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Introduction by James R. Stocker, Trinity Washington University

At the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem in May 2018, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John J. Sullivan paraphrased a comment by President Donald J. Trump that “moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem is first a recognition of reality—a reality many, many years in the making.” While this American act thrilled some and appalled others, few would disagree that the “making” of the “reality” had indeed been ongoing for many years. More precisely, 51 years had passed since Israel occupied the West Bank during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, more than quadrupling the amount of territory under its control and adding at least a million Arab Palestinians under its jurisdiction, including more than 600,000 in the West Bank.

For a nearly equivalent amount of time, scholars have been trying to make sense of the Israeli conquest. Was it a legitimate self-defense measure? A mistake based on a misinterpretation of Arab actions and words? A realization of longstanding territorial aims? And what role did the United States, the Soviet Union, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and other global and regional powers play in these affairs, not to mention the inhabitants of the territory itself?

Some readers may assume that these questions have been adequately answered by the existing literature. After all, the West Bank has been a central object of the Arab-Israeli conflict since its origin, and therefore has received at least indirect attention in virtually every scholarly treatment of the subject. Additionally, many (though not all) of the relevant archival collections have been open for years. Avshalom Rubin’s new book, as well as the comments of the reviewers in this roundtable, remind us, however, that these questions are still in need of attention from historians and other scholars.

Each of the reviewers has praise for Rubin’s work. Janice Gross Stein notes that “Rubin sheds new light on the missed opportunities to at least mitigate the Arab-Israel conflict.” Fred Lawson calls the book “deftly written,” and based on “a foundation of reliable scholarship.” He also praises many specific new insights of the book, including evidence that Syria’s ongoing conflict with Jordan may explain Syrian actions that helped spark the crisis that led to the 1967 War. Ziv Rubinovitz, whose review offers the most comprehensive summary of the book, sees it as a “valuable contribution to the literature on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Six Day War and Israel’s foreign relations.” All three reviewers have positive words for the research that went into the book, noting Rubin’s use of newly released U.S. government documents, Israeli archival material, and Arabic language sources.

That said, each reviewer also offers critiques of the book’s arguments and methodology. Both Stein and Lawson lament that the narrative veers more towards high politics than popular viewpoints. Lawson argues that the title of the book is somewhat misleading, since the work “presents a survey of diplomatic and military relations between Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan from 1948 to 1971,” rather than a study of the individuals who lived in, migrated from, and transplanted themselves into the West Bank. For Stein, the absence of local voices is “more than a passing absence, more than a minor gap.” She wonders if diplomatic historians are even up to the task, claiming that “This absence of the voices of those who lived in the West Bank, it can be argued, is standard for this kind of history. Diplomatic history is, after all, the story at the

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summit, the negotiations between kings and princes, prime ministers and presidents.” While this narrow view of diplomatic history is one that many, if not most, contemporary practitioners of the art have sought to transcend, both Stein and Lawson remind us that there is much left to be done to integrate the perspectives of local inhabitants into the regional and global narratives regarding the 1967 War.

As concerns the main historiographical question—why Israel ended up occupying the West Bank in 1967, despite what seemed to be significant hesitation on the part of its leaders to do so—the reviewers are split on Rubin’s assessment. Rubinovitz largely agrees with what he sees as the “basic argument of the book”: that “contrary to the Israeli narrative, Israel’s leaders did want wider borders [than the 1949 lines]. Yet contrary to the Arab narrative, the Israelis were not determined to expand at any cost.” Stein concurs, coming away from her reading of Rubin’s work convinced that Israel by the mid-1960s had become a “status quo power, deeply invested in the stability of the Hashemite monarch to the east of the Jordan River.” For this reason, its leaders would be loath to take actions that could undermine King Hussein. For Lawson, however, despite the book’s abundant archival research, Rubin does not clearly answer the question of whether Israeli leaders intended to expand their territory. In Lawson’s view, the “main thrust of Rubin’s argument resembles Gershom Gorenberg’s contention that the expansion of Israeli settlements took place inadvertently.”

The reviews contain many other insights that cannot be easily summarized here. Suffice it to say that the entire thread below is well worth reading, not just for its discussion of the historiography of Israeli-Jordanian relations and the role of the West Bank in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but for its reflections on the opportunities and pitfalls awaiting diplomatic historians who seek to shed light on the ‘realities’ of long-running regional conflicts.

Participants:

Avshalom Rubin is a Middle East analyst at the U.S. Department of State. From 2011-2016, he worked in the Department’s Office of the Historian, where he edited and compiled Foreign Relations of the United States volumes on Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli peace process during the Reagan administration. He received his Ph.D. in Middle Eastern history from the University of Chicago in 2010.

James R. Stocker is Assistant Professor of International Affairs at Trinity Washington University. He is the author of Spheres of Intervention: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Collapse of Lebanon, 1967-1976 (Cornell University Press, 2016), and has published articles in the International History Review, the Journal of Cold War Studies, Cold War History, the Middle East Journal, and other publications.

Fred H. Lawson is Visiting Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School and Professor of Government Emeritus of Mills College. He is the author of Why Syria Goes to War (Cornell University Press, 1996), and co-editor of International Relations of the Middle East (Sage, 2015) and Armies and Insurgencies in the Arab Spring (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

Ziv Rubinovitz, Ph.D., is an Israel Institute Teaching Fellow at Sonoma State University. Among his publications: “Blue and White ‘Black September’: Israel’s Role in the Jordan Crisis of 1970,” International

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Review by Fred Lawson, Mills College

So here is yet another book about the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is too soon to hope for the kind of grand synthesis of classical accounts and penetrating critiques—in this case by the so-called New Historians—that have started to be formulated for the global Cold War, and crucial documentary material remains impossible to consult (xiii-xiv). What, then, does Avshalom Rubin bring to the table?

