

The Henry Mance Interview **Israel-Hamas war**

## **Historian Avi Shlaim: 'I remain hopeful Israel will start to act rationally'**

The Oxford professor, born to a Jewish family in Baghdad, argues that Joe Biden can force change by threatening to slow military aid

## **Henry Mance** YESTERDAY

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In 1988, three Israeli historians undermined the heroic narrative around their country's birth. Benny Morris documented how many Palestinians did not leave their homes voluntarily in 1948, but were brutally evicted by Israeli commanders. Ilan Pappé showed that Britain had not sabotaged the Jewish state, but had disregarded the Palestinians. And Avi Shlaim argued that, in the 1948 war, Israel did not stand alone against stronger Arab armies — but had the collusion of Jordan and the military upper-hand.

Briefly the so-called new historians chimed with a mood of self-criticism in Israel. But as Israeli society swung to the right over the past two decades, revisionism became unwelcome again. Morris changed his tune to suit the times: arguing in 2004 that Israel's "mistake" was not to have evicted all of the Palestinians in 1948.

Pappé and Shlaim became ideological outcasts. "The embrace by the establishment didn't last for very long because I continued to be critical of Israel," says Shlaim, now emeritus professor at Oxford university.

Since Hamas's attacks on Israel on October 7, during which militants killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials, the audience for Shlaim's version of history has shrunk further among the Jewish diaspora. He was due to give a talk drawing on his childhood memoir at Liverpool Hope University weeks after the attacks. The university asked him to postpone after local Jews and staff raised safety concerns. Furious at the "no platforming", Shlaim cancelled.

"What this illustrates is the excessive sensitivity of some British Jews of interpreting any criticisms of Israel as an attack on Jews . . . They can't silence me. But I'm seriously worried about young Palestinian academics in British universities who are subjected to intimidation."

Shlaim is both eminent and controversial. A gentle 78-year old with a shock of frizzy hair reminiscent of Kramer from the sitcom *Seinfeld*, he backed former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn over allegations of antisemitism. He accuses Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of [having turned](#) the country into an "apartheid" state, and recently joined in with British protesters chanting "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," a phrase many Jews say is genocidal.

Such stances mean Shlaim, who moved to Britain aged 16, finds his very identity questioned. “Why does he persist in using this common Israeli name, usually an abbreviation of Avraham?” Morris has asked. (Shlaim’s answer: it is what he has been called since the age of five.)

Yet even Morris accepts Shlaim’s research is valuable and readable. History offers a possible silver lining for the current conflict. Violent episodes in the past have created the space for diplomacy. “The best example is the October 1973 war [when Egypt and Syria led an Arab offensive in the Sinai and the Golan Heights], which caught Israel completely unprepared,” says Shlaim. The fighting, followed by then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat’s trip to Jerusalem, paved the way for the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty of 1979.

Similarly, the first intifada — which started in 1987 — led to the 1993 Oslo accord, which provided a framework for peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians. “The world saw the brutality of the Israeli army against civilians.”

Shlaim says the Hamas attack on Israel, and Israel’s response, which has so far killed about 32,000 people in Gaza, according to Palestinian officials, is “a catastrophe, but something good may yet emerge.”

“[Former Israeli foreign minister] Abba Eban once said nations are capable of acting rationally when they’ve exhausted all the alternatives. I remain hopeful that, after Israel has exhausted all the military alternatives, it will start to act rationally.”

## **I had an inferiority complex that shaped my relationship with Israeli society**

Shlaim argues foreign pressure is the only thing that can push change. “America is [Israel’s] last bastion, and one day American policy is going to change.”

US President Joe Biden has stepped up criticism of Netanyahu. But other US presidents went further, says Shlaim. “If only Biden would say to Netanyahu, you must not invade Rafah and if you do, I’m going to slow down military supplies, he would stop Netanyahu in his tracks.”

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Shlaim was born in Baghdad to a wealthy family. His memoir [Three Worlds](#) depicts a time when Jews could live alongside Muslims in Iraq without hostility. That

coexistence is “the best model we have for a better future,” he wrote.

Israel’s creation, so welcomed by European Jews, proved sour for many Middle Eastern Jews. They faced a backlash in their home countries after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Shlaim argues many who moved to Israel, as he did aged five, found their heritage disdained. (Some families were sprayed with DDT on arrival.) “I had an inferiority complex that shaped my relationship with Israeli society.” He still imbibed “the Zionist version of history”, did military service, and tried to enlist for the 1967 Middle East war, when Israel occupied Gaza and the West Bank. But when he later studied the conflict, his stance changed.



Avi Shlaim believes Israel's 2018 nation state law, which holds that only Jews have a right to self-determination, amounts to apartheid © Portraits taken by Charlie Bibby

While the US and other western nations have long blamed Palestinian leaders for not accepting the peace offered by Israel, Shlaim says Israel “never offered a formula for a two-state solution that would be acceptable even to the most moderate Palestinian leader.”

Israel’s “best offer”, he argues, was Ehud Olmert’s 2008 proposal, under which it would have ceded 94 per cent of the West Bank. But Shlaim argues Olmert, who had already announced his resignation to face corruption allegations, was “a lame duck”, and any deal may have been unconstitutional.

Shlaim argues a Palestinian state is now unviable, because of the expansion of Israeli settlements, and favours a one-state solution.

Critics say he overlooks the actions of Arab states and the Palestinians. Many Palestinians have supported [suicide bombings](#) and the [October 7 attacks](#). Are they as

much to blame for the lack of peace? “No,” insists Shlaim. But he accepts his views are shaped by his experience of Israel: “History isn’t written in a vacuum.”

It is also about sources: Arab states do not open their archives. Shlaim, who reads Hebrew fluently but not Arabic, works from Israeli archives and some Arabic primary sources.

Perhaps Shlaim’s most controversial stance, particularly after the October 7 attacks, is his view on Hamas, whose 1988 charter called for the destruction of the Israeli state. He argues the west isolated Hamas after it won “a fair and free election” in 2006 and that its political leaders have [said](#) they could accept a Palestinian state if it was based on borders before the 1967 war.

“Today the Hamas leaders are very violent and uncompromising. Power has shifted inside Hamas from the [more] sophisticated, moderate, political leadership [such as Ismail Haniyeh] to the military commanders [like Yahya Sinwar].

“The political leadership tried the diplomatic route and didn’t get anywhere. The military commanders say you can’t negotiate with Israel, you have to inflict pain on Israel. They use the example of Hizbollah, which drove Israel out of south Lebanon.”

For now, Shlaim is “ambivalent” about his Israeli nationality. As the political mood hardens, he is unsure whether he will be interrogated at the airport on his next visit. He cannot return to Iraq, because it is now a criminal offence there to contact anyone who promotes normalisation with Israel. He served in the IDF, so any Iraqi who dealt with him could be liable. In Oxford at least, the historian is among his people.

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