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JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING



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Author(s): Avi Shlaim

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Winter 2012), pp. 80-98

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jps.2012.XLI.2.80>

Accessed: 02/05/2012 15:22

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THE IRON WALL REVISITED

AVI SHLAIM

*More than a decade after the publication of his acclaimed *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, Avi Shlaim returns to Ze'ev Jabotinsky's theory as a framework for understanding Israel's Arab policies, this time focusing on the post-1967 period. The author revisits the theory's formulation by the leader of Revisionist Zionism in 1923 and its near total convergence with the (unacknowledged) strategy followed by Labor Zionism. Examining each Israeli government since 1967, he shows that all zealously followed stage one of Jabotinsky's strategy (constructing an "iron wall" of unassailable military strength) but that the lesser known stage two (serious negotiations with the Palestinians after being compelled by stage one to abandon all hope of prevailing over Zionism) has been completely ignored except by Yitzhak Rabin. Indeed, the recent periods have witnessed a full-blown return to the iron wall at its starkest, with increasing resort to violence and unilateralism.*

ZIONISM WAS one of the most successful national liberation movements of the twentieth century. It set out to build an independent Jewish state in Palestine and this goal was achieved with the establishment of Israel in 1948. Arab resistance was the most serious obstacle that the Zionist movement encountered on the road to statehood. Consequently, from an early stage, Zionist leaders became preoccupied with what they euphemistically referred to as "the Arab question." Conventional accounts tend to portray the Zionist movement and its principal political progeny, Israel, as the innocent victims of Arab aggression.¹ These accounts overlook the fact that violence was implicit in Zionism from the beginning, that the Arab-Israeli conflict was an inescapable consequence of the Zionist program. Zionism sought to create a Jewish state in a land that was already inhabited by another people. Labor Zionists denied that this entailed the resort to force, while right-wing Zionists admitted it. That was the main difference between them.²

Conventional interpretations also emphasize the reactive nature of Israel's behavior in the conflict with the Arabs. One example is Yehoshafat

AVI SHLAIM is a professor of International Relations at St. Antony's College, Oxford, and the author of a number of books, including *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullab, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine*. He would like to thank Linda Butler, Gwyn Daniel, Roger Louis, and Gabriel Piterberg for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Harkabi, a director of military intelligence, a professor of international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and an influential writer on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Harkabi called one of his many books *Arab Strategies and Israel's Response*.³ The title suggests that Israel has no strategy of its own but merely responds to Arab strategies. My own view is that since the 1920s the Zionist movement has had a clear strategy for dealing with the Arabs—the strategy of relying on military power in order to achieve its political ends. This strategy is sometimes referred to as the strategy of the iron wall. The iron wall is merely a metaphor. But it encapsulates a coherent, consistent, and compelling idea, perhaps even a fatal idea, and it provides the best framework we have for understanding Israel's foreign and defense policies from pre-independence days to the present.

In my book *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, I gave a detailed account of Israel's policies toward the Arabs in the first fifty years of statehood.⁴ This article examines the formulation of the strategy of the iron wall in the 1920s and its application by Israeli governments from 1967 to the present. The article is not merely an update of the main argument of the book, however. In the decade that has elapsed since its publication, I have continued to reflect on the argument in an effort to make sense of subsequent Israeli actions.

My central thesis is that the iron wall was a national strategy to which the rival political camps subscribed in both the pre-independence and post-independence periods. To claim that there was a remarkable convergence between mainstream Labor Zionism and right-wing Revisionist Zionism on the Arab question, and that this convergence persisted after 1948, is not to deny the existence of deep differences between the rival camps. Among other important differences, they were divided on Zionism's territorial aims: Revisionist Zionism staked a claim to a Jewish state over the whole of mandatory Palestine, including Transjordan, while Labor Zionists accepted the principle of the partition of Palestine west of the Jordan River into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. Yet—and this is the crucial point—regardless of the extent of their territorial ambitions, the two groups understood that, given Arab rejection of the whole idea, a Jewish state could be established only by force of arms.

JABOTINSKY AND THE IRON WALL

The principal architect of the strategy of the iron wall—of dealing with the Arabs from a position of unassailable military strength—was not a policymaker but an ideologue and the leader of the opposition to the official leadership of the Yishuv, the pre-independence Jewish community in Palestine. Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky (1880–1940) was an ardent Jewish nationalist, the founder of Revisionist Zionism, and the spiritual father of the Israeli Right. Born in Odessa to a liberal Russian Jewish family, he worked as a journalist in Rome and Vienna and at an early age put his

outstanding skills as writer, orator, and polemicist at the service of the Zionist cause. During World War I he persuaded the British to form Jewish volunteer units within the British army and himself served as an officer in the 38th battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. In 1921 Jabotinsky was elected to the Zionist Executive but two years later he resigned, charging that its policies would result in the loss of Palestine. He formed a new party, the World Union of Zionist Revisionists, in 1925, as well as the youth movement Betar. After a decade in opposition, he and his group seceded from the movement altogether and established the New Zionist Organization, which elected him president. Until his death in 1940, Jabotinsky remained uncompromisingly opposed to the partition of Palestine.

