WHAT AND WHERE IS ISRAEL?

Time for a Gestalt Shift

Ian S. Lustick

Israel is one of the few states in the world that has never issued a postage stamp featuring a map of the country. Although most countries are proud of their shape and often use their map image on postage stamps and elsewhere as a unifying and iconic representation of national existence, that is not the case in Israel. The question of the country’s exact territorial composition is, and always has been, too politically and ideologically fraught to enable its map image to be used in that way. But if the State of Israel dares not officially speak the name of its borders, that does not mean it does not have them. What it does mean, however, is that tracing where the borders of the state have been, and where they are now, requires an act of explicit and assertive analysis.

Because thinking productively about the future of a state means knowing what is inside it and what is outside it, we must ask what is it that lies between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Is it a state named Israel, located in part of the area, with other parts of this territory existing outside it? Or does the State of Israel contain all the territories west of the Jordan River, even if those territories and the populations living in them are ruled differently? For a half-century the answer to that question in the minds of most (not all) of those living in this space, studying it, or seeking to change it was clear: the land west of the Jordan was defined as divided between Israel and not-Israel. For decades this was the solid ground of analysis and action: it contributed an unquestioned apprehension of reality to campaigns to bring about or prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. The result was on-point journalism, energetic political mobilization, and much excellent scholarship.
But the world, including Israel, has changed in fundamental ways. Previously unquestioned assumptions now appear as highly problematic claims. Familiar categories fit uncomfortably with irresistible observations. Standard arguments seem hollow and lose their persuasive power. Intellectual and political moorings are loosened as unexamined premises and conventional beliefs no longer can enforce limits on discourse and discipline on the imagination. Those active in the communities of thought and effort based on destabilized first principles confront disorienting analytic, professional, and psychological challenges.

Struggles governed by differences in deep structures of thought are distinctive. They are, as Antonio Gramsci described them, "wars of position" involving fundamentally different ways of seeing the world expressed via questions posed, topics treated as trivial or crucial, and criteria for judging agendas for action and investigation as either necessary or irrelevant. Propositions made within one universe of discourse are difficult to challenge or even frame within another. This fundamental element of incommensurability springs from commitments that are not and, in the normal course of things, cannot be subjected to evidence-based criticism.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the stark discrepancy between perceiving West Bank and Gaza Arabs as if they are living outside the State of Israel and the actuality of their status as living within it. Thereby I hope to encourage a gestalt shift so that the area between the sea and the river can be seen for what it is, rather than how it must be imagined to justify continued work on behalf of a negotiated two-state solution (TSS). For many this will pose an unsettling epistemological challenge. Is Israel a state that includes within itself all the territory and people west of the Jordan, or do those living "across the Green Line" (ma'ever ha-kay ha-yarak) live outside the State of Israel?

This is a question about the nature of political reality for Jews, Arabs, and others living between the river and the sea—a question that cannot arise within the discursive universe established and contained by the TSS. Accordingly, to engage with those whose assumptions forbid even posing the question, I need to establish a basis for thinking about how change occurs in beliefs that are so fundamental to systems of thought that they are not, and cannot normally be, exposed to criticism or demands for evidence. To do so I draw on the history of scientific beliefs as a model for understanding how dominant frames of reference can be replaced, even though the fundamental assumptions of their adherents forbid it.

The problem is one of ontology. "Ontology" and "ontological" are big and somewhat mysterious words, but they have a very specific meaning. Ontology is the study of existence—of what constitutes reality. Ontological claims reflect judgments and apprehensions that precede theories, hypotheses, or even discrete perceptions. As unexamined and therefore unvalueable assumptions, they establish what questions can be posed, what facts can be gathered to evaluate answers to those questions, and what kinds of change are and are not imaginable. In this sense they are preanalytic or "metaphysical." As key elements of a paradigm for thinking, they cannot be studied from within the paradigm but only from an external position animated by a framework of thought based on different ontological assumptions.

What does "ontological" mean in practical terms? Consider the case of fire. What is it? That is an ontological question. According to Aristotle fire is one of the four basic elements, along with earth, air, and water, that make up everything in the world with which we have direct contact. Burning was explained as the process by which fire, as an elemental substance, was released from things that contained it like wood. Renaissance revivals of Aristotelian ontology led to the theory of phlogiston as an invisible substance that yielded fire when things containing it were heated. Centuries of science and whole industries, such as metallurgy, were based on phlogiston. It took decades of dogged work by Lavoisier and others in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries before a new paradigm for understanding chemistry arose that dispensed with phlogiston altogether. Instead, the whole idea of fire as a substance was replaced by metaphysics of an entirely different kind. Fire was not a thing itself, and neither was "air"—which was now understood as a mixture of "gases." Fire was but an effect of heated gases within fuel interacting with another gas, "oxygen." In the course of these interactions tiny things called "molecules" were broken and reformed, yielding another kind of highly energized "thing"—plasma—which is how we apprehend fire.

