

KEITH KAHN-HARRIS *Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community*, 223 pp., David Paul, London, ISBN: 978-0992667306, 2014 , £10.00 (paperback)

The angst and anguish of British Jews in comprehending and coping with Israel's political and military actions are documented and dissected in Keith Kahn-Harris's book. It attempts to disentangle the different types of reaction to a specific event. Indeed the author lists fourteen categories – from the “decent left” to the “neo-conservative right”, from “private engagers” to the “apathetic”. Even Howard Jacobson's fictional “Ashamed Jews” gets a look-in.

In particular the book documents and explains the divisions amongst British Jews during the first decade of the twenty-first century. But what do British Jews really think? Significantly there has only been one UK survey of Jewish attitudes towards Israel even though the American Jewish Committee has been carrying out regular surveys for the past thirty years. The JPR survey of 2010 suggested that British Jews are decidedly dovish – 74% opposing the settlement drive, 67% endorsing “land for peace” while remaining strong on Israel's right to security. Thus a similar proportion supported Operation Cast Lead in 2009 and the erection of a security barrier to thwart the suicide bombers. It is unlikely that many would have voted for Netanyahu in last year's election. However such surveys do highlight the distinct difference between Jewish organisations which stand in the public arena against ill-informed critics and the views of the ordinary Jew in the street. Many “representative” Jewish organisations choose not to get involved and do not express an opinion. In not having a policy about the West Bank settlements and in not criticising an Israel government, the silence of organisations can easily be construed as a quiet support.

Keith Kahn-Harris's book rightly reflects unease and disquiet during the period of the al-Aqsa Intifada. It adopts a sociological, psychotherapeutic and spiritual reflection rather than an overtly political and historical analysis. Civilian casualties in any incursion into Gaza attract the media far than Israel's reasons for actually being there. On the moral level, the wholesale killing of families is terrible, but it is also a political weapon that Hamas deploys. This is Israel's Achilles heel that eventually brings about a ceasefire.

The advent of social media has played an important role in the polarisation since 2000. It is a great leveller in that it allows constructive comment alongside anti-Semitic innuendo in the name of free speech. The

BOOK REVIEWS

blogosphere occasionally resembles a pub discussion which starts off rationally and then descends into foul-mouthed rants as its participants become progressively more intoxicated. Pour the complexity of the Israel-Palestine conflict into this whirlpool and it is not surprising that “uncivil wars” break out.

The book is good on events since the year 2000, but is often incorrect in its recording of history before then. It is not the case to suggest that there was a broad consensus after the Six-Day war in 1967. Groups such as Siah (Israel New Left), BAZO (British Anti-Zionist Organisation), Mapam and the Israel-Palestine Committee all existed in the 1970s. This peripheral concern moved into the mainstream in 1982 when Begin and Sharon misled British Jews with the rationale for Israel’s invasion of Lebanon. This catalysed the formation of the British Friends of Peace Now in 1982 – not 1987 as the author maintains. It became the central focus of opposition since many of its founders were intellectuals and academics – people who were disposed to ask questions and did not imbibe the accepted wisdom emanating from Jerusalem.

The period since 1982 has also been marked by the rise of Palestinian Islamism which has divided the “peace camp”. Some believed that just as it was possible to talk to the PLO the same could be done with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This resulted in the emergence of such groups as Jews for Justice for Palestinians and Independent Jewish Voices – and leftist opposition to them. The development of real-time television news has brought home the brutality and nihilism of war – and this has clearly affected many Jews who live and work amongst non-Jews. On the spiritual plain, the morality of Judaism is invoked. The idea of deference to Israeli political figures has waned.

While many British Jews passionately believe in Israel’s survival, the blanket survivalism of the 1948 generation – a generation which tolerated little dissent – has diminished as they have passed on. The current generation of British Jews are more discerning. Unity is not synonymous with uniformity. The spat between the Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Leadership Council is evidence of the latter’s willingness to break with the past. It also relates to the significant influence which communal philanthropists can exert.

This book overflows with good intentions, but as the Oslo process of the 1990s indicated, it is only a meaningful peace which will soothe the savage Jewish breast.

Colin Shindler

Emeritus professor at SOAS, University of London.