



War and Peace, Israel-Style

***Israeli Foreign Policy:
A People Shall Not Dwell Alone***
by Uri Bialer
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The book by Prof. (emeritus) Uri Bialer about Israel's foreign policy opens by closing a circle. Bialer reports that one of the experiences that sparked his interest in the history of Israeli foreign policy was a course he took in 1970 with Prof. Michael Brecher at the Hebrew University. Brecher, a famous and prolific political scientist from McGill University in Canada, who at age 95 is still active in the field, published in 1972 the most important academic study on Israeli foreign policy: *The Foreign Policy System of Israel: Setting, Images, Process* (Brecher, 1972). Three years later he followed with another important work the topic, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy* (Brecher, 1975). The two books, writes Bialer, "laid the foundations for the discipline, and these foundations are still standing today" (p. 1).

This is perhaps a subtle way of saying what Prof. Dov Waxman wrote in 2003: "Given the vast, some would say inordinate, amount of media attention that Israel receives, one would expect scholars of International Relations (IR) to have

devoted considerable attention to studying Israeli foreign policy. Surprisingly, they have not" (Waxman, 2003).

Bialer attributes this state of affairs to the paucity of primary sources. The clandestine nature of diplomacy during the pre-state period, Bialer suggests, carried over into the statehood era, due in part to the sense of threat from surrounding nations. The result was that not much was recorded, a tradition of internal reporting was not established, and later, legal mechanisms were used to hide discussions of sensitive issues such as the Palestinian refugees or energy procurement. The difficulties, writes Bialer, continue into the present: important actors in the Israeli foreign policymaking process, such as the Ministry of Defense, the IDF, and the Mossad make it difficult to access their documents, or simply do not allow such access. In the IDF archive, some 50,000 documents have been fully declassified out of approximately one million. Documents in the state archive are also only partially accessible: only one-sixth of the documents are available for viewing.

This may also be a result of developments in the scholarly community. Traditional diplomatic history is in decline in the ivory tower. One study found that the percentage of history departments that employ at least one diplomacy historian declined from 74.8 percent in 1975 to 45.9 percent in 2005 (Nickles, 2011). Departments of political science and international relations add to the challenge with their current intellectual incentive structure, which gives preference to comparative work and not in-depth research of a particular state, with the goal of extracting broad principles valid beyond a specific time or place. As Michael Barnett has shown, the use of the Israeli case in comparative politics research is also uncommon, given that Israel does not fit comfortably into familiar categories such as developed/developing, Western/non-Western, post-colonial/non-post-colonial (Barnett, 1996). Bialer reviews some of the works in this field (including sources published in the excellent

series of the State Archives volumes *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel*) as background for his effort to fill this vacuum.

Unlike Bialer's other work, this book does not deal with a specific era or issue on the basis of primary sources, but rather gives a broad overview of Israeli foreign policy, based particularly on secondary sources. The book's central thesis is that the overarching goal of Israeli foreign policy "from the outset and to this day has been to build a state and to ensure its existence; its political, economic, and social fortitude; and its security."

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The book includes eleven chapters that are organized in four sections. The first section is dedicated to the roots of Israeli foreign policy. Bialer locates the first layer of the "historical mound" (p. 9) that is the basis of Israeli foreign policy in the Jewish lobby in Europe in the 18th and especially the 19th century. This lobby, such as the efforts by Sir Moses Montefiore to assist the Jews of Damascus in coping with the blood libel of 1840, derived from a sense of Jewish solidarity in structural circumstances of weakness and reliance on others to provide personal and communal safety. The result of this legacy, notes Bialer, is twofold. On the one hand it served as fuel for antisemitic claims about Jewish global power; on the other, it was a source of strength for Zionist and Israeli diplomatic activity, to the extent that over the years "Israel's foreign ministers regularly instructed their diplomats not to correct this [the] impression" of many states, especially in the Third World, that the path to Washington goes through Jerusalem (p. 324).

Sporadic intercessions on behalf of Jewish communities were transformed by Benjamin Zeev Herzl into a concentrated political effort to create a permanent solution to Jewish existential weakness. He sought to do so by gaining international recognition that would lead to the granting of a charter to Jews to establish a national home. The struggle for international recognition continues in some senses until the present day, such as the efforts by Prime Minister Netanyahu to secure American recognition of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and parts of the West Bank.

Bialer then moves onto the British Mandate era, which he calls "the most important formative period for Israeli diplomacy and foreign policy" (p. 20). In this chapter he analyzes the importance of relations with the British, and afterwards with the United States and the Soviet Union, particularly regarding the UN General Assembly vote in 1947 on the future of the territory. He also discusses relations with the Palestinians, specifically around an assessment

formulated during the 1940s that there was nothing to be expected from diplomatic contacts with the Palestinians and with most Arab states. Alongside this approach Bialer looks at the dialogue established with the Hashemites, which was considered the preferred avenue for dealing with the Palestinian issue. Both geography and demography suggest that eight decades later, the Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian triangle remains at the center of the various future territorial scenarios for the State of Israel.

Two additional chapters in the “deep” historical portion of the book concern the period of the state-in-the-making—the efforts to establish the state, and the legacy of the War of Independence. Here emphasis is placed on the political department of the Jewish Agency, the institutional basis from which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Mossad later emerged. The chapter makes it clear that current claims that too many different bodies are involved in Israeli foreign policy have a long history: alongside the political department, this early period also saw a long list of other private and institutional actors, including the JNF and other Jewish Agency departments, such as the *aliya* department and the economic department.