Just as the phlogiston paradigm for understanding burning and why some substances burned and others did not was based on a particular ontological view of the kind of thing that exists, so the two state solution paradigm is based on particular ontological presumptions, or "priors." Although many may be accustomed to thinking of the TSS as simply a scenario for achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace, it came to assume enormous importance both as a political and as a scholarly/social science project. Those who worked within it to either bring a TSS about, prevent that outcome, or simply understand it, adopted its ontological assumptions as their "priors." Chief among these was and continues to be that the land between the river and the sea comprises two fundamentally different kinds of spaces: territories and people within the State of Israel, and territories and people not within the State of Israel. Treating that principle as valid made perfect sense in the years and even decades following the 1967 War. But at least since the aftermath of the Second Intifada, palpable realities have made it impossible for scholars and political activists to treat the political separateness of the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Israel as an unquestioned fact, rather than as a claim that is at best problematic and at worst patently false.
Nevertheless, abandoning such a basic principle, even in the face of mounting evidence that contradicts it, is difficult. For many it entails the loss of hope for a long-cherished political utopia of two separate and independent national states. As is the case for anyone long committed to and heavily invested in an ambitious scientific or political project, this kind of change also threatens reputations, careers, and valued communities of mobilization and support. Faced with the terrible costs of paradigm exhaustion, adherents are caught in a painful predicament. Their analyses and policy recommendations can remain consistent with the old paradigm or they can grapple effectively with realities, but they cannot do both. To ignore the inadequacy of one’s conceptual equipment means that work done will be repetitive, boring, and disconnected with ultimate political or intellectual purposes. Grappling with the invalidity of key assumptions means operating in unfamiliar territory and, perhaps, alongside former enemies rather than with familiar comrades and collaborators. At the same time, it can produce new insights and offer exciting prospects for scholarly and political progress.

We can learn about the challenges (and rewards) of abandoning an outdated paradigm and of adopting new ways of seeing and not-seeing the world by considering the history of science. At the core of that history are stories of how social, cultural, economic, political, or technological change and increasingly accurate observations regularly challenge prevailing paradigms. Upstart scholars, renegade scientists, and intellectuals with a greater taste for risk and less tolerance for analytic convention than most accelerate the decline and fall of established ways of thinking by identifying and questioning assumptions, destabilizing standardized ways of formulating questions and thinking of answers, and making it increasingly costly for defenders of the old paradigm to pretend to have faith in their doctrines.

Science and politics are conventionally characterized as dramatically different ways to approach the world. Accordingly, some may wonder how the history of science can be used to understand the changing character of a problem so intensely political as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Science, the systematic production and accumulation of knowledge, is normally figured as based on individually unselfish or disinterested curiosity sustained by a general commitment to the welfare of humankind or the planet. Scientific communities are thought of as sharing insights and data while arguing about which theories or models use fewer assumptions to explain more observations of interest than others. Good science, including good scholarship, is imagined as requiring a logical if not psychological separation between the values and preferences of its practitioners and the observations and analysis that are the primary focus of their work. The world of politics, in contrast, is generally seen as saturated with the pursuit of individual and group self-interest, however effectively it might be portrayed as serving the larger purposes of group.

Politicians may compromise in their campaigns to achieve their goals and form partnerships and coalitions as key parts of those campaigns, but those alliances succeed not by satisfying curiosity but by winning power or implementing programs that serve their interests.

Science and politics do differ—in rhetoric, in expectations about how competition is to be regulated, in gatekeeping, recruitment, styles of communication, and so on. But there are fundamental similarities as well, arising from the identical predicament that both scientists and politicians confront. In their laboratories and libraries, scientists and scholars encounter the same overwhelming complexity and intractable uncertainty about how the world really works as do politicians in their legislatures, bureaucracies, smoke-filled rooms, and public arenas. Neither knows for sure what can happen and what cannot and, in the face of that uncertainty, what kinds of activity will prove either rewarding or not. To think and to act, both scientist/scholars and politicians/activists must treat the world as much simpler than it really is.

That simplicity is achieved by treating certain kinds of behaviors, data, observational opportunities, and questions as relevant and meaningful, relegating many alternatives to the category of meaningless or irrelevant. Without such limits on the imagination, no individual investigator could ever know where to begin a study or how to end one, and no community of scientists and scholars could ever form to discuss problems, findings, and new horizons for research. The same goes for politicians—who must effectively choose from a vast if not infinite number of logically possible appeals, postures, operational goals, and stratagems—if they are ever to be able to communicate effectively with masses or other ambitious elites about how to formulate, pursue, and achieve either individual or shared objectives.

