INSS Insight

The Iron Wall—and What Lies Beyond It: Past and Present

Azar Gat | No. 2046 | October 20, 2025

With the major turning point in the war in the Gaza Strip, the release of all the remaining living hostages, and the apparent end of the intense phase of fighting, it is time to return to and reexamine several fundamental assumptions of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Segments of the Israeli elite are deeply—and rightly—concerned about the growing messianic and annexationist tendencies in Israel, which have reached their peak in the current governing coalition. They also sense—again understandably—that the absence of an adequate response to the conflict with the Palestinians could lead to the end of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and jeopardize its very existence. Consequently, many have concluded that Israel's policies over the years are the main reason for the persistence of the conflict, forgetting or downplaying the true nature of the region in which Israel lives. The outbreak of the war two years ago and the defeat of Iran's Axis of Resistance demonstrate that in this tough neighborhood, the Iron Wall is far from having fulfilled its purpose. On the contrary, as in the past, it remains a fundamental condition for agreements between Israel and its neighbors. Of course, this does not absolve Israel of the need to take serious initiatives and make significant efforts of its own—befitting the gravity of the moment.

A starting point for our discussion could be found in Uri Bar-Joseph's book *Beyond the Iron Wall: What Is Missing in Israel's Security Doctrine* (Hebrew, Kinneret Zmora Dvir, 2024). Bar-Joseph argues that this doctrine—formulated by Ze'ev Jabotinsky in the early 1920s and placed at the core of Israel's security concept by David Ben-Gurion after Israel's War of Independence—has achieved its purpose and has outlived its usefulness. According to Bar-Joseph, since 1967, the Arab world has, to varying degrees, undergone a gradual process of reconciliation to Israel's existence (which is true). He argues that Israel could have reached a comprehensive peace had it not become addicted to holding on to the territories occupied in 1967 and failed to recognize the opportunities that arose to promote a settlement that would end the conflict. His book proposes a comprehensive peace agreement with the Arab world based on the 1967 borders, the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the Arab Peace Initiative. To support his claims, the book offers a systematic historical discussion of the conflict's evolution that is written for the most part in a relatively objective spirit but is marred by significant biases throughout.

There is some validity to the argument that Israel should have been more attentive to Sadat's proposals for an agreement in 1971. This may be so even if one can understand the Israeli mistrust at the time of a mere "scrap of paper," given past experience with Egypt and the 1949 Armistice Agreement, which did not prevent the fedayeen attacks before 1956 or the Egyptian army's entry into Sinai and Nasser's slide toward war in 1967. Yet Bar-Joseph does not

mention that Sadat's willingness to sign a peace and normalization agreement with Israel, separate in practice from the Palestinian issue and other fronts, only came in 1977.

As is well known, following the Yom Kippur War and despite grave concerns, Israel signed two interim agreements with Egypt and concluded a peace treaty with it in 1979. It reached a peace agreement with Jordan in 1994. In the 1990s, under the governments of Rabin, Netanyahu, and Barak alike, Israel conducted serious negotiations toward a peace treaty with Syria, faced with a Syrian demand for a return to the Sea of Galilee (beyond the international border) and an extreme Syrian stinginess in a willingness toward normalization. In 1993, Israel also signed the Oslo Accords with the PLO, which were meant to serve as a prelude to reaching a final settlement between the two sides and to resolving the Palestinian problem. It is therefore difficult to claim that Israel did not seek opportunities for agreements with its neighbors and did not act to realize them.

Bar-Joseph devotes significant discussion to the claim that Yasir Arafat did not initiate the Second Intifada. But he completely avoids dealing with other critical questions on the subject: Did Arafat not jump on the bandwagon, encourage the Intifada, and direct it once it broke out? And even earlier, how did Arafat respond to Hamas's terrorist attacks against Israel during the Oslo process, and what was he willing to do about them? What was Arafat's conception of the Palestinians' fundamental goals and his vision for the future? And why did all efforts to stop the Second Intifada fail?

