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JANUARY 2000

Israel Now

The author, a former resident of Israel, finds that raw power and economic forces are redrawing the map of the Middle East, and peace talks will merely formalize the emerging reality

by [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

(The online version of this article appears in three parts. Click here to go to [part two](#) or [part three](#).)

Crossing the Jordan

LEOPOLD Weiss, the grandson of a rabbi, was born in the Polish city of Lwów in 1900. In 1922 he went to Palestine to visit an uncle who was a psychiatrist at a hospital in Jerusalem. From Jerusalem, Weiss began traveling through North Africa and Arabia, where he became deeply attracted to Arabs and to life in the desert. Weiss converted to Islam, changed his name to Muhammad Asad, married an Arab woman, and made the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. Asad was among the few Westerners who had ever visited Mecca and Medina, and also among the early-twentieth-century explorers of the Arabian and Libyan Deserts. He was befriended by King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, of Saudi Arabia, and became one of the King's envoys and troubleshooters. Asad also helped to set up the modern world's first Islamic state, Pakistan, which he represented as its minister plenipotentiary to the United Nations. For a decade after Asad converted to Islam, his father refused contact with him. But in 1935 the two began exchanging letters. The correspondence continued until 1942, when the Nazis deported Asad's father and sister to a concentration camp, where they both perished.

Discuss this article in [Post & Riposte](#).

More [foreign correspondence](#) in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Atlantic Unbound*.

From the archives:

Flashback: "The State of Israel" (May 18, 1999)

Israel has rarely been free of political and cultural turmoil, as a look back at *Atlantic* articles from the past century reminds us.

Flashback: "Israel at 50" (May 1, 1998)

Atlantic articles from 1919 to 1993 -- including "The Kingdom of the Spirit," by David Ben-Gurion -- trace the origins and history of the Jewish state.

"Hallowed Ground," by Cullen Murphy (December, 1995)

A first experience of the Holy Land.

"Tel Aviv: Secular City," by Corby Kummer (December, 1995)

Where Israel meets the modern world.

"Israeli Mosaics," by Herbert Mitgang (August, 1966)

Impressions of a new country.

"The Creed of an American Zionist,"

by Rabbi Milton Steinberg (February, 1945)

"I advocate Zionism as the most immediate and practicable answer to a vast,

In his autobiography, *The Road to Mecca* (1954), Muhammad Asad looked to Abraham, the forefather of the Jews, for understanding.

That early ancestor of mine whom God had driven toward unknown spaces and so to a discovery of his own self, would have well understood why I am here [in Arabia] -- for he also had to wander through many lands before he could build his life into something that you might grasp with your hands, and had to be guest at many strange hearths before he was allowed to strike root. To his awe-commanding experience my puny perplexity would have been no riddle.

Asad, who looked back on his Jewish childhood as "happy" and "satisfying," was the ultimate free man, reinventing and negating himself, and thus full of contradictions. I was attracted by his autobiography because of the contradictions in my own life.

In the 1970s, when I was in my twenties, I traveled throughout Islamic North Africa and the Middle East, settling in Israel, where I served in the military. In Israel, finding life among people of my faith claustrophobic, I rediscovered my Americanness. What I took away from Israel was not Zionism so much as realism: whereas Israel's phobias about security might seem extreme to outsiders, life in Israel taught me that the liberal humanist tendency to see politics predominantly in moral terms was equally so. In Israel I often met foreign journalists who demanded absolute justice for the Palestinians and talked constantly about morality in politics, which in practice meant that anyone who disagreed with them was "immoral." You couldn't argue with these people. My right-wing neighbors in a poor, oriental part of Jewish Jerusalem sought absolute security. You couldn't argue with them either, but at least their arguments were grounded in self-interest and not in airy abstractions. (A confidant of the late King Hussein's and Prince Hassan's once told me that the two men trusted Yitzhak Rabin, then the Israeli Defense Minister, because he always framed his arguments for peace in terms of Israel's self-interest rather than morality.) Self-interest at its healthiest implicitly recognizes the self-interest of others, and therein lies the possibility of compromise -- and realism. A moral position admits few compromises. That's some of what I took away from Israel.