Scientists and politicians solve the problem of simplifying the world enough to grapple usefully with it in the same way: by creating communities of belief and of fate whose members share fundamental presumptions about the world, how it works, and what is important within it. In this basic sense, successful scientific and political communities are both well-institutionalized “projects.” Such projects impose on the intractable complexity of the world a stable array of rules for membership, large-scale challenges to be faced, and operational goals worth pursuing. To succeed as arenas for either science or politics, such projects must also offer a sustainable balance between opportunities for competition among individuals or teams of practitioners and boundaries or limits to acceptable behavior that protect the integrity of the community as a whole. In science and scholarship, the most successful projects are known as “paradigms.” In politics, the most ambitious and successful of these projects are known as “states.” In both realms successful projects take on a hegemonic aspect. In science, these are registered as...
metaphysical beliefs—unprovable or unproven claims, not open to testing. In politics, they are treated as self-evident truths, as in “We hold these truths to be self-evident. . . .” they are beliefs requiring no justification and admitting no test as to their validity.

Of course, not all projects in science or in politics are successful. And no matter how much knowledge is produced or how much coordinated human activity is enabled, all eventually fail. Many promising projects, and almost all revolutionary groups, never enjoy the opportunity to fully test whether they hold capacities to explain or to govern that exceed those of reigning orthodoxies. Those projects that do succeed, however, that institutionalize themselves as robust scientific communities, academic disciplines, or regimes of political power, usually survive long after the questions and challenges they pose cease to be important and long after the answers and policies they enable cease to offer satisfaction or meaning.

Thomas Kuhn’s seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, popularized the concept of a paradigm as an all-encompassing framework of thought that isolates scientific discourses from one another by making claims based on one paradigm that are incommensurable with claims based on another. Progress in science, according to Kuhn, is thus marked by “revolution”; disruptive breakthroughs involving the defeat or conversion of scientists from one way of looking at the world to another. Kuhn was explicitly dismissive of social science, even though he found himself unable to make his argument without drawing directly on both social psychology and political science theories of revolution. “At the heart” of his book, according to a recent study, is the “basic insight” that “scientific and political revolutions can be understood in important ways as the same thing.”

The saturation of science with politics and the importance of political maneuvering in the competition among scientific projects were key features of the thinking of another neopositivist philosopher and historian of science, Imre Lakatos. His theory of “research programs” built on Kuhn’s provocative yet somewhat extreme and even confusing position. While using the terms “paradigm” and “research program” more or less interchangeably, I draw directly on Lakatos’s dynamic account of how and why communities change in relation to the effectiveness of the work they can do within the paradigms that define them. His vocabulary offers an array of concepts particularly useful for understanding the trajectory of the TSS paradigm (or “research program”) and the “morbid symptoms” that attend the increasing gap between reality and the way that reality must be depicted by those struggling to keep it alive.

Lakatos asked what made scientific progress possible when the underlying assumptions guiding scientists can be exposed as fundamentally invalid. He was unsatisfied with Karl Popper’s answers to this question and with the arbitrary and even nonrational image offered by Kuhn as to how one paradigm could be replaced by another. He strived for a theory to account for how new evidence could lead to the replacement of ineffective paradigms and, in a complex but somewhat orderly fashion, lead to more effective frameworks for pursuing knowledge.

Lakatos’s theory emphasizes long-term processes of political and scientific competition among rival communities, each guided by its own productive or dysfunctional research program. Although scientists working within separate paradigms cannot contradict or even learn directly from one another, science nonetheless progresses as communities working within these research programs either succeed or fail to attract sufficient resources, to pose problems that adherents feel compelled to address, and to generate answers consistent with basic assumptions. This competitive and evolutionary process is as much political as “scientific.” As research programs and the communities that sustain them flourish, expand, stagnate, decay, disappear, or replace others, the process enables progress without guaranteeing it.

A key implication of this analysis is that the demise of once-flourishing paradigms is crucial for progress—whether in science or in politics. Adherents to a formerly dominant paradigm in either domain are required to abandon cherished beliefs and ask forbidden questions. The project’s “negative heuristic,” as Lakatos referred to the questions ruled out by ontological and other “metaphysical” assumptions, are, in effect, instructions to project adherents as to what not to think about or try to improve. The program’s “positive heuristic,” in contrast, are questions that communities are encouraged to find worthy of solving, goals they are urged to pursue, and methods they are authorized to use. As long as the community’s efforts, methods, and answers remain consistent with the assumptions that mark its discursive boundaries, conclusions and accomplishments can be celebrated by the project’s community as valuable and as rendering the world more tractable to its purposes.

Maintaining the integrity of a research or political community requires the sense or at least the promise of progress. Occasional failures of analysis, persuasion, mobilization, or prediction can be rationalized as errors of measurement or technique, but sustained contradictions of expectations are serious threats. The key to project survival is to respond to such “anomalies” by ignoring them until their challenges can be explained or treated with authorized techniques and with basic assumptions still intact. Lakatos refers to the successful absorption of such anomalies as “progressive problem shifts,” in which difficult-to-explain observations or events become exceptions that prove the rule, yielding new insights and provoking more interesting questions without contradicting core assumptions.

