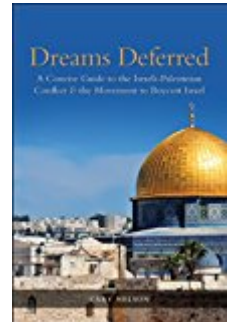


**Cary Nelson.** *Dreams Deferred: A Concise Guide to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Movement to Boycott Israel.* Chicago: Indiana University Press, 2016. 400 pp. \$12.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-02517-3.



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Cary Nelson's *Dreams Deferred: A Concise Guide to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Movement to Boycott Israel* overviews many important topics related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, albeit from a “progressive-Zionist” perspective. The author seeks to convince the reader that the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement (BDS) and the promotion of a binational one-state solution are at their core anti-Semitic, because both seek to deny Jews the right to self-determine in their ancient homeland. Only a two-state solution is acceptable for Nelson, but he offers little insight into how to get there from here, and gives little reason to believe it is even possible. Moreover, *Dreams Deferred* is a book about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has little to say about the United States, diaspora politics, and the pro-Israel lobby in America. These are remarkable omissions considering how important each issue is to the ongoing conflict. Regardless, Nelson's book is worth the read because it is full of concise overviews and insightful arguments that can serve as

launching points for further discussions about the many important topics addressed within.

*Dreams Deferred* is written encyclopedia-style, with alphabetized entries. Many entries are original works by Nelson himself, but others are excerpts from larger essays by other contributors. Most of them are clearly written and easily digestible, but if the reader is looking for something approximating a balanced introduction to BDS or the one-state versus two-state debate, they need to look elsewhere. This work is another partisan shot in the ongoing struggle to shape how people think about the Israel-Palestinian conflict. To be clear, bias is par for the course in this emotional field of study. Very few authors take neutral stances when writing about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nelson is up front about his biases—he is not trying to pass something over on his readers. In just the second paragraph of the book, he notes scholarly essays he has already published denouncing academic boycotts of Israel. He also promotes a website that offers “action fliers and Q&A's to distribute during debates and discus-

sions” (p. 8). And he points out that while *Dreams Deferred* takes the form of an encyclopedia, he is “not seeking the kind of neutrality expected from an encyclopedia” (p. 6).

The primary purpose of *Dreams Deferred* is clearly stated in the introduction: to delegitimize BDS and the one-state solution while advocating for a two-state solution. BDS calls for the widespread boycotting, divesting, and sanctioning of Israel in pursuit of three goals: an end to the occupation, full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes. It was initiated by members of Palestinian civil society and is modeled after the anti-apartheid movement. The one-state solution Dr. Nelson seeks to delegitimize envisions a binational, democratic state in which Palestinians now under occupation become full citizens and enjoy equal treatment under the law. This scenario is in stark contrast to a two-state solution in which Israel allows the Palestinians to create a state on parts or all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Nelson also hopes his book will empower readers to better confront anti-Israeli sentiment on college campuses and other public spaces (p. 6).

*Dreams Deferred* is not intended to be read in a sequential manner, but as a quick guide to key elements of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the end of each entry is a list of related topics in the book which the reader can consult for further edification. The book covers many of the issues one would expect, including the BDS movement, the intifadas, the one-state and two-state solutions, settlements, and Zionism. It also addresses many lesser known but still important topics including anti-imperialism, intersectionality, pinkwashing, proportionality, asymmetric warfare, and diversity in Israeli universities.

At his best, Nelson’s entries are fairly even-handed and compassionate. When addressing the Oslo Accords he insists both sides share blame for the failure of the peace process (pp. 245-249). In his entry on the *Nakba*, he recognizes that all na-

tions are imagined and suggests that there is little use in comparing the size of one nation’s sense of victimhood to another (pp. 230). This entry hints at an often overlooked point—Israeli and Palestinian national identities have developed in a symbiotic manner. Many elements of contemporary Israeli political and strategic culture are the result of Zionist efforts to control geographically and demographically inhospitable territory. Zionists were outnumbered twenty to one when they first arrived in Arab-dominated Palestine and they simply had to develop a pioneering, self-sufficient, warrior mentality to survive. By the same token, Palestinian nation identity was clearly catalyzed by the Zionist movement’s efforts to create a state in Palestine. Many supporters of Zionism conveniently overlook the former and suggest that the latter is evidence that Palestinian national identity is in some way inferior to, or less deserving of, self-determination than Zionism. Nelson flirts with this line of argument when he argues that Palestinian national identity would have been stillborn had Israel’s Arab neighbors simply treated Palestinian refugees better (p. 228). But that is not how history went, and today, Nelson insists, Palestinians have a right to self-determination which should be achieved through the creation of a Palestinian state on some or all of the West Bank and Gaza.

