

The Middle East knot

British-Israeli historian Avi Shlaim publishes a new, fully updated version of his classic *The Iron Wall* and presents a number of key pointers to help understand the conflict in the area. "There will be no peace in the world without a solution to the Palestinian problem", he says.

By Georgina Higuera

At 66 years old Avi Shlaim has spent half his life studying the conflict between Palestine and Israel, and the foundations on which the state of Israel is based. All of which has led this mild-mannered man to repeat time and time again that "there will be no peace in the world without a solution to the Palestinian problem". This is why he sees the campaign launched by Israel against Iran as a "new attempt to divert attention" from the central core of the problem, namely the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

"I wholeheartedly agree with the poem by Günter Grass, in which he states that the Israeli nuclear arsenal is a danger for world peace, which is already in a fragile state" says the author of *The Iron Wall*, an essential read for those wishing to understand the Israeli strategy against the Palestinians and their Arab neighbours, and their "imperialist paranoia".

What most angered Shlaim was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's response to the poem. "He completely ignored the content of the poem and devoted himself to a personal attack on Günter Grass, just as he did with the renowned, Jewish legal expert, the South African Richard Goldstone, who documented over 30 war crimes committed by Israel in Gaza" between 27th December 2008 and 18th January 2009.

Shlaim contends that in both cases the press and the international community have reacted with "disgraceful double standards" by accepting the slogans of the "powerful, effective Israeli propaganda machine, which presents Israel as the victim of Arab aggression and Palestinian terror". He adds, "Israel claims that all their wars are defensive, but the war in Gaza was immoral, illegal and completely unjustified".

Netanyahu dubbed Grass an "anti-Semite", as Grass feared he would. According to Shlaim, this is Israel's way of trying "to confuse anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism". "It is perfectly legitimate" he goes on "to criticise the policies of the Israeli government, such as the expansion of the settlements in the occupied territories. But Israel does not accept any criticism and anyone who speaks out is immediately branded as anti-Semitic. This is a sort of moral blackmail they use to silence their critics and prevent people from analysing their policies".

Born into a Jewish family in Baghdad, Avi Shlaim served in the Israeli army in the 1960s. In 1966 he moved to the United Kingdom to study history and stayed on to become a professor at Oxford University. He is a fellow of the British Academy. In 1982 when the Israelis opened their archives about the first Arab-Israeli war (1948), Shlaim embarked on intensive research and began raising doubts about the "official

history", and in some cases turned it on its head. Together with Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev and Hillel Cohen, Shlaim forms part of a group known as "the new historians", who blame Israel above all for the failure of the peace process and reject its version of history.

For Shlaim, anti-Semitism is a "European phenomenon". He reminds us that in his birthplace, Iraq, and in Morocco Arabs and Jews live side by side in harmony. "It is the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory that has whipped up anti-Semitism in the Arab world. If this conflict were brought to an end there would no longer be a reason for Arab anti-Semitism" he says, while recognising that "Israeli policies create hostility between Arabs and Muslims and the entire world, although Israel itself is not aware of its contribution to creating this hostility".

"Israel has made huge efforts to reach a peace agreement with the Arabs, but it has forgotten the most important aspect of all: the need to end the occupation", says Shlaim in *The Iron Wall*, in which he makes an exhaustive review of what he calls the officialist, heroic, moralistic story of the creation of the State of Israel.

Shlaim states that he is moved by the "need for fairness" towards the Palestinians when it comes to revealing the truth about the peace process, as the real story has been manipulated beyond all recognition. On this question, he states that the failure of the Oslo peace negotiations was not due to Palestinian intransigence and in fact was the result of the extension of the Jewish colonies on the West Bank. "Jerusalem is at the heart of the conflict. If there is no Arab Jerusalem on the east side, there will be no chance to establish a Palestinian state, and this is why the Government is so intent on judaizing the city".