If one takes subtitles seriously, *The Limits of the Land* can be expected to offer a fresh perspective that places the West Bank at the epicenter of the dispute. Such a project would presumably accord primacy to the residents of that fiercely contested territory, and show how the actions and attitudes of the local populace determined pivotal developments in the rivalry among surrounding states. Alternatively, the text could focus on one particular actor, say, the State of Israel, and focus on its dealings with the West Bank. Rubin chooses the latter tack, and proposes to address “two fundamental questions about Israel’s strategy both before and after 1967. First, did Israel’s leaders intend to widen their borders before they went to war? And, if the Israelis did not plan to enlarge their territory, why did they change their minds once the guns fell silent?” (2).

Neither of these questions actually stands at the heart of the study. Instead, Rubin presents a survey of diplomatic and military relations between Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan from 1948 to 1971. The narrative is deftly written and rests on a foundation of reliable scholarship. Yet it is surprisingly conventional. Israeli attacks against Jordan, Syria, and Egypt are consistently “retaliatory” in nature. Israeli policy-makers think only about external threats, not about economic prospects or ideological aspects of territorial aggrandizement. Israel’s decision to develop nuclear armaments was taken as a means to “ultimately ensure Israel’s security” (42). The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) only launched the military operation that captured the West Bank after Israeli commanders “lost patience” with their Jordanian counterparts (167). And so on.

More striking is a comparatively short passage that indicates just how innovative it might have been to tell the story of the Arab-Israeli conflict from a West Bank-centric perspective. The pertinent paragraph, which comes at the very end of Chapter 4 (132-133), deserves to be recapitulated in full:

“The [West Bank] riots of November 1966 dwarfed the protests of April 1963 in scale and intensity. It was the declared aims of the protesters, however, that made this outbreak of unrest so different from the ones that preceded it. The anti-Baghdad Pact protests of late 1955, the demonstrations in support of the al-Nabulsi government in 1957, and the April 1963 riots had all been most intense on the West Bank, and had all drawn upon Palestinian discontent with the [Jordanian] monarchy and its policies. Yet in all of those protests, discontent with the Hashemite regime was expressed in terms of support for Arab unity. This time, specifically Palestinian concerns dominated. Petitions drawn up by “National Leadership” committees in Nablus, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Hebron demanded that the government arm the West Bank’s border villages, give the fida‘iyyn

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free rein, and allow other Arab troops into Jordan. The signatories included some opposition figures, including members of the [Palestine Liberation Organization’s] Executive Committee and the Arab Nationalists Movement, but also included members of the Jordanian parliament, prominent businessmen, and former government ministers. From urban notables in Jerusalem and Nablus to herders and farmers in the border villages in the Hebron hills, West Bankers seemed united in their discontent with the monarchy and their support for Palestinian national self-expression and confrontation with Israel.

Placing events like these at the core of the analysis, and explaining the twists and turns of Israeli-Jordanian interaction in terms of successive shifts in popular mobilization on the West Bank, would constitute a notable and properly revisionist complement to existing accounts.

Rubin’s retelling of Israeli-Jordanian relations does contain some surprises. “In October 1959,” for instance, “when Iraqi Ba’thists nearly assassinated [‘Abd al-Karim] Qasim, [Jordan’s ruler, King] Hussein readied the J[ordanian] A[rab] A[rmy] to invade Iraq. Convinced that a Jordanian invasion would be a fiasco, the Americans and British implored Hussein to stand down, and the king had no choice but to hold back his troops” (33). More important, the authorities in ‘Amman took steps throughout 1966 to subvert the radical Ba’thi leadership that had seized power in Damascus that February (121-123). Perhaps King Hussein’s concerted efforts to weaken, if not overturn, the new Syrian government posed a sufficient threat to prompt Salah Jadid and his colleagues to adopt a markedly belligerent posture toward neighboring countries and encourage Palestinian militants to escalate attacks against Israel. In other words, the upsurge in Syrian bellicosity that sparked the 1967 crisis might turn out to have been the consequence or concomitant of an inter-state conflict spiral, rather than the cause of one.

There can be no doubt that the West Bank played a major role in shaping the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the decades after the occupation. Rubin remarks somewhat antiseptically that “during and after the [June] war, [Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe] Dayan, Central Command chief Uzi Narkiss, and many lower-ranking IDF commanders took steps designed to reduce the size of the West Bank’s population and consolidate Israel’s hold over strategically crucial territory” (184). Debates over how to administer the area kept Israeli policy-makers busy for years (177-191), just as the question of its permanent disposition dominated regional diplomacy and fueled persistent violence (201-242). To what extent post-1967 developments involving the West Bank are distinctive, rather than common to all disputes over lands seized by force of arms, would be worth exploring. Maybe some ambitious graduate student will counterpose Rubin’s discussion of the ways in which the West Bank affected Israeli-Jordanian relations from 1968 to 1970 against the relevant portions of Jean-Pierre Filiu’s remarkable history of contemporary Gaza.2

