

## III. Book Reviews

# An Intimate Investigation Into the Self-Destruction of Zionism

by Harley Schlanger

### Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab-Jew

by Avi Shlaim

Oneworld Publications, London, 2023

Paperback, 324 pages, \$17.23

June 18—“The only way to make sense of Israel’s senseless war in Gaza is through understanding the historical context. Establishing the state of Israel in May 1948 involved a monumental injustice to the Palestinians,” wrote renowned historian Avi Shlaim, a veteran of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in an op-ed in *The Guardian* titled, “How Israel Brought Gaza to the Brink of Humanitarian Catastrophe,” on Israel’s brutal assault on the people condemned to live on that narrow strip of land.

To assure the reader that he is not an anti-semitic polemicist—which seemingly has become necessary, due to the weaponization of the charge of “anti-semitism” against anyone critical of Israel—the author provides a brief autobiographical comment: “I write as someone who served loyally in the Israeli army in the mid-1960s and who has never questioned the legitimacy of the state of Israel within its pre-1967 borders. What I utterly reject is the Zionist colonial project beyond the Green Line. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of the June 1967 war had very little to do with security and everything to do with territorial expansionism. The aim was to establish Greater Israel through permanent political, economic and military control over the Palestinian territories. And the result has been one of the most prolonged and brutal military occupations of modern times.”

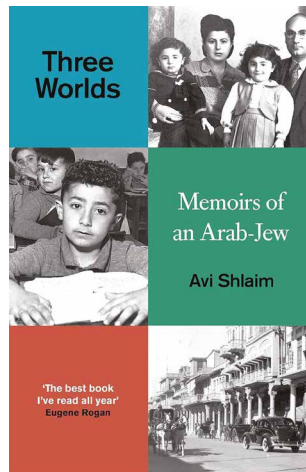
The reader might be surprised to learn that Shlaim [wrote](#) this, not about today’s atrocities inflicted on

Gaza, but in January 2009, following the “First Gaza War.” Also known as “Operation Cast Lead,” it was launched after a six-month ceasefire had broken down, following an incursion into Gaza by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in November 2008. The “War” began on December 27, 2008 and lasted for three weeks, resulting in an estimated 1,400 Palestinian deaths, including more than 300 children, and the destruction of 46,000 homes.

While this pales in comparison with the death and destruction meted out today by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s regime in response to the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, Shlaim identified the common feature of this and the many other previous “counter-terror” operations in Gaza: a ruthless commitment by Israel’s leaders to achieve “territorial expansion,” which requires “cleansing” the land of Palestinians. Adherence to this concept of “security,” treated by Zionist leaders as though it were a religious commandment, has convinced Shlaim that “Zionism is in the process of destroying itself,” as he stated in an interview on March 21, 2025.<sup>1</sup>

### A Learned Prescience

How he reached that conclusion is an ever-present thread in his autobiographical work, *Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab-Jew*, published in 2023. By joining him on his journey of self-discovery, readers will find that the prescience displayed in his 2009 op-ed was sharpened by his penetrating self-reflection on his life experience. The three worlds in the title refers to his early childhood in Iraq, prior to his family’s departure to Israel in 1950; his difficult childhood and school days in Israel, where he felt out-of-place, and his move to England at the age of sixteen, where he



has lived since, with the exception of a two-year return to Israel in 1964 to serve in the IDF. He became a professor of International Relations at the University of Oxford in 1996, where he taught until his retirement in 2011.

Beginning with the story of the lost world of the successful Jewish community in Iraq prior to the founding of the Zionist state of Israel in 1948, he introduces the reader to a subject about which little is known, and which most might find hard to believe. Contrary to the widespread acceptance of Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" geopolitical narrative, which asserts that there is "an unbridgeable gulf between Muslims and Jews," Shlaim writes of more than 2,500 years of relatively peaceful Arab-Jewish coexistence in Iraq. For him as a child in Baghdad, being an "Arab-Jew" was not a paradox.