Two days after finishing my military service in Israel, I flew to the Balkans to restart my career as a journalist. Within weeks I was back in the Arab world, and I traveled in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, and elsewhere throughout the 1980s, keeping the Israeli part of my life a secret. As I had

terrible and very tangible need."

"Zionist Aspirations in Palestine," by Anstruther Mackay (July, 1920)

"I propose in this article to discuss [Zionism] from a historical and practical standpoint, without sentiment in favor of either Jew or Arab, among both of which parties I have many friends."

"The Atlantic Report: Israel," (January 1952, June 1953, November 1957.)

Three articles by the editors of *The Atlantic* on the progress of the new nation during the fourth, fifth, and tenth years of its existence.

From Atlantic Unbound:

Atlantic Abroad: "Israeli Forms of Identity," by Miriam Udel Lambert (December 3, 1999)

"Was I to be the arbiter of Israel's immigration policy?"

Interviews: "Setting the Record Straight" (September 22, 1999)

Edward Said, author of a new memoir, *Out of Place*, talks about the Oslo Accords, Arafat, and the "enormous fabrication of lies" printed in *Commentary* this month.

Atlantic Abroad: "A Saturday at the Auction," by Miriam Udel Lambert

learned from the foreign correspondents I met in Israel, being an outsider is easy, and so I enjoyed the Arab world, just as I did the Balkans. But in Israel, though my Hebrew is now very rusty, I will never be completely an outsider. Thus I had mixed feelings last year as I prepared to leave Amman and cross the border after several weeks of travel in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. In Israel I would be less a traveler than someone returning to a former home, and would experience reality at a level different from that elsewhere in my journey.

FROM Amman I took an early-morning bus north, toward the Syrian border, alighting at Irbid. Irbid was a summation of what I had experienced in the Arab world over the previous weeks. Like many other places in Jordan, it has clean sidewalks and clean public spaces, but few trees. The streets were dominated by men in drab clothes; boys carried trays of coffee and tea into offices; and the bus station was a jumble of produce stands amid lines of vehicles departing at no particular time -- no disadvantage for me, because this was a traditional society in which strangers are immediately looked after. Irbid lies almost twenty miles east of the Jordan River, the border with Israel. Though the bus station was busy, I was the only person traveling to the border, so I had to take a taxi, for the equivalent of \$15.

The Jordan River Valley is part of a deep rift in the earth's surface that stretches from Jordan to East Africa. The descent to the river from the biscuit-brown tableland where Irbid sits was dramatic. The temperature climbed steadily as we neared the hazy ribbon of green fields along the Jordan, on the other side of which, in Israeli territory, the mountains rise steeply. Occasionally I saw a faded sign for the "Jordan Valley Crossing" ahead: there was never a mention of Israel. The road was lined, as roads so often are in the Arab world, with dusty garages, rickety fruit stands, and small groups of young men talking and smoking. The border post was a series of old ship containers in an empty lot, housing offices for customs, passport inspection, currency exchange, and other formalities. Four years old already, the ramshackle complex looked both temporary and sleepy. My bags were not inspected, and it took only a few seconds to have my passport stamped. The sole official signal that Israel lay about a hundred feet away came at the currency-exchange office, where my dinars were replaced with Israeli shekels.

Though it was only a short distance to the Israeli side, I was not allowed to cross on foot. I was told to enter an empty bus whose engine was running. Soon two elderly Arabs in suits and ties took nearby seats. Then came another passenger, wearing dirty, baggy jeans, a short

(August 4, 1999)

"The synagogue I am visiting today is attended by Sephardic Jews -- those from Morocco, Syria, and Yemen -- who have done things differently for generations."

Atlantic Abroad:
"Talmud in a Taxi,"
by Miriam Udel Lambert (March 3, 1999)

"Here was an exchange shaped, however subtly, by a textual tradition reaching back thousands of years."