Did the Israeli leadership intend to augment its domain by incorporating the West Bank? Rubin never quite says. IDF commanders expressed an interest in exercising control over the territory whenever it looked as if Jordan might permit Iraqi troops to take up positions along Israel’s eastern frontier (17-18). Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion “contemplated seizing the West Bank on a few occasions” (19), but never followed through. The 1956 war over “Suez ended without Israel conquering the West Bank, but that outcome was largely a matter of circumstance and chance” (23), and “The IDF’s 1961 war plan, MATTITYAHU, acknowledged that Israel could live comfortably with a Jordanian-controlled West Bank so long as Hussein

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stayed in power” (41). As late as 31 May 1967, General Yitzhak Rabin authorized “Operation PARGOL, a battle plan that called for seizing the West Bank’s central ridge if Jordanian armor assumed offensive positions on the West Bank, if an Iraqi division entered Jordan, or if the JAA attacked Israel” (165).

On the other hand, as internal challenges to King Hussein peaked at the end of April 1963, the Israeli foreign ministry dusted off “contingency plans, probably prepared at the prime minister’s discretion, [which] assumed that Israel would ‘seize strategic positions in the West Bank’ if the monarchy were violently overthrown” (56). At the same time, the IDF’s “Operations Branch and Central Command had prepared plans for the military administration of occupied territory in case they were ordered to implement Plan SHAHAM (‘Granite’), which called for taking the entire West Bank” (56). Such expansive objectives were superseded by more defensively oriented preparations in 1964-1965 (91), but resurfaced in calls by Menachem Begin and Yigal Allon on 5 June 1967 for the IDF to seize all of the land west of the Jordan River (168). A day later, “the cabinet defense subcommittee voted to complete the conquest of the West Bank’s central mountain ridge,” and in the aftermath of that decision “there seemed to be no reason for the IDF not to take the sparsely populated Jordan Valley and establish a more defensible ceasefire line” (169).

Just why Israel ended up taking charge of the whole of the West Bank is therefore no clearer than it was before. The main thrust of Rubin’s argument resembles Gershom Gorenberg’s contention that the expansion of Israeli settlements took place inadvertently.3 And the overall lack of direction persisted through the summer of 1967 (196) and on into the fall (200-201). As the months passed, competing factions inside the Israeli government hardened their respective positions regarding the future of the territory, making it impossible to take decisive action (215). Furthermore, Israeli officials started to use the future of the West Bank as a bargaining chip in their attempts to negotiate with King Hussein (220). Whatever autonomous influence the area might have had on regional affairs steadily evaporated.

*The Limits of the Land* could well serve as a textbook for upper level courses on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indiana University Press has set it up admirably for classroom use, with a helpful list of acronyms, useful maps and photographs of key personages. The book resembles early post-revisionist scholarship on the Cold War, in that it highlights considerations explicitly mentioned in the official record and downplays the long-term, underlying or hidden motivations of the actors involved.4 For that very reason, it skews in the direction of reaffirming the classical viewpoint. It will therefore most likely frustrate anyone persuaded by the contributions of the New Historians, and irritate those who think that the New Historians do not go far enough in their criticisms of Israeli policy.

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The book is well written and thoroughly researched. The use of numerous archives from Israel, the United States, and the United Kingdom is impressive and certainly adds credibility to the conclusions the author reaches. *The Limits of the Land* is an excellent opening to this fascinating topic that is far from historical and is relevant to current affairs.

The basic argument of the book is that “contrary to the Israeli narrative, Israel’s leaders did want wider borders [than the 1949 lines]. Yet contrary to the Arab narrative, the Israelis were not determined to expand at any cost” (3). This is basically true, although it is important to note who is referenced and when. For instance, it has been established that Israel’s first prime minister and defense minister, David Ben-Gurion, wanted to expand Israel’s borders beyond the territory allocated by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 (the Partition Plan, 29 November 1947), but, for tactical reasons, the Jewish Agency which he chaired accepted the Resolution, knowing that the Arabs would reject it, thus providing the Jewish community the pretext to expand its allocated territory in Palestine. But after the 1956 Sinai War, once he saw that the Palestinians had not fled from the Gaza Strip as had occurred in the 1948 war, he concluded that the practice of expanding Israel’s territory in warfare and obtaining vacant territory was over. Therefore he—and most other leaders of the time—no longer aspired for expanding Israel’s territory, knowing that such acts will bring more Arabs under Israel’s rule (24-25, 29, 39).

Hence, Israel concluded that it would not be able to expand its territory and settle in more defensible boundaries. This sense was intensified by the U.S. and Soviet pressures on Israel to withdraw from Sinai after the 1956 war. The reasonable conclusion was that the superpowers would not allow Israel to keep territory it captured in war. Therefore, Israel’s strategy after 1956 included three elements: preserving Jordan’s independence, strengthening strategic ties with the United States, and developing the nuclear program. Together, they should have secured Israel (3). But, as Rubin writes, in 1967 the strategy clearly had not worked, and Israel found itself with Jordan aligning with Egypt (and handing command of its army to an Egyptian general), without the U.S. as an ally (and therefore with no security guarantee to Israel) and with the nuclear program incomplete. Therefore, after the 1967 war, Israel changed its strategy and decided to keep some, if not all, the conquered land.