Zionism's territorial aims—whether on both banks of the Jordan River or only west of the river—raised a question: Did the Arabs of Palestine constitute a distinct national entity and, if so, what should be the Zionist attitude toward them, and what should be their status within the projected Jewish state? Jabotinsky's answer is contained in two major articles he published in 1923 under the heading "The Iron Wall," which served as the political manifesto of the Revisionist movement. The first, "On the Iron Wall (We and the Arabs)," begins with Jabotinsky's characterization of his attitude to the Arabs as one of "polite indifference," yet he goes on to reject any thought of removing them from Palestine as "absolutely inconceivable." The real question, he says, is whether it is always possible to achieve peaceful aims by peaceful means. The answer to this question, he insists, depends not on Zionism's attitude toward the Arabs, but on the attitude of the Arabs toward Zionism.

The attitude of the Arabs was clear, he wrote. There was no chance of gaining their agreement to turn Palestine into a country with a Jewish majority because they regarded the country as their patrimony and wanted to remain its sole owners. Jabotinsky sharply criticized those Zionists who portrayed the Palestinian Arabs either as fools who could be easily deceived by a watered down version of Zionist objectives, or as a tribe of mercenaries ready to renounce their rights in exchange for economic advantage. "Every indigenous people," he wrote, "will resist alien settlers as long as they see any hope of ridding themselves of the danger of foreign settlement. This is how the Arabs will behave and go on behaving so long as they possess a gleam of hope that they can prevent 'Palestine' from becoming the Land of Israel." He went on to say that

A voluntary agreement is unattainable. So those who regard an accord with the Arabs as an indispensable condition of Zionism must admit to themselves today that this condition cannot be attained and hence that we must give up Zionism. We must either suspend our settlement efforts or continue them without paying attention to the mood of the natives. Settlement can thus develop under the protection of a force which is not dependent on the local population, behind an iron wall which they will be powerless to break through.

The article concludes with a profession of faith that peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Jews in Palestine is possible, but only as a result of the construction of an impregnable wall. "It is my hope and belief," Jabotinsky declared, "that we will then offer them guarantees that will satisfy them and that both peoples will live in peace as good neighbours. But the sole way to such an agreement is through the iron wall, that is to say, the establishment in Palestine of a force which will in no way be influenced by Arab pressure."⁵

Moderate Zionists criticized the article, especially on moral grounds. Jabotinsky therefore wrote a second article, "The Morality of the Iron Wall," in which he turned the tables on his critics. From a moral standpoint, he said, Zionism was either a positive or a negative phenomenon, and anyone who had become a Zionist had necessarily concluded that Zionism was positive, a moral movement with justice on its side. Now, "if the cause is just, justice must triumph, without regard to the assent or dissent of anyone else." The Jews had a moral right to return to Palestine and the enlightened world had acknowledged this right. For those who deemed the iron wall immoral because its aim was to settle Jews in Palestine without the consent of its inhabitants, the logical response would be to renounce altogether the idea of a Jewish national home. Even to dream of a national home would then be immoral. The article concludes with the assertion: "A sacred truth, whose realization requires the use of force, does not cease thereby to be a sacred truth. This is the basis of our stand towards Arab resistance; and we shall talk of a settlement only when they are ready to discuss it."⁶

The crux of Jabotinsky's strategy, then, was to deal with the Arabs from a position of unassailable military strength. But his article also incorporated a sophisticated theory of change. He envisaged two stages. Stage one was to build the iron wall that would compel the Arabs to abandon any hope of destroying the Jewish state. The resulting shift toward moderation and realism on the Arab side was to be followed by stage two: negotiations with the Palestinian Arabs about their status and national rights in Palestine.

Although "On the Iron Wall" became the bible of Revisionist Zionism, its real message was often misunderstood, not least by Jabotinsky's followers. For Jabotinsky, the iron wall was not an end but a means to an end. Once Arab resistance had been broken, a process of change would occur inside the Palestinian national movement, with the moderates coming to the fore. Then and only then could serious negotiations begin. In these negotiations, the Jewish side should offer the Palestinians civil and national rights. The article does not spell out what precisely is meant by "national rights," but other pronouncements suggest that what Jabotinsky

Jabotinsky recognized that the Palestine Arabs formed a distinct national entity and were accordingly entitled to some national rights, albeit limited, and not merely to individual rights.

had in mind was political autonomy for the Palestinians within a Jewish state. What emerges from the article is that the founder of Revisionist Zionism recognized that the Palestinian Arabs formed a distinct national entity and were accordingly entitled to some national rights, albeit limited ones, and not merely to individual rights. Unlike Golda Meir, the Labor party leader, he admitted that there is such a thing as a Palestinian people.

Jabotinsky's views—at least with regard to the inevitability of recourse to force—were much more widely shared than is commonly acknowledged. Arab rejection of a Jewish state in Palestine, coupled with mounting violence, led the moderate Zionists to the same conclusion—that military power would be necessary to achieve Zionism's objectives. But they were reluctant to admit it. In fact, Jabotinsky had long claimed that all Zionists were agreed on the iron wall, and saw the moderates' constantly repeated willingness to negotiate with the Arabs as a hypocrisy he considered it his sacred duty to expose. Tactically, however, there was a difference between the two rivals. Labor Zionists wanted to proceed toward statehood by immigration and settlement and gave lower priority to building a military capability. Jabotinsky regarded Jewish military power as the key factor in the struggle for a state and he never wavered in this conviction. Gradually, Labor Zionists came round to his point of view without openly admitting it.