Bar-Joseph does not ask why the Palestinians rejected the proposals that were on the table in the three serious attempts to reach peace with them: the Clinton Parameters in 2000, the Olmert–Abbas negotiations and Annapolis talks in 2007, and the Kerry Initiative in 2014 (see my article, "What Is the Problem With the Palestinian Problem?"). In all of these, the establishment of a Palestinian state was offered, with small and reciprocal border adjustments, alongside a de facto Palestinian renunciation of the "right of return" to Israel, apart from limited symbolic Israeli concessions. Bar-Joseph entirely ignores the fact that the "right of return" (and with it, the dream of Israel's eventual elimination)—the erasure of the injustice of 1948 rather than the establishment of an independent state within the 1967 borders—is the core of the Palestinian ethos, from which no Palestinian leader has dared to deviate. Not a word is devoted to this.

Indeed, Bar-Joseph praises the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and regards it as the framework for resolving the conflict, one that Israel has failed to adopt. Yet in describing the initiative, he neglects to mention, among other things, the clause calling for a "just and agreed solution" to the refugee problem in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194 of 1948. Apparently, Bar-Joseph sees no significance in this clause and is untroubled by the fact that, by accepting the initiative, Israel would in effect legally recognize Resolution 194, which has no binding legal status, and thus make it a part of international law—something Israel has always refrained from doing. After all, the Arab Peace Initiative proposes a solution "agreed upon" in accordance with UN Resolution 194—something akin, perhaps, to a proposal for an "agreed solution" on the issue of control over Judea and Samaria based on the political platform of Israeli far-right party leader Bezalel Smotrich. He also seems certain that the Palestinian demands for a "just and agreed solution" to the refugee issue would be reasonable and would not include broad implementation of the "right of return," in accordance with the

wording of UN Resolution 194: “Refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date.”

Finally, Bar-Joseph seems not to notice that the Middle East is a region torn by murderous civil wars across its expanse: in Libya, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and earlier, in Algeria and Lebanon. The Arab League has stood helpless before all of them. Yet with regard to the conflict with Israel, Bar-Joseph apparently believes it wields great power.

Meanwhile, following the war of October 7, the shattering of Iran’s Axis of Resistance by Israel, the revolution in Syria (does Bar-Joseph still advocate withdrawal from the Golan Heights?), and the strengthening of the pro-American axis in the region, there may be cautious and measured opportunities opening up toward new arrangements. For the first time in the Arab world, worn down by failures and mired in backwardness, beginnings of successful modernization processes are evident, so far in the energy-rich periphery of the Gulf states and—facing far greater social and cultural obstacles—Saudi Arabia. It remains to be seen how far these processes will penetrate the core of the Arab world and influence it and, in turn, the Arab–Israeli conflict. Prospects for progress toward new agreements have now emerged, primarily through the potential expansion of the Abraham Accords, linked to the goal of ending the Israeli occupation. For Israel, ending the occupation and separating from the Palestinians is an existential necessity—but it takes two to tango. On the Palestinian side, there has not yet been a meaningful change in fundamental attitudes and aspirations, and the Palestinians’ record over the years, which has justified all Israeli concerns, has, in turn, led to a dangerous radicalization within Israel.

Bar-Joseph’s book, written by a scholar specializing in bias in assessment and cognitive dissonance and their influence on decision-making, is symptomatic of a mindset prevalent among significant parts of the Israeli elite. These circles are deeply and rightly concerned about the growing messianic and annexationist trends in Israel, which have peaked in the current governing coalition, and feel, again rightly, that the lack of an adequate response to the conflict with the Palestinians could lead to the end of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and threaten its very existence. Consequently, many within this elite have concluded that Israel is the main reason for the persistence of the conflict, while forgetting or underestimating the true nature of the region in which Israel lives.

The outbreak of the war two years ago and the defeat of the Axis of Resistance demonstrate that in this tough neighborhood, the Iron Wall is far from having run its course. On the contrary, as in the past, it remains the fundamental condition for agreements between Israel and its neighbors. Of course, this does not absolve Israel of the need for serious initiatives and efforts of its own, befitting the gravity of the hour.

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