Raffaela A. Del Sarto, Israel under Siege. The Politics of Insecurity and the Rise of the Israeli Neo-Revisionist Right


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For anyone trying to understand why right-wing politics and discourse became so dominant in today’s Israel, whereas the political left almost disappeared, I highly recommend reading Raffaella Del Sarto’s “Israel under Siege”.

Del Sarto pinpoints how a fundamental shift in Israeli public attitude took place in the early 2000s. Before, a majority of Israeli society saw peace as its most important political goal and supported territorial compromise, and even a Palestinian state. In the new post-Oslo narrative, which still dominates, hopes for peace remain at best remote, military deterrence is perceived as superior to negotiations, and unilateral action is preferred over coordinated efforts. In addition, criticism of Israel’s actions is quickly portrayed as consciously or naively endangering the state, either in its physical security or in its identity as a Jewish state.

How did this change come about, why is the right-wing narrative so dominant, its arguments so deeply ingrained in the public discourse, and how does it influence Israel’s foreign, but also domestic policy? These are central questions that “Israel under Siege” tackles. In Del Sarto’s own words:

"The objective of this book ... is to explain how a majority of Israelis view their regional environment post-Oslo, what policymakers think they are doing; what a given policy means in a specific context, what implications are, and why hegemonic notions on these issues can be challenged."1

Del Sarto does so by analysing Israel’s security discourse, which relates to Israel’s embattled reality. Depicting herself as an ontological realist and empirical pragmatist, she clarifies that while she assumes an objective reality, its interpretation is always subjective and therefore up for discussion. As she points out:

"This does not mean ... Israel is not facing a number of substantial security threats, or that bombs and rockets do not kill people. It does mean, however, that specific notions of threats and regional order are but one interpretation of reality. "2

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2 Del Sarto. p. 220.
Her central argument is that post-Oslo, Israel developed a hegemonic discourse, in which neo-revisionist right-wing ideology remains almost unchallenged. A hegemonic discourse, as she notes,

“occurs when specific concepts and norms are shared by an overwhelming majority and turn into an axiomatic truth that goes unquestioned. In other words, they become common sense.”

She traces the origins (Chapter 1) of this development to three trigger events. The first was the failed peace talks of Camp David II and Taba (2000/1), where according to the Israeli narrative, the Palestinians were offered a state but rejected it. Consequently, Prime Minister Ehud Barak concluded that “there is no partner to peace” on the Palestinian side. Del Sarto explains in great detail how this statement uttered by Barak – the leader of the left and an epitome of national security at the same time – became so convincing that it undermined one of the pillars of left-wing ideology itself: the hope for a compromise with the Palestinians. This was catalysed by the suicide attacks of the Second Intifada (Del Sarto’s second pillar), which caused Israelis to see Palestinians and the conflict primarily through the lenses of terror and counterterrorism. The third pillar is the rise of Iran as a regional power with its proxies Hizbollah, (and to a certain extent Hamas), as well as its ambitions to develop a nuclear bomb.

The combination of these three events led to an amalgamation of views, which changed public perception in Israel fundamentally – vis-à-vis the Palestinians, but also in a more general way when regarding Israel’s foreign policy outlook. Ever since, Israel’s adversaries are primarily described as aiming for the destruction of Israel. Therefore, peace with those forces seems illusionary and cannot be achieved. The only way to deal with them is military deterrence, as negotiations are futile. Del Sarto describes how this became part and parcel of a new military consensus:

“[The] consensus legitimized specific policies rendering other lines of action irrational and illegitimate. [...] Israel came to be perceived as having only one choice: deterrence and forceful policies.”

As the author points out, this evolves into a narrative in which foreign policy is primarily seen in existential terms: if at base Israel’s enemies do not want peace, military means are a necessity which in turn leads to an attitude like “let the IDF win”. Thus, this narrative rarely leaves room for any other options (an exception would be the peace talks in Annapolis 2008). And it goes deeper: it creates a black and white scenario in which critics are perceived as naive at best or as traitors or outright enemies at worst.

