

Israel

Challenges to identity, democracy and
the state

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4 A place among the nations

Introduction

Foreign policy in Israel has always remained subordinate to the demands of ensuring national security. Having been involved in six major conventional conflicts in its half century of existence (in addition to innumerable border clashes of varying intensity), the culture of national security remains central to the conduct of Israel's foreign policy. Maintaining a powerful military, as well as ensuring strong ties with Washington, have become the enduring themes of Israel's search for security. It is an approach determined by the logic of a security dilemma particular to a state that lacks substantial human resources, strategic depth and, until recently, any tangible regional alliance.

Despite the seismic shifts in the contours of the international system since 1991, the old mantra that 'Israel has no foreign policy, only a defence policy' remains the dominant prism through which the Jewish state views its immediate external environment. It would be churlish to ignore the formal peace treaties Israel has signed with Jordan and Egypt, or, more immediately, the recognition of Palestinian national rights, however circumscribed, under the Oslo Accords. But equally, Israel's burgeoning strategic relationship with Turkey, its concerns expressed forcefully over the acquisition – real or otherwise – of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by Baghdad and Tehran, as well as the continued importance placed upon the special relationship with the United States, delineate a continuity of thinking seemingly immune from changes in the broad arena of global politics.¹ While Israeli foreign policy has become synonymous with the external demands of national security, this fails to capture the domestic context of foreign policy decision-making peculiar to the Jewish state. This is important because, since the 1980s, the consensus among Israelis over what constitutes national security began to fragment under the impact of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the outbreak of the Palestinian *Intifada* in 1987, events that were entwined with the fate of the territories captured and occupied by Israel in the June 1967 war.²

As discussed in Chapter 2, a popular consensus over the strategic threat faced by Israel among a hostile Arab world held in abeyance ideological

debates within Zionism over territory to be claimed as part of a Jewish sovereign state. But since 1967, Israel's domination of the physical and political space in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has not only appeared incongruent with Israel's democratic tradition, but exposed deep rifts in a society that even seasoned observers of Israel's political scene have come to believe contain the future seeds of internecine conflict.³ In this respect, Israel's foreign policy is as much about defining the political boundaries of Zionism, as it is about determining the future physical borders of the Jewish state.

Domestic determinants of Israel's foreign policy

In his seminal study, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel*, Michael Brecher describes the dominant Jewish character of the state as the prism through which all foreign policy decisions are made. He declared, 'For Israel's high policy elite, as for the entire society, there is a primordial and pre-eminent aspect of the political culture – its *Jewishness*: this pervades thought, feeling, belief and behaviour in the political realm'.⁴ Israel remains one of the few states worldwide to encourage immigration on ideological grounds alone irrespective of constraints imposed by resources or geographical space. Because of the emotive appeal of fulfilling the highest ideal of Zionism, the state continues to actively promote the value of *aliyah* throughout the Jewish diaspora and among governments able to facilitate Jewish immigration to Israel. Accordingly, such activity has become a foreign policy *value* rather than just another foreign policy objective, given the decimation of European Jewry during the Second World War.

Brecher noted that Ben-Gurion regarded the population of the State of Israel and those Jews living in what was termed *galut* (exile or the *diaspora*) as indivisible. In perhaps the most explicit declaration of the Jewish state's *raison d'être*, Israel's first premier declared that: 'The two groups are interdependent. The future of Israel – its security, its welfare, and its capacity to fulfil its historic mission – depends on world Jewry. And the future of world Jewry depends on the survival of Israel'.⁵ It is this claim to be the protector of heterogeneous Jewish communities worldwide, irrespective of their national allegiance, that is perhaps unique to Israel in the construction of its national identity. It should be noted, however, that defining the *internal* character of the Jewish state and, in particular, the exact balance to be struck between religious and secular identities remains, as the assassination of Rabin demonstrated, a contemporary issue of bitter debate.

