

No peaceful solution

Miron Rapaport interviewed Avi Shlaim for "Ha'aretz Friday Supplement"

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And apparently, despite his very innocent appearance, with his curls and his slow speech, Avi Shlaim - the third and least familiar member of the group of new historians - knows that he is a sort of enemy of the people, and even enjoys it with refined British enjoyment. And now he has come to Israel, armed with his book, "The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World."

After reading the 573 pages of the book, one can understand why Sharon and Livnat do not want Shlaim to be taught here: in very readable prose, based on facts, he surveys the history of Israel's contacts with the Arab world from 1948 to 2000, and states decisively ("The job of the historian is to judge," he says) that the Israeli story that Israel has always stretched out its hand to peace, but there was nobody to talk to - is groundless. The Arabs have repeatedly outstretched a hand to peace - says Shlaim - and Israel has always rejected it. Each time with a different excuse.

Among the new historians, Avi Shlaim is the most "classical." Benny Morris began as a journalist with a conscience, served time in a military prison for refusal to serve in Lebanon, and from this starting-point, came to write the "new history" about the creation of the refugee problem. Ilan Pappé was an activist in the non-Zionist left even before he went to complete his doctoral studies at Oxford.

Shlaim did not come from a political background. He studied history at Cambridge so he could serve as a diplomat in the Israeli Foreign Service, a job chosen for him by his mother, who fell in love with the British Foreign Service when her family found refuge in the British Embassy in Baghdad during the anti-Jewish riots there in 1941.

Only after he had taught international relations for several years at the University of Reading (specializing in European issues), and only after moving to Oxford, did he begin to take an interest in the history of that country, Israel, where he had lived between the ages of five and 16, and where he did two-and-a-half years of military service. This interest began in no small part thanks to one student, whose doctoral thesis he read as an outside examiner. The name of the student was Ilan Pappé.

Chance brought the new historians together. In 1988, Simha Flapan published his book "The Birth of Israel: Myths and Reality," Ilan Pappé published "Britain and the Arab-Israel Conflict, 1948-51," Benny Morris published "The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem" and Shlaim published "Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine." Shabtai Tevet, Ben-Gurion's biographer, published in Haaretz a no-holds-barred attack on what he called "the new historians." Benny Morris replied, and he and Ilan Pappé continued to fight that war, which quickly went beyond a simple academic debate.

But while Morris and Pappé were clashing here with the guardians of the "old history," which claimed that the Palestinian refugees left of their own free will and that the Zionist movement was always peace-loving, Shlaim remained in England, continued to teach at Oxford, to publish articles and to write books about the Israeli-Arab conflict. "The Iron Wall" was published in Great Britain in 2000,

and sold over 45,000 copies, a best-seller in academic terms. Since then it has been translated into four languages, first into Arabic and recently into Portuguese, in Brazil.

The book is being published in Hebrew only now, at the initiative of Yaakov Sharett, the son of Israel's first foreign minister Moshe Sharett, who decided on his own to translate the book, and approached Aliyat Gag publishers with a completed manuscript. Shlaim had already approached five publishers in Israel asking them to translate the book, and was turned down. "Not interesting," they told him. This is Shlaim's first book to appear in Hebrew.

A life of luxury in Baghdad

Not only does Shlaim's academic career differ from that of his friends, so does his biography. Pappe was born on the Carmel in Haifa, Morris was born in England. Shlaim was born in Baghdad in 1945, to a wealthy family with a magnificent three-story house and 10 servants, including a special servant who went to the market to do the shopping. His father was an importer of building materials, and hobnobbed with the heads of the Iraqi government, including then-prime minister Nuri Said.

"Most of the ministers were customers of ours," says Shlaim. "They used to come to our house and order building materials for their houses. They never paid, but in return they ordered work for the government from us, and paid much more than necessary. That was corruption, but not brutal corruption, as with Saddam Hussein. That was an old Arab political culture, a culture of compromise."

