



Israel's Foreign Policy—The Long Struggle Over Its Direction and Status

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Knocking on Every Door – Israel's Foreign Policy, 1948–2018

by Abraham Ben-Zvi and Gadi Warsha
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I was pleased to receive Abraham Ben-Zvi and Gadi Warsha's book on Israel's foreign policy. The work covers a wide range of topics that relate to Israel's foreign policy. Its chapters deal with core principles in the following areas: Israeli foreign policy, Israel-US relations, Israel-Soviet Union relations, Israel-Europe relations, Israel-China relations, Israel and neighboring states, Israel and developing countries, Israel and the UN. However, before diving into these chapters, I will first make some preliminary comments on the role of foreign policy in shaping the State of Israel's policy and positions in the international and regional arenas.

The State of Israel has unique characteristics that significantly limit the influence of foreign policy in shaping its positions in the international and regional arenas. The State of Israel was borne out of a war for its existence in 1948. In many ways, it can be said that this war still takes place today. Therefore, it is not surprising that the military and the other security agencies practically play a dominant role in the formulation of Israel's policy in the international and regional arenas. These bodies—the Intelligence Directorate in the IDF, the Mossad and the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet)—have gained this position as a result of the fact that they possess control over the vital sources of information necessary for shaping Israeli policy. These bodies are basically under the authority of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense.

Unfortunately, for many years, the State of Israel lacked a formal framework of rules that gave the Foreign Ministry access to the classified information sources to which the security bodies had access. At some stages, attempts were made to formalize the transmission of information. However, the Foreign Ministry staff was always in an inferior position compared to the security bodies, who held the most important information for shaping Israel's foreign policy.

It can be said that all of Israel's foreign ministers were excluded from valuable and highly classified information, to varying degrees, by the Prime Minister's Office and the security system. Needless to say, this phenomenon harmed their ability to shape Israel's foreign policy. In one of the conversations with Kissinger in mid-June 1973, a few months before the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, Simcha Dinitz, presented the prime minister's position on a certain strategic issue to Kissinger. Kissinger asked, "Does the Foreign Minister [Abba Eban] know about this position?" Dinitz responded, "No, absolutely not," probably not for the first

time. “Only the Prime Minister is aware of the full picture” (White House, 1973b, June 15).

The book naturally focuses on the issue of Israel–United States relations. It covers central events in the relations between Israel and the US administrations. The authors discuss on several occasions the checks and balances between different elements of the American government: the White House, the judiciary, and Congress. Public opinion and the press can also be added to this list.

This system enabled Israel, particularly governments that had a deep understanding of this complex system and carefully planned their actions, to achieve significant accomplishments over the years. These achievements, it should be stressed, were made without straining relations with key players in setting foreign policy, namely the White House and the State Department. In a conversation with his advisers in May 1973, President Nixon made a statement that reflected the power of the Israel lobby in Washington: “The Israeli lobby is so strong that it makes Congress act illogically” (White House, 1973a). Numerous documents concerning Israel–US relations explicitly demonstrate the immense influence that Israeli governments were able to exert in Congress and on the American public. On multiple occasions, we see senior administration officials requesting or even pleading with Israeli leaders to “allow” the administration to take certain actions, such as selling weapons to Arab states, by convincing members of Congress to support these actions. Israel often complied, usually after being promised something in return.

In certain cases, Israel used its connections in Congress to prevent strategic moves by the administration. Perhaps the most significant example is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech to Congress on March 3, 2015, which aimed to undermine the US–Iran agreement on Iranian nuclear activity. This move drew harsh criticism for allegedly damaging Israel’s relations with the Obama administration and making it

harder to halt the Iranian program. According to the authors of the book, “the prime minister failed to sway American public opinion and the majority of Democratic legislators against the nuclear agreement with Iran, and was unable to hinder the approval of the agreement. Furthermore, he faced consequences for his opposition to the President, in particular when the agreement became a reality” (p. 171).

It would have been important, at the same time, to present the stance of Netanyahu’s supporters in this context. They claim that when dealing with an existential threat to the State of Israel, the Israeli government cannot afford to make “marginal” political calculations and must sound the alarm over the severe threat being faced, no matter what the political price would be. They also argue that the impact of Netanyahu’s speech to Congress cannot be judged solely by what occurred during the Obama administration. Its effects were gradually felt in US public opinion and came to fruition during the Trump administration.

The book’s title, “Knocking on Every Door,” seems to express a worldview shared by many Foreign Ministry staffers from the early days of the state onwards. This perspective tends to assume that the international community will be receptive to Israel’s positions and adopt them if Israel, in turn, makes an effort to adopt the stances acceptable to the international community. Moshe Sharett, the man who symbolizes more than any other Israeli public figure the importance of the need for Israel to pursue diplomacy, believed that it was possible for Israel to take into account the stances of the international community without compromising its own essential interests.