This seems essentially correct, but the situation was more complicated. On 19 June 1967, the Israeli government approved its secret resolution that included an offer to relinquish the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights in exchange for peace with Egypt and Syria, respectively. The West Bank and Gaza were not included in the resolution because there was no agreement in the Israeli government on their future. Therefore, the argument for keeping the territories did not seem to apply to all territories. Moreover, the fact that the Occupied Territories were populated made keeping them problematic, because Israel would now run the inhabitants’ civil life, not just use the territory for security requirements and remove potential threats to

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1 The Zionist Movement had been struggling with demographics and with the relations with the non-Jewish community from its very early days. Efraim Karsh, “Zionism and the Palestinians,” *Israel Affairs* 14:3 (2008): 355-373.

Israel’s civil population. This means that there was another element in Israel’s considerations regarding the West Bank, and that is ideology and the belief that this area belonged by historical or religious right to the Jewish people, and hence to Israel. These regions are referred by many as the patrimony.

This brings to the front the Israeli attitude to Jordan, which the author deals with throughout the book. Jordan was a relatively weak state with a small army. It appears that Israel believed that it could cope with it well, but the problem was that Jordan’s weakness could allow (willingly or forcefully) a strong Arab army to operate from its territory. Iraq’s army was already stationed in Jordan in 1948 and could come again. That was the serious concern (5), and it was the basis of the strategic alliance between Israel and the Hashemites, which culminated in Israel backing King Hussein’s independence, thus keeping other Arab armies out of Jordan (5). Supporting Hussein was also intended to hinder pan-Arabism in the Middle East on Israel’s eastern front (4-5, 27-28).

Jordan was and is a buffer state, separating much more powerful neighbors. And even though it was quite certain at times that all of its neighbors would like to tear Jordan apart, they could not because of Jordan’s other neighbors. In general, it was Israel that prevented Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia from doing so, as well as these Arab countries balancing one another. Israel’s defense depended on Jordan. For Jordan, Israel was its more stable backer. This was the basis of the tacit alliance. But it was fragile, and depended on the King’s survival in power, balancing between domestic and foreign pressures. In Israel, many people saw Jordan as illegitimate. Even Secretary of State John Foster Dulles referred to Jordan as an artificial state (33). Revisionist Zionism had held that position since 1922 when the British partitioned Palestine to create Trans-Jordan, and in Israel, the Herut Party that emerged from Revisionism held this position and refused to recognize Jordan as a legitimate state.³ The fact that they were in the opposition until 1967 made their positions less relevant, although as the Israeli right rose to power, their views were a matter of concern. Menachem Begin himself held this basic Revisionist position but moderated its practical implication from the 1960s onward,⁴ and eventually when he became prime minister in 1977, called on King Hussein to make peace with Israel.⁵

The book is very detailed on the run-up to the 1967 war but could have been tighter in its discussion of the post-1967 era. The most significant point is King Hussein’s decision to disconnect from the West Bank in 1988. It seems odd that the Palestinian Intifada (uprising), which started in December 1987, seven months before the King declared Jordan’s disengagement from the West Bank, is not mentioned at all. Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) declared the establishment of a Palestinian State in November 1988, which was merely a symbolic act. But this context, mostly the Intifada, is significant in understanding the King’s final decision to disassociate Jordan from the West Bank. The Palestinians were


taking a separate track, and King Hussein recognized that. This act allowed King Hussein to start consolidating Jordan without irredentist considerations—at least none from Jordan itself, although the Palestinians, on either bank of the Jordan River, might have had other feelings and aspirations. And no less important, with King Hussein’s disassociation from the West Bank, he placed the Palestinian issue on Israel’s doorstep, forcing Israel—five years later—to come to terms with the PLO, and in retrospect most importantly, this act allowed Israel and Jordan to reach a peace agreement in 1994. By then, there was no territorial dispute between the two neighboring countries, and after the Oslo Accords were signed, the strategic setting pushed King Hussein to make peace with Israel in order to save Jordan’s interests in the West Bank and mostly in Jerusalem. By then, due to the dynamics of the Oslo process, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was willing to recognize Jordan’s role in Jerusalem and sign it into the peace treaty, believing that Jordan would not always side with the Palestinians, and thus Jordan might balance them.

Before the 1967 war, Israel’s political and military leadership believed that the superpowers would not allow it to keep any Arab occupied land. Therefore, it appears, the war plans were designed to remove the imminent threat. But as the war developed, Israel captured vast territories. And Israel found out shortly after the war that it had been wrong; the U.S. did not join the Soviet Union in denouncing Israel and demanding withdrawal. Thus, there was no pressure to withdraw (184). But, as Rubin points out, the U.S. did not support Israel’s staying in the territories and began pressing for an Israeli peacemaking policy (216).

Arabs did flee from the West Bank and Gaza but most of the population did not, unlike in 1948. Consequently, any thought of annexing the territory became unattractive. The alternatives were either to return the territory to Jordan, perhaps under new rules, some sort of joint rule with Jordan, and establishing a Palestinian state tied to Israel or an autonomy under Israeli control.

The change of control over the West Bank from Jordan to Israel solved nothing. The Palestinians who had been Jordanian citizens since 1950 remained in place but now were under Israeli occupation. Israel aspired for the territory, but Jordan had never given up its own aspirations, which go back to the 1922 partition. King Abdullah I had always wanted to have historic Palestine as part of his kingdom, and, shortly before Israel was founded, even suggested to the Jewish Agency’s head of the political department, Golda Meyerson (Meir), that he take over Palestine to prevent the coming war. The Jordanian takeover of the territory known as the West Bank had been in that spirit, as well as the annexation of the territory in 1950.