His mother was connected to the British government. Her father was the British army's head interpreter in Iraq during World War II, two of her brothers served in British intelligence as interpreters, and received British citizenship. That helped them later on, when they wanted to leave Iraq.

Shlaim describes a home in which Judaism was not an important component of his parents' identity. "Judaism was ritual," he says. "My parents used to attend the synagogue once a year, at home we spoke Judeo-Arabic, we listened to Arabic music. Nor was Zionism important, my parents had no empathy for it. There were Zionist agents who tried to create propaganda, but it didn't impress the Jewish elite and the middle class. There was no tradition of persecution or anti-Semitism in Iraq."

The first pogrom took place in 1941, in Farhoud, in the context of the (pro-Nazi) Iraqi rebellion against British rule. The real problems began with Israel's War of Independence in 1948, says Shlaim, when the harassment began. The climax came when a hand grenade was thrown into the central synagogue in Baghdad in 1951, "and from that day to this, there have been rumors that an Israeli agent tossed the grenade."

And have you, as a historian, tried to check out these rumors?

"At the state archives, I asked for the file on Baghdad in 1950. Although by law these documents are already supposed to be released, they told me that the file was closed and that I couldn't see it. An acquaintance of mine told me that he had examined the file, and that there was no Israeli involvement recorded in it. All those involved in bringing the Jews of Iraq to Israel - Shlomo Hillel, Mordechai Ben Porat - vigorously deny that there was such involvement."

And what do you think?

"I don't have enough tools as a historian. I only know that Sharett wrote in his diary, relating to the

`stinking affair' in Egypt (in which Israeli agents placed bombs in movie theaters in Cairo, to cause conflict between Egypt and Britain), that `there was a similar case in Iraq.' He doesn't explain, but Sharett apparently suspected that the Mossad had tossed the grenade.

"I think - I can't prove it - that there was an understanding between the Iraqi government and the Israeli government. An understanding, not an agreement. Israel asked Iraq to let the Jews immigrate, the Iraqis said: We are not opposed, but the Jews are filling central positions here in the Iraqi economy, so Israel said: Leave the Jewish property in Iraq. That accords with the behavior of the Iraqi government. Immediately after the grenade was thrown, the Jews of Iraq started to panic, and then the government issued a law that any Iraqi - they wrote `Iraqi' rather than `Jew' specifically - who wanted to leave the country, could leave if he registered by a certain date, but would have to surrender his citizenship.

"Out of the 130,000 Jews in Iraq, 100,000 registered, including my father. And then, immediately afterward, a new law was issued, to the effect that any Iraqi who had given up his citizenship was giving up all his other rights, including property rights. My father was sure that he would have enough time to sell his property, but then it turned out that he had lost everything: a house and warehouses and merchandise worth half a million pounds sterling at the time. In the end, he was even forced to cross the border illegally on a mule, because he was the guarantor of the debts of another Jew who had disappeared. I, my mother and my sisters, with our British citizenship, left Iraq on a regular flight to Cyprus, and met up with my father in Israel."

Then you in effect agree with the members of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow, who say that the Jews were brought from the Arab countries to provide "raw material" to shore up Zionism in Israel?

"That theory is very convincing. We won the War of Independence and founded a state, but the number of inhabitants was very small, fewer than 1 million. For Ben-Gurion, the top priority was aliyah (immigration), and the large reservoir of Jews was no longer in Europe, but in the Arab countries. We are not refugees, nobody expelled us from Iraq, nobody told us that we were unwanted. But we are the victims of the Israeli-Arab conflict."

He knows what nationalism is

Shlaim, five years old at the time, landed with his parents in Ramat Gan. His father managed to bring some money with him, and tried to do business here, but failed. "They cheated him. In Baghdad, if you gave a check and it bounced, you wouldn't show your face again. Here it was a badge of honor," says Shlaim. His mother, who hadn't worked a day in her life, found work as a telephone operator in the Ramat Gan municipality. She acclimated, as did Shlaim and his sisters. They learned Hebrew quickly, although they continued to speak Arabic with their parents.