But defense of a paradigm is often achieved in ways that are not progressive and indeed may undermine its vitality and competitive position. If experimental
or predictive failures are repeatedly excused by specifying new assumptions, the paradigm quickly becomes more complex but less coherent and useful. As a "protective belt" of conditions and assumptions expands to protect the "hard core" of the project's belief system, more and more work is required to make arguments that are less and less interesting or effective. A paradigm defended in this way narrows opportunities for success, discourages learning, and prevents discoveries. It also forces its adherents to rely less on evidence or on their ability to understand or explain events and data, and more on their faith in the truth of their theories and of the assumptions undergirding them. Less able to elicit excitement or satisfy curiosity, the project's theories become doctrines, orthodoxies that rely less on empirical results and more on political clout to fend off competition. In Lakatosian terms, the research program enters a "degenerative" phase, characterized by "sterile inconsistencies and ever more ad hoc hypotheses." 28

The fact is that no successful system of belief, or paradigm, can have within it the means to quickly recognize when its time has passed or to establish procedures for discarding its assumptions when they become the obstacle, not the route, to progress. When contrary evidence becomes difficult to deny or ignore, both scientists and politicians have shown extraordinary ingenuity. They have offered brilliant strategies and arguments to extend the life of projects even in the face of seemingly stark evidence of error and failure. For example, phlogiston chemists long sought to ignore puzzling evidence that a burned substance weighed more, not less than it had prior to combustion, as if removing something made it heavier, not lighter. Eventually, when forced to acknowledge the accuracy of the measurements, some suggested that phlogiston had buoyancy—a kind of "negative weight"—that, when removed, increased the heft of the burned substance. Others hypothesized that disappearing phlogiston created air deposits that added more weight than was removed by its elimination. After decades of work, however, experimental chemists using radically new theories about individual gases produced a consensus that heat added mass from surrounding gases to combustible materials, rather than removing phlogiston from them. Only then did the ad hoc-er-y and increasing complexity of phlogiston theory expose the degenerative character of that research program, leading to abandonment of beliefs that phlogiston even existed. 29

Newtonian mechanics reigned supreme for two centuries on the basis of a robust positive heuristic that rewarded Newtonians with successful explanations of an amazingly wide variety of phenomena. This success protected scientists from having to ask how gravitational forces exerted themselves instantaneously over great distances, even as a hardcore assumption of the paradigm was the impossibility of "action at a distance." Their reputation also allowed Newtonians to avoid worrying over much about various anomalies—such as a glaring discrepancy between theoretical predictions and the observed orbit of the planet Mercury. Newtonian control of established institutions of science, and public belief in the deep connections between the truth of their theory and the truth of Christianity, bolstered their resistance to accumulating and powerful evidence in favor of Einstein's special and general theories of relativity. Eventually, however, advances in mathematics and scientific measurement enabled relativity to subsume and effectively replace the fundamental assumptions, if not most of the practical conclusions, of Newtonian mechanics.

The same pattern is observed outside the natural sciences. Core Marxian doctrine held that history was the unfolding of class struggle. This premise seemed fatally contradicted by the willingness of millions of workers to slaughter each other under national flags in World War I. In response Marxians quickly developed theories of nationalism as "false consciousness," thereby invoking psychology to protect their negative heuristic or hard-core assumptions, though at the cost of making fuzzy the orthodox commitments to materialism as the single basic driver of human history. Efforts to expand Marxism's "protective belt" also included Lenin's famous identification of imperialism as the final or "highest stage" of capitalist social organization, along with theories of the labor aristocracy and of the dynamics of "neocolonialism." These latter theories were developed to protect Marxian doctrine regarding the overexpansion and inevitable doom of capitalism via imperialism from being challenged by the success of European decolonization and the survival of capitalist powers.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century the "modernization paradigm" dominated social scientific approaches in sociology, economics, and political science to processes of change in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The presumptive truths of this powerful research program and its associated political projects were that industrial technology would produce "modernity" in all "traditional" cultures and societies exposed to it. The irresistible and revolutionary changes that comprised this process of "modernization" would mold those societies and their political system, to conform to American and Western European models. Despite the obvious failure of their predictions, modernization theorists stuck by their assumption of a fundamental incompatibility between "traditional" and "modern" norms and organizing principles. For decades they offered elaborate, ad hoc subtheories and hypotheses to protect and save the paradigm. These included "breakdowns in modernization," "primitivism," "polynormativism," and "crises and sequences." Entire careers, projects, institutes, and subspecialties were built around these efforts to save modernization theory by protecting its hard core from the spreading failure of its key predictions. By the end of the twentieth century,
however, little remained of the dichotomous ontology and technological determinism that lay at the heart of the modernization paradigm or of the expectation of convergence toward a single secular, rationalist, capitalist, and liberal democratic social order that it had encouraged. What began as a series of progressive problem shifts became, eventually, a flood of excuses, burdening remaining modernization theorists with the frustration, anomie, and sense of intellectual drift characteristic of a degenerative research program.

