situation of everyday state terror. Palestinians have lived with the reality of state terror for decades—it is the very stuff of Occupation—but it has now seeped into the texture of life inside the Green Line, as many on the left have warned that it would. Israelis with a memory going back to the 1960s sometimes liken the current campaign to the violent actions of the extreme right in Greece before the colonels took power, as famously depicted in the still-canonical film Z.

The witch-hunt began this time with a targeting of the ex-soldiers’ organization Breaking the Silence by a strident chorus on the right, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon, and other members of the cabinet, but also including prominent politicians and journalists from the wishy-washy center, including the highly popular Haaretz correspondent Ari Shavit. There have been calls to outlaw the organization entirely.

In Israeli parlance, Breaking the Silence is one of a group of so-called “leftist NGOs” (amuzot hasmodot) that are the object of a new bill now making its way through the Knesset, an initiative of the fanatical minister of justice, Ayelet Shaked, possibly the least just person in the country. Like many right-wing NGOs, leftist groups such as B’Tselem receive funding from donors both in Israel and abroad; the new bill aims at forcing leftist and human rights organizations to disclose all foreign sources of support every time they appear in a public setting.

The proposed law is a transparent attempt to humiliate these groups and to limit their freedom of action. Clearly, Shaked wanted representatives of left-wing organizations that receive foreign funding to take foreign funding out of the country; she even entered the Knesset or other public spaces, but Netanyahu, still apparently capable of seeing the invidious analogy to the badges the Nazis forced Jews to wear in public, squashed this clause.

The steady stream of government-funded invective and threats has also been channeled into the shadowy world of clandestine operations. In recent weeks several of the peace organizations have uncovered right-wing spies and molest that had worked their way into their ranks. It’s hard to know who has been orchestrating this wave or how high up the operation goes. There are front organizations, including a newly registered group of Israeli settlers who call themselves Ad Kan (This Far and No Further) that I’ve come back to in a moment.

Among the more ludicrous cases is that of a private detective who targeted the office of Michael Sfard, an outstanding human rights lawyer. For about two years, this shady character apparently salvaged documents from wastebaskets and even proudly claimed to have run after municipal sanitation trucks in order to retrieve scraps of paper. By his own testimony, he was hired to do this by a far-right, and partly state-funded—organization called Regavim (Cleats of Earth) that is active primarily in acquiring and colonizing Palestinian land in the occupied territories. (There is no other kind of land in the territories, notwithstanding claims by Israeli governments, which were upheld by Israeli courts, that so-called miri, or state lands, in the West Bank belong to nobody but the state.) It’s worth noting that the peace and civil rights organizations have nothing to hide, and the attempt to find documents that could somehow implicate them is in itself a futile and paranoid gesture worthy of the Stasi-run East German state at its height. But in a way, transparency as an ethical principle is the only way forward. Israeli peace activists have graduated from being protesters, in theory, at least, protected by the law, to being disidents—that is, legitimate targets for government-inspired attacks. One of the spies did some damage to Ta’ayyuh (Arab-Jewish Partnership), the group of Israeli and Palestinian volunteers with which I myself have been associated for the last fifteen years. Here there is a story to tell. Ta’ayyuh has focused its work on the South Hebron Hills, where we have had moderate success in defending Palestinian civilians from violence on the part of settlers and soldiers and from the recent and relentless attempt by Israeli governments, using all the means at their disposal, to expel this Palestinian population from their homes and to take over their lands. In some cases, working together with our Palestinian allies in the field, adopting the classic methods of nonviolent resistance associated with Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, we have actually reversed the process of dispossession and helped Palestinian villagers come back home.

Well over a year ago, a young Israeli, Itzik Goldway, and his girlfriend Julia, both linked to Ad Kan and the extreme right, joined Ta’ayyuh on its weekly trips to South Hebron. They subsequently portrayed this “infiltration” as a heroic, James Bond–style act; in actual fact, anyone is welcome to take part in our activities, no questions asked. Itzik managed to win the confidence of Ezra Nawi, a pivotal and charismatic figure in Ta’ayyuh and, for that very reason, hated by Israeli settlers and the police serving in this region. Nawi has been arrested on false charges many times in the past, and has been awarded damages for this by Israeli courts; he was also jailed for a month for allegedly obstructing soldiers during violent house demolitions at the Palestinian village of Umm al-Khair in 2007. For some months at least Goldway traveled with Nawi, surreptitiously recording and filming him to no particular effect, until in one moment he was with an apparent sting operation, no doubt masterminded from above, was set in motion. An alleged Palestinian land dealer, “Mousa,” telephoned Nawi and tried to entice him in the sale