He was somewhat ashamed of his father, especially when he would call to him in Arabic in the street, but he didn't dare to ask him not to speak Arabic to him in front of strangers. "He was a broken man, but he continued to dress and to behave like a respectable man, very polite, he didn't interrupt and he was not aggressive," says Shlaim. "He brought with him from Baghdad all the suits that his tailor had sewn for him from British fabric. He didn't have any work, and he would go down to the street, in a suit and an ironed shirt and a tie, and go to the cafes to sit with his friends from Iraq, who also had no work, and also walked around in the street in their suits."

And did you try to talk to him?

"He didn't talk about Iraq, he was silent. Today I'm interested in his trauma and I'm interested in why he didn't speak at the time. Maybe he spoke and I didn't show any interest. Children, apparently, are not interested in history. He died in 1971."

Quite a few Iraqi children were in Shlaim's class in Ramat Gan, but the Ashkenazi children set the tone. "I didn't encounter discrimination, and I didn't feel deprived, but the atmosphere was that anything Ashkenazi was good, and anything Arab was primitive," says Shlaim. "I felt I had accomplished something when I had Ashkenazi friends. I remember that one boy placed his hand on my shoulder and said to me: You're my best friend. I was amazed that he didn't feel that I was inferior."

In the classroom, Shlaim sat in back, didn't do homework, didn't say a word. His grades were poor. To everyone's surprise, he passed the seker, the test that was administered at the time in eighth grade, prior to the selection for high schools. His homeroom teacher was surprised too, and made sure to tell him so. "Her name was Miriam Glans, and she was a good teacher, of yekke (German Jewish) origin. But she was hostile. When I received the results of the seker, she came to me and said: 'You know that you passed only because of special dispensations they give Mizrahim (Jews of North African or Middle Eastern origin).'"

Were you insulted?

"I was insulted, but I didn't say anything. She should have been happy, she shouldn't have said that."

This humiliation marked the beginning of Shlaim's successful career. Two years later, to save him from the clutches of the high school that prophesied certain failure for him, Shlaim's mother decided to send him to England, to her brother who had immigrated there after leaving Iraq. Shlaim arrived in London in 1962 at the age of 16, studied in a Jewish school, and no longer felt like a foreigner. Just the opposite. The fact that he came from Israel turned him into a star, an attraction. He completed high school with high grades, returned to Israel to serve in the army, and even now recalls his swearing-in ceremony during basic training.

"It was in the Judean Hills, and the slogan was 'In blood and fire Judea fell, in blood and fire it will rise.' I remember that I had the feeling that we were surrounded by enemies and that I was ready to die for the homeland. Today that helps me as a researcher. I know what nationalism is. I have felt it inside me."

After the army he returned to study history at Cambridge, married a great-granddaughter of David Lloyd George, who was the British prime minister at the time of the Balfour Declaration, returned to Israel to be accepted into the Israeli Foreign Service, but then was informed that he had received a position as a reader at the University of Reading's department of international relations. In 1987 he was appointed a professor at Oxford, where he is a Fellow at the prestigious St. Anthony's College. And as far as is known, he achieved all that without special dispensations for Mizrahim.

I didn't feel ashamed, but I was astonished

At the start of his academic career, says Shlaim, he made a deliberate decision not to deal with the Middle East conflict. Slowly but surely, however, he was pulled into it. An article here, an article there. In 1982 he came to Israel with a stipend to write a study on the influence of the Israel Defense Forces on Israeli foreign policy. Just then the archives dealing with the 1948 war were opened, and Shlaim

found himself sitting in the State Archive for days on end. "Then my eyes were opened," he says. "I had the knowledge acquired in childhood, and I believed in Israel's purity of arms, I believed that Israel was the victim. I discovered documents that showed me other things."