"We belonged to a branch of the global Jewish community that is now almost extinct. We were Arab-Jews. We lived in Baghdad and were well integrated into Iraqi society. We spoke Arabic at home, our social customs were Arab, our lifestyle was Arab.... We in the Jewish community had much more in common, linguistically and culturally, with our Iraqi compatriots than with our European co-religionists."

Instead of a "clash of cultures," he writes that his family's experience "points to a dramatically different picture. It harks back to an era of a more pluralist Middle East with greater religious tolerance and a political culture of mutual respect and cooperation." In the 1880s, there were fifty-five synagogues in Baghdad, and at the end of the first decade of the 20th Century, one-third of the population of Baghdad was Jewish.

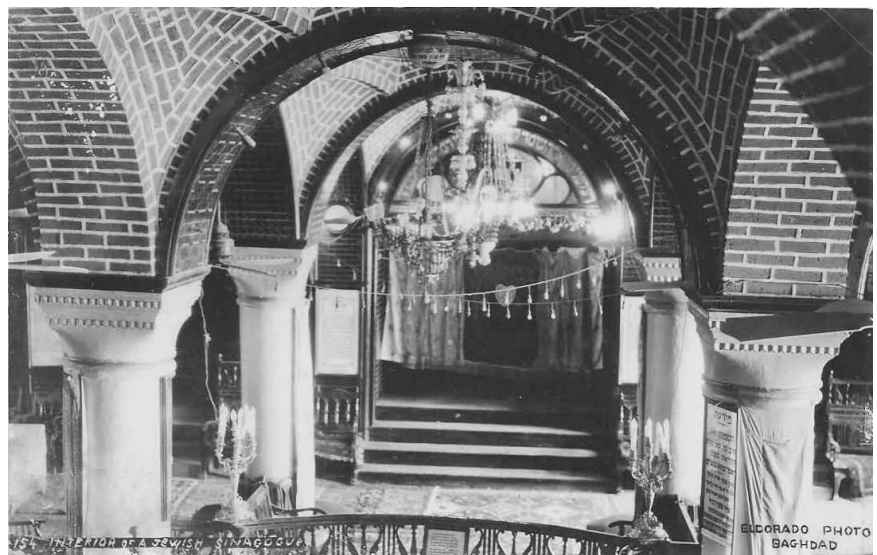


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Author Avi Shlaim

the Greater Council of the Iraqi Jewish community to the United Nations opposing the vote on November 29, 1947 to partition mandatory Palestine into two states, creating the State of Israel. "Like my family, the majority of Iraqi Jews saw themselves as Iraqi first and Jewish second; they feared that the creation of a Jewish state would undermine their position in Iraq."

In fact, that is what occurred after the creation of Israel, and its army's victory in the War of Independence. "As a result of the Arab defeat, there was a

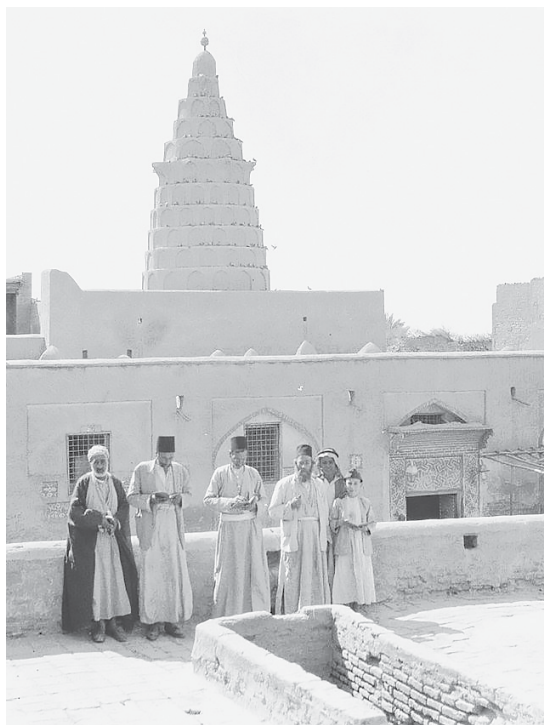


Author Unknown

*The Great Synagogue of Baghdad, Iraq.*

backlash against the Jews throughout the Arab world.” Jews were “increasingly perceived as a sinister fifth column,” deployed and protected by forces of the British empire, to counter Arab nationalism. By eliminating the distinction between Jews and Zionists, which he describes as “so crucial to interfaith harmony in the Arab world,” that harmony was shattered after the 1948 War of Independence, leading to demonstrations in Iraq against the Jews, and laws against Zionism. By the end of 1953, more than 90% of Iraq’s Jews had left the country.

