

1. Ivory Tower and Embassy: Interview with Itamar Rabinovich

This extensive discussion with Ambassador / Professor Rabinovich focuses on the intersection of his experiences as scholar and political practitioner, and on the merits of academic training and a scholarly career as preparation for the actual practice of diplomacy. Professor Rabinovich also shares his unique perspective on the state of theoretical and practical scholarship about Israel, with particular reference to U.S.-Israeli relations, Arab-Israeli relations, polarization within the field of Israel studies, and the peace process. Coeditors Eisenberg and Caplan conducted the interview in New York in April 1997 for this volume of Books on Israel (BOI). A list of bibliographic references for the works mentioned during the interview appears at the chapter's end.



BOI: Were there any particular facets of your experience in academia that served, in retrospect, as good preparation for your role as negotiator and ambassador?

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He is the author and editor of a dozen books, including *The War for Lebanon* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), *Israel in the Middle East*, coedited by Jehuda Reinharz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), *The Road Not Taken: Early Arab-Israeli Negotiations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; winner of the Jewish Book Award); *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and, most recently, *Waging Peace: Israel and the Arabs at the End of the Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

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Rabinovich: Yes. I studied Middle Eastern history and general history at the Hebrew University and then I did my military service as a junior officer and spent six years in Israeli Military Intelligence as an analyst. As you know, part of the subtext of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and other attacks on Western and Israeli scholarship on the Middle East is the charge that much of the research has been in the service of colonial governments, or the Israeli government. I bring this up at the outset, and lay it on the table fairly and squarely because it so happens that the most important analytical work in Israel on the Arab world and the Middle East for many years was done by military intelligence, which predominates in this analysis work over the Foreign Ministry's research outfit. But there is nothing to hide in this sort of work, which is done in every country.

For the next twenty years at Tel Aviv University, my academic activity and writing focused on two issues: British and French policy in Mandatory Syria and Lebanon in the 1920s and 1930s, based on research in the British and French archives, and work on the contemporary Middle East, in what was then the emerging world of Israeli think tanks. The latter offered many opportunities to meet policy-makers, diplomats, and visiting dignitaries from other countries. All three experiences—traditional historical scholarship, writing on the modern Middle East, and my work at the Shiloah Institute (subsequently the Moshe Dayan Center)—turned out to be pertinent to my diplomatic assignments in 1992–96. For example, working in diplomatic archives I imbibed many diplomatic techniques. After reading thousands of diplomatic despatches and the minutes written on them, and after following the careers of ambassadors and consuls and bureaucrats in London and in Paris, I came to know how foreign policy establishments work, inside and out.

BOI: Were there any specific readings or research which proved especially useful for your later diplomatic postings?

Rabinovich: Writing a book about early Arab-Israeli negotiations, *The Road Not Taken*, gave me even more preparation than working in the archives. I got a very clear sense of negotiations, of how [Israeli officials Reuven] Shiloah and [Eliyahu "Elias"] Sasson implemented [Prime Minister David] Ben-Gurion's instructions. Of course, one doesn't walk into a room with the Syrians and try to replicate what Sasson did with [Jordan's king] Abdallah, but if you ask me how that research compares with a two-year cadet course in the Israeli Foreign Ministry, I would say it's certainly not inferior to



Itamar Rabinovich. Courtesy F. Leslie Barron.

the Israeli Foreign Ministry, I would say it's certainly not inferior to the latter kind of training.

BOI: Can you elaborate upon the topic of “think tanks”? Are they something of a bridge between academia and policy-making?

Rabinovich: For some historical perspective, we have to speak about Chatham House, the American context of policy-making for the Middle East, and then about the Israeli environment.

Focusing on the interaction between intellectuals and policy-makers, Elie Kedourie's [seminal essay,] “The Chatham House Version,” correctly identified the Royal Institute of International Affairs, also known as Chatham House, as the most important nongovernmental forum for shaping British policy in the Middle East. After World War II, power shifted to America. The Council for Foreign Relations and places like the Middle East Institute established a new environment for U.S. foreign policy-making. The American government also stepped into the picture with the National Defense Educational Act, by which it hoped to produce area experts.

