



# Exploring secular and theological claims to Israel/Palestine

**IF ONE** is looking for a serious book to help you understand the competing secular and religious claims to Israel and Palestine in the modern world – and in our contemporary post-October 7 situation – this is the one!

Written by an eminent and experienced scholar in the field of Zionism, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Israel Studies, this superbly researched and well-developed book by Professor Emeritus Ilan Troen of Ben Gurion University in Beer-sheba and Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, is an invaluable resource for understanding deeply the diverse historical and theological narratives which underly the current conflict which has been raging for more than 100 years by now in the land of Israel. This special land, which is claimed to be holy by three religions –Judaism, Christianity and Islam—and two peoples, the Jewish People and the Palestinian People, who have been trying to figure out ways to share this land for a long time (not terribly successfully), has been and remains an issue of unresolved conflict and contention.

Let me begin by saying that this book is dedicated to the daughter and son-in law of Carol and Ilan Troen—Shachar Deborah Troen-Mathias and Shlomi David Mathias—who were murdered by Hamas terrorists while defending their family at Kibbutz Holit on the Gaza border on Shabbat morning of October 7th, 2023. The author and his wife wrote in the dedication of the book to them that they “celebrate their lives and commitment to mutual understanding and accommodation”. This is a beautiful tribute to two very special people who were brutal-

ly massacred last October in the most heinous attacks in Israeli history.

Indeed, this book goes a long way toward helping Jews and Palestinians to understand each other’s multiple narratives compre-

Secondly, as someone who has devoted much of my professional life to inter-religious dialogue and education, I was fascinated to learn from the “Acknowledgements” that the author of this book

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participated in two multi-year international seminars with inter-religious implications that helped him crystallize his underlying insights that led to the research and writing of this book. The first one was at the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA) at Boston University, which was founded by the famous sociologist of religion, Professor Peter Berger. This seminar focused on the relationship between religion and secularization, which, as we will see below, is one of the themes of this book. Troen applied many of the insights learned in this seminar to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, and to the many contentions (and discontents) with Israel’s legitimacy, which is another main issue discussed in depth in this book. The second seminar was chaired by Professor Phillip Cunningham, a professor of theology at St. Joseph University in Philadelphia and a leader in the field of Jewish-Christian Relations in America and internationally. These seminars helped stimulate a book which is both deeply secular and profoundly religious and interreligious at the same time.

What is the main innovation in this book?

The uniqueness of this book lies in the linking the religious claims to the Holy Land with the secular/historical ones in a holistic and comprehensive discussion and analysis. Troen not only discusses in depth the classic Zionist and Palestinian secular/historical claims to



A map of Israel and the territories.

hensively and profoundly. It will also help Jews, Christians and Muslims around the world to better understand their religion’s claim to the land, as well as the claim of their co-monotheistic religions.



the land – which I would argue are not very well-known in detail by most people in the Western world today, including and perhaps especially students ( and faculty!) who have been demonstrating on American and international campuses in recent months—but he also brings the theological claims to the land of Judaism, Christianity and Islam to the discussion .



Prof. S. Ilan Troen

This enables us to have a more sophisticated and complex understanding of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the contemporary situation. This is done via rigorous research and appropriate analysis, which is very relevant to all of us who care about Israel and Palestine today.

Troen begins the book by raising the issue of Israel’s legitimacy as a state, a topic that has once again become central to all discussions about Israel, since the barbaric attacks by Hamas against Israeli citizens and soldiers on October 7, 2023 and by the war of Israel against Hamas, which has never recognized the existence of the state of Israel and seeks to obliterate it from the earth, with the help of Iran and its proxies, e.g. Hezbollah and the Houthis.

*The legitimacy of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine has been disputed since at least the Balfour Declaration in November 1917 when the British Cabinet announced that it viewed “with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” The Balfour Declaration placed this initially internal debate as a contested topic on the international agenda. The question of Israel’s legitimacy was not resolved by the League of Nations’ endorsement of the Balfour Declaration in 1922, the British Mandate for Palestine, nor by the United Nations’ decision in November 1947 in favor of establishing a Jewish state... Israel’s legitimacy is still disputed in the academy, in the polemics of the public square [e.g. the demonstrations around the world in recent months], and in religious settings. Challenges to its status, composition and identity remain part of the international agenda as the dispute over a Jewish national home in Palestine enters its second century. (p.1)*

This is quite amazing, in my view. Here

COURTESY we are, 76 years after the establishment of the state of Israel, and we are still not considered a legitimate political entity by so many people and nations and religious groups in our contemporary world.

In the history of Zionism, and of the Palestinian national movement, there have been many ways to legitimize the attachment of these peoples to the land which they call alter-

natively Israel or Palestine. One of the central ways that this has been done has been to refer to History. According to Troen, historical narratives are always part of secular claims to territory. This has been the case since the European Enlightenment. Moreover, throughout the 19th century, history became increasingly integral to nationalism in many places in the world. This is also true with regard to the competing claims to the land in Israel/Palestine:

*In the case of Palestine, history is commonly used by the contending parties to legitimize control over land by invoking past experiences and achievements.... History is used to legitimate both Jewish and Palestinian nationalism and is written into their foundational documents. Both the Israeli Declaration of Independence (1948) and the Palestinian National Charter (1968) make extensive use of history. The Israeli narrative begins with the ancient world [the Bible] and continues into the present, while the Palestinian focuses on more recent events. (pp. 87-88)*

Indeed, one of the salient aspects of this book is the fact that it recognizes very clearly that the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is a competition between two national movements – Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish People and Palestinian nationalism, the collective movement of the Palestinian People, both of which have their own unique histories. In fact, I would argue that one cannot really understand our conflict without understanding this basic fact, which is all too often ignored by publicists and politicians, who seek to deny any historical claims of “the other” in this conflict.

Troen does not only focus on secular historical claims to the land. On the contrary, the genius of his portrayal of our

interweaved histories is to also bring the theological claims of the major monotheistic religions to bear on the questions of the legitimacy of Judaism’s, Christianity’s and Islam’s claims to this land which they all regard as holy. For Troen, the challenges to Israel’s legitimacy today can no longer be understood by simply studying secular history. One needs to also study the religions involved in this issue in order to full comprehend the complexities of this conflict in the contemporary world. This is why he devotes the entire second part of this book to studying and analyzing the theological claims of Judaism, Islam and Christianity – in their diversity – to the Holy Land, in a comprehensive and convincing way.

In my own career in interreligious education and dialogue of more than 30 years, I too learned about how important it is to include the religious dimensions of our differences (and commonalities) in our dialogues and discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Indeed, I would argue that those scholars who leave out the religious aspects of our conflict are completely out of date. Fortunately, Professor Troen is not one of these. On the contrary, he has done all of us – including and perhaps especially the academic world, in which he works professionally and is well known and well-regarded – a great service by convincingly bringing these two major parts of the conflict together in an important, in-depth and enlightening discussion. ■



**Israel/Palestine in World Religions:  
Whose Promised Land?**

S. Ilan Troen

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