This pattern is as familiar in politics as it is in science. Projects move forward effectively toward analytic and political goals. The world changes or data available about the world improve, posing questions that cannot be answered or tasks that cannot accomplished within accepted and familiar categories. To protect cherished assumptions and agendas, adherents to the dominant political or research project avoid these questions. But if they cannot be dismissed as unimportant or turned into “confirming instances” with new theories that are yet consistent with the project’s negative heuristic, the community faces a crisis. Loyalists who cling to the project risk frustration, boredom, cynicism, and departure from their ranks of the more ambitious and imaginative among them. In these ways we can see in the experience of the TSS paradigm what Lakatos and other historians of science have traced in the rise and fall of research programs in many different disciplines.

Although it later became a dominant paradigm, the TSS appeared, after June 1967, as a politically irrelevant fantasy, seen as impossible and beyond the moral pale of both Palestinian society and Israeli politics. By the 1990s, however, both elites and the informed public concerned with Israeli-Palestinian relations came to adopt the assumptions of its negative heuristic as boundaries on their thinking. They can be summarized as follows:

- The West Bank and Gaza Strip are temporarily occupied territories, held by the State of Israel but separate from it.
- Israel can withdraw from enough of the territory occupied in 1967 to make a negotiated “land for peace” deal possible.
- Two territorial states for two peoples in Palestine/the Land of Israel would be the basis for long-term acceptance by Palestinians and Israelis of a new and peaceful political status quo.
- The Arab and Muslim worlds and the wider international community would use this agreement as a legitimizing framework for the presence of a Jewish state in the Middle East.

Both analytically and politically, the TSS project scored tremendous successes in its rise to prominence and then dominance in the last decades of the twentieth century, marked by the enormous attention paid to its positive heuristic: its agenda for discussion, political calculation, and diplomatic action. Among other things, that agenda focused on the implications of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and the meaning and presence or absence of a “point of no return”; the possibilities of dividing, defining, or sharing East Jerusalem; demographic trends and their political implications for Zionist values and Israeli interests; the likely importance of track-two versus formal diplomatic channels for facilitating negotiations; ways to finesse the refugee return question to suit political needs and public opinion on both sides; and strategies for bridging gaps between the “narratives” that Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs used to understand the tragedies and victories of their past relationship. The project’s success resulted in vast numbers of news stories, research studies, conferences, political gambits, diplomatic initiatives, and fundraising activities, all linked to these and similar issues.

But in the twenty-first century the TSS project has analytically failed to account for or halt the passage of virtually every West Bank settlement milestone its advocates had historically established as capable of preventing the achievement of its central objective. In the early 1980s the number of 100,000 West Bank settlers was commonly used as a marker for a political reality that would render the two-state solution an impossibility. There are now five times that number in the West Bank and seven times that number living across the Green Line—one out of every eleven Israeli Jews. This, however, is only one of the crucial anomalies the TSS project has been forced to (try) to ignore. Others include the rise on both sides and, in Israel, the ascendance of ultranationalist and fundamentalist views and programs; the vast and reliable support that Israeli Jews have given to governments wholly committed to de facto annexation; the miscarriage of dozens of international peace initiatives, including the Oslo process; the dominance among Israelis of beliefs in the absence of a Palestinian “partner for peace”; the failure of two generations of Israeli and Palestinian politicians who committed themselves to the banner of the two state solution; the near-evaporation of pressure on Israel from the Arab world and from Europe to agree to a Palestinian state; and the inability of even the most optimistic two-state advocates to describe how coalitions capable of negotiating and implementing a TSS could come to power in Israel and within the Palestinian community.

One specific and important hypothesis underlying the TSS project has been that the United States would play a key role in pressuring Israel toward territorial compromise. Despite a record of active US diplomacy on the issue, however, the TSS paradigm has failed completely to explain why US administrations have not done so. Instead, they have moved from weak attempts to slow the West Bank settlement juggernaut (Obama 2009–2010), to phony or half-hearted efforts to
achieve a TSS (Kerry 2013–2014), to a cynical and extravagant show of support for annexation and effective apartheid (Trump 2016–2020); and to lip service to a TSS goal unaccompanied by any hope or strategy for its achievement (Biden 2021–).

These are major anomalies for those expecting that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can and will be resolved by negotiations leading to a viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. To save their paradigm, TSS adherents need to offer compelling explanations for these outcomes, and these accounts must inspire confidence and continued work toward the project’s objectives. Instead, while the TSS’s political leaders have either passed from the scene or abandoned the project—think of Yossi Sarid, Shulamit Aloni, Yossi Beilin, Amram Mitzna, Ran Cohen, Tzipi Livne, Shlomo Ben-Ami, Amir Peretz, Haim Oron, Yuli Tamir, and Haim Ramon—its thought leaders have retreated to defend their research program’s negative heuristic. Instead of transforming these anomalies into “progressive problem shifts” (interesting agendas for research) or developing strategies for taking power, removing settlements, or starting negotiations, their attention is devoted to convincing themselves and followers that, in principle, it is not impossible (yet) for the dream of two states to be achieved, even if that might mean describing it differently, such as a confederation or as “parallel” states in the same territory.