When the police claimed they hadn't had enough time to determine the circumstances of this death and needed to keep Nawi locked up until they could do so, his lawyer, Eitan Peleg, was quoted as saying: "If you really wanted to know, you could find out not within minutes but within seconds by simply telephoning your colleagues in the Palestinian Security Forces." The list of those who are killed has not yet been revealed, but there has been a rush of volunteers for the weekly expeditions to South Hebron. But it's not hard to gauge how events are moving. Sadri Taha, a spokesman for the Hebron settlement, has said: "We are seeing a general insauln by the government and right-wing groups on those parts of Israeli society that are still standing up for democratic values.

A facade of discussion about the Israeli right, with the government firmly behind it, is continually attempting to criminalize and delegitimise human rights activists can be found in Disarming the Peace, published by the Israeli Rights Defenders Fund, which provides assistance to Israeli and Palestinian activists. The report also offers chilling firsthand testi mories of Israeli attacks, sexual abuse, and accounts of immense punish ments and humiliations of activists (very often women) by police and soldiers. Those of us who have participated in demonstrations in Sheikh Jarrah, Nabi Saleh, and other Palestinian settlements can vouch personally for the routine character of such acts.

Real danger accompanies peace work inside the occupied territories, but even greater danger may now threaten human rights workers inside the Green Line, in supposedly democratic Israel. One might be tempted to write off much of the current campaign as a particularly hostile form of McCarthyism. Ronen Shoval, one of the founders of a virulent right-wing organization called Im Tirtzu (We Will) has publicly expressed his deep admiration for Joseph McCarthy. In Israel, McCarthyism is a well-trodden path, with a history of punitive measures, including fines and imprisonment, against those who have engaged in peaceful protest. The Green Line, the border between Israel and the occupied territories, is a sensitive and contested area, and human rights activists working in these regions face significant risks.

Furthermore, activists have had to contend with a series of recent developments that have raised concerns about the safety and well-being of those working on the ground. The occupation continues to tighten its grip, with frequent incidents of violence and intimidation. The Israeli military and security forces have a reputation for brutality and abuse, and activists have encountered firsthand the harassment and threats they face.

The occupation system as a whole is ruled by the logic of strict division between the privileged Israeli occupiers and the Palestinian occupied, who are totally disenfranchised and stripped of all basic human rights. There should be no need to rehearse again the endless inequities inherent in the occupation; those unfamiliar with them can easily find them discussed in detail in New York's Times or The Guardian. But for the sake of transparency and accountability, it is important to keep these issues in the public eye.

The Hebron settlement, a hub of illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank, is a symbol of the deepening occupation. The settlement, which has expanded rapidly in recent years, is located on land that is claimed by the Palestinian people. Activists and human rights groups, including Amnesty International, have documented widespread human rights abuses in the area, including violence, discrimination, and displacement.

The occupation continues to be a source of contention and conflict, with ongoing struggles for justice and self-determination. The struggle for peace and justice in the region is a complex and ongoing process, requiring the commitment and dedication of all those who care about human rights and international law.
wounded in clashes with the army. Post-traumatic Palestinian violence can usually be counted on to supply the Israeli right with whatever rationale it needs for its hard-line program. But none of this happens in a vacuum. Incremental acts of violence—by nationalist character—character add up to a consistent, insidious, ultimately devastating attack on the very structure of Israeli democracy.

The minister of education, Nafzali Bennett, one of the most extreme spokesmen of the fanatical right, has issued a blacklist of books that are to be banned from the curriculum of all Israeli schools on the grounds that they are not patriotic enough. These include a popular novel by Dorit Rabinyan, Borderline, about a love affair between a Palestinian man and an Israeli woman—a heinous crime in the eyes of the religious right. It is being Jewish means anything at all, after a more or less continuous history of some three millennia, I think it must mean that Jews are people who do not ban books. To my mind, proscribing books is entirely consonant with the enormous threat of Palestinian land. The former might be the more fitting of the latter. The minister of culture and sport, Miri Regev, another fanatical nationalist, is also sponsoring a “loyalty in culture” bill; you can guess what she has in mind.