Israel had its own small tradition, dating back to the Jewish Agency and its Political Department, partially staffed by academic experts on the Middle East, like David Ayalon, Uriel Heyd, and Pesah Shinar. There were also people who did not become academics in the sense of university professors, but were nevertheless experts, like Eliahu Elath, or Asher Goren, who for many years was the leading Arabist at the Foreign Ministry. Yaacov Shimoni was a very important intellectual force, while Eliyahu Sasson was the practitioner; both worked in the Jewish Agency and later in the Foreign Ministry. Shimoni also wrote books, lectured at the Hebrew University on Asia, and with others founded the journal *Yalkut ha-Mizrah ha-Tikhon*, the “Middle East Journal” of the yishuv which eventually became *ha-Mizrah he-Hadash* (The New East).

Notice that when people like Heyd and Ayalon took up careers in the university, they made a very clear decision to have nothing to do with the contemporary Middle East, drawing a distinction between their political work and their scholarship. The underlying assumption was that one could not do genuine scholarly work on yesterday's political event in Egypt or the next coup in Syria. The result was that the Hebrew University, which was for all intents and purposes the only university in the country for many years, did not have an institute or a center working on the modern Middle East. Also, remember that Israel of the early fifties was a very poor state, without indepen-

dent sources of support for journals, institutes, or think tanks. Research was in the government, in the university, or not at all.

When the Israeli establishment finally decided to create an Israeli equivalent of a Chatham House or a Middle East Institute, they named it after Reuven Shiloah, a veteran policymaker and practitioner from the days of the Jewish Agency and subsequently the “father” of Israel’s intelligence services. It was governmentally supported and rather ineffectual until the mid-1960s, when Tel Aviv University invited Shimon Shamir, then a young faculty member at the Hebrew University, to come to Tel Aviv to set up a new department. Shamir’s very creative vision was to insist that the university establish not just a department, but also an institute, to focus on the modern period. So Tel Aviv University took over the Shiloah Institute and this is how research on the contemporary Middle East was brought into the Israeli university world.

Leaping forward to our own day, there is now enough of a civil society in Israel to support institutes, think tanks, and forums that have nothing to do with the university, such as the Van Leer Institute. Still, the main theater of activity for foreign policy analysis is the university scene in Israel.

BOI: To what extent do these academic think tanks focusing on the contemporary Middle East inform actual policy?

Rabinovich: The dominant view at the Moshe Dayan Center is that we are a research institute, not a policy institute. Now I don’t want to belittle advocacy institutes, which are very important and have their place and function, and are now emerging in Israel. But at the Dayan Center our work is to inform policy and the public debate about contemporary Middle Eastern issues, but not propose policy.

However the Jaffee Center at Tel Aviv University, which is quite different from the Dayan Center, published its famous study of six options for an Arab-Israeli settlement, and then advocated its own choice. The Dayan Center would never advocate specific policies. Privately, of course, if a member of government invites one of us for a discussion and asks “What do you think we should do?” we give him or her our opinion—like any other Israeli would.

One must remember that everything concerning the contemporary Middle East and also classical Islam can be politicized. Take the word “*jihad*,” for example, which Yasser Arafat used in his [May 1994] speech in South Africa and which caused an immediate hue and cry: “The man is inciting to war.” Some replied, “No, *jihad* can also be a form of spiritual exertion.” Now, when a scholar of Islamic

studies is asked: “What is *jihad*?” his or her response in this case is necessarily politically charged. I don’t wish to suggest that a scholar has to get politically involved; one can be an Orientalist at the Hebrew University and work on ninth-century Sufism and decide to have nothing to do with politics and policy. But anyone who is an active member of society may easily be drawn into these discussions—especially if one works on the twentieth century, and certainly if one works on the present.

The expression “inform public debate” raises the interesting issue of the media, where much of the public debate now takes place. In Israel, as in America, academics are often asked to be on public-affairs programs or to write op-ed pieces. It was all new in the early seventies, and at the Dayan Center we fumbled to find our place by trial and error. Someone would call from the radio and ask for a comment on a coup in Sudan or the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, and all of us, myself included, wanted to do everything. We were given opportunities and we grabbed them. But we made mistakes. It is a mistake for the academic expert to confuse his or her work with that of the journalist, the politician, or the policy-analyst.

BOI: So academics contribute the broader perspective, a historical or long-term view, as opposed to the policy-analyst who says “This is what we should do”?

