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The Privatization of Israeli Security

By Shir Hever. London: Pluto Press, 2018. 256 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7453-3720-3.

People already familiar with the political economist Shir Hever will find *The Privatization of Israeli Security* an important and timely extension of his past work on Israeli violence and dispossession, including *The Political Economy of Israel's Occupation: Repression Beyond Exploitation* (Pluto Press, 2010). Though continuing to follow empirical developments specific to Israel's occupation, *The Privatization of Israeli Security* also engages with a wider set of processes related to policing, security, and warfare in contemporary Palestine/Israel, situating these dynamics within a broader global perspective that mobilizes Hever's long-standing journalistic experience working with the Real News Network.

In his latest work, Hever frames privatization broadly and intuitively as a recent phenomenon indicative of a shift from public to private and associated changes in the production of goods and services in the realm of security. In this formulation, state sovereignty is juxtaposed against privatization, even seen as its "opposite" (117). Yet at the book's core is an apparent contradiction between Israel's "strong emphasis on security politics" (which gives Israeli state authorities the power to shape policy) and these actors' willingness to privatize security and thereby revoke this authority (2). In grappling with how this tension plays out in practice, the book grapples with the drivers and rationalities that undergird the apparent privatization of security in Israel since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1994. Here Hever argues existing theories "are insufficient to fully encompass the idiosyncrasies of the privatization of security" in Palestine/Israel (170). He further suggests formulations of the concept of Israeli militarism have yet to fully make sense of competing tendencies in the same state, namely the dual prerogatives

of “security politics” and privatization. He therefore proposes an alternative approach based on a political economy perspective that engages with an eclectic range of theoretical approaches from across the critical social sciences.

One of the book’s principal merits is its breadth. While the title might suggest a rather narrow focus, it offers a comprehensive account of a wide range of trends related to security, policing and war in Palestine/Israel, based on 12 in-depth case studies covering changes in Israel’s key state institutions, weapons industry, and private security firms. Another key strength is the book’s close attention to the competing interests in driving privatization, as well as the sites of struggle at play therein, narrating privatization as an “embattled story” rather than a natural or inevitable process (174). This approach helps qualify and at times counter scholarly and mainstream representations of Israel’s weapons and security industries as always and ever expanding in an unbridled fashion. *The Privatization of Israeli Security* also importantly challenges the official rationalizations of Israeli security policy interventions, technologies, and practices as generally successful. In all these respects, the book usefully textures and qualifies the shifts entailed in security privatization but also the contradictions and limits these processes entail.

While providing much needed empirical depth to broader scholarly, journalistic, and activist discussions about Israeli security policies, technologies, and industries in recent decades as developed by Erella Grassiani (2017), Jeff Halper (2015), Laleh Khalili (2013), Juliana Ochs (2010), Eyal Weizman (2007), and others, Hever’s effort to capture a wide range of contemporary changes in these articulations under the banner of “privatization” perhaps unduly simplifies matters. On the face of it, his juxtaposition of sovereignty as the antithesis of privatization is questionable, especially given the uncertain boundaries between public and

private in relation to practices of warfare, state repression, and violence historically. Perhaps even more importantly, however, the complex nature of the dynamics the book unpacks at times belies the implied simplicity of its core privatization framework. Indeed, while engaging with textbook examples of privatization such as the sales of formerly public Israeli weapons to private companies and the outsourcing of the operation of checkpoints in the Occupied Palestinian Territories to private contractors, the nature, significance, and ultimate directions of these alleged shifts are never definitively resolved by the analysis. Although the book engages with by a wide range of theoretical approaches, these approaches are not always cohesively synthesized as they might be in such a way as to deliver its own novel theoretical contribution.

Despite these limitations, Hever's in-depth empirical attention to the unfolding security dynamics in Palestine/Israel and their broader global underpinnings and reverberations provides a much-needed study of dynamics that are often shrouded in high degrees of secrecy and are thus inherently difficult to pin down decisively. At a time when the statements of Israeli state and private officials are all too often taken at their word even by critical scholars, Hever's dogged diligence in following stories through all their twists and turns is welcome and much needed.

Rhys Machold

University of Glasgow

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