Atlantic Abroad:
"Tower of Babel,"
by Miriam Udel Lambert (November 18, 1998)

"Each party was speaking in a different language, literally and symbolically."

Atlantic Abroad:
"Miracle on Jaffa Street," by Miriam Udel Lambert (August 12, 1998)

"We all waited on the frozen bus, growing frightened at the continuing sounds of sirens and the chop of helicopters overhead."

Interviews: "A Century of Zionism"
(November, 1996)

British journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft takes stock of Theodor Herzl's "mad" idea.

beard, and a yarmulke, and carrying an old briefcase. He might have been coming from one of the Israeli factories that had opened recently in Irbid. A burly fellow, he was brusque and alert, and didn't nod hello to me, as the two Arabs had done. There were no other passengers. The driver took his seat, and the bus headed toward the bridge.

The Jordan River, all the more precious here because it is so narrow, was an immaculate blue. On the opposite bank a landscaped park of grass and palm trees separated the traffic lanes -- like a traffic island anywhere in the West, but a small wonder after the bleak public spaces of the Arab world and many parts of Turkey. The bus stopped beside two young men in Timberland shirts that were only partly tucked into their jeans, because of the handguns at their sides. Their bad crew cuts, hunted looks, and roving eyes indicated that they did not see themselves as heroes in an action movie playing inside their heads -- as security men I have encountered in other countries do. These two young men were not aware of themselves, but they were aware of everything going on around them. They boarded the bus, glanced at our passports, and asked me to step outside with them.

The awkwardness and conciseness of modern Hebrew -- a vernacular only a century old -- struck me as poignant after the elegant elaboration of Turkish and Arabic. My conversation with the two security agents slipped between Hebrew and English. They had no interest in my whereabouts in the Arab world -- they simply wanted to run a test on an immigration officer who had started work that day. They handed me the Israeli passport of an Arab, a commonplace item given that many Israeli Arabs live nearby, in the Galilee. The passport was phony, they told me, and they wanted to see if the new officer would spot it. The photograph in it vaguely resembled me, and they asked if I would try to get through immigration carrying it.

"Where will my American passport be?" I asked.

"In my back pocket," one of them said. "Don't worry, I'll be a few feet away from you. I will never be out of your sight."

"Fine," I said. Israel is a place where people are always running checks.

The immigration hall, with its luggage x-ray machine, looked like that at any small air terminal in the United States. I handed the passport to a uniformed officer, a woman in her early twenties. Her eyes ran over the document for about ten seconds; then, without even glancing at my face or asking me anything, she walked

over to the security agent and slapped the passport on his chest. They smiled at each other, and he gave me back my real passport. Though Israel is a macho society in many respects, the gulf between the sexes is often curiously narrowed in the security forces.

Leaving the immigration building, I found a small bus-and-taxi terminal with a new sidewalk and benches, tourist maps, phone booths, and a bank. The bank teller looked up from her paperback just long enough for me to change more money. When I asked her where I could buy a long-distance phone card, she snapped "There," tilting her head toward a modern kiosk across the paved road. Suddenly, for the first time on my journey, I felt lonely, even though I knew much more Hebrew than Arabic or Turkish. The public spaces seemed vast, because nobody was hanging around: nobody here had time for strangers. In *East Is West* (1945) the British traveler and diplomat Freya Stark quoted a British official in Transjordan as saying "Years of Arab courtesy spoil us for the rough and tumble of the Western World." Though such a statement could mask an untoward political sympathy (as it did in Stark's case), it is nevertheless true.

With the phone card I called my friend Mitch, who lives in the central Galilee. He told me to take a taxi to the bus station in Beit She'an, a few minutes away to the west, where he would pick me up. On the way to Beit She'an I noticed signs in the other direction saying PEACE BRIDGE and JORDAN. Israel brags about the peace treaty and the open border that Jordanian road signs try to conceal.

Continued...

*(The online version of this article appears in three parts.
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Robert D. Kaplan is a correspondent for *The Atlantic*. This article appears, in somewhat different form, as part of his new book, *Eastward to Tartary: Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus*, to be published by Random House in November 2000.

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