BEN-GURION AND THE IRON WALL

Labor Zionism's shift toward the premises and strategy of the iron wall is best illustrated by the career of David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973), the chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive (JAE) from 1935 to 1948, the founder of the State of Israel, and its first prime minister. Ben-Gurion and Jabotinsky were bitter political antagonists, but the similarities between them are far from negligible. Both were single-minded Jewish nationalists. Ben-Gurion's socialism was a thin veneer for his intense and all-embracing commitment to the Jewish nation. Socialism for him was more a rhetorical resource for legitimizing the building of a Jewish state than a blueprint for a just society.⁷ Once stripped of their socialist veneer, Ben-Gurion's goals are almost identical to Jabotinsky's: a Jewish state in Palestine, Jewish independence, the creation of a Jewish majority, and the consolidation of Jewish power.⁸

The difference between them concerned territory. Ben-Gurion wanted a Jewish state on one bank of the Jordan River; Jabotinsky wanted it on both banks, within the original borders of the Palestine Mandate. Both knew that the desired goal could be achieved only by force. Jabotinsky was the first formulator of the strategy of the iron wall; Ben-Gurion, because he was not just a socialist but a practitioner of *realpolitik*, gave it top priority as of the mid-1930s. Ben-Gurion led the struggle for

statehood by force of arms when diplomacy failed. In 1948 he went even further than Jabotinsky in pursuit of Zionist goals: he presided over the expulsion of over 700,000 Arabs from Palestine.⁹ This was something that Jabotinsky in 1923 had considered “absolutely inconceivable.”

Where the two men differed with regard to force lay at the declaratory and public relations level. Ben-Gurion’s public pronouncements in the 1920s and early 1930s generally conformed to the official position of the Labor movement: first, that the Arabs of Palestine did not constitute a separate national entity but were part of the wider Arab nation, and second, that there was no inherent conflict between the interests of the Arabs of Palestine and the interests of the Zionists. Zionism’s only conflict, the socialist argument ran, was a *class* conflict with the Arab landowners and effendis that would be resolved when the Arab peasants realized that their true interests coincided with those of the Jewish working class.

Privately Ben-Gurion did not share this class analysis or its optimistic forecast. Already as an agricultural worker he had recognized the acuteness and danger of “the Arab problem.” His fears deepened when he saw that Arab opposition was grounded in principle and amounted to a root-and-branch rejection of the entire Zionist enterprise. The turning point for him was the Arab Revolt, which broke out in April 1936. For the first time, he acknowledged openly the national character of Arab opposition to Zionism. There was a conflict, a great conflict, he told the JAE on 19 May 1936, “We and they want the same thing: We both want Palestine. And that is the fundamental conflict.”¹⁰ Recognition of the deep-rooted nature of the Arab Revolt did not incline Ben-Gurion toward negotiation or compromise, however. On the contrary, it led him to the conclusion that war, not diplomacy, would be the final arbiter of the conflict with Palestine’s Arabs.

In a letter to the JAE dated 9 June 1936, he wrote, “It is not in order to establish peace in the country that we need an agreement. Peace is indeed a vital matter for us. It is impossible to build a country in a permanent state of war, but peace for us is a means. The end is the complete and full realization of Zionism. Only for that do we need an agreement.” The question was whether an agreement with the Arabs regarding Zionism’s final objective was at all conceivable. Ben-Gurion’s answer was that it was, but only in the long term: “A comprehensive agreement is undoubtedly out of the question now. For only after total despair on the part of the Arabs . . . may the Arabs possibly acquiesce in a Jewish Eretz Israel.”¹¹

The similarity between Ben-Gurion’s conclusion in 1936 and the conclusion announced by Ze’ev Jabotinsky thirteen years earlier is striking. Both men regarded the Arabs of Palestine as a national movement, which by its very nature was bound to resist Zionism’s encroachment on the land. Both men realized that the Arabs would not willingly make way

for a Jewish state, and that diplomacy was therefore incapable of resolving the conflict. Both believed that the Arabs would continue to fight as long as they retained any hope of preventing the Jewish takeover of their country. Both concluded that only insuperable Jewish military strength would eventually make the Arabs despair of the struggle and come to terms with a Jewish state in Palestine. Ben-Gurion did not use the terminology of the iron wall, but his analysis was virtually identical to Jabotinsky's.

Where they were at odds was over the timing of the Zionist resort to force. Jabotinsky stated openly that there was no alternative to military power and pressed for an immediate declaration of statehood. Ben-Gurion knew that there was no alternative to military power but wanted to delay confrontation with the Arabs until military superiority had been achieved. His declared belief in a peaceful solution to the conflict served a useful public relations purpose. Both internally and externally, it enabled the Zionist movement to hold the moral high ground, to pose as the innocent victim of Arab aggression. For Ben-Gurion, however, the so-called defensive ethos of Zionism was from the beginning inextricably linked to the offensive ethos. They were two sides of the same coin.