The final chapter deals with the rising tensions in Jordan in 1969-1970, which culminated in a civil war and in Syrian intervention that Israel was instrumental in halting. Rubin argues that by 1970 influential Israelis

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7 Raz, “The Generous Peace Offer that was Never Offered.”


9 Podeh, *Chances for Peace*, 47-57.
were willing to see Hussein and the Hashemites removed and a Palestinian government take command of Jordan, but eventually Israel lined up with the U.S. due to the latter’s determination that Hussein should survive in power (248). It is true that there were talks of “Jordan is Palestine” which meant that Jordan—mostly inhabited by Palestinians—should be led by the Palestinian majority, even the PLO, instead of the Hashemite Kingdom (a demographic minority ruling the majority). The logic was that if Jordan were de facto Palestine, Israel could claim that the Palestinian aspiration for independence had been met and the pressures on Israel to relinquish the West Bank would decline.

A mixture of individuals held variations of this idea, some from the Labor camp, though concentrating in Rafi (Ben-Gurion’s party since he broke away from Mapai in 1965), and some from the Revisionist camp. Minister of Transportation and Communications, Shimon Peres (from Rafi), certainly thought that Hussein was replaceable (270). Generals Ariel Sharon and Rehavam Zeevi also supported making Jordan into Palestine. Menachem Begin rejected the slogan that Jordan was Palestine, arguing that it implied that Israel had no claim for Jordan, while in his Revisionist view, it had. Begin’s colleagues in Gahal certainly objected to the Hashemite regime. But they were a minority in the Israeli leadership, and in August 1970, one month before the Jordan crisis, Gahal resigned from the unity government and returned to the opposition, which virtually silenced their voice in Israel’s decision-making.

In the leadership that was making the calls in September 1970, there was no one who seriously considered allowing the PLO to take over Jordan. Except for one hint that Israel’s then Ambassador to Washington, Yitzhak Rabin, gave to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger that Israel’s best interest might not be served by saving Hussein (“…does not correspond exactly with our political aims”), there is no indication that the Israeli leadership was seriously considering allowing the PLO to take over Jordan, sponsored by Syria. However, Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Allon wrote to Rabin privately during the crisis that “if the Kingdom of Jordan disintegrates and its neighbors bite parts of it, we [Israel] hold it our right to do as we understand proper.”

This seems logical, if (and perhaps, only if) Jordan fell apart. Otherwise, and despite all of Hussein’s misgivings and weaknesses, the Israeli leadership preferred him in power over any alternative, and this was the major mobilizer for Israel’s decision to accept the U.S. request to operate in Jordan, even if its action was eventually no more than mobilizing forces and sending one sortie over the Syrian forces. That turned out to be enough. Concerning Rubin’s assertion that Israel’s decision to help Hussein as a result of its wish not to part with the U.S. (248), this seems somewhat overstated. Israel certainly wanted to improve its status in

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12 Allon to Rabin, telegram 939, [no date, but it is 21 September 1970], *Israel State Archives* A 7529/7.

American eyes, but Hashemite Jordan was important not just to the U.S., but also to Israel, and therefore it seems that there was a merging of interests to save King Hussein. 

There is one minor error in the book: Zerach Warhaftig was not minister of justice in 1967 (155), Yaacov-Shimshon Shapira held the position. Warhaftig was minister of religious affairs.

In conclusion, this is a valuable contribution to the literature on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Six Day War and Israel’s foreign relations.

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The ‘West Bank,’ a small but strategically located territory that lies between Israel and Jordan, has only been known by that name for a short period in its history. Its geography clearly has not changed; it has always been west of the Jordan River, south of the Litani River, east of the Mediterranean Sea, and north of the desert. When it is described as the West Bank, however, its name comes not principally from its relationship to the Jordan River, but rather from its political relationship to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The name is new but the contestation over the territory is thousands of years old and its name has changed many times throughout its history. Even today, Palestinians describe it as Palestine, many Israelis describe it in the Biblical language of Judea and Samaria, and Jordanians still think of it as the West Bank of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Avshalom Rubin, in his *The Limits of the Land: How the Struggle for the West Bank Shaped the Arab-Israeli Conflict,* makes a choice when he names the territory. This diplomatic history, which covers the history of this piece of land from 1949 to 1970, unconsciously mirrors everything that is right and everything that is wrong with our understanding of the ‘West Bank’ and its impact on the Arab-Israel conflict. Drawing on newly opened archives in Washington and Jerusalem, and a rich reading of public Arabic sources, Rubin paints a picture of how the states in the region and the great powers that supported them crafted their strategies to control this small piece of land. In this book, the West Bank is territory that is coveted both by Israel and Jordan, a source of conflict, the focus of strategy and manoeuvre. In the process of telling this story, Rubin sheds new light on the missed opportunities to at least mitigate the Arab-Israel conflict.

What is missing, however, from the diplomatic narrative is an account of the people who lived between the Jordan River and Israel from 1949 to 1967 as part of the Kingdom of Jordan, and, then after the war in 1967, under occupation by Israel. These people are largely absent from the story until 1967, and even after, play very minor roles, popping in and out of the narrative only as they relate to the fortunes of King Hussein of Jordan. The absence of Palestinians who live in the ‘West Bank,’ or Palestine as they call the place they live, mirrors their absence from the stories that Israel’s and Jordan’s leaders tell. And it is their absence rather than their presence that contributes to the ongoing conflict that Rubin describes.