Rabinovich: Yes. It’s unnecessary for an academic to go on television or on radio and say, “Well, yesterday’s coup in Sudan was carried out by Major so-and-so who is the brother-in-law of the former minister of defense, and who used the Seventh Battalion to capture the broadcasting station, and tomorrow he’s likely to do this and that.” Nobody needs academics for that. We need academics for the perspective, for the underlying analysis of what Sudan is, of what a military coup means in Sudan. The academic should not compete with the journalist on his or her turf. Once an academic has made that decision and learns to live comfortably with it, he or she can have a much more comfortable relationship with people in the government.

BOI: How did you find the reorientation from your academic role, dedicated to research, to your political roles, which were by definition “advocacy” aimed to influence and advance policy?

Rabinovich: It was a big change, of course. Let me say a word about having an “influence” on policy-making. Often academics say, “In addition to my scholarly work, I also want to have an impact on

policy.” And there are many ways one can do so, depending on the discipline. For instance, people who work in areas like modern or contemporary history, international relations, or political science may want to help shape national security policy. My very clear-cut advice is: if you really want to have an influence, join the government. By writing position papers, or by going to see the decision-makers on a random basis, your contribution is very limited.

If, for example, someone who works on Jordan wants to advance a specific cause that has little to do with scholarship, such as a closer relationship between the Hashemite family and the State of Israel, he or she should join the fray. Talking to the policymakers every so often has limited influence. But the rules of the political fray are substantially different than those that govern academia. Political actors engage in advocacy and partisanship, because they work for a political leader and are duty-bound to promote the agenda as set by the politician. Then they engage in policy-making, in policy formulation, implementation, advocacy, partisanship—all of it. One certainly doesn’t have to stoop to the lowest level of the political gutter, but if you don’t play by the rules of the political game, you are going to be “out,” or insignificant.

There is evidence that occasionally the academic can have a degree of influence by writing an important book which shapes the climate of opinion in which public opinion is formed and policy made. Edward Said had a great deal of influence on current affairs with his *Orientalism*—although not with *The Question of Palestine*. Bernard Lewis, through many articles and books over the years had a tremendous impact on how outsiders view the Arab and Muslim worlds. Publishing a seminal work is a very significant way of making a contribution, maybe truer to the calling of the scholar than having day-to-day influence on policymakers.

BOI: There have been substantial changes in the political climate, albeit with highs and lows, since 1991. Do you see evidence of serious Arab scholars, research institutes, and think tanks prepared to undertake joint projects with Israeli scholars and institutions?

Rabinovich: There is a long distance to be covered. Until recently, Israel was a taboo subject among Arab scholars, who could justify studying Israel and learning Hebrew only under a “know-thine-enemy” approach. That, of course, is a very skewed way of studying another society. We are beginning to see changes. When I went to Jordan for the second time, in 1996, I spent an evening with a group of Jordanian intellectuals and was very glad to be ques-

tioned about the most minute details of the difference between Shas and Degel ha-Torah, or the Agudat-Yisrael and Degel ha-Torah parties. I said to myself, "We have reached a very positive phase; they are not just interested, but also knowledgeable about the subject matter, which is good."

I think that one of the instructive aspects of the work of Israeli academics and researchers is that we produce scholarship about the Arab countries that is significant in absolute terms; a number of our publications are used throughout the scholarly community, including Arab academics, as basic works. I've yet to see work of comparable quality about Israel written by Arab scholars.

BOI: So the Syrians read Moshe Ma'oz's work on Hafiz al-Asad, and they take his analysis seriously?

Rabinovich: Yes, they do.

BOI: But there isn't an equivalent Syrian scholar writing about Yitzhak Rabin?

Rabinovich: Right. Exactly. And a related point is, there isn't a running discussion in Syria on what Moshe Ma'oz writes. People don't organize or attend seminars in Damascus on "Asad's leadership style." The use they can make of Ma'oz's work is limited by the constraints on public discourse in Syria.

BOI: What about Arab scholars and institutions outside of the Middle East, such as the Institute of Palestine Studies (IPS), which has an office in Washington? It seems to combine research with advocacy. Do you have any experiences, either from watching this organization in action or from personal dealings?

Rabinovich: I know the main actors in the Washington office, and I used to meet with them. At one time the IPS reflected the quasi state the Palestinians had in Lebanon prior to 1982 and was quite important; I think that since then its significance has declined immensely. But the *Journal of Palestine Studies* still has interesting material: an important interview with Syrian ambassador Walid Moualem, a recent piece by Patrick Seale on the Israeli-Syrian negotiations . . . it's a good journal. I think the IPS is in a transitional period. If the Palestinian Authority becomes consolidated, there will be a new wave of production from places like the Palestinian universities in the West Bank. But this has yet to happen.