Benny Morris once told me that when he found a document that proved an act of massacre or murder, he was happy about the historical discovery, but felt shame as an Israeli. What did you feel?

"I didn't sit in the IDF archive and I wasn't exposed to documents about acts of murder or rape. I worked with diplomatic papers. I didn't feel shame, but I was astonished. I knew that in every country there's a gap between rhetoric and practice, but I don't know of any country where the gap is as great as in Israel. All the leaders speak about peace, Golda Meir used to say that she was willing to travel anywhere in the world to make peace. But these were not truthful words. In the archive, in the Israeli papers, I found that all the Arab leaders were practical people, people who wanted peace.

"Take, for example, Hosni Zaim (the Syrian chief of staff who took over the government in 1949 and was deposed a few months later - M.R.). He said that his ambition was to be the first Arab leader to make peace with Israel. He proposed an exchange of ambassadors, agreed to absorb a quarter of a million Palestinian refugees in Syria, but demanded that the border pass through the middle of Lake Kinneret. He didn't issue any ultimatum about the rest of the refugees. I was astonished by the Israeli reaction. Ben-Gurion said: First we'll sign a cease-fire agreement with Syria, then we'll see. That destroyed my childhood version. It's not that Ben-Gurion didn't want peace, he wanted peace, but on the basis of the status quo. Israel said at the time that there was nobody to talk to. The truth is that Israel was actually saying that there was nothing to talk about."

Based on this statement, which took shape among the shelves of the State Archive in Jerusalem, Shlaim wrote his book "Collusion in Transjordan," which was published the same year as the books by Morris, Pappé and Flapan, those same famous - or infamous - "new historians," depending on the eye of the beholder.

In an article by Shlaim a few years ago, he summarized what seemed to him the five main arguments of the new historians:

- * The official version said that Britain tried to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state; the "new historians" claimed that it tried to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state
- * The official version said that the Palestinians fled their homes of their own free will; the "new historians" said that the refugees were chased out or expelled
- * The official version said that the balance of power was in favor of the Arabs; the "new historians" said that Israel had the advantage both in manpower and in arms
- * The official version said that the Arabs had a coordinated plan to destroy Israel; the "new historians" said that the Arabs were divided
- * The official version said that Arab intransigence prevented peace; the "new historians" said that Israel is primarily to blame for the dead end.

This group has meanwhile disintegrated. Morris' ideological revolution after the outbreak of the second intifada, during which he in effect justified the expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948, distanced him

from Shlaim. "He went off his rocker, and expressed racist views," says Shlaim. "That undermines him as a scholar."

In Shlaim's opinion, Pappé made a mistake by politically defending the research of Teddy Katz about the massacre in Tantura, and made an even bigger mistake when he supported the academic boycott of Israel. "That is a totally stupid and absurd idea," he says. "Under no circumstances am I willing to support an embargo on dialogue." He maintains good personal relations, by the way, with both of them.

From the start, Shlaim was interested in the last of the five points discussed by the new historians: He was interested in the history of the dead end in the relations between Israel and the Arab world. "The Iron Wall" is an abridged history of this dead end. The book took its name from the famous article published by revisionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky in 1923. "Their voluntary agreement is out of the question ...," wrote Jabotinsky in that article. "This colonization can, therefore, continue and develop only under the protection of a force independent of the local population - an iron wall that the native population cannot break through."

Jabotinsky was in the minority at the time, Mapai (the forerunner of the Labor Party) was in the majority, and Ben-Gurion disdained Jabotinsky. But in effect, claims Shlaim, Ben-Gurion and the Zionist movement, and the State of Israel in its wake, adopted the theory of the "iron wall." In other words, they believed that the only important thing was to "establish facts on the ground," and therefore, there was no point in entering negotiations with the Arabs. They only forgot the end of Jabotinsky's article, remarks Shlaim, where he said that after the Arabs had come to terms with the "iron wall," it would be possible to speak to them about mutual concessions.