Ben-Gurion and his associates tended to perceive this approach as naive. They took it as a given reality that the international community would not be in favor of Israel, primarily due to political and economic interests they have in the Arab world. Ben-Gurion also considered religious motivations to be a factor explaining the unfriendly, sometimes even hostile, attitude

of the international community toward Israel. As a result, Ben-Gurion was always suspicious of the international community and its approach to the State of Israel. He did not accept Sharett's stance that intensive diplomacy could lead to a fundamental change in the international community's attitude toward Israel. He and his associates adopted the worldview of Hans Morgenthau, who believed that states' views are based on interests and power. Therefore, in order to enhance its position in the international community Israel must strengthen its diplomatic, economic, military, and technological power. That is the only way in which states will come to support it.

Though being in an inferior position Moshe Sharett never gave up in his efforts to convince public opinion and political figures in Israel that the diplomatic approach was a highly valuable asset and should by no means be neglected. He should be highly appreciated for that. Eventually, of course, David Ben-Gurion who had a charismatic leadership and served in extremely powerful positions, as both prime minister and minister of defense minister, had the upper hand.

In all the years he served in office, Sharett questioned the security policy set by Ben-Gurion. In particular he criticized the tendency to ignore international criticism, which characterized Ben-Gurion's worldview and that of his associates. Sharett sought to present an approach based primarily on diplomatic channels, public diplomacy, and persuading international actors that Israel's actions were justified under the harsh reality in which Israel found itself. Gradually and quietly, he worked to consolidate Israel's status in the international arena in general and in the Middle East specifically. He did not rule out the use of military force but aimed to use it in as limited and moderate a way as possible.

Sharett was given the opportunity to prove the validity of his stances and demonstrate that the diplomatic path he believed in could lead Israel to safe harbor. In late 1953, Ben-Gurion

announced his resignation and move to Sde Boker. Sharett did not join those who asked him to reconsider his resignation. He was happy to finally have the chance to shape Israel's policy in line with his beliefs. It is still unclear today what prompted Ben-Gurion to resign and isolate himself in a remote location like Sde Boker.

In the final days before his resignation, Ben-Gurion managed to obtain government consent to appoint Moshe Dayan as the IDF Chief of Staff, following a long and difficult struggle with the government and the Mapai party. In historical perspective it can be argued that this move was aimed at placing an extremely powerful figure in a highly dominant position which would enable him to thwart Sharett's efforts to prioritize diplomacy over security policy. (Shalom, 2022).

Moshe Sharett eagerly took on the role of prime minister. As mentioned before, he aimed to make Israeli diplomacy central in shaping the country's decision-making, including in matters of security. He sought to expand Israel's international relations and even potentially reach agreements with Egypt's ruler, Gamal Abdel Nasser. Sharett garnered significant support from political figures who disagreed with what they perceived as Ben-Gurion's aggressive militarism. Those who had been adversely affected by Ben-Gurion also aligned themselves with Sharett in an effort to prevent Ben-Gurion's return to national leadership.

Ultimately, Sharett did not succeed in his mission. The diplomatic path did not improve Israel's status in the realms of diplomacy and security. Why? Sharett firmly believed that Egypt's ruler would prioritize the economic advancement of his country over the irrational hostility toward Israel. Sharett thought there was a chance that Nasser would seek a resolution that would reduce the conflict with Israel, and that he might even desire Israel's assistance in advancing his own nation. However, Sharett's hopes were swiftly dashed as Nasser quickly transformed Egypt into Israel's primary enemy. Turning away from the image of a peace-seeking

leader who focused on his country's economic progress, he became seen in Israel as the most dangerous threat to Israel's very existence.

Sharett quickly realized that in the war-weary State of Israel, where daily killings and robberies were common, the military agenda would be the dominant factor shaping the country's path. Military events that occurred during his term from January 1954 to November 1955, such as the Uri Ilan affair, the Lavon affair, and the Maaleh Akrabim massacre, not only set a military agenda in Israel's public life, but also significantly damaged Sharett's authority as prime minister. These events made it abundantly clear that security policy, rather than diplomatic policy, would take precedence in the State of Israel.

Unfortunately, Sharett's international achievements during his term were also limited. Those who hoped that the American administration would appreciate Sharett's moderate approach and provide support to Israel were greatly disappointed. In fact, the authors describe the US policy toward Israel during those early years as "the cold shoulder." However, this term is too moderate for describing the American administration's policies toward Israel. Despite opposition from many senior officials, the Truman administration decided to recognize the State of Israel. The authors correctly state the three main concerns of those who opposed recognition: the fear of losing support in the Arab world, the fear of disrupting the oil supply, and the fear of having to intervene militarily if Israel faced defeat.

Within Israel itself, there were also varying degrees of opposition to the declaration of statehood. Senior officers in the IDF, including Yigal Yadin, who held an equivalent position to the Chief of Staff, voiced reservations. Yadin believed that the chances of victory were "fifty-fifty" and suggested postponing the declaration for several months. Undoubtedly, these positions of influential military and political figures were conveyed to senior American officials, thus further strengthening

their resistance to recognition (p. 396). The authors correctly mention the initiative taken by American administration officials to suspend the Partition Plan, which raised great hopes within the Jewish community in Israel, that their long enduring dream for an independent Jewish state would eventually be realized (p. 399). Furthermore, they highlight the role played by Chaim Weizmann and prominent representatives of American Jewry, along with a sense of guilt over US policy during the Holocaust, in motivating President Truman to sign the document recognizing the State of Israel.