Shlaim argues that the shift that led to the mass exodus was caused in part by a fear reaction to the bombings of five Jewish sites in Baghdad in 1950-51. He investigated suspicions that the bombings were the work of Zionist agents, intent on convincing Jews that they had no future in Iraq. He reports, in the chapter titled “Baghdad



G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection; Library of Congress  
*Ezekiel's Tomb at Kifel, the area which was inhabited by Iraqi Jews, who appear in the photo. Photo taken in October 1932.*

Bombshell,” on the documentary evidence he discovered and meticulously assembled, which showed that Zionist provocateurs had been responsible for three of the five bombings.

The fears provoked by these bombings, combined with growing anti-Zionist sentiment nourished by Arab nationalism, which intensified following the defeat of Arab armies in 1948 by the Zionists, drove the exodus to Israel. “We did not feel any affinity with the Zionist movement,” he wrote, “and we experienced no inner impulse to abandon our homeland to go and live in Israel.”

Yet, for his family, as with the majority of Iraqi Jews, little choice was left, other than emigrating to Israel.

Years later, Shlaim asked his mother if she had had any Zionist friends when they lived in Iraq. She replied, “No. Zionism is an Ashkenazi thing. It had nothing to do with us.”<sup>2</sup>

## Ben-Gurion’s Statement on Jews from the Arab World

Shlaim’s study of the attitude toward the Mizrahim deepened his insight into the origin of Zionism as a settler-colonial movement, in which racism played a role. He quotes an October 25, 1960 speech by David Ben-Gurion to the Knesset, in which he denigrated the Mizrahim as Jews who “lived in a society that was backward, corrupt, uneducated and lacking in independence and self-respect.” Ben-Gurion, who is venerated as a Zionist founding father committed to liberal humanitarian values, continued, stating that the state must imbue the younger Jewish émigrés from Muslim countries with the “superior moral and intellectual qualities” of those who created the State of Israel, i.e., European Zionists. “If, heaven forbid, we do not succeed, there is the danger that the coming generation may transform Israel into a Levantine state.”

It is this attitude toward the “other,” i.e., non-Ashkenazi Jews, which underlies the obsession with establishing “Greater Israel.” For Shlaim, “Greater Israel is incompatible with any equitable solution of the conflict with the Palestinians.” He notes that it is the embrace of the ethno-nationalist outlook which precludes a commitment to peaceful resolution.

In its current ideological rigidity, “Zionism has discouraged us from seeing each other as fellow human beings.” This “cuts to the core of the Zionist conception of Israel as a European stronghold in the Middle East... It was also the basis on which Britain had issued the Balfour Declaration. It was the ethos of the Jewish state.”

Unless this changes, Shlaim is telling his readers, the survival of Israel remains in doubt.

## Exodus from Iraq

The Jews who fled Arab countries did not exactly receive a hero's welcome upon arrival in Israel. In the eyes of the majority of European Zionists, they were regarded as "backward and primitive.... The lens through which the new immigrants were viewed was the same colonialist lens through which the Ashkenazi establishment viewed the Palestinians." Those like the members of his family, Jews who had been comfortable and secure in Iraq, now found themselves "relegated to the margins of Israeli society."

This "painful ordeal of displacement" as author Yitzhak Bar-Moshe—a distant relative of Shlaim—described it in his book *Exodus from Iraq*, had a profound effect on Iraqi émigrés. "We left Iraq as Jews," Bar-Moshe wrote, "and arrived in Israel as Iraqis." Shlaim writes of the effect this change of identity had on his father, who never recovered from the loss of dignity, which accompanied the loss of status and comfort, in the exile.