The socialist leader also fully shared his right-wing rival's view about the Jewish state's place vis-à-vis the Arab world. Ben-Gurion's basic image of the Arabs was of a primitive, implacable, and fanatical enemy that understood only the language of force. In his speeches, he repeatedly stressed the gulf between "us" and "them." "We live in the twentieth century, they in the fifteenth," he said in one speech. He took pride in the fact that "we have created a modern society . . . in the midst of a medieval world."¹² Ben-Gurion could not conceive of a multiethnic society embracing Jews and Arabs. He often compared Israel to a boat and the Arabs to a cruel sea; his aim was to make the boat so watertight that no storm or turbulence could capsize it.¹³ He often remarked that Israel was located in the Middle East by an accident of geography and despite its values and culture, which made it part of the West. "Israel is not a Middle Eastern state, it is a Western state," he insisted.¹⁴ His view of the Arabs, like Jabotinsky's, translated into a geostrategic conception that presented the Jewish state as the vanguard of Western civilization against Eastern barbarism and aspired to link it as closely as possible to the Western powers. This same notion prompted Ben-Gurion and his successors of both political parties to market Israel as a strategic asset for the West in the Middle East during the cold war.¹⁵

THE TRIUMPH OF THE IRON WALL STRATEGY

Ze'ev Jabotinsky's strategy of the iron wall, adopted in all but name by his Labor opponents, became the cornerstone of Israeli government strategy from 1948 onward. And the strategy worked. Indeed, the history

of Israel can be seen as a vindication of that strategy. By 1967, the Jewish state had taken root in the Middle East largely because of it. The crushing defeat inflicted on the Arab states in the Six-Day War of June 1967 and the easy conquest of Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights proved beyond a doubt Israel's unassailable military and technological superiority. Just as important, UN Resolution 242, which called for exchanging the new territories for peace, represented what amounted to an underwriting of Israel's security by the international community.

The 1967 victory therefore could be seen as the definitive achievement of stage one of the long-term Zionist strategy for dealing with "the Arab problem." By its very magnitude, the victory gave Israel's leaders the possibility of moving to stage two of the strategy—negotiations with the Arabs. But although Israel now had something concrete to offer in exchange for peace, it did not proceed from this position of strength to serious negotiations either with the neighboring states or with the Palestinian Arabs. The principal exceptions were Menachem Begin in the late 1970s with regard to Egypt, and Yitzhak Rabin in the early 1990s with regard first to the Palestinians and then to Jordan.

The 1967 conquests reopened the issue of Zionism's territorial aims. Jabotinsky had opposed on principle any partition of Eretz Israel, and his ideological heirs adhered to this position. The ruling Labor party, the dominant political force in the first three decades of statehood, had accepted the principle of the partition of Mandate Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. This consensus ended immediately after the 1967 war, with Labor split down the middle between territorial minimalists and territorial maximalists, between proponents of partition and advocates of Greater Israel. In the absence of a clear consensus, the settlement movement began to make headway, especially on the West Bank, the heart of the biblical Land of Israel. Internal divisions within the ruling party combined with resurgent nationalism in the country at large to ensure that creeping annexation became the order of the day.¹⁶

LIKUD AND THE ARABS

A new phase in Israel's foreign policy began with the election in 1977 of a Likud government under the leadership of Menachem Begin.¹⁷ Begin had been the heir to Ze'ev Jabotinsky and the commander of an underground organization, the Irgun. Like Jabotinsky, Begin was a territorial maximalist with a long record of opposition to the partition of Palestine. Indeed, the day after the historic UN partition vote on 29 November 1947—a vote that provided an invaluable international charter of legitimacy for the creation of an independent Jewish state—Begin asserted the credo of the underground fighters: "The partition of the Homeland is illegal. It will never be recognized. . . . Jerusalem was and will forever

be our capital. Eretz Israel will be restored to the people of Israel. All of it. And forever."¹⁸ A more categorical statement is difficult to imagine.

For Begin, the West Bank (he preferred the biblical terms Judea and Samaria) was liberated, not occupied. But as prime minister, he was willing to trade the Sinai peninsula (which was *not* part of Eretz Israel) for peace with Egypt. During his historic trip to Jerusalem in November 1977, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat made clear to his host that a purely bilateral peace deal was out of the question and that a solution had to be found for the Palestine problem in the form of national self-determination. Begin responded with an autonomy plan for the Palestinian residents of the territories that was directly inspired by Jabotinsky: essentially nonterritorial, the autonomy was to apply not to the land but only to the people who lived on it. On this, Begin did not budge, but at the September 1978 Camp David summit he moved further on the Palestinian issue than he had intended in order to clinch the deal with Sadat. His greatest departure from the tenets of Revisionist Zionism (and from all previous Israeli governments) lay in his recognition of "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and their just requirements." This recognition in principle enabled Sadat to proceed to the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. In the subsequent negotiations on the treaty's implementation, however, Begin reneged on his agreement at Camp David, deferring the decision on the territories' sovereignty until the end of the transition period of Palestinian autonomy: in August 1981, with autonomy negotiations still ongoing, the foreign policy guidelines of Begin's second government stated categorically that Israel would assert its claim to sovereignty over all the land west of the Jordan River at the end of the transition period. In these conditions, the negotiations inevitably ended in failure, but Begin could tell his right-wing critics that he had achieved the two fixed aims of his foreign policy—peace with Egypt and the integrity of the historic homeland.

Peace with Egypt in 1979 was followed by the June 1982 invasion of Lebanon, which by Begin's own admission was a "war of choice" rather than a "war of no choice."¹⁹ The real architect of this offensive war was defense minister Ariel Sharon, whose aim was to reshape the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East by crushing the PLO and breaking the backbone of Palestinian nationalism so as to pave the way to the absorption of the West Bank into Greater Israel. Sharon enlisted Begin's support for the invasion of Lebanon by presenting it as the battle for the Land of Israel.