Shlaim believes that the imbalance of power between Palestinians and Israelis is so great that they are now unable to reach an agreement by themselves. The US appeared to have a monopoly over the solution, but by refusing to put pressure on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories and by clearly positioning itself on Israel's side, it has made this imbalance even greater. For this reason, Shlaim believes that a common, active stance is required from the European Union, the destination of 30% of Israeli exports. In the preamble to the trade agreement it states that human rights must be respected. "Europe could suspend this agreement until these clauses are complied with", he claims.

The historian says that he is optimistic about the so-called Arab spring, which he considers "a genuine, broad-based, social revolution, in which young people have broken down the barrier of fear and demanded their rights". Shlaim rejects the opinions of those that consider Islam to be incompatible with democracy, putting forward Turkey as an example. He believes that the West must support these processes. The young people in these countries are spurred on by an internal agenda that is neither anti-imperialist nor anti-Israeli, and instead seek economic opportunity, personal justice, political reform and above all national dignity. "This is the end of the dictatorships, and although Bashar el Asad says that the Arab spring stops in Syria, what is really finished is his regime, which will fall in the same way as those in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen".

After criticising Netanyahu for not saying a "single positive word about the Arabs" in his book *A durable peace: Israel and its place among the nations*, Avi Shlaim believes that the Arab spring "has given Israel the chance to feel part of the near East and to integrate itself into the region". However, the current government, "the most racist in Israel's history", only sees threats and dangers to its security. According to the historian, the Arab spring has done away with Israeli arguments that presented their country as an island of democracy in a sea of dictatorships, and has revealed Netanyahu's "hypocrisy", in that for years he has been telling journalists that they could not make peace with the Arabs until they became democrats.

What most concerns Shlaim however is an attack on Iran. He supports the views of the former head of Mossad, General Meir Dagan, who called the Israeli government "irresponsible" for raising the possibility of a lone attack after three years of trying unsuccessfully to drag the United States into the conflict.

Revising the wall

The Iron Wall

Israel and the Arab world

Avi Shlaim

Translation by Regina Reyes Gallur

Almed. Granada, 2012

856 pages. 32 euros.

By **M.A.Bastenier**

In the 1920s the leader of revisionist Zionism, Zeev Jabotinsky, bluntly defined the problem that any future state of Israel would have to resolve: the need to build an iron wall that would convince the Arabs that it was useless to resist the return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland; and only then negotiate the peace. It is important to add that Jabotinsky, whose great nemesis David Ben Gurion managed to convince the West to regard him as a fascist, was not, at least in a crude outspoken sense, a racist. He acknowledged the right of the Palestinians to their own land, something which Ben Gurion never did, although he added that whichever side was the strongest could keep it. Avi Shlaim is one of the leading figures of the so-called new Israeli historiography, which has destroyed the ridiculously self-congratulatory foundational myths of the official history about the creation of the state. The first version of what this *Iron Wall* was and what it signified appeared in the year 2000. We now have a second enlarged, corrected edition which goes as far as the beginning of 2006 with the end of the government of Ariel Sharon. The publishers have also added four articles, the last of which deals with the Arab spring, so bringing the story almost up to date. Shlaim explains what the different governments of Israel have done with this idea of the wall. All the various cabinets, both right and left wing, have only implemented the first phase, the military phase, the theory, and have replaced negotiation with the covert appropriation of the territory in which the Palestinian state might be established. The only Israeli leader to move on to the second phase was Isaac Rabin at the beginning of the 1990s, but his death in 1995 at the hands of a right-wing Jewish radical put an end to any hopes of negotiation. Since then successive Israeli governments have systematically sabotaged even the most modest moves towards a solution to the conflict. Shlaim believed that the Oslo agreement signed by Rabin and Arafat in 1993 could lead to

peace. In one of the appendices to his new book he now seems much less optimistic. The sanctification of the figure of Rabin continues, a process to which the Palestinians themselves, with President Yasser Arafat at their head, contributed, but Shlaim admits that an agreement in which there was no talk of self-determination for the Palestinian people or of an end to Israeli colonisation of the West Bank and Arab Jerusalem was seriously flawed. But Shlaim is an exceptional custodian of the dignity of historiography and by extension of Israeli society itself, not all of whose members view the Arabs as enemies that must be fought.