According to Shlaim, the first 10 years of the State of Israel prove this argument. King Farouk of Egypt wanted an agreement, and Israel rebuffed him. King Abdullah of Jordan wanted an agreement, and Israel rebuffed him as well. We have already mentioned Zaim of Syria. Even the archenemy Nasser, writes Shlaim in one of the surprising revelations of the book, sent emissaries and even a personal letter to then-prime minister Sharett, to put out feelers for an agreement. He was also turned down out of hand.

The book gives a clear sense of a state that could not get enough. Moshe Dayan, then chief of staff, pressed for war with Egypt to capture the Gaza Strip and Sharm el-Sheikh, and "raised a suggestion" to capture the West Bank. Yigal Allon pressed for remedying the "long-term mistake" made in 1948, by capturing and annexing the West Bank. Ben-Gurion toyed with this idea and once with another idea; in 1956, a moment before the Sinai Campaign, he explained his great dream to his new friends from France: Israel would occupy the Sinai Peninsula, take over the West Bank and dismantle the Kingdom of Jordan, and reach the Litani River in Lebanon, establishing a Maronite state in northern Lebanon. The entire Israeli leadership (with the exception of Moshe Sharett), says Shlaim, adopted the idea of the "iron wall." The only argument was about where to place it.

Every meeting is important

Mordechai ("Moraleh") Bar-On was there when Ben-Gurion revealed his "grand plan" in the Sevres Palace near Paris. He was then serving as the head of Dayan's office, and was involved in many secret and non-secret contacts. Today he himself is a historian, as well as a personal friend of Shlaim. We are sitting on the balcony of Bar-On's home in Jerusalem's German Colony, the bastion of the Israeli elite, a place to which Shlaim never belonged, and discussing what happened.

Bar-On was active in Peace Now, and he does not really have any argument with Shlaim as to the facts. He has a serious disagreement with him regarding Shlaim's interpretation of them. It's true that Israel rejected all the Arab proposals, he says, and it's true that up until May 1967, the Arabs had no real plan to attack Israel. But the Arab proposals were unacceptable, and the war was unavoidable, because the Arabs could not forget what the Israelis had done to them in 1948.

Bar-On remembers Ben-Gurion's "grand plan" speech. "I was embarrassed when I heard it, it sounded like a text from the Versailles Conference," he says. But he admits that thoughts of expansion, at least in the direction of Egypt, were very common in the 1950s. "It's true that from 1955 on, Dayan pressed for war with Egypt. He begged the Old Man [Ben-Gurion] to embark on 'a war of deterrence,' and the Old Man didn't agree. In December 1955, Dayan met with 50 officers and asked them who supported a war of deterrence. All of them, with one exception, voted in favor. Dayan didn't receive permission from Ben-Gurion to embark on a war of choice, but he did get permission to cause the situation to deteriorate. In one of the retaliation operations in the demilitarized area in Nitzana, he wanted to leave the forces in place until morning, in the hope that Egypt would attack."

In the end, Ben-Gurion ordered him to withdraw the forces and Dayan gave in. Bar-On admits that Dayan wanted to get Egypt out of the Gaza Strip and create a strip from El Arish to Sharm el-Sheikh under Israeli control. "That was territorial expansion," says Bar-On, "but it stemmed from what Dayan saw as Israel's strategic weakness. There was no ideological issue here."

Shlaim, on the other hand, considers Dayan and Ben-Gurion the source of all evil. Ben-Gurion was a wicked man, Dayan thought in terms of a perpetual conflict. Sharett was the only one who tried to fight them. He represented another school, a school that believed that dialogue with the Arabs was possible, that what Israel did, and even what Israel said, affected the dynamics of the conflict. "I think that there were two schools," says Shlaim, "and when Ben-Gurion dismissed Sharett in 1956, he destroyed the moderate school, and it was never revived. That school had no leader, Abba Eban didn't count."