The unexpectedly high level of Israeli casualties plunged Begin into a deep depression and led to his resignation and replacement by Yitzhak Shamir in 1983. In terms of outlook and ideology, the difference between Shamir and Begin was not great. Both were disciples of Jabotinsky; both were dedicated to the Greater Israel project; both were suspicious of outside powers. In some ways, Shamir was the more intransigent. He had abstained in the Knesset vote on the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979: for

him, there could be no retreat from *any* territory, not just territory of the Land of Israel.

Shamir was prime minister from 1983 to 1992, except for two years when he served as foreign minister in a national unity government under Shimon Peres. The decade provided several opportunities for negotiations both with the Palestinians and the Arab states, but Shamir was not interested. He regarded the trading of land for peace as contrary to the doctrine of the iron wall. Toward the end of 1988, after military measures failed to suppress the first intifada, some Likud members, in line with Jabotinsky's thinking, recognized that the iron wall had to be followed by a political initiative. Shamir also invoked the authority of Jabotinsky, but, unlike their mentor, he saw the iron wall not as a necessary precondition for negotiations and ultimately peaceful coexistence, but as a bulwark against change and an instrument for keeping the Palestinians in a permanent state of subservience to Israel. His favorite saying was that "the Arabs are still the same Arabs, and the sea is still the same sea." Referring to the 1948 war in a speech he gave on 21 June 1992, just two days before his electoral defeat, Shamir declared: "We still need this truth today, the truth of the power of war, or at least we need to accept that war is inescapable, because without this, the life of the individual has no purpose and the nation has no chance of survival."²⁰

Shamir's aversion to bargaining and compromise was on full display at the Madrid Conference, convened by the United States and the Soviet Union in late October 1991 in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Negotiations were to take place on the basis of UN Resolution 242 and the principle of land for peace, but Shamir reasserted his view that the real issue was not territory but Israel's right to exist, on which there could be no negotiations. His position remained fixed: no to withdrawal from the occupied territories, no to recognition of the PLO, no to negotiations with the PLO, no to a Palestinian state.

THE RABIN INTERLUDE

With Shamir's defeat at the polls in June 1992 and the return to power of a Labor government headed by Yitzhak Rabin, a fundamental change in the country's outlook and direction became possible. On the face of it, Rabin was an unlikely candidate for overturning the country's traditional preference for military force over genuine diplomacy when dealing with the Arabs. A renowned hawk, he had spent his entire career building up Israel's military power and regional dominance. When the first intifada broke out in December 1987, his instinctive reflex had been to use brute force to suppress it, but when that failed he recognized the need for political flexibility and started to respond to the national aspirations of the Palestinians living under occupation. By the time he became prime minister (for the second time) in 1992, his thinking had developed a stage

further. He grasped that the iron wall had achieved its primary purpose and that the remaining confrontational states, as well as the Palestinians, were ready to make peace with Israel based on mutual compromises. After some wavering between the Syrian and the Palestinian tracks, he opted for the latter.²¹

The Oslo Accord of 13 September 1993—which entailed PLO recognition of Israel's right to exist, Israeli recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, and commitment to resolve outstanding differences peacefully—marked a fundamental breakthrough in the century-old struggle. It was the first agreement between the two principal parties to the conflict, Israel and the Palestinians. It was based on the implicit acceptance by both sides of the principle of partition, and a modest start was made in implementing this principle by granting the Palestinians self-government in Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho. However limited in scope, the agreement took the Labor party back to its original acceptance of the principle of partition. By starting the process of gradual withdrawal from occupied Arab territory, Rabin laid the only secure foundation for peaceful coexistence between Israel and the Palestinians. He followed up the Oslo Accord with a peace treaty with Jordan.

The Interim Agreement signed on 28 September 1995, better known as Oslo II, was a further step in implementing the principle of partition. As such, it gave rise to a vicious campaign of vilification that culminated in Rabin's assassination on 4 November 1995 by a religious extremist whose declared aim was to derail the peace process. Messianic nationalism, fanatically opposed to ceding any part of the biblical homeland, had gained force after 1967 and constituted the ideological hard core of the settler movement, embodied in Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful). The worst blot on Rabin's record as prime minister was his failure to confront this movement. Although he had no sympathy for these extremists,²² he did not dismantle any of the numerous illegal settlements or caravan sites that had been springing up, and took no action when, in the wake of the February 1994 massacre of twenty-nine Muslim worshippers at the Hebron mosque by a U.S.-born settler, a majority in his cabinet favored removing the settlers from the city.

There is, of course, no way of telling what might have happened had Rabin's life not been cut short by an assassin's bullet. History does not disclose its alternatives. What is reasonably clear is that toward the end of his life Rabin was ready to take Jabotinsky's strategy of the iron wall to its logical conclusion by engaging in serious political negotiations with the Palestinians about their status and rights in Palestine.

