

## The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World

**Review Number:** 153

**Publish date:** Friday, 1 September, 2000

**Author:** Avi Shlaim

**ISBN:** 978071399410X

**Date of Publication:** 2000

**Pages:** 695pp.

**Publisher:** Allen Lane

**Place of Publication:** London

**Reviewer:** Matthew Hughes

Few areas of historical enquiry resonate with such contemporary relevance as the Arab-Israeli conflict, and any scholar attempting a book on the subject is walking into a politically charged minefield. Historians enquiring after the 'truth' are accused of partisan bias: after all, they must either be supporters of Zionism or the Arab cause. Authors are charged, sometimes justifiably, with misusing history to pursue an agenda that supports either the Palestinians or Israel. The debate on Arab-Israeli relations is always robust; often, it is acrimonious, bad-natured and personal. Authors, perhaps even reviewers, need a thick skin when entering the arena of debate on the hotly contested issue of Israel and the Arabs.

Traditionally dominated by Israelis, the historiography on the Arab-Israeli dispute has gone through various phases. The 'old' or 'mobilised' history, written by Israeli scholars in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, portrayed Israel as under serious threat from the Arabs and so forced into a series of wars of survival. This 'old' history also sought to exculpate Israel from the charge that it stole Palestinian land and forcibly evicted the inhabitants. Then, in the late 1980s, a group of 'new' or 'revisionist' historians headed by Simha Flapan, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim emerged to challenge this 'old' history. These 'new' historians argued that Israel was responsible in some measure for the Palestinian refugee crisis and for the Arab-Israeli wars, and that the image of Israel put forward by the 'old' historians was both misleading and determined by the political need to be pro-Israeli. The conclusions of the 'new' historians were not, however, necessarily pro-Palestinian. As Morris concluded in *The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem* (1987): 'The Palestinian refugee problem was born of war, not by design, Jewish or Arab. It was largely a by-product of Arab and Jewish fears and of the protracted, bitter fighting that characterised the first Arab-Israeli war; in smaller part, it was the deliberate creation of Jewish and Arab military commanders and politicians.' The debunking by the 'new' historians of long-held shibboleths provoked a furore among the 'old' historians (who now became the 'new old' historians) and the debate soon spilled over into the public domain. In articles and books, the 'new old' historians counter-attacked. Aharon Megged charged the 'new' historians with writing history in the spirit of Israel's enemies; Efraim Karsh angrily accused Morris and Shlaim of falsifying and recycling history. Attack and counter-attack ensued as both sides slugged it out. Meanwhile, Palestinian historians attacked the 'new' historians for not going far enough in their analysis. The debate goes on in books and journals such as *Middle Eastern Studies*, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *Middle East Journal*, *Studies in Zionism* and *Commentary*.

Shlaim's part in this debate was a thought-provoking book entitled *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine*

(Oxford: Clarendon, 1988). In it he examined the controversy that the early Zionists 'colluded' with the Arab Hashemite regime in Amman to divide Palestine. This was done with the knowledge and tacit acceptance of the British. The collusion benefited Israel and King Abdullah of Jordan but divided the Arab front against Israel. Shlaim's book angered the 'new old' historian Karsh sufficiently for him to devote a chapter to criticising Shlaim's thesis.