What do we learn from a diplomatic history that focuses on the thinking of the leaders of Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, the Soviet Union, and the United States from 1949 to 1970? A great deal. First, Israel’s leaders, who in these years came from the labor movement, from the left of the political spectrum, nevertheless wanted the West Bank as part of the newly created state of Israel. Some wanted it for strategic reasons because it was so obvious how vulnerable Israel was to a strike by an Arab army that would cut Israel in two at its narrow neck. Others wanted it because they looked back to a biblical promise and a biblical story. Remarkably, however, after President Dwight Eisenhower forced Prime Minister Ben Gurion to withdraw from the Sinai in 1956, Israel’s leaders reluctantly accepted that the West Bank was beyond their reach, that it would remain part of Jordan that had annexed the territory conceived by the United Nations in 1948 as Palestine. Israel became, in other words, a status quo power, deeply invested in the stability of the Hashemite monarch to the east of the Jordan River. Had President Gamal Nasser of Egypt, largely for domestic political reasons, not upset the status quo in 1967, the ‘West Bank’ would still be part of Jordan.

A second theme that runs lightly through the narrative is Israel’s determination, beginning in the 1950s, to acquire nuclear weapons to offset its lack of strategic depth and its vulnerability to Arab ground forces that
could cross the Jordan River, move quickly to the mountain ridges, and snap the state in two. Since the geography could not be changed, some of Israel’s leaders thought that only a nuclear weapon could deter an all-out Arab attack. That thinking was controversial, not only within Israel’s leadership, but also in Washington. How valid was it? Did nuclear weapons deter?

Rubin does not explore this question but the evidence now seems conclusive. President Nasser took the gamble that he did in May of 1967 partly to outrun Israel’s race to acquire a nuclear weapon. Once such a capability was in place, the Egyptian president implied, a ground attack to wipe Israel off the map would become impossible. Rubin, citing a third-party source, asserts that Israel assembled two primitive nuclear weapons during those long three weeks in May of 1967. More persuasive is evidence from the archives of Saddam Hussein, captured by U.S. forces, that suggests even more strongly that Saddam was deterred from using chemical weapons against Israel because of its credible capability to retaliate with nuclear weapons.

This story can only be read as troubling. Israel’s leaders, not confident of their capacity to defend against an Arab attack and resigned to the provisional borders in the ‘east,’ alongside the West Bank of Jordan, turned to nuclear weapons to compensate. A sense of strategic vulnerability is clearly one major driver of leaders’ decisions to acquire or develop nuclear weapons.

Would Israel have been less determined to develop nuclear weapons if it had controlled the West Bank from the beginning and felt less vulnerable to a strategic attack by Arab armies? This kind of counterfactual question is almost impossible to answer, but it seems unlikely that Israel would not have moved to develop a nuclear weapon at some point in the last fifty years. Asymmetries in the size of Israel’s population and military forces, compared to its Arab neighbors, would likely have pushed in the direction of nuclearization.

Third, an ‘independent Palestinian state’ makes only a fleeting appearance in Rubin’s story. In the aftermath of the war in 1967, when all the pieces of the jigsaw were scrambled in just six days, some of Israel’s leaders flirted briefly with the creation of a demilitarized Palestinian state between Israel and Jordan. They saw it as a solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees and as a strategic buffer against Arab armies that might be tempted to cross the Jordan River.

The flirtation did not last long. It was defeated by King Hussein of Jordan, President Lyndon Johnson in Washington, by divisions within Israel’s Cabinet, and, most notably, by ‘notables’ living in the West Bank. The King strongly opposed the loss of the western part of Jordan, even though the West Bank had consistently been an economic burden. President Johnson was focused on a more general peace settlement and Israel’s Cabinet could not make up its mind what to do with the West Bank and felt no urgency to do so.

Most interesting are the all-too-brief descriptions Rubin provides of the reactions of leaders in the West Bank. Long-standing Palestinian mayors, many representatives of old families and tribes, worried about jeopardizing their families and businesses that were located on both sides of the Jordan River. Mayors and former mayors of Jerusalem, Hebron, and Bethlehem, along with associations of women, lawyers, doctors, and engineers, announced their loyalty to King Hussein and their commitment to the unity of the two banks. In Nablus, historically a stronghold of opposition to the Hashemite monarchy, Hamdi Kan’an, then the mayor, was able briefly to organize a general strike in opposition to independence under Israel’s auspices. Moshe Dayan, then the newly minted Minister of Defense in Israel, read the political tea leaves and quickly put in place arrangements that allowed West Bankers to maintain their economic ties with Jordan and pulled Israel back from day-to-day administration of the occupied territories. And so began the long struggle that still goes on.
today. It was the end of the territorial struggle over the West Bank that made space for the political struggle for the future of Palestine.

Where are these voices of ‘West Bank notables’ from 1949 to 1967, the period when the ‘West Bank’ is part of Jordan? This is the historical period that Rubin covers most extensively. Where are the Husseinis, the Nashashibis, the Nuseibehs, the Khalidis, the distinguished Palestinian families in this two-decade long history of the West Bank? They are almost completely absent from the story, drowned out by the Hashemite king, his strategic calculations, and his relationship with Israel.

This is more than a passing absence, more than a minor gap. This is after all a book about the West Bank and its implications for the Arab-Israel conflict. Yet, it is almost as though the West Bank itself is uninhabited, leaderless, without voice, valued only as strategic depth or strategic buffer. It was valued as well for the relationship that developed between King Hussein and Israel’s leaders who often met secretly with him and came to his defence more than once when he was threatened by the ‘Palestinians’ living in the East Bank.