Often these defenses of the paradigm’s negative heuristic come down to an appeal to faith, hope, or to the logically problematic formula that because there is no (acceptable) alternative, the two state solution must still be available. Thus did a fundraising pamphlet issued by the Americans for Peace Now (APN) in September 2016 echo the haunting and fundamentally non-rational faith appeal of the Anta Mal’amin chant about the coming of the Messiah: “And even though he may tarry, with all that yet will I wait for him.”

The APN request for donations concluded with this call by its vice chair Aviva Mayer: “You should believe in hope. I know that I do, even as I know that the peace process is currently non-existent. Should you wallow in despair? No, the time for peace will come . . . our time will come . . . My battered dream is better than no dream at all.” The analytic version of this appeal to faith is well illustrated in a luxuriously produced 2017 plan for the two state solution, 2050 Strategic Plan: Between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Acknowledging that the region between the sea and the river “is too small to be strictly separated” and that “peace talks have stalled completely,” the authors nonetheless offer detailed scenarios for development projects based on a declaration of fait accompli made in the first sentence of the report: “We believe that by the year 2050 there will be two sovereign states, Israel and Palestine, living in peace with each other in the region that lies between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.”

This “underlying premise” performs the same function of explaining how to achieve a two state solution as does the assumption used by the economist on the desert island who is asked how to open a can of food: “First, assume you have a can opener.”

When a paradigm is on the rocks, its adherents find it impossible to avoid engaging in forbidden behavior. For two staters, that means examining and trying to uphold the validity of assumptions that should be unquestioned starting points for discussion and work. Thus, for nearly a decade, the modal workshop, symposium, or panel discussion on or about the TSS has been framed as a question of whether it can ever be achieved or, in the metaphor of death that attends all these discussions, whether it should be considered comatose, on life support, “dying,” “dead,” or “dead but not buried.” It is also why, in April 2018, the Geneva Initiative (one of the TSS project’s diehard organizations) launched its “Two-State Index,” billed as “a monthly assessment of the road to the two-state solution.” Until the announcement of its suspension in May 2021, the index offered graphical representations of monthly movement of a needle toward or away from prospects for success. No rules were offered to explain the relative importance of or relationships among different categories of developments deemed to be of importance (“Political and Public Arena,” “Diplomatic and Legal Arena,” “Reality on the Ground,” and “Solvability of the Core Issues”) or how events were coded under these headings as more or less positive or negative. In its report, in May 2021, the index stood at 5.68 (compared to 5.20 in April 2018); in other words, a little more than half-way between impossibility and accomplishment. But these numbers were much more instructive about the desperation of Geneva Initiative advocates than about the plausibility of progress toward a negotiated TSS. Note, for example, that the index was calibrated by treating the situation in 2018, when it was launched, as halfway to complete success instead of on the edge of complete failure.

The function of a paradigm’s negative heuristic, of its hard core of assumptions and truths, is to focus perceptions so that opportunities can be exploited while problems can be identified and solved. But for the last decade, at least, and probably since the second intifada, trying to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the TSS lens has been like using a funhouse mirror to assess and navigate reality. So much effort has had to go into correcting the errors created by the lens that very little could be invested in advancing understanding or making progress toward desirable change. On the other hand, by adopting a new ontology, a new negative heuristic, and a new operating lens, questions of real importance, challenges of real significance, and opportunities of real promise come clearly into view. Those are the payoffs of flipping one’s gestalt by seeing reality as one state ruling (if not governing) all those living between the river and the sea.

What happens when we start with the assumption that the State of Israel already rules the entire area between the river and the sea? First, it makes it easier to see just what being an inhabitant of the state means. Consider what political
scientists mean by a "state." It is, fundamentally, an organization that enforces property rights. States appropriate property, but unless they appropriate all of it, they also enforce property claims of those ruled by it. If I can keep you off my property or even call property "mine" and have it mean something, that means there is an organization around that I think can enforce my claim to exclusive control of that property. If I do not believe that such claims can be enforced, then there is no state. If I and others are uncertain about the security of claims to property, then the state, such as it is, is weak.

Just as the property rights of Jews, wherever they live between the sea and the river, are a function of the power and policies of the State of Israel, so is that true of the property rights of Palestinians, such as they are, wherever they live west of the Jordan. No Palestinian property—no piece of land, no building, no home, no furnishings, no wealth of any kind—can be preserved in the face of an Israeli government seizure or demolition order. In that light, all Palestinians between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, whether denizens of Tulkarem, East Jerusalem, Gaza, or Jaffa, are living within the State of Israel. Saying that simplifies Israeli practices. Indeed, it is precisely what the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics does when it classifies all Jews living between the river and the sea as living in the State of Israel. If all Jews living west of the Jordan River, including those in the West Bank, are counted within the total number of people living in the State of Israel, it seems natural to expect that all people living west of the Jordan would also be seen to live there.