BOI: When thinking about the reversibility or irreversibility of the peace process, we look for signs of “normalization” of relations between Israel and the Arab world. What can you say about normalization between Israeli and Arab scholars and academics who meet each other outside of the Middle East? Can we see the frequency and openness of those encounters as a barometer of how well, or poorly, the peace process is going at any given time?

Rabinovich: Let’s not talk about reversibility or irreversibility; this is based more on hunches than sound scholarship. As for normalization, the former debate about “peace” has been telescoped into a debate about “normalization.” What’s happened is that the Arab world has accepted “peace”—to the same extent that the Israeli consensus has, by and large, accepted the notion of a Palestinian state. Arabs have accepted the word “peace” and the notion of signing peace treaties and opening diplomatic relations with Israel. But all their remaining opposition and misgivings that were formally invested in the word “peace” are now transferred to the word “normalization.” All the arguments that used to be marshaled against *peace* are now marshaled against *normalization*. And that, I think, is an issue with which we are only beginning to grapple, and an area where much work needs to be done.¹

BOI: Do you see Israeli and Arab scholars who meet each other outside of the Middle East, perhaps at annual conferences like MESA [the Middle East Studies Association], playing a role in advancing normalization?

Rabinovich: I feel that Arab scholars and Israeli scholars should be among the first to grapple with “normalization.” My first meetings with Arab academics at international conferences, dating back to 1979 at the Orient Institute in Hamburg, established relationships that have lasted until today. We spent many hours talking together, forming an informal “network” and a way of understanding each other, and I’m very much for it. It has certainly become more comfortable since the late seventies, although this process is pegged to the latest headlines in the sense that the tendency of Arab participants to show up or not to show up depends on the political situation at home, and how comfortable they can feel “consorting” with Israelis at any particular time.

I might add that I, personally, stopped going to MESA meetings a long time ago. The Association for Israel Studies [AIS] annual meeting has become, in many respects, a much more constructive place to

go. In the late 1970s, Jehuda Reinharz and I began working on a college reader, *Israel in the Middle East*, which grew out of a discussion about what was wrong with MESA and the “establishment” in Middle East studies. Jehuda proposed that scholars interested in Israel and Arab-Israeli relations need not be “stepchildren” of MESA, but should foster a recognized area of “Israeli studies” which would be institutionalized like other areas of scholarly activity.

BOI: Were there important American books or authors who helped prepare you for your ambassadorial work outside the Ivory Tower?

Rabinovich: In my career as practitioner, there were two very different areas: ambassador in Washington, and peace negotiator with Syria. The ambassador needs to work with the administration, with Congress, with the media, and with the American Jewish community, each of which requires different skills and different areas of expertise. They can, of course, be mutually reinforcing. One can be effective with the administration because one has a standing in Congress, and one may have a standing in Congress because one knows how to work with the Jewish community, or one may have some clout in Congress because one has something interesting to say to a senator with whom a good relationship has developed. Senator Byrd, for example, is interested in Roman history; others are interested in foreign affairs and love to hear about Arab-Israeli negotiations. I built a very interesting relationship with Speaker Newt Gingrich, based on common academic interests; that, needless to say, was a very important relationship to have. I believe that, being an academic myself and able to have an “intellectual” discussion with him, was significant.

And, in this sphere, the books one needs to read are books about American politics: Hedrick Smith, *The Power Game*; Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment*; Robert Caro’s biography of Lyndon Johnson; David McCullough’s biography of Truman. One needs to read these in order to feel comfortable with the American political tradition, not just to know the technicalities.

BOI: What about the traditional political literature on American-Israeli relations?

Rabinovich: It’s good work and one needs to know it. One needs to know the history, for example, of the use of American pressure on Israel: Eisenhower’s pressure on Ben-Gurion to retreat from Gaza in 1956 and early 1957; Carter and Reagan’s relationships with Begin; the Bush administration’s influence over Shamir at Madrid.

Questions arise: Does it make sense to try to mobilize the American Jewish community through AIPAC [the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee] in order to arm-wrestle with the president? What is the relative weight of the State Department in the scheme of things? What is the relative weight of the secretary of state and the national security advisor? Is the Pentagon important for policy-making? How important is the CIA? How does one work with all these factors?