This absence of the voices of those who lived in the West Bank, it can be argued, is standard for this kind of history. Diplomatic history is, after all, the story at the summit, the negotiations between kings and princes, prime ministers and presidents. And that is a fair answer. Moreover, I suspect that very little attention is devoted in any of the official documents in the archives to the Palestinian leaders in the West Bank. At best, there may be records and correspondence in Jordan of political negotiations between the notables and the Court. It is not surprising then that a diplomatic history of the West Bank should be almost exclusively about the West Bank as territory, with so little attention to the mayors and governors that shaped its past and continue to shape its future.

That history, however, badly needs to be written, even if diplomatic historians cannot do it. The stories of Palestinian mayors and city councils, the tightly connected families that structured political authority, and the complex negotiations that went on between Palestinians and the Bedouin leaders who surrounded the King and the officers who commanded the army, need to be told. It is these stories that give texture and shape to the emergence of Palestinian leaders ‘inside’ the West Bank, distinct from those who were expelled or fled and came back to lead Palestine from the ‘outside.’ It is these stories that change the status of the West Bank from ‘territory,’ as it is described in Rubin’s book, to a ‘place’ that is populated by people with memories and attachments to the land.

It is these stories, alongside the stories of some Israelis, that create the contestation over claims not principally to territory, but more important, to ‘home.’ Without these stories, we are left with an incomplete understanding of “the limits of the land” and of the Arab-Israel conflict.
Author’s Response by Avshalom Rubin, U.S. Department of State

I thank Thomas Maddux for organizing this roundtable, James Stocker for writing the introduction, and the reviewers for taking the time to carefully read my book and offer both praise and incisive criticism. I would likely to briefly address my readers’ critiques of the book.

Fred Lawson’s and Janice Gross Stein’s principal critique of the book is that it is focused on the inter-state diplomacy over the West Bank rather than the lives and views of its Palestinian residents, which in their view, should be front and center. I certainly have no objection to the study of Palestinian social history, and to the extent that socio-political developments on the ground shaped the broader course of the diplomacy of this period, have tried to highlight them. But fundamentally, a book cannot be about everything and still be coherent, and that means that we historians have to focus on what we think is really driving the events at the heart of our story. In my case, I chose not to explain Israeli-Jordanian relations in this period in terms of “successive shifts in popular mobilization,” as Lawson advocates, because I do not think this would give the reader an accurate picture of what actually happened.

I agree—and make clear—that Palestinian popular discontent with the prewar status quo played a key role in the coming of the 1967 war and the collapse of the Israeli-Jordanian entente. Indeed, I devote an entire chapter to it (see chapter 4). But Palestinian popular mobilization was just one of many determining factors in how the struggle for the West Bank played out. Israeli domestic politics, trends in the broader Cold War, the waxing and waning of Pan-Arabism, and the changing availability of different types of military technologies all also shaped how Israel and Jordan’s leaders made decisions regarding the West Bank. And, contra Lawson, I do not think that the story of the political and military decision-making by Israeli and Jordanian decisionmakers prior to the 1967 war and in its aftermath is so well understood that our attention should be focused solely upon its social underpinnings. Books like Limits, Avi Raz’s The Bride and the Dowry, and Guy Laron’s The Six Day War: The Breaking of the Middle East that have appeared within the last five years are full of findings that are absent from works like Michael Oren’s Six Days of War and Tom Segev’s 1967—the first major efforts to reconstruct the history of the war based on comprehensive documentary evidence. Important documents such as the minutes of the Israeli cabinet defense sub-committee from this period were still in the process of being released when my book was published. If someone chooses to write a history of popular mobilization on the West Bank during this period, I will be happy to read it—but surely there is a place in the historiography for both this sort of social history and further analysis of governmental decision-making.

Speaking of historiography, Lawson interestingly compares my book to scholarship by Cold War post-revisionists. I agree with this comparison, although not because I accept his contention that the common thread between Limits and post-revisionist scholarship is a tendency to downplay the “underlying” or

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1 The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the United States government.

“hidden” motivations of the actors involved. What I do think *Limits* has in common with Cold War post-revisionist scholarship is that it portrays its subjects as much more constrained and the courses of action that they took as more contingent than was depicted in prior revisionist scholarship. Both the Cold War revisionists and the Israeli New Historians tended to see their subjects as unconstrained by domestic politics, bureaucracy, or the international environment; to borrow Lawson’s phrase, their “hidden motivations” determined how events played out. But a close look at Israeli policy toward the West Bank during the decade leading up to 1967 war reveals that even the most powerful “hidden motivations” sometimes hit a wall.