Rabin was succeeded as prime minister by Shimon Peres, one of the principal architects of the Oslo Accord. Yet Peres was curiously reluctant to proceed along the course he had been instrumental in charting, rebuffing plans for Palestinian statehood put forward by his own party

and coalition partners. His self-description as an “unpaid dreamer” was undercut by his launch of the bloody Operation Grapes of Wrath in southern Lebanon in spring 1996, another example of the use of brute force to buttress Israel’s regional hegemony. By the time general elections were held on 29 May 1996, Peres had no credible peace option to offer the electorate.

BACK TO THE IRON WALL

If the Oslo accords appeared to move Israel closer to stage two of Jabotinsky’s vision, Likud’s electoral victory marked a decisive return to stage one. The new prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, was a self-proclaimed disciple of Jabotinsky, but his version of the iron wall did not see Jewish military power as a means to an end, but sometimes as a means to achieving security and sometimes as an end in itself. Netanyahu had denounced the Oslo accords as incompatible with the Jewish people’s historic rights and a mortal danger to Israel’s security: for him, the very conclusion of the agreement with the PLO at Oslo was proof that terrorism pays.²³ Beyond his animosity and contempt for Palestinians, he maintained that there could be no genuine peace with undemocratic states.²⁴

Netanyahu spent the two and a half years of what turned out to be his first prime ministership in a largely successful effort to freeze, undermine, and subvert the Oslo accords while ramping up settlement expansion in the West Bank. He also launched a major housing project in annexed East Jerusalem, proclaiming that “the battle for Jerusalem has begun.” The authors of the Oslo Accord had left Jerusalem to the end of the process to permit progress on other fronts; Netanyahu deliberately put it at the center of his agenda to *block* progress on other fronts.

Under strong U.S. pressure, Netanyahu signed two agreements with the PLO: the Hebron Protocol of 15 January 1997, and the Wye River Memorandum of 23 October 1998. In the latter he undertook to withdraw Israeli troops from a further 13 percent of the West Bank in three redeployments, but he suspended the memorandum after a single redeployment to appease his right-wing coalition partners. His murky manoeuvres eventually brought down his government. This was probably inevitable because of the basic contradiction between the government’s declared objective of seeking peace and its ideological makeup, which militated against trading land for peace.

Labor’s electoral victory in May 1999 was decisive enough to constitute an unambiguous mandate to continue the peace process where Rabin and Peres had left off. Ehud Barak, a military man who like his mentor Rabin had turned to peacemaking later in his career, became prime minister. Great hopes were pinned on him. In my epilogue to *The Iron Wall*, I myself wrote that his election “was the sunrise after the three dark and

terrible years during which Israel had been led by the unreconstructed proponents of the iron wall."²⁵

Unfortunately, Barak as prime minister failed to live up to these high expectations. When he finally turned to the Palestinian track after eight months trying to achieve a breakthrough with Syria, he seemed intent on giving the illusion of progress while avoiding the price. He repeatedly stated that Israel would leave no stone unturned in its quest for a settlement even as the persistent Israeli violations of the Oslo accords piled up. The third Wye redeployment was not implemented; Arab villages around Jerusalem were not turned over to the PA as promised; and the safe passage between Gaza and the West Bank was not opened. Meanwhile, in blatant disregard for the spirit of Oslo, Barak forged ahead with the old Zionist policy of creating facts on the ground, keeping pace with settlement-building under Netanyahu. As chief of staff, Barak had not been consulted during the secret Oslo talks and had serious reservations about the step-by-step approach. As prime minister, he insisted on proceeding straight to final status and resolving all issues in one go. To that end, he persuaded U.S. president Bill Clinton to convene the Camp David summit conference in July 2000 aimed at reaching a final agreement.

As is well known, the summit ended in failure.²⁶ Barak was largely responsible, because the terms he offered on territory, Jerusalem, and refugees failed to satisfy even the most moderate members of the Palestinian delegation. One last try to reach a final-status agreement was made at Taba, Egypt, in January 2001 on the basis of proposals drawn up by President Clinton. But although the two sides came closer to a final agreement than at any point in the conflict's history, it was too late. The al-Aqsa intifada had been raging since 28 September 2000, and new Israeli elections had been called. With Ariel Sharon strongly leading in the polls, Barak, to appear tough, unilaterally suspended the negotiations in the final phase of the election campaign, but to no avail. On 6 February 2001, Sharon won the elections by a landslide, and proceeded to form a hard-line, right-wing government.

Ariel Sharon's victory marked a full-blown return to stage one of the iron wall strategy at its starkest: deployment of overwhelming military force to crush Arab resistance beyond all hope. The ruthless use of force and disregard for civilian lives had long been a hallmark of Sharon's career, as evidenced by the Qibya massacre in 1953 and the Lebanon invasion in 1982. Immediately upon taking office, Sharon and his government escalated the savage war that Barak had launched against the Palestinian people to quell the al-Aqsa intifada. The full-scale operations Sharon unleashed in both the West Bank and Gaza involved F-16 fighter planes, targeted assassinations, the shelling and bombing of residential areas, and the razing of agricultural lands. The most destructive of these measures was Operation Defensive Shield, launched on the West Bank at the end of March 2002 in response to a horrendous suicide bombing in

Netanya by a member of Hamas. Sharon, however, made no distinction between the democratically elected Palestinian Authority and the militant organizations of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, lumping them all together as terrorists. The broader political objective of Operation Defensive Shield was to sweep away the remnants of the Oslo accords, which Sharon had opposed from the start.

