

Israel and Palestine by Avi Shlaim  
Verso 2009.

Avi Shlaim is Professor of International Relations at the University of Oxford and a fellow of St Antony's College; he is a scholar of the highest quality and also a man of huge personal courage. Professor Shlaim was once part of a brave triumvirate known in Israel as the 'new historians'. Together with Professors Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé, he set out to re-write the early Zionist history of the founding of the State of Israel and shed fresh light on many of its founding myths. After the second intifada of 2000 Benny Morris changed his views radically, but Pappé and Shlaim continue to hold the view that the primary responsibility for the sorry state of affairs in the Middle East conflict rests on Israel's shoulders.

Israel and Palestine represents a collection of Avi Shlaim's best writings, brought together from other sources, and divided into four sections: 1948 and After, To Oslo and Beyond, The Breakdown of the Peace Process and Perspectives. Those with an acquaintance with aspects of Israel's history will be unsurprised by the topics chosen, though their views on these matters will doubtless affect their response.

For me the gems are in the last section; an interview with the late King Hussein, an assessment of Shlaim's old friend Professor Edward Said, the symposium called in Seville in 2004 by Daniel Barenboim, around rehearsals of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra which he and Said helped found, a polemic against Benny Morris for his change of views (such things are always entertaining!) and finally an impassioned plea for the principle of free speech to be applied to Israel's critics, especially when they come from within the Jewish community.

Israel and Palestine is a wonderful collection that epitomises the philosophy and integrity of Avi Shlaim, and essential reading for those who truly want to approach the thorny issues of the Middle East with an open mind.

Rabbi Dr Charles Middleburgh