As for young Avi, Shlaim traces his problems in school as, in part, due to the adjustment to the weight of this identity shift. To gain the acceptance of the "Mizrahi" to Zionism, the Israeli education system set out "to undermine our Arab-Jewish identity."<sup>3</sup> This led to a "systematic process ... to delegitimize our heritage and erase our cultural roots."

It wasn't until he left Israel for England in 1961, at the age of 16, that he began to find his identity as an "Arab-Jew." But this was a slow process of more than a decade, which included a two-year stint in the IDF in 1964, during which time he became "almost a 'normal' patriotic Israeli," leaning "towards a hard-line posture in the conflict with the Arabs, placing more faith in military force than in diplomacy." He "veered to the right in the political spectrum and shared the militant nationalism that was its hallmark."

During that time, he was won over to the perspective of Fortress Israel. "It was us and them, we and the enemy. I believed in the cause. I felt I belonged and, as a consequence, I managed to shake off the debilitating sense of inferiority that dogged me throughout my childhood."

## The Emerging Identity as an Arab-Jew

The summary of Shlaim's political and intellectual evolution in the "Epilogue" provides a compelling sequence of self-discovery, set in the context of a turbulent period in Israel's history. His masterful mapping of

his personal development onto that historical period offers fascinating insights into the dangers facing present-day Israel, with deepened "left-right" polarization coinciding with a hardening attitude against any compromise with Palestinian nationalism.

For example, he describes the Six-Day War of 1967 as a turning point for him. It "marked both the crest of my Israeli patriotism and receding zeal for the State of Israel." This change in his thinking began with his conclusion that the occupation of Palestinian territories after 1967 was the moment when Israel became a colonial power. In this explanation, the IDF, which he had seen as a unifying force defending Israel, was transformed after the '67 war "into a brutal police force of a brutal colonial power."<sup>4</sup>

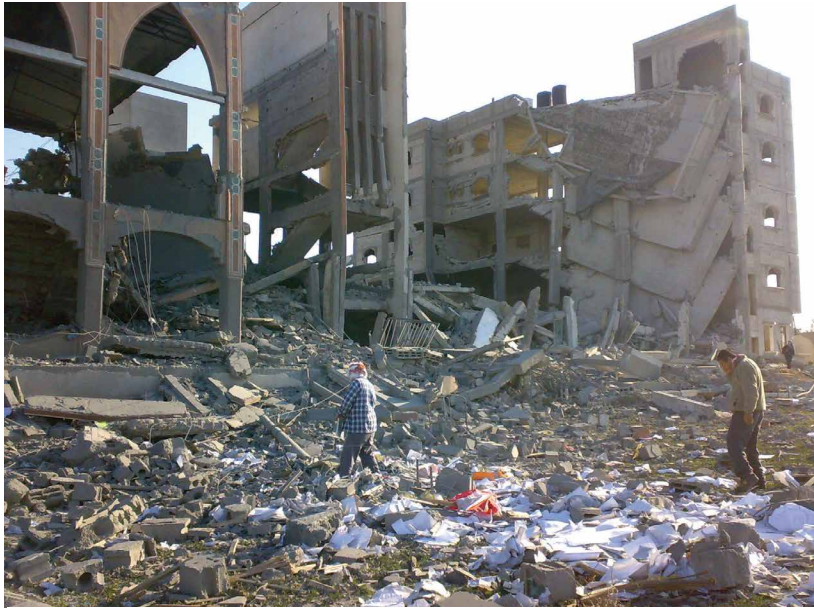
Further investigation convinced him that, in fact, "Israel had been created by a settler-colonial movement" and that the events of 1948 and 1967—the Nakba in '48 and the occupation after 1967—"were merely milestones in the relentless, systematic takeover of the whole of Palestine." This critique was sharpened by his study of the history of his family in Iraq. He concluded that the goal of building a Jewish state in Palestine would necessarily lead to "the dispossession of the native population," which led inevitably to the Nakba as a major step toward the "ethnic cleansing" of Palestine.