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Recognition of Israel was unfortunately one of few positive American decisions toward Israel during that time. In the years that followed, the US had a callous approach toward the State of Israel. The main objective of American policy was to prevent Israel from retaining most of the gains it had made during the War of Independence. For instance, the American administration denied Israel the right to respond militarily to acts of murder and theft committed on its territory against soldiers and civilians, which were referred to as "infiltrations" at that time. The Israeli leadership correctly believed that imposing a heavy cost on Arab states for acts of hostility on Israeli territory would compel them to take action against the terrorists and put an end to the terrorism. However, the US did not support this stance taken by Israel.

Numerous arguments were presented to deny Israel this basic right (pp. 111–113). These included the claim that retaliatory measures

would harm innocent civilians and violate international law, that such measures would only further incite hostility toward Israel instead of promoting calmness, and that the measures were disproportionate to the acts of terrorism carried out against Israel. The administration insisted that only a diplomatic agreement could bring an end to hostile activities against Israel and that Israel should focus on pursuing such an agreement. The administration was fully aware that the significant differences between the positions of Arab states and Israel made it impossible to reach such an agreement. Ultimately, the US suggested that Israel should focus on defensive means and even offered to provide such means. Naturally, Israel could not accept this proposition. Terrorist attacks became a regular occurrence, eroding confidence in the capabilities of the IDF and, in some cases, causing residents to abandon their homes.

The book is also accessible to members of the general public seeking to understand the conduct of the State of Israel in the international and regional arenas since its founding. It is written eloquently, in a professional and balanced manner, and draws on a wide range of sources. It covers events until almost the present day.

The second issue in which the US demonstrated a callous approach toward Israel was its efforts to compel Israel to withdraw from the borders agreed upon in the 1949 Armistice Agreements. Despite playing a key role in formulating these agreements, the United States still attempted to impose a significant Israeli withdrawal, especially in the Negev region. Shortly after the agreements were signed, particularly during the Lausanne Convention, Israel was pressured to withdraw to the boundaries outlined in the Partition Plan, with the assertion that these were the only internationally recognized borders.

A few years later, the US, in collaboration with the United Kingdom, devised a secret plan known as the Alpha Plan. This plan aimed to force Israel to withdraw from substantial portions of the Negev in order to create a corridor between Egypt and the Arab world. Israel clearly communicated to the administration that creating a corridor between Egypt and the Arab world did not necessitate the relinquishment of sovereign Israeli territory (pp. 50, 112, 255). Free movement between Middle Eastern countries, it argued, could be facilitated in a peaceful situation. However, the administration rejected this argument and issued severe threats against Israel if it refused to comply with their demands.

On the issue of refugees, the US administration also made significant efforts to compel Israel to absorb over 100,000 people who had left their home during the War of Independence. The administration was well aware that absorbing so many refugees would create serious security threats and endanger the Jewish character of the state (pp. 355–365). Additionally, the administration opposed Israel's positions on the status of Jerusalem and Israel's desire to strengthen the status of the portion of the city that remained under Israeli sovereignty after the war (pp. 402–405).

To present a balanced picture, it is important to note that the United States offered generous economic aid to Israel during all of these years, particularly in the fields of food and oil. During an era when the existence of the state was constantly questioned, American officials consistently expressed support for the existence of the Jewish state. It is doubtful whether the State of Israel could have existed without American assistance. Particularly moving are the portions of the book that discuss the Yom Kippur War. The authors describe the significant rupture in Israel–US relations after the war. Until the war, the administration tended to support Israel's position on a diplomatic agreement, though with reservations. It saw Israel as a reliable and powerful ally, with whom it shared secrets and planned actions to serve the

interests of both countries. The US believed that a strong, principled Israel could create reliable deterrence against Egypt, thanks to its varied capabilities. And if Israeli deterrence were to fail, the US believed that Israel could still defeat the Egyptian Army rapidly and unequivocally.

Senior American officials believed that Israel's strength would further American prestige in the international arena. Arab states would learn that only the United States could influence Israel to soften its stances. It would therefore be worthwhile for the Arabs to abandon the Soviet bloc, which had no real impact, and join the Western bloc. However, all of these assumptions and hopes were proved wrong on Yom Kippur 1973. Israeli intelligence, which had unparalleled prestige before the war, took a heavy blow, and the heads of the administration were puzzled by its colossal failure. Furthermore, many American officials claimed that the incorrect assessments by American intelligence were mostly caused by their reliance on Israeli intelligence.

In summary, Abraham Ben-Zvi and Gadi Warsha's book is a textbook of primary importance in an academic context for students, researchers, and lecturers. The book is also accessible to members of the general public seeking to understand the conduct of the State of Israel in the international and regional arenas since its founding. It is written eloquently, in a professional and balanced manner, and draws on a wide range of sources. It covers events until

almost the present day. This is an obligatory work for all those who value the field of Israel studies.

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