For Nelson, a two-state solution is the most practical, least unjust resolution to the dilemma of two nations seeking self-determination in the same land. Neither side will be completely happy with partition, but given the facts on the ground, it is the best option for both parties. Others beg to differ, but Nelson does little to give those dissenting voices a fair hearing. He denounces the binational one-state solution as impractical and tantamount to the destruction of the State of Israel. To be sure, a binational state in which all Jews and Palestinians living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea enjoy citizenship and equality under the law *would* mean the end of Israel as we know it since over time Jews would

lose their privileged status over non-Jews. However, this would be a gradual process. It is naïve to think this would happen overnight, as Nelson suggests could happen (p. 238). If all Palestinians were given citizenship tomorrow, how long would it take them to fundamentally change the Basic Laws (Israel's de facto constitution) that ensure Jewish domination of society? How long would it take Palestinians to reach the commanding heights of the economic, judicial, political, and security organizations that currently privilege Jews over non-Jews in Israel? It has taken decades for Middle Eastern and African Jews to achieve some semblance of equality vis-à-vis the European Jews who established Israel, and they had all the privileges of being Jewish in the Jewish state. It would take Palestinians decades to achieve similar success. In the meantime, arrangements could be made to ensure the new state's binational political structures do not produce the kind of one-sided majority rule that now characterizes Israeli governance.

Nelson clearly believes that Palestinians cannot be trusted with full citizenship in Israel unless they remain a minority. If they gained a majority, or even parity, then the rights and physical security of Jews would be threatened. And even if Palestinian violence against Jews did not consume the country right away, the two peoples would still be unable to achieve enduring peaceful relations in a unified state because each ethno-religious group would constantly be struggling to impose its identity in every sphere of public life (p. 238). Nelson insists majorities on both sides want to live in states dominated by their ethno-religious compatriots and anything short of that is both unworkable and unjust.

As the subtitle suggests, much of *Dreams Deferred* is dedicated to delegitimizing the BDS movement. Advocating for boycotts, divestments, and sanctions in protest of unacceptable corporate or state behavior is a staple of nonviolent civic activism in democratic societies. But Nelson

insists that the BDS movement is illegitimate for many reasons: It calls for academic boycotts, which impinge on academic freedoms, restrict the free flow of ideas, and target Jews (pp. 14-22). Its economic boycott efforts are similar to those used by the Nazis (pp. 26-31). Furthermore, BDS unfairly "demonizes, antagonizes, and delegitimizes" Israel while it "uncritically idealizes" Palestinians (p. 63). BDS also presents no practical solution to the conflict and offers nothing realistic to the people it purports to champion (p. 63). It also seeks the unqualified return of Palestinian refugees, which would undermine Israel's Jewish character (pp. 257-259). Finally, BDS falsely claims to be nonviolent even though there is no nonviolent way to achieve its real goal, which is the elimination of the State of Israel. All this is plain to see, Nelson contends, and so those that support the movement are either naïve or have suspect motivations (p. 239). The BDS movement is not just flawed or misguided, it is anti-Semitic because its agenda seeks to deny Jews the right to self-determine in their ancient homeland. And even though it takes no official stand on the one-state versus two-state debate, Nelson is certain that its leading advocates promote the former as a way to destroy the Jewish state (pp. 7, 237-240).

Nelson forcefully rejects every tactic advocated by the BDS movement and other more coercive options, such as limiting or ending American military aid to Israel. Yet he suggests certain forms of international on Israel pressure might be appropriate. Concerned Americans could press Congress to discourage settlement construction deep in the West Bank and support a UN Security Council Resolution that lays out "a thoughtful set of principles behind a two-state" solution (p. 58). He even suggests the European Union's efforts to force Israel to label products exported from the occupied territories is an acceptable form of pressure (pp. 118-119).

