

# Disengaged

*Ari Shavit*

**A Land Divided: Israelis Think  
About Disengagement**

*Keter, 2005, 254 pages, Hebrew.*

*Reviewed by Uzi Arad*

Ari Shavit, a columnist for the daily *Haaretz* and one of Israel's most celebrated journalists, published his new book just three months before Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria this past summer. *A Land Divided* has attracted attention, due in no small measure to the fact that quite a number of the public figures interviewed in it—and not only those associated with the Right—chose to assail Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his withdrawal plan, known as the “disengagement.” Yet the book's importance extends far beyond the pros and cons of disengagement; indeed, it sheds a great deal of light on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a whole.

Shavit describes his own book as “strange,” and it is indeed unusual,

in both its structure and its method. Although the main part is a collection of interviews which Shavit conducted, his introduction takes the form of a candid personal confession in which the author traces the development of his thought on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In his own sharp style, Shavit describes his evolution from the fringes of Zionism on the far Left (in movements such as Peace Now, Ratz, and Meretz) to his current view, which he characterizes as moderate-Left. As he explains, Shavit once identified with those Israelis who saw “ending the occupation” as the ultimate goal, but then his eyes were opened by the violence of the first Palestinian uprising beginning in 1987. And yet, while the first Intifada made him reconsider certain elements of his thinking, it certainly did not end up changing his basic position that the solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict lay only in the partition of the territory west of the Jordan.

Shavit publicly endorsed the idea of unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip well before Ariel Sharon

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adopted it as official Israeli policy, and he has not wavered from this view. Yet he was profoundly disturbed by what he saw as the absence of any serious discussion about disengagement—and this is what ultimately drove him to write *A Land Divided*. Shavit argues that if Israel were to pull out, it ought to have been a “proper withdrawal”: Not an act of desperation, but one carried out from a position of strength and as part of a larger strategy enjoying broad public legitimacy. Unfortunately, he writes, the decision-making process that led to disengagement was never public enough or serious enough to do justice to so momentous an act. Shavit goes on to record the disquieting fact that Sharon “never explained the logic behind the disengagement.” The cabinet never discussed the plan before it was announced at the 2003 Herzliya Conference, and the institutions responsible for strategic planning were given no chance to prepare their plans properly.

Beyond the wholly inadequate decision-making process in the upper echelons of government, Shavit was also disturbed by what he saw as the intellectual shallowness of the wider public debate over withdrawal. This is what Shavit may have sought to rectify by bringing together thirty-three Israelis (myself among them) from the political, academic, and

military arenas, whose views represent a broad spectrum of Israeli public thought. According to Shavit, all the interviewees can be called “thoughtful Israelis,” but the most obvious common denominator is the fact that they are all people in a position to address authoritatively the subject at hand. Shavit has arranged them alphabetically by last name; although by not grouping the interviews according to themes or areas of expertise, the reader is forced to leap between arguments and levels of analysis. This can be somewhat difficult to follow.

Among Shavit’s personages, some take an Olympian, historical perspective, while others critique disengagement, directly or indirectly, and offer alternatives to it. What results is an enlightening, panoramic overview of the conflict and a collection of recipes for its solution. *A Land Divided* succeeds in creating a sense of mutual discourse, even if a roundtable never really took place. Here Shavit is at his best, showing himself to be the most talented interviewer in Israeli journalism: Although the subjects’ ideas are presented in their own words, Shavit’s masterful touch—his inquisitive prodding and encouragement to formulate positions more decisively and clearly—is obvious throughout. The only interview, in fact, which follows a

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more conventional style is that of Dov Weisglass, chief adviser to the prime minister. This interview, published in *Haaretz* in October 2004, made waves both inside the country and abroad on account of its claim that the disengagement plan was designed, with American consent, to freeze the diplomatic process. "Together with the world leadership, I found a device through which there will be no stop-watch. There will be no timetable for carrying out the settlers' nightmare," Weisglass boasted. "I postponed this nightmare indefinitely."

Shavit is exceptional in his ability to extract such statements—ones never really intended to be made—from the people he interviews. As someone who has been at the receiving end of Shavit's method, I can testify that his form of grilling, on the one hand, and his close attention to detail on the other, succeed in persuading the interviewee to be more open and expressive than he would normally have been. In this way Shavit has, over the years, managed to conduct interviews that were not only first-class journalistic achievements, but also milestones in the development of Israel's social and political culture.