For no matter where one lives in relation to the Green Line, the state that collects taxes, delivers mail, regulates trade, controls the airspace, and enables or prevents infrastructural development is Israel. This is not to say that Israel rules the fourteen million people living under its sway democratically or with the same laws and norms applied to all populations. It does not. A political caste system is in place. Ashkenazi citizen Jews occupy the highest rung; Gaza Palestinians are on the lowest. But regardless of how much political inequality exists within the state and how parochial is its application of the liberal and democratic principles it sometimes espouses, it is the State of Israel that is the apparatus of power and the arena of contestation determining who has what rights and who does not, who can travel and who cannot, whose lands can be possessed and used and whose are off-limits or confiscated, whose home can remain standing and whose can be demolished, who can be targeted for summary execution and who cannot. As measured by the State of Israel's impact on the intimate details of their lives and indeed on whether they live at all, Palestinians are as much its inhabitants as Black slaves were of the United States and as Africans in the Bantustans were of apartheid South Africa. The five-and-a-half-decade occupation of the West Bank and the fifteen-year blockade of Gaza, combined with the exposure to state violence that these populations regularly endure, do not mark their exclusion from the Israeli state: they are the crucial factors conditioning their incorporation within it.

If trying to see the situation in terms of the TSS paradigm produces anomalies, switching one's gestalt to a one state reality (OSR) paradigm eliminates them. From the OSR perspective it is not puzzling that no meaningful negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), or brokered by the international community, took place over the last decade. If the PA, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip are within the State of Israel, why should one imagine otherwise? Similarly, that Israel arrests Palestinians in all areas of the West Bank virtually every night, or that it simply closes off whole sections of Ramallah or other West Bank cities at will, is not surprising. That is how Israel has long treated Arab, especially noncitizen Arab, inhabitants. That is to be expected given a OSR in which the dominant group in the state is threatened by a furious and subordinated population.

From an OSR point of view, Israelis living in the West Bank do not have to be treated "as if they are living in Israel": they are living in Israel. Within the context of the OSR, masses of East Jerusalem Arabs can improve their lot, and the city they share with hundreds of thousands of moderate Israeli Jews, by exercising their right to vote without fear of betraying their national cause. Liberal Jews can stop making a demographic argument that they know is racist but one that they used (in vain) to mobilize prejudice against and distaste for Arabs on behalf of territorial compromise. Given the impossibility of a land-for-peace deal, continued use of the argument only strengthens Jewish animus toward Arabs while blocking alliances with present and future Arab voters in a polity already inhabited by a majority of non-Jews (alliances whose political importance has become obvious in recent years).

Instead of desperately trying to see the Palestinian Authority as a potential negotiating partner or Palestinian state-on-the-way, it can be seen, much more accurately and fruitfully, as the functional equivalent of an Arab Department in Israel's "Ministry for Judea and Samaria"—a corrupt, alienated, and self-interested tool of discriminatory rule, used by Arabs to gain the (Israeli) permissions necessary to travel and by Israel to prevent popular resistance and lighten its administrative load. Increasingly, something of the same can be said about Hamas's position in the Gaza Strip. Chapter 4 by Yael Berda, which links the travel permit regime used to surveil and control West Bank and Gaza to its predecessor enforced by Israel via the military government that operated over Arab areas from 1948 to 1966, is an important contribution to understanding how the trajectory of Arab experience and struggle within the Green Line can illuminate the challenges and opportunities faced by those on the other side of it now and in the future.

Instead of chasing after a two state mirage or joining the ranks of the silent apartheidists who prefer pretending that the TSS might still be available to
opening the door to struggles over Palestinian political rights, both Jewish and Arab progressives can work to end the occupation, not via withdrawal, but through full absorption of the territories and populations that Israel rules and the extension of equal citizenship to all. That is a real and, in the long run, attainable objective. In practical terms it means acting on the values that have led so many to support a TSS rather than acting to bring about the TSS itself. That means working in direct, meaningful, and satisfying ways to alleviate discrimination wherever it is found, increase political participation opportunities for everyone, and struggle against political disenfranchisement and economic inequality. In short, the OSR leads progressives toward democratizing Israel rather than wasting their time seeking to redesign its boundaries.

In chapter 7 Mohanad Mustafa and As‘ad Ghanem discuss the “politics of hope” and document the shift among the “Arabs of ’48” toward confidence in the mobilization of Palestinian political power within Israel and commitment to the democratization of the state. Although they are proud of the accomplishments of the Joint List, Mustafa and Ghanem make it clear that the new generation of Arab elites in Israel question the official line adhered to by their leader, Ayman Odeh, and look forward to a struggle not for a separate Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza but for a democratic state in the whole country.