What of the book under review? How does it fit into the historiography? In *Iron Wall*, Shlaim nails his colours firmly to the 'revisionist' mast, stating at the outset: 'My aim in the present book is to offer a revisionist interpretation of Israel's policy towards the Arab world during the fifty years following the achievement of statehood.' (p.xii) With this in mind, the book begins with a brief examination of the nascent Zionist movement prior to 1948. In particular, Shlaim unpacks the ideas of the extremist Jewish nationalist agitator and thinker Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky. In 1923, Jabotinsky published two works under the title 'The Iron Wall'. In these pieces, Jabotinsky argued that the 'sole way' to an agreement with the Arabs was through an 'iron wall, that is to say, the establishment in Palestine of a force that will in no way be influenced by Arab pressure. In other words, the only way to achieve a settlement in the future is total avoidance of all attempts to arrive at a settlement in the present.' (p.14) As Shlaim points out later in *Iron Wall*, it was, therefore, pointless to talk with the Arabs as the 'Zionist program had to be executed unilaterally and by force.' (p.598) This notion of building a tough wall within which the Jewish state could flourish before it considered seriously negotiations with the Arabs is central to Shlaim's book. It is arguable that Shlaim could have done more to dissect the 'iron wall' idea in the introduction, considering its importance for *Iron Wall*. As Shlaim argues, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's formative first leader, broadly followed Jabotinsky's thinking. This meant a preference for military over political solutions when dealing with the Arabs. As a result, Zionist-Arab relations foundered and, at times, descended into war. This challenges the notion that the Zionists wanted an accommodation with the Arabs and the Palestinians, but Arab obstinacy ruined any deal. In fact, the critical interchange was within Israel between those wanting to follow the 'iron wall' policy versus those seeking a more peaceful, political solution to the Arab-Israeli impasse. As Shlaim argues, too often the former won out over the latter.

Shlaim challenges and overturns many orthodoxies. He questions whether the formation of Israel and consequent battle with invading Arab armies really was a David versus Goliath struggle. While this is still taught in Israeli schools, it is described by Shlaim as the 'heroic-moralist version' that 'is a prime example of the use of a nationalistic version of history in the process of nation building. In a very real sense history is the propaganda of the victors, and the history of the 1948 war is no exception.' (p.34) In discussing the vicissitudes of the 1948-9 Arab-Israel war, Shlaim emphasises the disunity of the Arab forces deployed against Israel. This allowed Ben-Gurion's generals to deal with one enemy front at a time and so achieve victory in 1948-9. In this respect, Abdullah's collusion, dealt with in Shlaim's earlier book, was a vital factor in Israel's divide and win policy. The conclusion of the chapter on the formation of Israel is telling. The theoretical concept of the iron wall alongside the reality of a comprehensive military victory in 1948 set up military toughness as a leitmotif in Israeli relations with the Arabs. As Shlaim observes (p.50): 'military power expanded the margins for political choice.' In these crucial early years, Ben-Gurion leaned towards the bellicose approach of the newly formed Israeli Defence Force (IDF). This marginalised the 'doves' led by those such as the Foreign Minister (and later Prime Minister), Moshe Sharett, who sought some form of reconciliation with the Arabs. In the discussions over policy, Ben-Gurion's stamped his authority. Shlaim describes one cabinet meeting where the ministers were like 'polite and frightened children in a kindergarten' reduced to hesitantly raising hands before asking questions against the 'overpowering' authority of Ben-Gurion. (p.75) Israel dismissed Arab peace feelers as Ben-Gurion preferred to wait in the hope that with the passage of time Israel's borders and land seizures would become accepted facts.

Shlaim argues that because of the 'iron wall' policy Israel missed signing a peace settlement after the armistice of 1949. Discussing the promising but failed Israeli-Jordanian peace talks, 1949-51, Shlaim wryly observes that 'it was a turning point in the history of Israeli-Jordanian relations at which history failed to turn.' (p.65) For Ben-Gurion, Egypt was the Arab country with which to make a peace and not Jordan which he considered to be a small, unstable country dependent on Abdullah and British aid for its survival. The

assassination of Abdullah in 1951 convinced Ben Gurion of the fact that the Arab states would need to be 'deterred, coerced, and intimidated' into peace. (p.68) Consequently, Israel pursued disproportionately aggressive policies, particularly in response to numerous border clashes and incidents. Israel militarised the demilitarised zones (DMZs) along the Syrian border, ignoring UN protests about this infraction. As with Jordan, Israel also threw away a peace with Syria. In all of this discussion, Shlaim is persuasive. He marshals a considerable array of evidence and presents a cogent and lucid argument that takes the reader through the twists and turns of Israeli-Arab relations.