With the Israeli government in the hands of colonial-settler extremists such as Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, pursuing the goal of an ethno-nationalist state, the genocidal assault on the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank comes as no surprise to Shlaim. This is documented in his latest book, *Genocide in Gaza: Israel's Long War on Palestine*.<sup>5</sup>

## Autobiography as History

I must admit that I approached Shlaim's *Memoirs* with a bit of skepticism. Having read several of his historical studies previously, including his superb *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, I was familiar with the quality of his writing and depth of his research, as well as his ability to guide the reader through the complexity of the history of the implantation of Zionism into Southwest Asia as a tool of the British Empire. But what could be gained, I wondered, by presenting this through an intimate view of his family history and his personal life story?

It turns out that this was a brilliant decision, as it



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*A destroyed building in Rafah, January 12, 2009.*

takes history out of the dusty shelves of archives and places the reader at the kitchen table of those who are making history. One can't help but be drawn in by the author's personal story, of his self-exposure, through which he is re-living the pain and disruption of exile. Perhaps it adds a necessary edge to his conclusions in the "Epilogue," where he lays bare not only his personal struggles, but that of a nation he reluctantly acknowledges is now engaged in genocide.

Yet, on the personal journey, in his poignant recollecting of his evolution, from being a reluctant Israeli, to a momentary embrace of militant nationalism, to questioning the "Zionist master narrative," he expresses neither shame nor regret. The fact "that I once shared it has helped me to understand its powerful stranglehold on the Israeli psyche."

This deeper understanding provides a basis for overcoming what otherwise might end in tragedy. From his family history, he is able to present a picture of Muslim-Jewish relations in Iraq of an era "of a more pluralist Middle East with greater religious tolerance and a political culture of mutual respect and cooperation."

It was the intervention of the British empire on behalf of a "Jewish nationalist" movement, Zionism, which changed that for the worse. "By endowing Judaism with a territorial dimension that it did not have previously, it accentuated the difference between Jews and Muslims

in Arab spaces." Further, Zionism not only turned the Palestinians into unwanted intruders who should leave voluntarily or risk their lives should they insist on claiming their land; in its treatment of Arab Jews, as in the case of his family, "it turned the Jews of the East into strangers in their own land," with no choice but to emigrate to Israel, where they were expected to accept second-class citizenship, serving the Zionists from Europe.

"One thing is certain," he writes in summation: "without reviving or reimagining the kind of religious tolerance and civilized dialogue between Jews and Arabs that prevailed in Iraq before the emergence of the state of Israel, we will not be able to move beyond today's impasse."

And he closes with a touch of the characteristic good humor and optimism displayed throughout the journey. "Like Abba Eban, I believe nations, like individuals, are capable of acting rationally—after they have exhausted all other alternatives."

## End Notes

1. Shlaim, quoted in an interview conducted by Sebastian Shehadi. The interview was published by Novara Media on March 21, 2025, "'We're Witnessing the Last Gasp of Israeli Violence': In Conversation With Avi Shlaim."
2. Ashkenazi Jews are those with roots in northern and eastern Europe. The vast majority of early Zionist leaders were Ashkenazi.
3. The "Mizrahim" are those Jews from communities in the Muslim world. Mizrahim is translated from Hebrew as "Easterner."
4. I am assuming that the "deeper analysis" which led to this conclusion regarding the "original sin" in the creation of the Zionist state emerged from the research that went into his study of the origins of Israel's reliance on military power and use of ruthless force to suppress the hopes of Palestinians for legitimate statehood. His book, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, published in 2000, is a must-read to understand why Israel's leaders reject negotiations to resolve the "Palestinian problem." See also note 5.
5. Avi Shlaim, *Genocide in Gaza: Israel's Long War on Palestine* (Belfast, Ireland: The Irish Pages Press, October 2024).