Survey books don't include that. Bernard Reich, Nadav Safran, and William Quandt give insights into the nature of the relationship and how things work, and they give the chronology. But the real know-how comes from some of the "manuals" on how Washington works, and from the transmitted knowledge of veterans in the field. For example, I spent a lot of time—not with any deliberate plan—talking with Ephraim "Eppie" Evron, a great Israeli diplomat, a master of building networks and relationships as minister during the Johnson administration and ambassador during the Carter administration. In the years before I actually went to Washington, I learned a lot simply by talking to practitioners. Samuel Lewis [U.S. ambassador to Israel, 1977–85], was someone from whom I learned a great deal.

BOI: What can you say about some of the authors who have become the "standard work" in their fields, such as William Quandt on Camp David, Saadia Touval on mediators, and Harold Saunders on the peace process?

Rabinovich: These are the standard works and we all need to read them as we go along, either for teaching courses in modern Middle East history or diplomatic history, or if we want to be practitioners. But let's never underestimate the frequent superiority of practical knowledge over book-learning. I am reminded of an incident when Prime Minister Rabin recalled a minute detail of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement with Syria which I, his "expert," had to look up! Rabin, Peres, Dayan all became experts through practice. Asad has been at this business for almost fifty years. In Egypt, Osama El-Baz and Hosni Mubarak have been on the scene forever. And of course there's King Hussein in Jordan. They know their history firsthand; they have become real "experts."

BOI: Do journalists have a role in contributing to scholarship? David Shipler and Thomas Friedman [*New York Times*] and David Makovsky [*Jerusalem Post*] have written books which students appreciate for their interesting and anecdotal treatment, despite a lack of scholarly rigor.

Rabinovich: The media has become a very important part of diplomacy today. The journalist, as the author of serious books, offers us a different form of scholarship. Patrick Seale's first book on Syria was originally written as an Oxford Ph.D.—though it does not read like a dissertation. David Shipler's work [*Arab and Jew*] is an account of a journalist who has lived through interesting experiences. Friedman's book [*From Beirut to Jerusalem*], to some extent, is the same. They share their experiences, often with some very profound insights, some pieces of information, and some creative writing. It's a different form of knowledge than what we call "scholarship," but it's legitimate, important, and has its place.

What Makovsky did [*Making Peace with the PLO*] is journalism in the sense of "high journalism," which oftentimes is not well respected by social scientists, who sometimes also look down on historians for an alleged lack of scientific or methodological rigor. And there is something in these accusations. Let's look at this "high" journalism and "low" history. I think we do well to use works like Tom Friedman's in the classroom. He's a man who knows a lot and has a particular gift for saying things that graphically catch the main point. He's also someone who speaks to everybody involved, from [President Bill] Clinton to [Secretary of State] Warren Christopher to [U.S. special Middle East coordinator] Dennis Ross to [Syrian ambassador] Moualem.

Similarly, anyone wanting to know about what goes on in Israel should read Nahum Barnea, who is a very significant source. He's very smart; everybody talks to him; he's the most influential journalist in the country. Ehud Yaari is also very good, very knowledgeable. Again, he speaks to many Israelis, to many Arabs, to many Americans; he is friendly with Martin Indyk [U.S. ambassador to Israel, 1995–97] and Dennis Ross, and he's a very authoritative source. Yaari is an area specialist, while Barnea gives both a very good X-ray and a photo of Israeli reality, which makes him somebody scholars and teachers should want to use in the study of Israel. Sometimes instructors must choose between a dry academic study of an important social phenomenon and brilliant insights offered by a journalist, or by an author like Amos Oz, in his *In the Land of Israel*—a very significant collection of reportages. Another such book is by Israeli journalist Daniel Ben-Simon, whose *Another Land*, a study of what happened in the 1996 elections, is a message to the traditional Israeli elites: "Ladies and gentlemen, you don't realize it, but you are living in another country."

At the same time, we must remember that journalists—whether in their books or in their columns—don't have to answer to the same rigorous criteria that we use in scholarly work.

BOI: What can you say about the politicization of Israel studies by scholars promoting left- or right-wing agendas? What is your opinion of the “revisionists” and “new historians” on the left who have recently generated a great deal of heated scholarly debate?

Rabinovich: I draw a distinction between “revision” and “revisionism.” Revision is part and parcel of what we do and what we have to do; there is no point in you or I writing another biography of Lincoln if we are not going to revise the standard picture; otherwise, what's the point?