As always in such situations, a huge majority of otherwise decent Israelis passivity go along with the new cultural and political regime. The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the strongest art museum in the country, recently canceled an exhibition of work relating to refugees and refugee camps by the renowned Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei along with photographs by Michael Krasnian, winner of the prestigious EMET Prize. Krasni- man’s photographs included some of the thousands of Palestinian movements from the camps. The museum made vague noises about difficulties in scheduling, which might even have been true; the director, Suzanne Landau, denied that the decision to cancel had anything to do with politics. Yet in the present climate, there is a potential price to be paid by those rare institutions that have the courage to stand up for what they believe in or once believed in.

Sometimes, on a good day, I think that the very starkness and horror of the occupation will eventually bring it to an end. Both in Hebrew and, I think, outside of Israel, throughout the world, the term “occupation” has by now acquired something of the specific gravity of the word “apartheid” in the days before the South African system collapsed. Apartheid regimes—and the word is, alas, eminently suited to the occupation of Palestine—do sometimes collapse. Michael Marder, the human rights lawyer, recently published a humane and hopeful statement: one day, he said, the occupation will crumble, probably all at once. Sárd is not alone.

The most astute political commentator in Israel, Dmitry Shumsky, has written in Haaretz of the somewhat paradoxical character of this latest round of right-wing terror; there is, at the moment, no electoral threat whatever to the continued rule of the right and no clear sign of effective resistance from outside. Why, then, is it so intent on hunting down its enemies? Shumsky thinks that on a subtler, more hidden level, even the Israeli right is beginning to sense that its hold on Palestine is becoming untenable. I myself am less sanguine; the far right in Israel very rarely goes for total destruction of thinking and acting, and it’s not clear who is left to stop it.

February 4, Natan Sharansky announced that he is building a huge fence around the entire country to protect it from the “wild beasts” out there. He has, as always, failed to notice his own responsibility for extreme violence inside this fence-to-be, including his part in purveying paranoiac fantasies as the active perpetrator of a Palestinian population of millions entirely without rights. Like many, indeed most of those around him, he has substituted the false and often fatal notion that citizens exist only to serve the state for the democratic notion that the state, a nonmetaphysical entity not meant to mediate collective identities, is there to foster and serve its citizens. Dark days lie ahead.

Perhaps more than any other human rights and peace activists are still in the field in Israel—a few hundred too many in the eyes of the far right and, I guess, of large parts of the political center as well. These remaining activists are, of course, certainly supported by much wider networks, and it’s important to note that some parts of the democratic apparatus of the state still function. The courts, despite their ambiguous, indeed often appalling record on matters relating to the occupation, still can exert some kind of constraint on the government. To the extent that one can still speak and write more or less freely, although new moves to censor social media have been announced.

Marwan Darweish and Andrew Rigby, authors of Popular Protest in Palestine, discuss many of the major settings for Palestinian nonviolent resistance to the occupation—the villages of Bil’in, Nabi Salih, the Jerusalem neighborhoods of Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah, the South Hebron Hills, and so on. It is certainly true, as I can attest from personal experience, that one meets many remarkable, courageous, and astonishingly articulate people in these settings. The right-wing extremists of Ad Afar may have recently released a contrived and mendacious film clip attempting to discredit these Palestinian activists and the Israeli peace workers who have demonstrated alongside them.

But Darweish and Rigby also set out the minimal conditions or prerequisites for “sustainable unarmed resistance” in Palestine: a strong sense of solidarity throughout the subject population, organizational resilience, and external support from state and nonstate actors. These conditions are still, for the most part, very far from being realized; Palestinian society is rife with internal division (as the recent wave of strikes by Palestinian schoolteachers against the Palestinian government makes clear). So far the Israeli system has succeeded in keeping nonviolent protest a highly localized and mostly small-scale phenomenon, lacking a strong leadership that goes beyond local protest. Indeed, the occupation rests to a large extent precisely upon the fragmentation of the occupied territories into many tiny, discontinuous, fenced-in enclaves. Still, fences, even or especially barbed-wire fences, will produce a fecile foundation on which to build a future for the state when those trapped inside them decide to become free.