Eventually, this new outlook leads to a chain reaction: it empowers the right-wing narrative, which was always critical of the Palestinians and at the same time caused – partially self-inflicted – the demise of the left-wing liberal positions. Thus, right-wing positions became the mainstream, which Del Sarto depicts through many examples. One of the most striking is her quote of an interview with Dov Weissglas,

3 Del Sarto, p. 13.
4 Del Sarto, p. 213.
Del Sarto goes on to show how this becomes a self-enforcing process: the primacy of the logic of deterrence is that political or diplomatic approaches to conflict become marginalised and less perceptive. This leads to a higher chance for escalation into military conflict, which in turn supports the right-wing positions, as the blame for military escalation will primarily be put on Israel’s opponents.

After establishing what she calls the “New Foreign Policy Consensus”, Del Sarto dedicates the rest of the book to explaining how this effects Israel’s policy. In the second chapter she shows how the consensus influenced Israel’s foreign policy over the next decade. She analyses the conflicts with Hamas and Hizbollah, but also the controversy with the Palestinian Authority (PA)/Fatah during the Second Intifada and how Israel confronted and continues to confront Iran’s nuclear ambitions. The third chapter shows the domestic repercussions of the hegemonic narrative. While the book is primarily focused on the decade 2000–2010, this chapter also explains the long-term changes in Israeli domestic policy. Even though Del Sarto does not delve into party politics, her explanations form the background of Israel’s political shift to the right.

Arguably this shift in narratives described by the author is one of the main reasons why Benjamin Netanyahu has been in power since 2009. The last chapter before the conclusion is a welcomed outlook beyond the 2010s. She briefly discusses if the hegemonic narrative might be challenged but demonstrates why this was not the case, and will probably not change in the near future.

One of the strongest points of the book is that she shows how divergent political views, which could support a greater variety of political solutions, are not being heard in the hegemonic mainstream narrative. Del Sarto draws from a rich pool of examples: the most important is probably the question of why the Arab Peace Initiative was basically not discussed, that the failure of peace negotiations was always blamed on the Palestinian side; that the well-functioning security cooperation with the PA is not publicly discussed as a building block for further steps towards cooperation; and that the efforts to strike a nuclear deal with Iran were categorically rejected.

An additional example, though not mentioned in the book, would be Benjamin Netanyahu’s (then as foreign minister) appearance in September 2002 before the U.S. House of Representatives, when he declared with utmost certainty (“no question whatsoever”) that Saddam Hussein is working to develop nuclear weapons.

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just before the US invasion of Iraq: this is a prime example of employing apocalyptic visions, even if they are unfounded.  

Yet, Del Sarto manages to toe a fine line: she always makes clear that Israel faces material threats and points out that the interpretations are not necessarily incorrect, but that the lack of discussion hinders an alternative path in the first place. 

While the book does an excellent job in many fields, three minor points of critique should be mentioned:  

1) When Del Sarto describes how, in the past, Israel’s right-wing path led it into international isolation (with Europe, but also with the US under President Obama), this situation has changed entirely now. With Donald Trump in office, the Gulf States are moving ever closer towards Israel and many non-liberal but pro-Israel heads of state (Bolsonaro, Modi, Duterte, Orban, etc.) draw a different, less critical picture of Israel’s international standing. Also, Netanyahu’s almost tireless lobbying in many regions of the world has contributed to this.  

2) While the author is always very careful to stress the existential threats that Israel faces, she will still face a hard time when trying to convince conservative Israelis with her book, as they will continue to argue that there is no other way. One point of countering this could have been a brief discussion about when deterrence or “counter-terrorism” is necessary – and when it actually was at least in short term successful.  

3) One criticism that can be made actually goes beyond the book itself. When reading the book, one could get the impression that it is only the Israeli discourse that shifted away from compromise. This is of course not true, since the Palestinian discourse also moved away from the acceptance of a two-state solution. Thus, an analysis of Palestinian society and political discourse mirroring Del Sarto’s book would be of urgent need. But Del Sarto herself attests to this in the introduction (p. 8).  

But these are minor points of critique. Summing up, one can say that the book is excellent in explaining how Israel’s right-wing political views formed a hegemonic narrative over the years. It equally excels in deciphering how this narrative hinders alternative views on the conflict from gaining public cogency, as well as how the circle of military confrontation causes this narrative to perpetuate itself.