Revisionism, I think, is an exercise that begins with the determination that one is going to change the view of a particular past before even beginning one's research. Secondly, it's always grounded in a present perspective. For example, the American revisionist historians of the Cold War began with an animosity toward the Vietnam War. They believed that if America behaved so badly during the Vietnam War, it might not have been so “good” when the Cold War began, and therefore the Russians may not have been the “bad guys” and the Americans may not have been the “angels.” And so they looked at the evidence through that lens in order to produce a different history. In a way, the conclusion was predetermined before the work began.

Thirdly, the revisionists mostly work with the source material only of their side. When writing history only through the Israeli archives, there is a built-in inaccuracy or twist. Let's say one writes about the expulsion/flight of the Palestinian refugees. If one were to write about it based only on the Jordanian archives, one would see the problem through the eyes of the Jordanian officers and some of the Palestinians, with their own dilemmas, particularly the dilemma of flight. If one writes it through the eyes of the Israeli officers, the dilemmas are the dilemmas of exclusion. There is a certain deformation built into the research. Ideally, one would consult Israeli archives, Arab archives, British archives, etc., requiring many years of sifting through the files and coming up with an integrated picture, as seen from four or five perspectives. Now many revisionists, since they already know the answer, don't look at the whole range of evidence. That is another flaw that is built into that school.

BOI: What is your assessment of the likely long-term impact of the current wave of revisionist Israeli history?

Rabinovich: First, there are elements of substance. I myself have written that the state-inspired, self-serving Zionist orthodoxy had to be corrected. This is a definite contribution that the revisionists and others have made. In every intellectual endeavor there is a danger of staleness; people may become too comfortable doing what they have been doing for too many years, resting on conventional wisdom. Anyone who stirs the waters, I would credit them with doing something very positive. Definitely, the revisionists have stirred the waters, asked important questions, and generated important debates. Some of the work they did also stands on its own and should be welcomed. But some of it, I think, needs to be criticized along the lines that I mentioned.

BOI: It sounds as if you credit them with asking fresh, hard questions, but challenge their interpretations and conclusions.

Rabinovich: What I tried to do in writing *The Road Not Taken*, as you [Caplan] noted in your review article in *Israel Affairs*, was to bridge the traditional and revisionist schools. I read Avi Shlaim's 1986 piece on Husni Za'im and had two reactions: First, Shlaim had clearly found some extremely important and interesting material in the archives and, second, I sensed that he was wrong in his interpretation. My own look at this subject took me to the Israel State Archives in Jerusalem, where I read the files that Shlaim cited in his footnotes and confirmed my intuition that Shlaim was wrong. I subsequently wrote a paper on Ben-Gurion and Husni Za'im (which eventually became the Syrian chapter in *The Road Not Taken*) and then I thought of expanding the study to look also at the Jordanian and Egyptian negotiations at the time. I devoted several months of work in the Israel, American, and British archives, and then took a summer sabbatical to write the book. So, I am grateful to people like Shlaim and Tom Segev for generating this research interest.

But I think that the "new historians" picked on some very weak opponents. The people who wrote the traditional histories of the War of Independence were, for the most part, nonacademic historians. It's very easy to say that they were given access to the archives when others were not and therefore felt somewhat timid. These people were intellectually ill-equipped to debate with scholars versed in the latest Oxford or Berkeley vocabulary and academic styles. Elhanan Orren, for example, has a Ph.D., but it is difficult for him to debate with Avi Shlaim, in English, in an academic setting. Shabtai Teveth, on the other hand, is not an academic historian but is intellectually powerful, and, I think, gave the "new historians" a fair fight [during a 1989 symposium at the Dayan Center]. Efraim Karsh, in his new

book, *Fabricating Israeli History*, offers a frontal attack on the “new historians,” and he may be the first intellectually equipped scholar to tackle them on their own ground. He may be the first manifestation of what will become a counterweight to them. Avraham Sela, a young historian who works on the 1948 period, is less explicit than Karsh. He works with the intellectual tools and language skills that some of the “traditional” historians lacked, so his research will definitely become a valuable resource for the next wave.

BOI: Could you elaborate on this issue of a counteraction from the scholarly right?