Indeed, there are signs that increasing numbers of “liberal Zionists” and veteran two states have shifted the focus of their hopes to the Joint List and, more recently, to Ra‘am (the Islamist, Negev Bedouin party of Mahmoud Abbas) since the latter’s split from the Joint List and its ascendance to power as a member of the Bennett-Lapid-led coalition government. It is impossible to say how many Jews in the large and mixed urban areas voted for the Joint List, but it is known that in the September 2019 election three predominantly Jewish areas contributed 10,000 votes to it. Five months later, in March 2020 that number doubled.16 Meretz, meanwhile, which secured only four Knesset seats in the April 2019 elections, ran as a part of two different electoral unions in September 2019 and March 2020. In those elections Meretz representation fell to only three Members of Knesset. But in March 2021, embracing Arab voters more openly, it won six seats and entered the government. One of its three cabinet ministers was Issawi Frej, from the village of Kfar Qasim.

One grassroots organization, formed in 2015, whose composition, purpose, slogans, and tactics illustrate the OSR’s implications for progressives in Israel, is “Standing Together.” On its website, it states its core beliefs:

We believe that every struggle that we face in Israeli society is connected—
you cannot separate the struggle for peace, from the struggle for equality, from the struggle for social justice. If you are active in the fight for one of these rights in Israeli society, you are intrinsically connected to the fight for another one. Every person living in Israel, whether they be Arab or Jewish, male or female, living in the periphery or in a city center, is impacted by the government’s refusal to afford us of these basic factors for happiness and security.

The intersectionality of these struggles is undeniable—and when we fight for one, we fight for all. If we believe that we deserve to live in a society where peace exists, then we deserve a movement that presents a cohesive alternative to the right-wing in Israel which denies us this reality. That movement is us.17

Another specific example of this kind of struggle is the campaign against the 2017 “Law for the Regularization of Settlement in Judea and Samaria,” aka the “Regularization Law.” In 2017 President Reuven Rivlin sent shock waves through the country when he confronted a large meeting of settler activists with a speech framed in old-fashioned liberal Jabotinsky terms. Rivlin called for Israeli sovereignty to be fully implemented in the entire country, from the river to the sea, including the grant of equal citizenship to all its inhabitants. The occasion for the president’s speech was promulgation of the “Regularization Law,” which retroactively legalized the confiscation of Palestinian private property by Israelis in West Bank settlements. After passage of the law, more than a dozen Israeli organizations submitted petitions to the Supreme Court, sitting as the High Court of Justice, to overturn it. One of these organizations, Adalah: The Legal Center for Minority Rights, is staffed by Arab attorneys who are citizens of Israel. Adalah filed a petition on behalf of seventeen Palestinian village councils in the West Bank, and in 2020 the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the petitioners: it struck down the law as unacceptably discriminatory, mainly on the grounds of it contradicting not international law but rather Israeli constitutional principles of equality and human dignity.18 Thus, as a result of a civil-society–based struggle launched by Arab activists, and supported by liberal Jews and by stalwart right-wing annexationists such as President Rivlin, not only was a measure of justice achieved but also a major precedent was set. All inhabitants of Israel, including noncitizen Arabs living in the West Bank, have rights under Israeli law enforceable in Israeli courts. The fight over this law foreshadows countless struggles that will ensue as the reality of apartheid in territories holding masses of noncitizens collides with global human rights norms and the legal and moral commitments of Israeli democracy, however limited that democracy may be.

The OSR is not a fully formed project or paradigm. The image of the future it implies is a contested future, not a settled outcome. Nor can one design a blueprint for the state that a majority of Jews and Arabs within it would endorse. But
adopting the OSR as a fundamental understanding of what exists, and what does not, offers a secure place to stand and a much more productive and hope-enhancing framework of assumptions, categories, expectations, and questions than the TSS paradigm. And it can do real explanatory work. The puzzle I tried to solve in this chapter is why so many still imagine that the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza will end with Israel's withdrawal from those territories instead of ending, as the occupation of the Western and Central Galilee ended, by changing the terms of their absorption into Israel. By drawing on evidence for how and why deeply embedded scientific beliefs change slowly and jaggedly in response to contrary evidence, I explain why most of those devoted to the success of the TSS have been unable to respond in a timely way to realities that cannot be made to conform to their expectations and hopes. In doing so, my own hope is that disappointed two staters committed to democracy, equality, and mutual respect for nonexclusivist forms of national self-determination can be tempted to try to see the world differently, and thereby to stand as counterexamples to Max Planck's famous (paraphrased) dictum that "science advances, one funeral at a time."
THE ONE STATE REALITY
WHAT IS ISRAEL/PALESTINE?

EDITED BY
MICHAEL BARNETT, NATHAN J. BROWN,
MARC LYNCH, AND SHIBLEY TELHAMI