Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel

James Ron
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. 208 pages.

Scholars of state violence, among them sociologists and legal scholars, have insisted upon the existence of certain distinctions that separate those police methods deemed acceptable to the international human rights community from those methods of state brutality considered worthy of condemnation. Interestingly, most of the cases that cause confusion over what can be considered a legitimate use of state violence and what is condemned emanate from the same places: Serbia and Israel. James Ron's impressive study of state violence under these two modern regimes offers an important genealogical and comparative analysis of these blurred moral, ethical, and analytical lines.

Ron's work in *Frontiers and Ghettos* highlights, in particular, patterns of state violence in territories that are under varying degrees of direct state control. These patterns both challenge assumptions about Israeli and Serbian history and serve as a corrective to much of the theoretical literature on state violence. Ron clearly argues that it is the nature of the state's formal relationship with its territories that ultimately determines the level of state violence in both the Balkans and Palestine. His insight into these patterns is, perhaps, especially persuasive because they are fruitfully compared over distinct periods of both regions' history.

At the heart of this provocative study is a bravely argued claim that patterns of state violence vary because of international borders and how states operate within and beyond them. Ron suggests that geographical and administrative borders enforce a certain relational order between mechanisms of coercion and the extent to which the international community will tolerate state brutality. To make his argument, he carefully outlines how Serbian and Israeli repertoires of coercion dramatically changed depending upon the nature of each state's direct relationship with the territories in which they operated. In the cases of Serbia's activities in the former Yugoslavia and Israel's actions in Palestine and southern Lebanon, he sees a pattern of

engagement that highlights a distinction made by state authorities depending upon existing "institutional settings."

For areas that the state identifies as its own, methods of coercion are often brutal but not so excessive that mass expulsion or murder take place. In the case of Israel's evolving relationship with the West Bank and southern Lebanon, for instance, areas deemed beyond Tel Aviv's sovereign control prior to 1967, those two areas were considered "frontiers." As such, the Israeli military was not formally restrained from using deadly force against Palestinian and Lebanese targets. After 1967, however, the West Bank and Gaza became areas of direct Israeli administration. In Ron's terms, these two regions (the "Occupied Territories") became a "ghetto" within which Israeli power could be used far more selectively. Ostensibly, due to the fact that Israel had incorporated the Occupied Territories into its state in important formal ways, the Palestinians living there no longer had to be treated in military terms, but could – and were – policed in ways that emphasized coercion and punishment rather than murder and deportation.

Similarly, Ron suggests that Serbia modified its policies toward Muslims and Catholics in the 1990s. He believes that he has discovered patterns in how, as with Israel's direct annexation of the West Bank, Serbia's formal administrative claim to areas of the former Yugoslavia determined the kind of force used to suppress opposition. In the largely Muslim-populated enclave of Sandjak, which formally remains part of Serbia, the police did not employ anything near the kind of brutal tactics exhibited in Bosnia or Kosovo, both of which were, at different times, formally removed from direct Serbian control. It needs to be recalled that the international community declared both Bosnia and Kosovo to be external to direct Serbian administrative control. This, according to Ron, encouraged Belgrade to unleash an entirely different strategy, one consisting of the mass murder and forced expulsion of the unwanted Muslim and Catholic communities.

As can be imagined, such claims are littered with exceptions, and both Palestinians and Albanians would question Ron's grasp of history. Indeed, it is the author's inability to explore Serbia's long-term relationship with Kosovo that subjects his analysis to question. For decades, while squarely within Serbian/Yugoslav territorial control, Kosovo experienced such forms of state violence as the forced expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Albanians in the interwar and post-World War II periods. In much the same way, the nature of Israel's violent past in the Occupied Territories hardly fits well with the modification depicted in strategies of coercion after 1967. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians live in permanent exile in Lebanon, Jordan, and

throughout the Middle East as a direct result of Israeli colonialism in the West Bank after 1967. This situation is a far cry from the author's suggestion that Israel somehow modified its use of violence once it directly took over administrative responsibility for the Occupied Territories.

But such concerns about history do not dilute this book's importance. It is reasonable to believe that this important study may contribute to a deeper appreciation for what are clear and distinctive patterns of state violence. That international borders matter in determining the extent to which states are willing to use violence with varying levels of intensity is both reasonable and an excellent working model for a comparative analysis. In addition to exposing the extent to which violence has been used against civilians by both countries over the last thirty years, Ron introduces a tone that carefully avoids the oversimplifications often found in scholarship on the Middle East and/or the Balkans. Rather than reducing the actors to primordial enemies playing out an inevitable struggle for power, he reinforces the notion that individual decisions contributed to the escalation and reduction of direct state violence on civilians and armed opponents alike.

Ultimately, what accounts for Ron's innovative and provocative conclusions is of central importance to how social scientists and historians will interpret and analyze events in a wide range of similar cases. This book, therefore, should be seen as the perfect study to introduce such an analysis as an instructional tool for policymakers as well as convincing scholarship that has important contributions to make to several disciplines.

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