Rabinovich: Yes, there is now an attempt to create an intellectual right-wing revisionism in Israel. The “Shalem Institute” in Jerusalem is a neoconservative think tank, financed by Ronald Lauder (of Estee-Lauder cosmetics). It seems to be a direct response to Benjamin Netanyahu’s call for the creation of a right-wing intellectual tradition—as if intellectual traditions are created—because, as he correctly observes, in the USA and in France there are some very impressive right-wing intellectuals. Irving Kristol and Bernard-Henri Levy don’t have their Israeli equivalents, but I don’t think one can simply manufacture them. Maybe at some point they will write their own revisionist history of the creation of the state or of the peace process. But, so far, the “new historians” are revisionists with a left-wing ideological bent.

BOI: What about Daniel Pipes and Efraim Karsh, whose argument that the Syrians never intended to make peace in the post-Madrid talks has been embraced by the right wing? Your take on the Syrian position, based on four years of negotiating with them, is quite different. What are their sources? How should readers choose between the different theses in their books and yours?

Rabinovich: I happen to be privy to a lot that will never be in any archive, information that I will put at the reader’s disposal in my new book, *The Brink of Peace*, saying: “Here are the facts; here is my analysis; here is my hypothesis.” Now this, of course, does not exclude other forms of knowledge or scholarship. What can the other authors offer? It’s not as though Pipes or Karsh has been given the American record or the Syrian record to read, and they are therefore offering a different interpretation. Each of them is saying, “Based on my understanding of the Syrians, I think that Asad is not interested in peace and is only interested in the peace process.” I, on the other hand, am saying that Asad was interested in, but not anxious about, making a very specific form of peace. Let’s argue about it.

Pipes and Karsh's approaches are legitimate, but you will not find anyone on the liberal side of the spectrum making their argument. It happens to be a conservative argument. This raises another interesting issue. What happens when one writes scholarship in an honest and professional manner, and then people vulgarize or politicize it? Take the book by Shmuel Katz, *Battleground*. He rips through Bernard Lewis, Elie Kedourie, and others and vulgarizes them to say that there's no point in making peace with Muslims and Arabs. Scholars are in the public domain. They write their books and anyone can use them to promote their own interests. But certain arguments and theses are taken up either by the right wing or by the left wing. The Pipes version of Syrian intentions happens to suit the Golan settlers. They also like to argue that Asad doesn't want peace, because this is what they would like to believe. The center of their universe is the Golan Heights, and their question is, "How do we stay here?" If they can arrange "reality" around the argument that "Asad is not interested in making peace, therefore there will not be peace, therefore I can continue to live here," that's just fine for them.

BOI: This is the first book that you have written since you ceased being ambassador. Do you find that you are writing differently than you did prior to your government service? Do you write differently knowing that there will be a government censor reading your work?

Rabinovich: The main difference that I notice now is that I write more freely. Having worked a lot with the media in those years "liberated" me. I hope that I write better, more vividly. *The Brink of Peace* is a short account of a very powerful personal experience. I include portraits of the other negotiators. Part of the historian's work here is to recreate reality as well as possible, and I would like the reader to come away from the book actually feeling how it felt in the negotiating room.

The book will have both advantages and drawbacks. I intend to be fair-minded and decent, but I cannot claim to be objective, not just because I am involved in the story, or because it may be the most significant thing I have done in my life. I'll also be limited in the sense that I am not free to write everything. As a former government official, I have to submit the book for review, and there are also constraints that I impose upon myself. I don't intend to write a "kiss-and-tell" book; I don't believe in working with people and then turning around and spilling all the beans.

BOI: Based on your experiences in both the academic and political realms, do you see any gaps or underdeveloped areas of scholarly inquiry pertaining to Israeli foreign policy, and especially the peace process?

Rabinovich: I think there is much more to be done. I would love to see a biography of Elias Sasson. I know that Uri Bialer has written on early Israeli foreign policy, but much more needs to be done. We still haven't got a book, written by an Israeli, that covers the terrain that Ian Lustick covered on Israeli Arabs. I think we can take a fresh look at 1967. There is room for an Israeli treatment of Camp David, to go along with the definitive work by Quandt. I could go on and on; the good news is, there is plenty to be done.

Note

1. Essays in this volume by Zisser, Starr, Nsour, and Muslih contribute important first steps in this direction. For an indication of how far the terms of the debate have changed since 1948, see Nissim Rejwan, "Arab Writing on Israel: From Catastrophology to Normalcy," in *Books on Israel*, vol. I, ed. Ian S. Lustick (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 91-105.

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