Echoing the view put forward in the recent BBC TV series (and book), 'The Fifty Years' War', Shlaim sees the origins of the 1956 war in the dispute within Israel between the 'hawks' (or 'activists') led by the likes of Ben-Gurion, Pinhas Lavon and Moshe Dayan, eager for maximum retaliation, and the 'doves' headed by Sharett eager for negotiation. As a military man, Dayan, the IDF chief-of-staff, was keen to pursue the 'iron wall' of Jewish military strength. Lavon, a one-time moderate given the defence portfolio in 1953, who then metamorphosed into an extreme hard-liner, was a more surprising convert to the idea of the military offensive. Shlaim presents the 1956 war as a clash between the 'iron wall' policy of Ben-Gurion and the measured diplomacy of Sharett. As part of the 'activist' school, Ben-Gurion felt that Israel had to assert its military will. The activists 'believed in the policy of the iron wall'. (p.87) Reflecting the new hard-line in relations with the Arabs, Israel escalated various border clashes. The 'hawks' encouraged Israeli infiltration and disproportionate retaliation across the Gaza Strip border to provoke a war. While the Egyptians tried to stop infiltration, Israel, eager to respond with maximum force, established 'free-fire' zones and attacked Arab villages and Egyptian military positions.

For Shlaim, Sharett was (p.95) an 'independent and original thinker' who offered Israel an alternative pathway. Shlaim outlines the fundamental differences in temperament between Sharett the diplomat, and Ben-Gurion the man of action; between Ben-Gurion's self-reliance and Sharett's desire to accommodate the Arabs and the international community. Always eager to accommodate his opponent, Sharett was the consummate diplomat.

This book, with its argument that the IDF provoked border incidents to force a military solution, will not be an easy read for 'old' historians. The Israeli raid on Gaza town in 1955, an action that horrified Sharett, began the countdown to the 1956 war. Therefore, if Shlaim is to be believed, Israel, and not a bellicose Gamal Abdel Nasser, caused the 1956 war. Turning to the war itself, *Iron Wall* questions the traditional view that it was a defensive, just and well-executed affair that fulfilled Israeli objectives. Rather, Shlaim sees Israel's version of the war as the propaganda of the victors, and the image of the war as a 'striking example of the way in which history can be manipulated to serve nationalist ends.' (p.185) The hard-liners had failed to topple Nasser but they had succeeded in toppling Sharett.

In 1963, Ben-Gurion retired and a new leader, Levi Eshkol, emerged to lead Israel. Eshkol was in the mould of Sharett. His preference for compromise was such that when he was asked in a restaurant whether he wanted tea or coffee, he replied 'half and half'. That Eshkol was something of a Sharettist suggests that Shlaim overemphasises the victory of the 'hawks' in the 1950s. Israel's thriving democracy allowed Eshkol to beat off a challenge from Ben-Gurion in 1965. There were obvious limits to Ben-Gurion's power base. Eshkol, however, continued the policy of arming Israel, including the programme to build a nuclear bomb at the Dimona complex in the Negev desert. As with the 1956 war, Shlaim lays the blame for the 1967 'Six-Day' war with Israel and the policy of starting firefights along the Golan border: 'Israel's strategy of escalation on the Syrian front was probably the single most important factor in dragging the Middle East to war in 1967.' (p.235) But with the moderate Eshkol in power how was it that Israel went to war? Was it the 'iron wall' in action again?

The 1967 war, as Shlaim admits, followed a 'crisis slide' that neither side could arrest. The planned intent Shlaim outlined for the 1956 war disappears prior to June 1967. Events on the ground overtook any Israeli plan for war. As Shlaim admits, the 'Six-Day' war was a defensive conflict forced on Israel by Nasser's brinkmanship. Israel was reacting to rather than initiating events. Shlaim does a good job of discussing the

1967 war, but there is less structure and more narrative to his analysis. Israel tried to limit the conflict, but Hashemite forces shelled Israel forcing the IDF to attack the West Bank. The aggressive actions of King Hussein of Jordan seem bizarre in retrospect and cost him Jerusalem and the West Bank. Eshkol told the Jordanians that Israel did not want a war. The events surrounding the 1967 war show a more benign and scared Israel, and move attention away from the 'iron wall' idea. The 1967 war does not easily fit into Shlaim's overall thesis about Israel and the Arabs. Shlaim does, however, pick up the 'iron wall' theme after 1967 suggesting that the sweeping territorial gains made in June 1967 proved that peace could only be obtained from a position of strength.