Diplomacy was of no interest to him. Throughout his tenure in office, he steadfastly resisted the resumption of negotiations with the PA, ostensibly because of the persisting attacks (especially suicide bombings) by Islamic militants against Israeli civilians and Yasir Arafat's alleged complicity in these attacks. But Arafat's death in 2004 and his replacement by a moderate with impeccable credentials, Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazin), made little difference. Arab peace offers, such as the 2002 Saudi initiative, which was endorsed by all twenty-two members of the Arab League, were treated by him with an indifference verging on contempt.

Underlying Sharon's "war on terror" was the Likud's Greater Israel program. His role as a major driving force behind the settlement movement was tied to that vision, as was his construction of the so-called security barrier on the West Bank, condemned by the International Court of Justice and the UN General Assembly as a clear violation of international law. Built with the declared purpose of preventing terrorist attacks against Israel, the wall bites deep into the West Bank. Its route is designed to incorporate most of the settlements into Israel while maximizing Palestinian land on the Israeli side and fragmenting the remainder of the West Bank into four separate enclaves, further undermining the possibility of a viable two-state solution.

As a pragmatic politician, however, Sharon was forced to recognize that demography was not on Israel's side, and that something had to be done to prevent an Arab majority in the land between the river and the sea in the not-too-distant future. Faced with this prospect, Sharon did not change course or veer toward a solution acceptable to the Palestinians. Rather, he sought alternatives to direct occupation that would ensure Israel's continuing dominance over the entire area. What he eventually came up with was a plan for Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The plan won considerable international support while riding Israel of approximately 1.4 million Palestinians, over half of them packed into refugee camps, at the cost of resettling only 8,000 Jewish settlers.

This was not a peace plan but a unilateral move to redraw the borders of Greater Israel. Sharon did not submit it to the Palestinians as a basis for peace talks, and later refused even to discuss with them practical coordination relating to the pullback itself. Withdrawal from Gaza, completed in September 2005, was not a prelude to a comprehensive settlement but a prelude to further expansion on the West Bank. To the world, Sharon presented the disengagement as a contribution to a two-state

solution. To his right-wing constituency, however, he called the plan a “fatal blow” to the Palestinians, assuring his followers that “there’s no Palestinian state in a unilateral move.”

TWO ILL-CONSIDERED WARS

Two months later, Sharon, buoyed by public support and angered by opposition to the disengagement from within his own party, called general elections, quit Likud, and announced that he was forming a new party. Kadima, which means “forward” in Hebrew, was immediately joined by Sharon’s old Likud ally Ehud Olmert and Labor’s Shimon Peres. But in January 2006, Sharon suffered a stroke and went into a coma. Olmert took over as acting prime minister and won the 28 March elections in his own right, forming a coalition government that included Labor. Despite the new government’s more “centrist” appearance, the continuity in foreign policy was remarkable. Like Sharon, Olmert was a life-long supporter of Greater Israel who had been forced by the inexorable facts of demography to modify his goals. Another element of continuity, demonstrated less than four months after the election, was the privileging of military force over diplomacy to achieve political objectives.

In July 2006, faced with the capture of two Israeli soldiers in an unprovoked cross-border attack by the militant Lebanese Islamist guerrilla force Hizballah, Olmert could have used the fifteen Lebanese prisoners held by Israel to negotiate a prisoners’ exchange and continue the “containment policy” in force since Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000. Instead, the only option he presented to his security cabinet was the plan prepared by the IDF, then at the peak of its influence. Less than twenty-four hours later, Israel launched a massive operation against southern Lebanon aimed at destroying or at least forcibly disarming Hizballah. The aim was completely unrealistic, and the operation, which involved the deliberate targeting of civilians in flagrant violation of the laws of war, was a manifest failure. Olmert himself was sharply criticized by the Israeli-government-appointed Winograd Commission of Inquiry into the war, which called his judgment “misguided and rash” and faulted the IDF for its unpreparedness, inadequate planning, and poor performance.

Despite calls for his resignation over the commission’s findings, it was a corruption scandal that led Olmert to announce, on 28 September 2008, his intention to resign—though he would manage to stay in power until March 2009. The day after his announcement, he gave a highly revealing interview to the mass-circulation daily *Yedi’ot Abaronot*. Olmert had already registered one difference with Sharon by declaring that the wall being built on the West Bank was not just a security measure but would be Israel’s final border. In the interview, he went so far as to acknowledge that he had erred in his foreign policy views and actions for decades.

Stressing that the “window of opportunity” was short, he declared that “we must reach an agreement with the Palestinians, meaning a withdrawal from nearly all—if not all—of the territories,”²⁷ and specified that any territory retained must be compensated by the same amount of land in Israel. In other words, the only solution to the conflict was a political one, the occupation had to end, and Israel could not go on living by the sword.

Yet three months later, on 27 December 2008, Olmert presided over the launch of another totally unjustified and ill-conceived war, this time in the Gaza Strip. Its goal was to neutralize Hamas, cow the people of Gaza into submission, and crush all forms of resistance to the occupation. The official explanation claimed that the war was an act of self-defense to protect civilians in southern Israel against Hamas rocket attacks, omitting mention that the attacks had ceased almost six months earlier as a result of a June 2008 Egyptian-brokered cease-fire. Hamas scrupulously observed the cease-fire; the IDF violated it by launching a raid into Gaza on 4 November and killing six Hamas fighters. If Israel’s aim was to protect its civilians, the best way would have been to observe the cease-fire. But once again diplomacy was shunned and the men with the guns were ordered into action.

