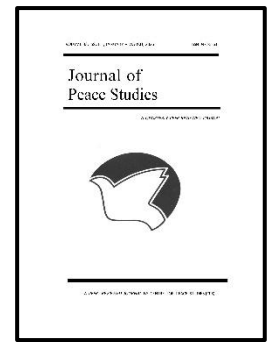


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Original Sin: Israel, Palestine and the Revenge of Old West Asia by Stanly Johny

Yasir Ali Mirza, Independent Researcher, New Delhi.

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BOOK REVIEW

ORIGINAL SIN: ISRAEL, PALESTINE AND THE REVENGE OF OLD WEST ASIA

By

STANLY JOHNY

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Yasir Ali Mirza*



The 7 October 2023 Hamas attack in Israel marked a watershed moment in the contemporary conflict landscape of West Asia. In its aftermath, the Israeli war on Gaza heightened geopolitical rivalries and rekindled long-suppressed hostilities across the region with Israel expanding the war to several

regional countries. But more importantly, the two successive wars against Iran by Israel and the United States during the last one year has further complicated the regional security environment – a development with lasting implications for the region and beyond. These developments have underlined how the question of Palestine’s unresolved status remains central to everything happening in West Asia. In this context, Stanly Johnny’s *Original Sin: Israel, Palestine and the Revenge of Old West Asia (2024)* offers a timely and incisive exploration of how historical and geopolitical dynamics interplay in shaping the region’s continuing instability.

Drawing on his extensive experience as a journalist covering West Asia and an academic background in regional studies, Johnny seeks to identify key geopolitical turning points through a broader analytical lens and to challenge the dominant Western narrative that often reduces the conflict to religious or ethnic antagonisms, situating the region’s

* Yasir Ali Mirza, Independent Researcher, New Delhi.

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unending conflicts within the historical legacies of colonialism and Cold War power politics. The central thesis, which binds the eight chapters of this book, holds that contemporary West Asian instability remains deeply rooted in the historical 'wrongdoings' of Western colonial powers. Jhony conceptualises this legacy as the region's "Original Sin", substantiating this by tracing the debate to historical developments that have shaped the regional cartography since early 20th century. It includes Hussein-McMahon correspondence (1915–1916) where Great Britain promised "independence" of Arab Ottoman lands to Sharif Hussein of Hejaz in return for a revolt against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War period, only to undermine it by signing a secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) with France to divide the Ottoman territories into their respective spheres of influence after defeating the Muslim empire. This British duplicity was further exposed by its endorsement of the Balfour Declaration (1917), promising to help establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, thereby entrenching competing national aspirations among Arabs and Jews over the same land.

A key strength of the book lies in its critique of Western frameworks

that portray the Israel–Palestine conflict primarily as a religious or ethnic dispute. Jhony instead emphasises structural and political causes, particularly the consequences of prolonged occupation and territorial expansion, actively aided and abetted by Western patrons of the Jewish state. He contends that the resurgence of violence following October 7 is not merely a continuation of territorial disputes, but a manifestation of accumulated grievances stemming from decades of Palestinian dispossession at the hands of Israelis. In his analysis, Israeli policies, especially settlement expansion and territorial annexation, have systematically undermined the viability of a two-state solution, reducing it to what he terms a "two-state illusion."

The book takes the debate of Israel-Palestine conflict to the late 19th century birth of Zionism and examining this Jewish political movement originating in Europe in the context of declining colonial empires and shifting global power structures, which notably witnessed the rise of the United States as a global power shaping international politics. Jhony argues that Israel's establishment in 1948 was not simply the outcome of Jewish nationalist aspirations but also

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aligned with broader Western strategic interests in the region. He highlights the Nakba (the catastrophe), the forced mass displacement of Palestinians by the proponents of the Jewish state, as a defining moment that continues to shape regional consciousness and political mobilisation in the region.

The history of Israel-Palestine is traced from the birth of Zionism, a Jewish political movement in Europe during the 19th century, in the context of the decline of colonial empires and changes in world powers, such as the ascendancy of the United States as a world power shaping global politics. In his analysis, Jhony notes that the establishment of Israel in 1948 did not solely result from Jewish nationalism but also served other interests of the Western powers in the region. In particular, the author points to the Nakba (catastrophe) – the forced expulsion of Palestinians at the hands of the advocates of the Jewish state – as a significant event that influences current regional awareness and political mobilization.

This is followed by a nuanced analysis of the complex nature and role of non-state actors like Lebanese Shia Hezbollah and Palestinian Sunni Hamas. What distinguishes Jhony's analysis is how he refrains from bracketing them as merely Islamist 'extremists', Iranian 'proxies', or rag-

tag militias fighting Israelis. He instead situates their emergence within the specific political and social contexts of Gaza and Lebanon, arguing that painting Hamas and Hezbollah as mere militant actors fighting Israelis obfuscates their other roles as providers of social services and political entities with nationalist objectives. While this perspective does challenge conventional portrayals of these groups, it may also be seen as contentious, particularly given how he frames their motivations and rhetoric.

Another critique that is central to the book concerns the Oslo peace process of 1990s between Israel and Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) under Yasser Arafat. Jhony argues that instead of creating conditions for the establishment of independent Palestine, these negotiations and diplomatic engagements effectively ended up normalising Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. This criticism is consistent with broader critical scholarship that describes Oslo peace process as inherently flawed, including by Edward Said, the Palestinian American postcolonial thinker, who called it "Palestinian Versailles" and a "kingdom of illusions". In addition, it also exposes the US's role in sustaining the status

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quo both by arming Israel to the teeth, and extending its diplomatic cover to shield it from any international accountability.

These strengths aside, *Original Sin* also has its limitations. Firstly, while it provides a strong criticism of Western colonial powers for their cartographic redrawing of region and their successor states for sustaining the violence that flows through such borders, it does not pay much attention to the role of regional players like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, whose policies, particularly in the context of shifting alliances and normalisation efforts, have also significantly influenced the trajectory of the conflict. Secondly, even though the book focuses only on the Palestinian issue, it could have gained from a wider analysis, including other historical incidents like the British-American conspiracy to reinstate Reza Shah's monarchy by overthrowing the Iran's elected

prime minister of Iran Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953. It is the memory of such historical incidents and wrongdoings of the Western powers that form the basis of the continuing violence in the region.

As such, while not positioning itself as a purely academic or theoretical work, the book represents a significant contribution to contemporary discussions on West Asia. What makes it accessible to both scholars and general readers is its journalistic flair, which lends it a fluid, engaging narrative style, thereby serving as a valuable entry point to understand the complexities of West Asia and its faultlines, particularly the Israel-Palestine conflict. By foregrounding the interplay of history, identity, and geopolitical power, Johnny's work underscores how unresolved past injustices continue to shape one of the most intractable conflicts of the modern era. ■

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Kishangarh, Vasant Kunj,
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Regd. Address:
C-11 Jangpura Extension
New Delhi – 110 014
Tel: (91-11) 49989230, +91-9810317972
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CENTRE FOR PEACE STUDIES

C-11, Jangpura Extension,
New Delhi – 110 014, INDIA

Tel: (91-11) 49989230, +91-9560126157, 9810317972

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