After 1967, the growing power of the Israeli military establishment reinforced a 'long-standing tendency to view relations with the Arab states from a strategic perspective and to subordinate political and diplomatic considerations to military ones in the making of high policy.' (p.288) Golda Meir, in charge after 1969, deferred to her military experts, thus extending IDF influence over government policy. Israel now reverted to its 'iron wall' policy and responded to force with greater force. Meir comes in for heavy criticism as the Israeli leader who personified the siege mentality: 'the notion that Israel had to barricade itself behind an iron wall, the fatalistic belief that Israel was doomed forever to live by the sword.' (p.323) Thus, during the Egyptian-inspired war of attrition along the Suez canal, Israel initiated deep air strikes into Egypt to escalate the crisis in order, so the thinking went, to de-escalate the conflict by proving Israeli determination. These air strikes were not accompanied by any political moves. They were pure punishment. In response, Moscow committed 15,000 'technicians' to Egypt, a serious escalation of both the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Cold War. One Israeli cabinet member wrote of the exaggerated vision Meir had of the role of war in international politics and how the 'triumph of our forces in 1967 had encouraged a belief in an Israeli invincibility'. (p.293)

Shlaim puts the case that military conquest had replaced political dialogue; strength had triumphed over compromise. It was Israel who rejected Arab and US peace overtures and this, as in 1956, led to another war. In the fifth Arab-Israeli war in October 1973, a surprise Egyptian-Syrian attack shattered the Golan and Sinai fronts. The attack caught Israel unawares and restored Arab military prestige. This presents an interesting situation: it was Arab military power in 1973, their 'iron wall' if you like, that prompted the two sides to negotiate the first peace treaty in 1979 between Israel and Egypt. So perhaps a policy of military toughness was not entirely mistaken? And perhaps Israel's willingness to sign a peace treaty with Egypt was also a function of the success of Israel's 'iron wall' policy? This is a conundrum Shlaim returns to in the epilogue to *Iron Wall*.

In a landmark election in 1977 Likud and Menachem Begin were elected to power ending Labour's long period in charge. Jabotinsky was the main inspirational source for Begin and, for Shlaim, Begin had soaked up the whole idea of the iron wall. Anwar Sadat of Egypt failed to realise the overwhelming reluctance of Israelis to part with the iron wall. Therefore, Shlaim feels that the 1979 treaty was an aberration and that once it was signed Israel was fated to go back to the 'ideological precepts of Revisionist Zionism.' (p.383) Harsh words, but explanation for Israel's subsequent annexation of the Golan Heights, invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and involvement in the massacres of Palestinian civilians in the Beirut refugee camps. Begin does not come out of this analysis with much kudos. Instead, he appears as a man increasingly out of touch with reality, comparing the attack on Beirut with the final battle for Berlin in 1945. Begin finally resigned a broken man, defeated by the Lebanon quagmire. As Shlaim concludes (p.419): 'Begin did have a spark of conscience and humanity in him, at least when it came to Jewish lives, and the burden of guilt finally overcame him.'

Israeli negotiations with the Arabs stumbled on through the 1980s until the uprising of the *intifadah* in 1987 galvanised the various parties. IDF soldiers confronting stone throwing Palestinian youths did little to present Israel as the David versus the Arab Goliath. Palestinian children throwing rocks had more of an impact than decades of terrorism and ineffectual posturing by groups such as the PLO. Images of Israeli soldiers maltreating Palestinian demonstrators rocked Israel's perception of itself, and Israel's position internationally. The issue of 'Palestine' needed to be addressed. Shlaim concludes his book with an in-depth study of the moves towards extending the peace to the other Arab states and the Palestinians. In this period,

