

From persecuted to persecutor

Though Leibowitz recognized the value of Israel being a sovereign state with supreme authority within its territory, he also warned of the danger that would come from elevating Israel's sovereignty above all else. "Sovereignty is a lofty and precious value for Israel," he said, "for it means that the Jewish people will not be subject to other nations. But elevating the power contained within statehood to a supreme value is a very major source of harm." From the perspective of the government of Israel, the 1967 War was a spectacular victory. Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in less than a week. It also captured the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Leibowitz did not celebrate the win. Instead, he articulated his prediction that Israel would now become the rodef (persecutor) rather than the nirdaf (persecuted) as the Jewish people were in the golah (diaspora) before the 1948 establishment of the state. "What happened in June 1967 transformed Israel," he said in an interview in 1985, "into an instrument for the violent domination of another people; this, I fear, may be the ruin of the state of Israel; Jews here may go the route of the white minority in South Africa." In other words, the day after that victory in 1967 Israel "decided" that it is now engaged in a war of conquest, rather than defense as evidenced by continuous settlement expansion. He even correctly predicted that there may come a day in this war of conquest when "the US may pressure Israel by cutting back aid." He explained in the same interview, lambasting those who think Israel will always be a strategic asset to the US regardless of its actions: "Remember Vietnam? Three American presidents ruined their political careers because of Vietnam. After a while, the American people could stand it no longer, and the US withdrew.

I think it might be the same for Israel; sooner or later, the American people will get tired of supporting our dirty policies. Why shouldn't they? We are mercenaries for America's interests, just as South Vietnam was a regional mercenary for the US. And all the aid we receive from the US is corrupting Israel's society and economy. We invested about \$4 billion in Sinai before we evacuated it, and the Lebanese war cost us about \$3 billion. These are the fruits of colonialism and imperialism." It is important to emphasize how radical Leibowitz's ideas were at the time — almost heretical. After all, European Jews were themselves victims of persecution and genocide only decades before. Leibowitz forced his fellow citizens — many of them concentration camp survivors and refugees — to question whether the trauma of the Holocaust justified the occupation of the Palestinian people. Furthermore, he warned of the negative consequences for both sides of the conflict. "Today, Jews have security everywhere except in the state of Israel," he said, long before the October 7 attack by the Palestinian resistance group Hamas. The occupation, Leibowitz predicted, would corrode Israel's social fabric. It will "bring about a catastrophe for the Jewish people as a whole; it will undermine the social structure that we have created in the state and cause the corruption of individuals, both Jew and Arab." The occupation would also hasten the destruction of democracy in Israel, where Jews enjoy rights and liberties, such as freedom of expression and movement, while in the occupied territories, Palestinians are denied those same freedoms. There can be no true democracy when people are deprived of their civil and political rights, Leibowitz argued. For that reason, he supported conscientious objectors and called on Israeli soldiers to refuse to serve in the occupied territories.



↑ Palestinians look at the aftermath of the Israeli strike on a UN-run school that killed more than 30 people, including 23 women and children, in the Nusseirat refugee camp in the Gaza Strip on June 6, 2024.
● JEHAD ALSHRAFI/AP

Long-term solution over conflict management

Leibowitz also advocated for what is known as a "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is premised on the idea that just as the Jews cannot deny the existence of the Palestinians, the Palestinian people cannot deny the existence of the Jewish people. Both have a right to exist. He believes that the "great victory of 1967" was really a curse in disguise because it prompted some Israelis to think about depriving the Palestinian people of their rights. "(Golda Meir) claimed there was no Palestinian people, but the Palestinians consider themselves to be a people, and that is the decisive point. Most historians and sociologists deny the existence of a Jewish people, most historians and sociologists. However, we are not interested in the opinion of other people as to whether the Jewish people really exists. It's our business. The same goes for the Palestinians; it is not Israel's business to decide whether a Palestinian people exists or does not exist." In his book, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (1992), Leibowitz wrote, "Only one way out of this historically cre-

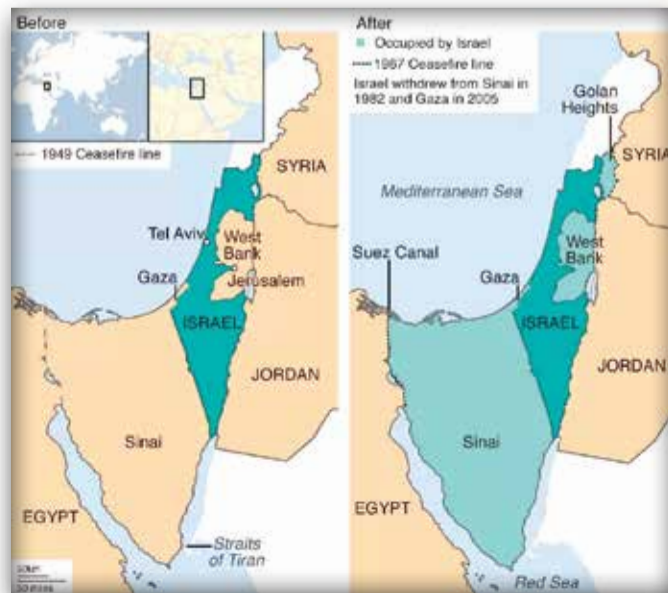
ated impasse is feasible in the present situation, even if neither side recognizes it as just nor finds it really acceptable: partition of the country between the two peoples," recognizing that a two-state solution requires an unconditional withdrawal from occupied lands. After the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, Israel, under the leadership of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), under the leadership of Yasser Arafat, came close to implementing a two-state solution with the backing of the Clinton Administration. But extremists sabotaged the effort. These days, a two-state solution seems like a distant, fading memory. In 2005, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu resigned in protest at the Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Gaza Strip. Since then, right-wing governments — including the current one headed yet again by Netanyahu — have focused more on managing the conflict than on finding a long-term resolution to it through peace negotiations. Although they both supported a two-state

solution, Rabin and Leibowitz were hardly political allies. In 1993, when Leibowitz was set to receive the prestigious Israel Prize, the highest honor the government can bestow, Rabin — who was army chief of staff during the Six-Day War — threatened to boycott the ceremony should organizers proceed with such plans. Rabin objected to the philosopher's persistent call for conscientious objection to military service in the occupied territories. Leibowitz withdrew his nomination but remained a fierce social critic. In early 2023, a group of Israeli reservists announced their refusal to serve in protest of a proposed controversial judicial overhaul led by the religious-nationalist and messianic factions of Netanyahu's government. In an interview for 60 Minutes, members of the organization Ahim La'neshek (Brothers in Arms), called the overhaul "an existential threat" to Israel, echoing the same dire warnings Leibowitz sounded decades ago.

↑ The article was compiled using resources from JSTOR archives.



↑ Israeli protestors carry a large banner that reads "Biden Save Them From Netanyahu" as they call for the Israeli cabinet to press ahead with a deal to release captives held by Hamas and hold early elections, in Tel Aviv, Israel, on June 1, 2024.
● SHUTTERSTOCK



↑ The map on the left shows territories occupied by Israel before the Six-Day War in 1967, while the map on the right shows territories occupied by Israel after the war.
● BBC



↑ Smoke and flames rise over a destroyed building following Israeli attacks on al-Bureij Camp in Deir al-Bureij, Gaza.
● ALI JADALLAH/ANADOLU