Nelson repeatedly calls for a two-state solution but offers little insight into how to get there

from here and presents little reason to believe such a deal is even possible. Indeed, few analysts think that Israel will allow the development of an independent Palestine in the occupied territories anytime soon, if ever. Israel clearly has the most control over what happens in and to the occupied territories since it is the occupying power. But for political, security, religious, and nationalist reasons the post-1967 settlement movement in Israel has been unstoppable. No politician can build a ruling coalition capable of selling a two-state solution to both Palestinians and Israelis or reverse the colonization of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where over 700,000 Israeli Jews now live. Some analysts insist Israel is already implementing an apartheid-like one-state solution in which Palestinians under occupation face extensive oppression while Palestinians with citizenship face extensive discrimination. Nelson rejects the apartheid label, calling it inaccurate and an example of how language is weaponized against Israel. Still, he recognizes that Israel discriminates against its Palestinian citizens, and that Palestinians under occupation are severely oppressed (p. 50). As a “progressive Zionist,” Nelson insists that both of these should and can be remedied, but only within the framework of a two-state solution: a Jewish state controlling about 78 percent of historic Palestine and a semi-independent Palestinian state controlling the remainder. But how realistic is it to advocate for a two-state solution that is clearly not in the offing?

From this reader’s perspective, Nelson ought to do more than explain why he supports one solution and opposes others. He ought to explain why his preferred policy solution has failed to materialize over the past fifty years, explain why he thinks it still can be achieved, and explain how. He offers precious little on all three scores. Nelson suggests that Israel should freeze settlement construction beyond the security barrier, ease the siege on Gaza, and encourage Palestinian economic development, while the Palestinians should stop inciting violence (p. 101). Yet such prescrip-

tions are as well worn as they are unheeded. He also suggests that observers should not give up hope on the two-state solution because future leaders might cut a deal (p. 104). It is true that both Palestinian and Israeli leaders have made compromises they swore they never would—Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin, Yasir Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin, and Ariel Sharon among others did so—but there are political, religious, and security-related factors on both sides that undermine the chances of achieving a two-state solution. These factors are not explored much in this book.

To the extent that Nelson describes what a two-state solution should look like, he presents well-established ideas. Israel would pull back to its pre-1967 border except in certain areas where it would annex most of the already well-entrenched large settlement blocks. In exchange for that annexed West Bank territory, Israel would transfer an approximately equal amount of land to the new Palestinian state. West Jerusalem would become Israel’s capital and East Jerusalem Palestine’s, although he leaves unaddressed what arrangements would govern the Old City and the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif. Palestinian refugees would have the right to return to the new Palestinian state and Israel would accept only a small number of them so as not to threaten its Jewish majority. The new Palestinian state would be nonmilitarized to ensure Israel’s security (pp. 312-314). None of this is particularly remarkable because the outlines of a two-state solution have been clear for decades and yet the occupation continues. Nelson gives optimists some hope by sketching out a plan in which Israel and the PA coordinate the former’s unilateral withdrawal from much of the West Bank as an interim step to a comprehensive settlement (pp.101-104).

Nelson rejects the suggestion that Israel’s settlement project has already created so many facts on the ground that a two-state solution is unachievable, but his brief explanation is not very convincing (p. 283). In essence, he argues that the

largest settlements would be annexed in a peace agreement and that many settlers further inside the West Bank could be enticed to return to Israel voluntarily. Still, tens of thousands of other settlers would have to be moved forcefully and no Israeli government wants to do that. Indeed, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin suggested he was ready to negotiate a two-state solution as part of the Oslo Accords, the right wing took to the streets in mass demonstrations. Rabin was soon after assassinated by one of the many Jews in Israel who reject partition as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since Rabin's death, Israeli Jews have settled in occupied territory, many of them deep in the West Bank. Every settlement building that goes up makes partition less tenable for Israeli politicians.

While Nelson does not think we have reached the point of no return, he does recognize that settlement expansion could make a deal impossible someday, which is why he advocates a settlement construction freeze beyond the security border. He argues that Israel's prolonged occupation threatens to undermine its core values (pp. 177, 283, 313). Presumably he is referring to Israel's putative commitment to democracy and social justice. But if fifty years of occupation is not enough time to undermine Israel's core values, then what is? How long or how harsh does the occupation have to be before that line is crossed? Some say the line was crossed a long time ago and that Israel's continued occupation has turned it into an increasingly cruel society. Indeed, many point out that Israel has never treated its citizens equally, that many state laws and policies advantage Jewish over the non-Jewish citizens. In "Israel: Democratic and Jewish," Nelson argues there is no contradiction between Israel being Jewish and democratic, even with a sizable minority of non-Jewish citizens (about 20 percent). He supports this assertion by, among other things, pointing out that "Israel's 1948 proclamation of independence guarantees complete equal rights to all its citizens," (p. 175), that all citizens have the

right to vote, and that Arabs can own property. But Arab land ownership in Israel is strictly curtailed since over 90 percent of the country is effectively off-limits to purchase by non-Jews. Moreover, Palestinians have been effectively disenfranchised from national governance since no Jewish political party will invite a Palestinian party into a ruling coalition. And Israeli laws and policies intentionally privilege Jews over non-Jewish in most areas of life.