**A** *Land Divided* is not without its flaws. It is hard, for instance, to find in the interviews any reference to one of the most important

issues raised by disengagement: The plan's "democratic deficit"—that is, the apparent breakdown of democratic restraints as government policy was being implemented by raw political force against cabinet ministers and with the intention to use military force against those who opposed it on the ground. Similarly, none of the interviews offers a take on the effects of disengagement on Israeli–Egyptian and Israeli–Jordanian relations; on the effects on ongoing security and border crossings, including the new territorial contiguity between Gaza and Egypt; and on economic relations with the Palestinian Authority. No one seems to have given too much thought to these questions. Actually, one wonders whether the decision makers in Jerusalem did either.

The book's most glaring flaw, however, is found in the tendency of most of the interviews to discuss disengagement without putting it into its immediate Israeli political context. Nowhere do we find an explanation or analysis of the process that led to the disengagement, or, especially, of the plan's real objectives. Most of those interviewed either avoid these questions or make only minimal, oblique references to them. The most burning question, in other words, is one to which *A Land Divided* offers no answer: What caused Sharon suddenly to depart from his longstanding

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opposition to unilateral territorial concession? Did he have a sudden strategic revelation, or was the turnabout—as has been suggested in some circles—the product of considerations altogether unconnected to strategic issues? The question of motive appears all the more urgent in light of the fact that two-thirds of Shavit’s subjects either oppose disengagement or doubt that it will ever achieve its declared goal of improving Israel’s security. Given this level of skepticism, we are left wondering what advantages the plan’s sponsors really saw in disengagement—benefits that were clearly so compelling as to overwhelm the skepticism they surely must have felt. Unfortunately, these issues remain virtually unaddressed.

**I**n his concluding chapter, Shavit sums up the opinions of his interlocutors and then reveals his book’s real ambition. He was not interested, he writes, in merely collecting opinions from a variety of quarters. And he saw the debate over disengagement—which he anyway took to be a “political *fait accompli*” even as the book was being written—as only a starting point for a much larger discussion, an exploration of the contours of Israeli thought with respect to the conflict with the Palestinians, and an effort to delineate a “golden path” or common denominator among the

different positions within the Israeli public.

And indeed, Shavit succeeds in identifying a number of opinions held in common by those he interviewed: That the conflict is essentially intractable; that Israeli policy should take into account the need to nurture future Palestinian partners to negotiation; that there can be no compromise on the issue of repatriation of Palestinian refugees—the so-called “right of return”; that the debate on the future of Jerusalem must be postponed to later stages of the peace process; that any steps toward a resolution of the conflict must be contingent on the fulfillment of operative measures on the basis of mutuality; that there must be no negotiations under fire; that the Palestinians must not be rewarded for employing terror; that future evacuations of settlers should be combined with countervailing steps, like the evacuation of Palestinians residing illegally in Israel; and finally, that a two-state solution will end the delegitimization of Israel on account of its being the sovereign state of the Jewish people.

Shavit then catalogs the various ideas put forth in his interviews with regard to a territorial solution to the conflict, dividing them into ten distinct approaches. Of these, four have little or nothing in common, while the other six oscillate between two

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main streams of thought: The “unilateral” approach, which encourages Israel to establish facts on the ground independently; and the “diplomatic” approach, which strives to anchor each territorial division in bilateral or multilateral arrangements. Such a dichotomy, however, seems a bit arbitrary, for even the unilateralists, as Shavit defines them, recognize that some degree of coordination with the other side, direct or indirect, is inevitable.

Shavit himself believes that the best way to achieve an agreement with the Palestinians is by adopting a middle, or “third” way, one that is not currently represented in Israel’s riven political life. He insists that a reliable political solution requires broad public consent. As a result, he dismisses those positions which have failed in the absence of a consensus, or because events on the ground proved their impracticability—even, it should be noted, positions that had formerly been his own. His objective, rather, is to try and identify that idea on which mainstream Israelis can agree—a theme that runs through the entire book.