From 1957-1967, Israel’s leaders, and especially military commanders, generally did not see anything immoral about territorial expansion, and ideally, would have preferred to conquer the West Bank and transform it into some sort of Palestinian dependency. Until the mid-1960s, they had no reason to believe that Jordan could survive as an independent state, and lived in fear of the day that the Hashemite kingdom would be absorbed by its Arab neighbors, leaving Israel with a far more powerful Arab entity abutting its narrow coastal plain. The experience of the 1956 Sinai Campaign, in which the superpowers forced Israel to rapidly withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, taught them that the best they could probably hope for in the short-term was for the West Bank to remain controlled by a reasonably weak and pliable ruler, one who had no interest in uniting Jordan with its neighboring Arab states—like King Hussein. “I do not see any danger in Hussein, even if I don’t love him,” Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion remarked in 1958, and it was this imperfect status quo that the Israelis sought to preserve until the eve of the 1967 war. ³ The hope was that over time, Jordan would become more independently viable, but more importantly, that changes to the Arab-Israeli military balance would render the problems of strategic depth bound up with the West Bank issue irrelevant. “Victory over the Arabs will cost us dearly,” Ben-Gurion told his cabinet in 1963. “We are interested in having a deterrent that will make an attack on us inconceivable to them.”⁴

In other words, the question of whether Israel harbored “hidden” revanchism, is, for the 1957-1967 period, not really the heart of the story. Powerful currents in the international system—namely, the superpowers’ unwillingness to permit Israel to conquer more territory—played a much larger role in shaping Israeli policy than ideological attachment to notions of a Greater Israel or residual frustration over having not conquered the West Bank in 1948. “We cannot just go and conquer the West Bank, and we know this in our hearts,” admitted Deputy Defense Minister Shimon Peres, the architect of Israel’s nuclear program and Ben Gurion’s protégé, in 1965. ⁵ Indeed, when Israeli leaders did intervene to try to change the course of American policy toward Jordan during this period, it was usually to coax the United States to take a stronger interest in preserving Jordan’s independence.

So how do we explain the sea change in Israeli policy that occurred after the 1967 war? Was it just a matter of “hidden motivations” finally asserting themselves? On the one hand, there is no question that the war and the conquest of additional territory, especially the Biblical heartland of the West Bank, spurred not only religious Zionists, but also the secular right and hawkish Laborites like Yigal Allon and Moshe Dayan, to rediscover the

³ Cabinet minutes, 17 July 1958, Israel State Archives (ISA).

⁴ Cabinet minutes, 5 May 1963, ISA.

⁵ Minutes of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol’s meeting with senior security officials, 21 February 1965, ISA/A/7936/6.
essentially expansionist ethos of the Zionist movement’s founders. But at the same time, I do not think that Israel’s revanchists would have felt that they either could or needed to act as they did if the basic geopolitical context in which they operated had not dramatically changed.

The eruption of the 1967 war made clear that Ben-Gurion’s search for a “deterrent that will make an attack on us inconceivable” had not achieved the desired results. Nuclear non-proliferation was not a superpower priority when Israel inaugurated its atomic program in the 1950s, but it certainly was by 1967. This meant that the vaunted “deterrent” that Peres and Ben-Gurion sought could never be employed in the kind of overt way that they may have originally envisioned. Therefore, Israel’s lack of strategic depth would continue to matter. And therefore, once Israel acquired additional territory during the 1967 war, its leaders saw greater logic in expansionism than they had beforehand. It is no accident that Yigal Allon, probably the most articulate prewar critic of Israel’s nuclear program, was also the architect of a plan for redrawing the West Bank’s borders that enjoyed broad support within the Labor Party well into the 1980s.

Moreover, unlike in the post-Suez years, Israel’s government could entertain plans such as Allon’s because it was clear that the United States would not force Israel to surrender its conquests without some form of negotiated settlement. An Eisenhower-style policy was not feasible for the Johnson administration and its successors, not just for domestic political reasons (as is widely assumed), but also because concerns about nuclear proliferation also impacted the U.S. willingness to press Israel for territorial concessions. “One of the consequences of pursuing an Arab-Israeli settlement that would require Israel to give up the security provided by expanded borders is that we would probably have to relax on the nuclear issue,” National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger wrote to President Richard Nixon in 1969.6

Finally, Ziv Rubinovitz argues that I somewhat overstate the Israeli leadership’s ambivalence about King Hussein’s survival, and specifically, over whether it was in Israel’s best interest to take steps to help preserve his regime in September 1970. “In the leadership that was making the calls in September 1970,” he argues, “there was no one who seriously considered allowing the PLO to take over Jordan.” Was Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, who argued strenuously against intervention on Hussein’s behalf, not part of this leadership? Certainly, even if the anti-Hashemite position did not ultimately win out, the fact that the powerful Dayan advocated for it means that it should be regarded as more than the argument of a few less influential hardliners.

Likewise, Rubinovitz’s claim that Israel’s decision to take military steps to deter the PLO’s Syrian allies reflected its leaders’ sincere desire to keep Hussein in power, and not mainly a desire to appear responsive to American requests, is belied by the evidence. By September 1970, King Hussein, who had effectively lost control of much of his kingdom to the PLO and presented an obstacle to the consolidation of Israeli control over the West Bank, no longer seemed as useful to Israel’s leaders—and not just on the political right. “The world would not come to an end if [Hussein] departed from the scene,” Foreign Minister Abba Eban—usually regarded as one of Israel’s more pro-Hashemite officials—told Nixon’s UN Ambassador, Charles Yost,

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in the midst of the September 1970 crisis. Yet the Israelis rightfully assumed that letting Hussein fall would alienate the United States, whose backing they felt they needed more than ever in light of the unprecedented threat they faced from the Soviet Union, which had militarily intervened in Egyptian-Israeli fighting along the Suez Canal line earlier that year.

All in all, however, these are the sort of issues over which historians can reasonably disagree. I thank all of the reviewers for their close reading of my book and thoughtful and stimulating engagement with its arguments, and to Thomas Maddux for organizing this roundtable.

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