The second section of the book deals with three strategic aims of Israeli foreign policy: international recognition, energy supply (a subject on which Bialer wrote a separate book [Bialer, 1999]), and *aliya* to Israel. In his analysis of international recognition (including recognition by Arab states) he points to lesser-known episodes such as Israel’s relations with the People’s Republic of China during the 1950s, when Israel had to balance its desire to be recognized by as many states as possible with its need to maintain its relations with the United States. The balance led to a cautious Israeli recognition of the People’s Republic of China, without diplomatic relations. Similarly, Bialer analyzes Spanish courtship of Israel and the decision in Jerusalem to conduct a dual policy: on the one hand, to reject formal relations with Spain (which was still ruled by Hitler’s former

ally, Francisco Franco); on the other hand to station representatives in Madrid to deal with trade, culture, tourism, and intelligence. Bialer shows that in all three fields—recognition, energy, and *aliya*—Israel worked to achieve strategic goals, even when it was forced to make tactical compromises.

The book’s third section deals with three strategic relationships that Israel has conducted over the years: with France, with African states, and with the US. In this section Bialer also sheds light on forgotten niches of history that make broader trends more clear, such as the way in which Paris tied recognition of Israel in 1948, to its desire to safeguard rights that French institutions (monasteries, hospitals, and schools) in the land enjoyed since the Ottoman era. He effectively describes these arrangements, which were tested during forgotten crises, such as when Israeli pressure to stop breeding swine in the French monastery in Ein Karem in 1963 generated real tension in the relations between the two countries.

In the second chapter of this section, Bialer discusses the singularity of Israeli-African relations from the 1950s to the 1970s. Unlike Israel’s relations with many other states, the relations with Africa were particularly motivated by ideological and humanitarian reasons. Subsequently the relations changed dramatically from significant closeness in the 1960s to the “fiasco” (p. 243) of the 1970s, when dozens of states across the continent cut off diplomatic relations with Israel.

In the chapter on Israel-US relations, Bialer admits that these relations have a “rich historiography” (p. 254). He gives an overview of central questions that have occupied researchers, including the special relationship, ethical vs. material components, and the role of American Jews in the equation. Israeli-American dynamics regarding the Israeli nuclear project in the 1960s are also surveyed. The welding of these two different parts somewhat weakens the sharpness of the claims made in this chapter

and its contribution to a unified and coherent thesis for this section of the book.

The fourth and final section, which deals with peace processes, has two chapters: one about the peace agreement made with Egypt in 1979, and the other an epilogue, which presents a broad overview and summary of some of the book's claims, while also relating to other topics. In the chapter on the peace agreement with Egypt, much attention is paid to the Egyptian stance on the strategic need to end the fighting with Israel, while showing reluctance to move forward with normalization. The chapter highlights the difficulty in separating political from security issues, as Bialer seeks to do. For example, he writes that Israel's major aim in making peace with Egypt was and remains to "eliminate Egypt's role in the cycle of war" (p. 307), and quotes Amos Gilad, who said that peace with Egypt is "a cornerstone of Israeli national security" (p. 314). The chapter relates briefly to events over the last few decades, such as the storming of the Israeli embassy in Egypt in 2011, but does not reach conclusions on the influence of Egypt's current domestic and international challenges on the questions of recognition and normalization.

The short epilogue discusses various issues, including Israel's efforts to join the European Common Market in the late 1950s, the Oslo Accords, and a review of some of the book's central theses. After the major effort invested in the preceding chapters, the reader is left wishing for a more comprehensive and focused conclusion that would further sharpen the components of the new analytic approach promised at the beginning of the book.

This is an important book in two respects. First, it makes clear the importance of the "civilian" components of Israel's foreign relations and their place in the strategic aim of building and developing the state. The military threats against the State of Israel and the strength of its security establishment (including in the field of foreign policy) have over the years blurred the boundary between foreign and security affairs,

in practice and in research. Inter alia, senior military figures have been appointed over the years to influential foreign policy positions, from the appointment of outgoing IDF Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin as ambassador to Washington in 1968 up until the appointment of former Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi as foreign minister in May 2020. Even in the Knesset, foreign policy and security are overseen by the same committee, which in the past was headed by retired senior security personnel such as generals (including two former Chiefs of Staff), and the heads of the Israel Security Agency. Similarly, much of the research on Israeli foreign policy is organized around wars and the agreements reached in their aftermath. Bialer's book reminds us that physical defense is just one dimension of the ultimate aim of building the state, and the ways in which foreign policy has helped serve that aim.

Second, the genealogical research of the roots of Israel's foreign policy allows a deeper understanding, not only of the historic development of the aims and institutions of Israeli foreign policy, but of the structural reality that shaped them, and especially the significance of the relative weakness of Jews and of the Zionist movement in shaping the aims and patterns of its diplomacy. Bialer thus lays out intellectual groundwork for analyzing the way in which changes in Israeli strength then influenced the theoretical and institutional dimensions of Israeli foreign policy.

The tectonic movement of global power relations and the dramatic changes in the Mideast over the past decade will also lead to changes in Israeli foreign policy and the challenges it faces. As these lines are written (in May 2020), we are perhaps given a taste of things to come, as Israel is facing American pressure to reduce Chinese involvement in infrastructure projects. Bialer's book is an important compass for those standing on deck during this time of change, and a most useful theoretical framework for those who follow it from the ivory tower.

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