

universalism of “prodemocracy” scholars, such as Vali Nasr, who advocate “for the promotion of capitalism for the multitude to bring about modernity and democracy in the Muslim world” (p. 269). Still, he seems in agreement with Arkoun’s dismissal of Islamic socialism, evinced by the absence in his book of left-leaning Muslim modernists such as Iran’s Ali Shariati. In the end, and even if one disagrees with its overarching thesis, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* remains a remarkable and highly recommended book that systematically introduces us to a plethora of ideas articulated by some of the 20th century’s most influential thinkers reflecting on Islam and modernity.

AZRIEL BERMANT, *Margaret Thatcher and the Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Pp. 273. \$99.99 cloth. ISBN: 9781107151949

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In this meticulously detailed account, Azriel Bermant comprehensively demolishes the myth that Margaret Thatcher was always more sympathetic towards Israel than senior figures in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), many of whom were Arabists. Certainly, Bermant demonstrates Thatcher admired the Israelis for their achievements and was attentive to the views of leading members of the Jewish community in Britain and Jewish voters in her Finchley constituency. Yet, as he also documents, Thatcher’s assessments of how best to advance British interests in the Middle East converged far more with those of the FCO than senior Israeli officials chose to believe. Crucially, as she gained more knowledge and self-confidence, it was she, not the FCO officials, who determined the direction of British Middle East policy. Indeed, even though she was close to U.S. President Ronald Reagan, she differed with him on policy priorities in the Middle East. She accepted and defended the European Community’s Venice Declaration of 1980 and with it the right of Palestinians to self-determination, notwithstanding Israeli objections on both counts. She also enthusiastically promoted arms exports to the Arab Gulf states, while maintaining an embargo on British oil and weapons sales to Israel.

Understanding the nuances of Thatcher’s policies requires a historical understanding of British foreign policy during her era. For most of her tenure in No. 10 Downing Street, Thatcher’s primary concern was to counter the expansion of Soviet influence in the region and she saw the persistence of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as a vehicle for radicalization which Moscow could exploit. She was frustrated, however, by what she perceived as a lack of commitment or sense of urgency in Washington to match her own and that of what she termed the “moderate Arab leaders.” Unlike the Americans, Thatcher derived many of her insights from frequent conversations with King Husayn of Jordan, with whom she formed a close and sympathetic rapport, until that was shattered by their differences over the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Thatcher’s aspiration for most of the 1980s was that the Israelis could be persuaded to enable resolution of the Palestinian issue through the creation of a federation between the West Bank (occupied by Israel in the 1967 war) and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (which had ruled the West Bank between 1948 and 1967). Thatcher did not want a fully independent Palestinian state, however, not least because of her distrust of Yasir Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Her views on the PLO, as Bermant explains, were determined by her antipathy to dealing with any terrorist organization, including the Irish Republican Army—though she rebuffed Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir for implying an exact equivalence since “the latter’s supporters could express their wishes through free elections” (p. 196), unlike Palestinians living under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. Accordingly, Thatcher advocated mayoral elections in the West Bank

as a potential means to find a more palatable leadership than the senior echelons of the PLO—but she found no appetite for this idea in Israel.

King Husayn's decision to disengage from the West Bank in 1988—following the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada and the Algiers Arab summit which “affirmed the right of the Palestinians to independent statehood under the PLO's leadership” (p. 177)—effectively demolished Thatcher's hopes of a “Jordanian option” for resolving the conflict. Thereafter, once Arafat had issued statements which appeared to renounce terrorism and recognize Israel, Thatcher argued that such signs of a softer line should be met with more flexibility on the part of the Israelis—only to run up against Israeli resistance once again.

A key value of Bermant's account derives from his careful reading not only of the official British archives, but also those of the Israeli governments of the time. He shows how each twist and turn in the British government's efforts to find a route to resolve the conflict was interpreted in Israel. The Israelis blamed Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington for the Venice Declaration. Reporting on how the Israeli Ambassador to London at the time saw developments in the aftermath, Bermant summarizes his assessment thus: “there was little that could be done within Britain to stop the UK's diplomatic machinations” and “the only option left was for Israel to use its influence with the United States to undermine Britain's credibility and reputation, and prevent it from playing a diplomatic role in the peace process” (p. 66). In Bermant's assessment, Carrington did set the pace on Middle East policy at the beginning of Thatcher's premiership, but after he was obliged to resign over the Argentinean invasion of the Falkland Islands (which happened while Carrington was in Israel attempting to improve relations), Thatcher increasingly managed the direction of policy. It was Charles Powell who, as her foreign policy advisor, served as the conduit between her and the FCO—and the Israelis came to see Powell as their “friend at court” (p. 138).

Carrington and Powell are two of the many individuals who feature in Bermant's book and he does offer some fascinating insights on the personal chemistry between each of them and Thatcher. She never established a rapport with Menachem Begin, and her dealings with Shamir were mostly tense. It was in Shimon Peres that Thatcher placed greatest faith as a potential peacemaker on the Israeli side. Peres himself saw Thatcher as a conduit to King Husayn, and when Peres was Prime Minister of Israel in the national unity government that he led alongside Shamir in the mid-1980s, Thatcher personally did broker what became known as the London agreement between Husayn and Peres. The collapse of that initiative, according to Bermant, was in no small part due to Peres's reluctance to reveal the details of the deal to Shamir. Instead he hoped that the U.S. administration would help assuage Shamir's suspicions that Peres was plotting against him—yet Washington declined to become entangled in internal Israeli politics.

Not so Thatcher, however. She, Bermant explains, sought very specifically to promote Peres as the Israeli leader most likely to deliver on her preferred option of a West Bank federation with Jordan. Reading Bermant's account of the machinations that Thatcher sought to orchestrate, one has a sense that both the British prime minister and the FCO had an inflated sense of their own capacity to promote a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Bermant also records how the British in those days still regarded it as their responsibility to fix a problem that they had had a hand in creating. That notion was subsequently dropped and not even Tony Blair thought Britain could be decisive in this arena—placing his hopes in the Americans to do the heavy lifting.

In sum, this is a persuasive and bold account, one built upon admirable archival research and historical knowledge, and which greatly adds to our understanding of British foreign policy and the Thatcher era as they pertain to the Middle East. Its tone is admirably measured. The value is in the detail and the substantial evidence provided on certain specifics. However, it would help readers to have some prior knowledge of the broader regional context, about which Bermant's account is more cursory.