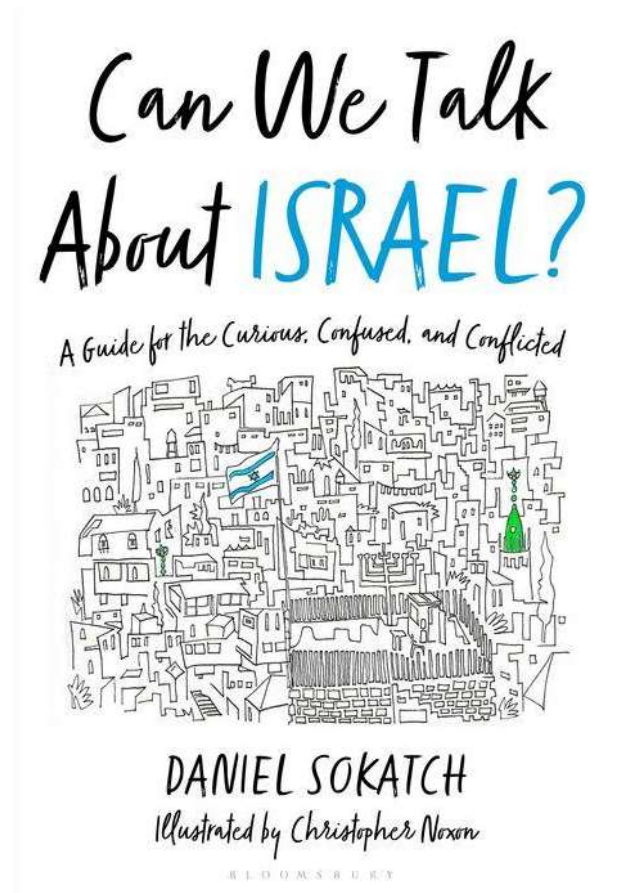


INFORMED ANALYSIS:

‘Can We Talk...’ is extensively researched

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“Can We Talk About Israel? A Guide for the Curious, Confused, and Conflicted” by Daniel Sokatch. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 384 pages, \$27.00 (hardcover)



“I still remember the first time I realized Israel made people a bit unhinged,” Daniel Sokatch explains near the beginning of “Can We Talk About Israel? A Guide for the Curious, Confused, and Conflicted,” his in-depth treatise on a subject of intense interest to many readers. “It was in the mid-1980s, and we were at a second cousin’s bar mitzvah in Chicago. I must’ve been sixteen or seventeen. Earlier that year, my family and I had gone on our first trip to Israel, as part of a ‘mission’ sponsored by the United Jewish Appeal, a Jewish philanthropic organization. My mom, dad, and younger brother had a good time, found it all interesting, and after ten days or so, happily returned to the routine of their lives. But me? I was hooked.”

“In that 1980s Lincolnwood, Illinois, town house, drifting past the deli platters and kibitzing relatives, I heard an old great-uncle hold forth on Israel to a group of young cousins,” the author continues. “I walked over to listen, my own recent experience in Israel still shimmering in my head. He was fulminating about Israel’s enemies, inexplicably angry – nobody was arguing with him

– and clearly exercised. If Israel were destroyed in a nuclear attack, he said, he hoped that it would take the rest of the world down with it... From that moment on, Israel became my primary interest – obsession even – and it’s been that way ever since.”

So begins a fascinating expedition into a reality that has existed since well before my time began on this planet. If you have been alive during the last few decades, without a doubt your life has been affected – in some way – by Israel. Long before our holidays, social get-togethers and family meals were infused with divisive rhetoric centered on the previous president, similar arguments were talking place regarding Israel on a fairly consistent basis. The truth is that many people are conflicted about the ancient-yet-contemporary country that was established (or reestablished, depending on your perspective) some 70 years ago. And often that conflict manifests itself in volatile and somewhat unpredictable ways.

For example, the Bible tells us that Jesus was condemned to death by the Jews. So why do so many Evangelical Christians feel such a fierce loyalty to Israel? Why do so many people point to Israel when asked what’s wrong with the world - or what’s right with the world - today? And what’s up with all the boycotts, sanctions, chants at rallies, and other manifestations of anger and/or allegiance that we don’t typically associate with other state actors? If you’ve ever wondered about these and a

seemingly infinite number of related questions, then “Can We Talk About Israel?” is a book you’ll definitely want to add to your personal collection. Sokatch doesn’t disappoint.

The manuscript is extensively researched, with 34 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and 23 chapters arranged in two major sections that form the main narrative. “Part One: What’s Going On?” is made up of the first 14 chapters; “Part Two: Why Is It So Hard To Talk About Israel?” which entails chapters 15 through 23. The prose is superbly illustrated by Christopher Noxon and includes a special appendix, “A Lexicon of the Conflict,” that helps the reader get a better understanding of the story being told. Seriously, did you know that the “Yishuv” was the Hebrew name for the Jewish community that lived in Palestine prior to the creation of the State of Israel in May 1948?

The Chief Executive Officer of the New Israel Fund, Sokatch previously served as the Executive Director of the Progressive Jewish Alliance and the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. His articles have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Los Angeles Times; he has a BA from Brandeis University, an MA from the Fletcher School at Tufts University, and a JD from Boston College Law School. Noxon is a journalist and illustrator; his work has been featured in The New Yorker, The Atlantic, The New York Times Magazine, and Salon. His previous books include “Good Trouble: Lessons from the Civil Rights Playbook,” which he wrote and illustrated.

One of the features I appreciate about this particular text is the way Sokatch tackles seemingly intractable issues in a mature, reasonable, and straightforward manner. Although the subject is emotionally charged, his writing is decidedly focused and rational. He presents a balanced yet realistic discussion of the relevant considerations inherently embedded in the discourse – without appealing to the underlying feelings that often accompany any conversation about the role Israel plays (or should play) in world affairs, especially within the context of the dynamics native to the region.

Witness the following from “The Settlements,” the eighteenth chapter and one I found exceptionally insightful and instructive:

“While the international community condemns and mostly refuses to recognize Israel’s expansionist moves, it hasn’t stopped Israel from developing the territories as it pleases – with very few, if any, serious consequences. Even tentative steps by the European Union to label settlement goods sold in European supermarkets as coming “from the occupied territories” (as opposed to “from Israel”) have faltered under withering criticism and claims of antisemitism from Israel and some of its supporters. And given the positive signals from the American right wing, why wouldn’t Israel just officially annex the West Bank – or at least Area C, which amounts to about 60 percent of the territory and is where all the settlements are located? It’s a good question, one with huge implications. The fact is, the ambiguity of the West Bank status quo over the last half century has worked to Israel’s advantage. But it is unclear how much longer this will be the case. Let’s look at why.”

And what follows is a very thought-provoking and informed analysis of the historical architecture of the disputed area that takes the reader back to the Six-Day War in 1967 and slowly and meticulously brings the reader up to date on how the current political environment has been shaped and redefined by the events and still-evolving sociopolitical climate endemic to the region. After finishing this remarkable treatment and reinterpretation of key events that have taken place during my lifetime, my view of the entire situation irrevocably changed.

In case you couldn’t tell, I liked this one. My sense is that a lot of readers would, too. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.