Operation Cast Lead, which claimed the lives of nearly 1,400 Palestinians (mostly civilians) and 13 Israelis, was one of the most extreme misapplications of the iron wall doctrine in Israel’s history. Although it achieved limited military objectives, it was a political and moral failure of considerable magnitude. It left the basic political problem unresolved, inflamed Arab hatred, and helped to turn Israel into an international pariah.

DESTINATION DEADLOCK

With the emergence of a Likud-dominated government under Benjamin Netanyahu in March 2009, the prospects of a negotiated settlement virtually vanished. The coalition government he formed was among the most aggressively right-wing, chauvinistic, and racist governments in Israel’s history. From the beginning, it was wedded to a rigid agenda of Greater Israel fundamentally at odds with the idea of a two-state solution. The main thrust of its policy was the expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank and the accelerated Judaization of East Jerusalem. With such a focus, Netanyahu ensured that no progress could be made on any of the issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only at the rhetorical level was there change: in a speech at Bar-Ilan University on 14 June 2009, Netanyahu endorsed for the first time a “demilitarized Palestinian state,” provided that Jerusalem remained the united capital of Israel and the Palestinians gave up their right of return. He also claimed the right for “natural growth” in the existing Jewish settlements in the West Bank while their permanent status was being negotiated.

These conditions left no scope for a genuinely independent and territorially contiguous Palestinian state. It made a mockery not only of the idea of negotiations between equals but also of the American-sponsored peace process, which had become widely discredited because it was seen for what it was: all process and no peace. Early in his administration, President Barack Obama correctly identified settlement expansion as the main obstacle to a negotiated solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Obama's efforts to secure a meaningful freeze failed: Netanyahu, by insisting on excluding East Jerusalem altogether and on going forward with the 3,000 housing units already approved for the rest of the West Bank, turned the settlement freeze into an empty gesture. He was like a man who

In holding to his position concerning a settlement freeze, Netanyahu was like a man who negotiates the division of a pizza and while he keeps eating it.

negotiates the division of a pizza while he keeps eating it. Not unreasonably, the Palestinians began insisting on two conditions for returning to the conference table: cessation of all settlement expansion, and the 4 June 1967 lines as the starting point for negotiations. Netanyahu totally rejects these conditions. The core of his policy was not destination peace but destination deadlock.

Meanwhile, Israel's negative response to the popular, pro-democracy uprisings in the Arab world starting in January 2011 served to underline the gulf that separates it from its regional environment. These home-grown revolutions were not primarily anti-Israeli or anti-Western, but rather calls for freedom, economic opportunity, social justice, and political reform. Notwithstanding Netanyahu's insistence on a shift to democracy as a precondition for lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors, the pro-democracy movements that got underway in the Arab lands were perceived as a threat, not an opportunity. In a speech to the Knesset on 23 November 2011, Netanyahu argued that the Arab awakening was moving the Arab world backward and turning it into an "Islamic, anti-Western, anti-liberal, anti-Israeli, undemocratic wave."

In Palestine, the Arab Spring took the form of popular demands for democracy, accountability, and, above all, ending foreign occupation. Popular pressure from below emboldened Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to make a bid for Palestinian membership in the UN. Given their declared acceptance of a two-state solution, it was not easy for Israel and the United States to explain why they reacted to this bid with threats of retaliation and economic sanctions. The argument was that Palestinian statehood should be achieved not by unilateral action but through negotiations. But another round of bilateral negotiations would have been an exercise in futility. Israel is so strong and the Palestinians so weak that an equitable settlement is beyond their reach. Hence the Palestinian application for UN membership. Netanyahu insists that Palestinian membership in the UN would not change the situation on the ground. On the other

hand, a successful bid would isolate Israel and mobilize increasing international support for Palestinian statehood. More crucially, if direct negotiations were to resume at any point in the future in the event of success at the UN, they would be based not on Israeli preferences but on international legality. And international law supports the Palestinian position on ninety-nine percent of the final status issues: territory, Jerusalem, the rights of the 1948 refugees, and the status of the Jewish colonies built on Palestinian land.

In exploring the evolution of the concept of the iron wall from Ze'ev Jabotinsky to Benjamin Netanyahu, this article paid special attention to Jabotinsky's strategy of two stages: first, building the iron wall, and second, negotiating from a position of unassailable strength about the status and rights of the Arabs in Palestine. All Israeli governments, regardless of political color, adopted the first stage of Jabotinsky's strategy of the iron wall, but, it was argued, Yitzhak Rabin was the first and only prime minister to move from stage one to stage two in relation to the Palestinians and that he did so by concluding the Oslo Accord with the PLO in 1993. After Rabin, it has been downhill all the way. His Likud successors reneged on the historic compromise that he had struck with the PLO and reverted to unilateral action that took no account of Palestinian rights, international law, or international peace plans.

Now the trouble with unilateral action is that it holds out no hope of real and sustainable peace. On the contrary, it is a recipe for never-ending strife, violence, and bloodshed. The Israeli Right thus provided both the paradigm for solving the conflict with the Palestinians, and the politicians who are unable or unwilling to implement it. Ze'ev Jabotinsky turns in his grave.

ENDNOTES

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