Nonsense, says Bar-On with a dismissive wave of his hand, "there weren't two schools. There was a strong, dominant school, that of Ben-Gurion, and there was a small, weak one, that of Sharett."

Shlaim claims that the retaliation operations in the 1950s, Dayan's baby, led to a deterioration, to an intensification of the hatred and to a distancing of the chance for dialogue. That was why Sharett fought against it with all his might. Fought and lost. Bar-On agrees that at least in the Egyptian sector, the retaliation operations were what gave rise to the fedayeen operations from the Gaza Strip, and they in turn led to the Sinai Campaign. But Dayan thought, says Bar-On, that the Arabs hated us in any case, and therefore it made no difference how much force we used.

Bar-On thinks he was right. "Sharett thought that if we behaved nicely, the Arabs wouldn't make trouble. And if we didn't behave nicely, Arab hatred would increase. I think that he was mistaken on two counts. There were 750,000 Palestinian refugees in Israel, we screwed them in 1948, they had good reasons for hatred, so what if we added another two or three kilos of hatred? If it was possible to carry out a good operation, it had to be done. The basic situation in the Arab world was refusal to accept the situation of 1948, and it was childish to think that anything would help."

This is exactly where Shlaim differs with Bar-On. Abdel Rahman Sadek, who was the Egyptian press officer in Paris, conducted the contacts with Israel on Nasser's behalf in 1955. "This dialogue was not

about peace," says Shlaim, "it was about relieving the tension, reducing the propaganda, lifting trade restrictions, things that could have improved the atmosphere, served as a lead."

Bar-On: A lead to what?

Shlaim: "To an attempt to understand one another, to the beginning of a dialogue beyond the lines of conflict."

Bar-On: "I totally disagree here with Avi. Abdullah could not have passed a peace treaty in his government. The matter of Zaim was not serious. Ben-Gurion was mistaken in not meeting with him, only because that would have prevented Avi from writing his article. Nasser was more serious, but they were not talking about peace there. Israel did not want to get peace under the minimal conditions that the Arabs were willing to discuss: the UN Partition Plan borders and the return of the refugees. Had we agreed to that, there would be no State of Israel today."

Shlaim: "Not everything is war or peace. There are also interim agreements. Every contact, every meeting is important. The Sinai Campaign intensified the hostility, intensified the hatred; in 1964 they created the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), established a united Arab headquarters. For the first time, the goal of the Arab League was to destroy Israel. That was the result of the Sinai Campaign, and that is what led to the Six-Day War."

The two actually agree about the Six-Day War. In 1967, the moment occurred when the iron wall became a reality in Arab awareness. From that moment on, the Arabs understood that they could not defeat Israel, and the only way to get anything from it was through negotiations. Bar-On says that "through a wise process," it would have been possible at the time to return the territories and achieve peace. Shlaim says that immediately after the war, Jordan's King Hussein offered a full peace in return for withdrawal from the West Bank, but "Galili and Allon and the other land robbers" replied in the negative. Shlaim believes that this negative answer was the continuation of a policy that has been in force since 1948, and maybe even prior to that. Bar-On believes it was a localized mistake.

Shlaim considers Sharon a direct successor of the "iron wall" approach. "Sharon never believed that the process could be resolved by peaceful means," says Shlaim. "He was always the master of violent solutions. He has been the prime minister for four years, and he hasn't had a single meeting about the final-status agreement. For Jabotinsky, the iron wall was a metaphor. For Sharon, the wall has turned into a physical reality that mars the landscape, destroys the environment and in the long term is destroying two societies, Palestinian society and Israeli society. The left supports a fence, but I don't believe that it will lead to an agreement."

But what does Shlaim know? Shlaim told me when we were still in the cafe that since he was a child, Israel has looked to him like an "Ashkenazi trick" of which he doesn't feel a part. "I'm not certain even now that I know how that trick works."