Nelson accepts some of this as true and troubling, but insists that some of these discriminatory policies are legitimate. For instance, other countries privilege the immigration of one part of their citizenry over others, and other countries privilege one religion over others as well, including some exemplary democratic states (p. 177). Other discriminatory aspects of Israeli society do need to be redressed, but again only within the context of Israel remaining a Jewish state. For Nelson, as long as the non-Jewish element of Israel's citizenry remains a minority, there is no contradiction between Israel's desire to be both Jewish and democratic. And that is why Israel must accept a two-state solution: "It has been said repeatedly that Israel can be a Jewish state, a democratic state, or an occupying state, but not all at once. It must choose two of these identities" (p. 177). So far, Israel has been more concerned with the first and third of these identities at the expense of democracy and justice. But even if Israel someday ends its occupation and embraces a two-state solution, one can reasonably question how democratic and just a society can be when it views maintaining the domination of one ethno-religious group over another to be a prime directive of governance.

Many academics now describe Israel as a settler-colonial power. Nelson believes this is not only unfair and inaccurate, it is a politically motivated activity aimed at delegitimizing Israel's right to exist. He suggests that the moniker might fit Israel's behavior in the occupied territories, but

even that will not hold true once a two state-solution is implemented. And to whatever extent Israel's history can be usefully analyzed through the settler-colonial prism, one must put such analyses in context and in comparison to the experience of others, including the United States (implying other countries have behaved far worse than Israel). Moreover, current and future behavior can always ameliorate any country's colonial history (pp. 284-288). Instead of engaging in a constant tug-of-war between critics and defenders of Israel, the academy ought to find ways to contribute to peace. For Nelson peace can only be had through the fulfilment of "progressive Zionism," which respects both people's right to self-determination via a two-state solution while mitigating the injustices Palestinian Israelis face, but in the context of Israel remaining a Jewish state (pp. 338-339). Efforts to promote a one-state solution and BDS are counterproductive—they make it harder to achieve partition, which is the only possible peaceful solution to this conflict.

Getting back to the issue of academic boycotts, which is central to Nelson's critique of the BDS movement, *Dreams Deferred* encourages readers to struggle with the questions of when a boycott or sanction is justified. They are never without adverse effects—clearly, academic boycotts can curb public discourse. But so can the domination of one narrative over all others. Many BDS advocates promote a policy of "anti-normalization" in an effort to reframe the dominant pro-Israel narrative that pervades public discourse in America. Anti-normalization has both an internal and external dimension. One goal is to limit cooperation between Palestinians and elements of the occupation. Some cooperation benefits Palestinian individuals, families, and even political organizations, but some forms of cooperation also help sustain the occupation and undermine the resistance. Normalization, some argue, advances a "colonization of the mind" in which Palestinians accept the current disparity as simply a reality they must cope with instead of overturn (p. 32).

Anti-normalization also has an international component. It seeks to highlight the imbalance of power between the occupied and occupier and limit international interactions with the latter as a way of advancing the human rights of the former. The goal is to undermine Israel's efforts to portray itself as a normal state acting in a normal fashion, and instead encourage the international community to treat it as an illegal occupier oppressing millions of people and flouting international law. Dissuading musical groups, academics, artists, businesses, et cetera, from performing/working in or with Israel is an effort to keep Israel from doing business as usual, to isolate it from the international community, highlight its abuses, and pressure it to end the occupation. For Nelson, anti-normalization is completely unacceptable because it unfairly singles out Israel for alleged human rights abuses that are far more severe elsewhere in the world. More importantly, it impedes the development of mutual understanding and empathy between Jews and Palestinians. Programs promoting empathy among youths on both sides have created a "core of people well prepared to facilitate and promote a two-state solution should the opportunity come to pass" (p. 35). Critics might reasonably ask if decades of such normalization efforts have done much to advance the Palestinian search for justice and equality.

Nelson's principled and firm opposition to boycotts, anti-normalization, and the one-state solution are well articulated, thought-provoking, and often convincing. Yet they are not without challenge. Many leading figures in the BDS movement like Omar Barghouti, Saree Makdisi, and Ali Abunimah (all of whom Nelson criticizes in his book) offer similarly principled and firm arguments favoring BDS, the one-state solution, and anti-normalization efforts. Readers of *Dreams Deferred* would do well to read the works of these or other BDS supporters to see how their arguments measure up. I suspect Dr. Nelson would welcome the debate.

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