Yitzhak Shamir, once memorably described as the 'tunnel at the end of the light', emerged as the exponent of permanent conflict, while Labour's Yitzhak Rabin was the force for peaceful change. Rabin's tragic assassination in 1995 by a Jewish extremist ended the most promising period of Israeli-Palestinian relations where real dialogue had replaced the long tradition of conflict. Likud bitterly attacked this change in policy with the Arabs, and Rabin's opponents likened him to a Nazi. The role of personalities in shaping events in the Middle East is immense and the death of Rabin meant the death of the peace process. The election a year later of Binyamin Netanyahu, standing against Labour's Shimon Peres, Rabin's successor, ended the breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian relations. (Shlaim likens Peres's performance in the election to the joke about the man challenged to a duel who sends his opponent a telegram saying: 'I'm going to be late. Start shooting without me.')

Shlaim's epilogue returns to some of the ideas he introduced in the prologue. In particular, Shlaim portrays a more complex picture of Jabotinsky's view of the 'iron wall' and suggests that right-wing Israeli politicians failed to realise that Jabotinsky's 'iron wall encompassed a theory of change in Jewish-Palestinian relations leading to reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.' (p.599) As is often the way, the disciples lacked the vision of the prophet. They failed to grasp that Jabotinsky's concept included the idea that once Israel had proved its 'iron wall' it could then negotiate effectively from a position of strength. Those such as Yitzhak Shamir were, however, fixed in a mindset of toughness and 'conceived of the iron wall as a bulwark against change and as an instrument for keeping the Palestinians in a permanent state of subservience to Israel.' (p.599) Naturally, considering the theme of *Iron Wall*, Shlaim is particularly harsh on Binyamin Netanyahu's period in office which he describes, bluntly, as 'Back to the Iron Wall'. Shlaim argues that Jabotinsky inspired Netanyahu with a Manichaean vision of a never-ending conflict with the Arabs. Under Netanyahu, history was 'rewritten from a Revisionist perspective in order to demonstrate that it was not the Jews who usurped the land from the Arabs, but the Arabs who usurped it from the Jews.' (p.565) Shlaim's epilogue notes with satisfaction the election of Ehud Barak as leader of Israel in 1999. Perhaps a new epilogue is needed considering the recent impasse in negotiations between Barak and the Palestinians.

This is an impressive and lucid piece of scholarship where Shlaim puts the 'revisionist' case with vigour and verve. While there is an occasional drift away from the 'iron wall' theme towards a chronological analysis of different topics, the theme of the 'iron wall' provides a thread drawing together the many elements making up *Iron Wall*. While Shlaim synthesises some existing historical debate, he also introduces new information and ideas, and provides new insights. And it is all packaged together in one easy-to-read volume. As with the question of whether a bottle is half empty or half full, those opposed to the 'new' history will look at the same evidence as Shlaim and come to completely different conclusions. In particular, they will point to what they see as the very real threat of annihilation of Israel throughout the period by overwhelming Arab forces. This is the stuff of lively academic debate. However, those opposed to the 'new' history will need to engage with the strongly argued substance of Shlaim's point about the 'iron wall' tradition in Israeli history. Karsh criticised Shlaim in the *Times Literary Supplement* for ignoring Arab aggressive intent and accused him of leaving out the Arab-Palestinian side to the conflict. Shlaim does downplay Arab aggression as part of his overall argument, but he is far from uncritical of Arab policy. Also, with his focus on Israel as the motor for the Arab-Israeli conflict, Shlaim naturally takes an Israeli-centric approach. There is also a real difficulty in gaining access to Arab archives to flesh-out Arab policy. However, using interviews, printed primary sources, memoirs and the secondary sources available, Shlaim covers the main points of the Arab side to the conflict. *Iron Wall* provides a broad sweep of history and is to be highly recommended for those interested in a well-written, lively, thought-provoking and controversial account of the Arab-Israeli conflict. One final complaint: why the American English for the book? Is the American market so important that Professor Shlaim, who holds a chair at St. Antony's Oxford, is not allowed to write British English?

#### Other reviews:

[2]

---

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/153#comment-0>

#### Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/789>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>