It is against this backdrop that Shavit articulates his own political views. As far as he is concerned, “the supreme objective of any Israeli-Palestinian political process is to end the occupation and stop the threat. It

is inconceivable for Palestinian Arabs to live under occupation. It is inconceivable for Israeli Jews to live under constant threat.” In order to realize this objective, he feels, there is no alternative but to divide the land.

This division, however, has to be implemented more wisely than was the disengagement from Gaza. Shavit believes that it must be based on seven principles: (i) An Israeli withdrawal from territories captured in 1967 will be contingent on an end to any further Palestinian territorial claims and right-of-return demands, as well as the recognition by the Palestinians of the right to exist of a democratic, sovereign Jewish state within these new boundaries; (ii) since the surrender of territory without a peace agreement includes within it an existential threat to Israel, there can be no establishment of a Palestinian state prior to such an agreement; (iii) Israel must be compensated for every territorial withdrawal, preferably by the Palestinian side, although such compensation could also come from the international community; (iv) progress will be possible only if it is accompanied by mutual and international recognition of the legitimate rights of each of the nations involved, a provision that was absent in the Oslo accords; (v) both nations will deal honestly and thoroughly with their own national pathologies—the Israelis with the

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“malignancy of occupation,” and the Palestinians with the “ethos of denial” and the “culture of death”; (vi) Israel must carry out a complete withdrawal from a “contiguous Palestinian region comprising a critical mass of land” in order to permit the Palestinians a life of freedom and honor; and finally, (vii) Israel must demand that the international community recognize its demarcation line as the “line inside of which Israel has the right to defend its existence.”

The importance of this last point becomes even more acute in light of the “terrible paradox,” as Shavit puts it, inherent in the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza: The disengagement has created international expectations of further withdrawals, although security concerns dictate that such withdrawals cannot be carried out before an agreement is reached.

Clearly, one must judge the viability of each of these principles on its own merits. There will be those who disagree with some while accepting others, probably including Sharon himself, who may well attempt to establish a Palestinian state with temporary borders immediately after a further unilateral Israeli withdrawal in an effort to maintain stability. It seems, however, that all of Shavit’s principles merit serious consideration. The principle of dividing the land is

not only the solution that enjoys the broadest possible support—it is also the most practicable. Indeed, from the 1937 Peel Commission plan to the “road map” of the last few years, all proposed solutions to the Israeli-Arab or Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been based on the principle of partitioning the land. The elected Jewish governing institutions—both those of the pre-state Yishuv and those of the State of Israel—have always decided in favor of partition; it was, in fact, the Arabs and the Palestinians who rejected it time and again, choosing instead to nurture hopes of erasing the Zionist state. The question still remains as to whether the Arabs and Palestinians will ever adopt this formula themselves.

One comes away from *A Land Divided*, both in the interviews and in Shavit’s own explorations, with the impression that Israelis are playing chess with themselves. Given our experience, every internal Israeli debate over what is to be done really ought to be accompanied by the question: Will the Palestinians accept whatever permanent solution one is proposing? This always was, and remains today, the key question. Yet many Israelis are quick to answer instead via wishful thinking. The gravity of the question requires an answer that is carefully considered, one that

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weighs both experience and history, on the one hand, and present reality, on the other, to the extent it can ever be truly understood.

An altogether different question is whether Shavit's platform would actually be good for Israel. Can his "third way," which he outlines so precisely, serve as a mission statement for a new political party, between the Israeli Right and Left? On the face of it, the time is right for such a party to enter Israeli politics, and there can be no doubt that the coming election year is a time of raised expectations for the formation of a Center camp. But it is far from clear whether Shavit's platform really fits the bill of a genuine Center. Just as the social-economic Third Way approaches of Avigdor Kahalani in Israel and of Tony Blair in Britain were essentially social-democratic platforms that had been modified to meet the new economic realities, so too is Shavit's

political-diplomatic "third way" tailored to appeal to the Israeli Left, with certain classical positions of the Right added on in light of the changing reality. But even this alone is no small achievement.

All in all, *A Land Divided* is a masterful work by an extraordinary interviewer. It is likely to offer a great deal to Israelis as they face the storms—those of the mind and those of action—that undoubtedly lie ahead.

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