Israel has gone to extraordinary lengths to rescue *diaspora* communities deemed to be under threat. The airlift of 35,000 Jews from the Yemen between May 1948 and November 1949 provided a template for similar operations involving Ethiopian Jewry in 1984 and 1991. More recently, some 1,000 Jews were smuggled out of Sarajevo in 1994 by representatives of the Jewish Agency and the Israeli intelligence agency *Mossad* during the

Bosnian war.⁶ Such actions are, according to the Israeli journalist and historian Tom Segev, entirely consonant with the core belief of Zionism that 'Jews can live in security and with full equal rights only in their own country and that they therefore must have an autonomous and sovereign state, strong enough to defend its existence'.⁷ The irony for Segev, however, is that given the tensions that have been engendered by the creation of the State of Israel, far safer places exist elsewhere in the world for Jews now to live.

The policy-making elite

Determining what constitutes *the* national interest, and indeed the core beliefs of Zionism, remains a vexed question. In the case of Israel, core values – the need to secure the Jewish state against external threat while preserving a Jewish majority internally – provide a framework in which the process of inductive reasoning determines the national interest. As such, ideological, pragmatic and geo-strategic dispositions of key decision-makers – attitudinal prisms – remain key variables in determining policy preferences. This is not to suggest that such prisms vary markedly between decision-makers over a period of time. From 1967 through to 1987 Israeli foreign policy was marked more by continuity than change in its approach towards the Arab world, as well as the need to ensure strong ties with Washington.

The emphasis upon security is influenced in no small part by the individual background of those charged with maintenance of Israel's national security, with key decision-makers having been, to quote Efraim Inbar, 'socialised in the defence establishment'.⁸ Such socialisation is best personified by the figure of Yitzhak Rabin, who held both the portfolios of Prime Minister and Minister of Defence twice, having already served as the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) chief of staff and Israel's ambassador to Washington. Other key individual decision-makers steeped in the ethos of Israel's military culture have included Yigal Yadin, Ezer Weizmann, Moshe Dayan, Yigal Allon, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Barak and Yitzhak Mordechai, all former generals who at one time or another occupied the portfolios of either foreign affairs or defence.

This process of socialisation has, however, proven to be problematic to a premier lacking a perceived 'grounding in or experience over' security issues. Levi Eshkol, Israel's premier on the eve of the June 1967 war, faced strong pressure from his Chief of Staff, Yitzhak Rabin, to turn the Defence Ministry – a portfolio held by Eshkol himself – over to former Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, thereby creating a critical mass within the cabinet for the option of launching a pre-emptive strike against Egypt. More recently, the permissive environment invoked by the need to ensure national security allowed Ariel Sharon, as Israeli Defence Minister in 1982, to manipulate

both cabinet opinion and Prime Minister Begin into authorising Israel's invasion of Lebanon.

Given this process of socialisation, it is not surprising that foreign policy in Israel has been viewed as complementing, rather than determining, the value placed upon ensuring the maintenance of Israel's military superiority. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the Israeli *Knesset* committee system, based on the Westminster model, convenes such a cross-party forum on both foreign affairs and defence combined, rather than treating them as distinct areas. The influence, however, that such committees have on preference formation in foreign policy remains limited. Indeed, once the horse-trading involved in the formation of a coalition government has been completed, the *Knesset* remains circumscribed from any real input into the decision-making process.

As such, foreign policy decision-making remains a restricted process in Israel, and one in which strong personalities can emasculate the role of bureaucracies charged with formulating and implementing foreign policy. David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir and Yitzhak Rabin based their leadership in government upon highly stratified lines with relatively few people party to broad policy formulation beyond their respective 'kitchen' cabinets. Nowhere is this demonstrated more visibly than in the role played by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the competition for influence within the Israeli cabinet, the views of the Foreign Ministry have carried less weight than either the views expressed by the Prime Minister's Office or the Defence Ministry. Indeed, even though Uri Savir, Director General of the Foreign Ministry, was responsible for brokering the negotiations that led to the signing of the Oslo Accords, senior representatives of the Defence Ministry and the IDF dominated negotiations over implementation of the Accords once they were signed. As one former ministry official opined:

This phenomenon can only be understood in the Israeli context. All of Israel's interests are determined according to security considerations, and that's why the security establishment became dominant in defining the state's vital interests. . . . political considerations were pushed aside. It was so in the talks with the Palestinians, as well as the contacts that preceded the signing of the peace treaty with Jordan.⁹

Moreover, prime ministers have often combined the duties of their primary office with that of foreign minister, denying sufficient representation of Foreign Ministry views on policy making at cabinet level. Accordingly, the Foreign Ministry has all too often been left to deal with issues of presentation rather than substance.¹⁰ In this hierarchy of influence, the intelligence services hold considerable sway in defining Israel's key foreign policy interests, a position that has led to a process of cognitive dissonance whereby alternative avenues of diplomacy have been downgraded.

Three main intelligence agencies exist in Israel: military intelligence (*Agaf Modi'in* or AMAN), the *Mossad* (*HaMossad LeModi'in U'Letafkidim Meyuhadim* – Institute for Intelligence and Special Duties), and *Shabak* (*Sherlut Bitachon Kalali* – General Security Service or GSS). Of these, AMAN carries the most weight, with the Director of Military Intelligence and the head of AMAN's assessment division serving as intelligence advisors to the Israeli cabinet. They remain subordinate to the Minister of Defence and Chief of Staff of the IDF, who attend all cabinet meetings. Mossad and the GSS operate under the auspices of the Prime Minister's Office and coordinate intelligence gathering and assessment with AMAN through the *Varash* (*Va'ad Rashei Sherutim* – the Committee of the Chiefs of the Services). Yet assessing the objectivity of attitudinal prisms through which an intelligence assessment or 'product' is presented to the consumer, in this case the Prime Minister or Israeli cabinet, can prove particularly problematic. On assuming office in 1996, former Prime Minister Netanyahu believed that as appointees of the previous Rabin/Peres government, the heads of the intelligence services had become politicised into an uncritical acceptance of the Oslo process and, as such, 'tended to ignore military intelligence, Mossad and GSS warnings that the likelihood of war increased as the peace process moved towards a dead end'.¹¹

Suspensions of political bias in formulating policy preferences are not new to a state where ideological disposition has influenced decision-making. Accordingly, much debate surrounded the establishment by Netanyahu of a National Security Council (NSC) based on the American model. The creation of an NSC was first recommended by the Yadin–Sharaf committee in 1963, set up following the intelligence scandal surrounding the Lavon Affair in the mid-1950s. Intermittent calls for the establishment of an NSC were met with entrenched bureaucratic resistance from the heads of the existing intelligence bureaucracies and government ministries. It was the failed Mossad attempt on the life of a Hamas activist, Khalid Meshal, in Amman in September 1997 that finally broke this resistance. The NSC is supposed to be a forum for balanced assessment of foreign policy aims and objectives, but evidence to date suggests that its areas of responsibility remain circumscribed. Established in March 1999, the NSC has been tasked with combating regional proliferation of WMD, rather than acting, as was the original intention, as a co-ordinating body overseeing objective assessment on a broad range of foreign policy issues, including continued negotiations with the Palestinians.¹²

Extra-parliamentary actors

If bureaucracies and personalities dealing with national security dominate the actual foreign policy decision-making process, the actual arena in which that process operates has been influenced heavily by pressure groups or grass-roots activists representing a distinct ideological, ethnic and religious

outlook associated with policy towards the Occupied Territories. The immediate strategic threat Israel faced between 1948 to 1967 held in abeyance debates inherent within the very concept of Zionism over the exact territory to be claimed as part of a Jewish sovereign state. The demands of *mamlachtiyut* – not least the need to build a coherent polity from a largely immigrant society – as well as the continuous demands of ensuring external security, offset potentially divisive debates over the normative character of Zionism. While successive Israeli governments remained convinced that the ceasefire lines established following the 1948–49 Arab–Israeli war remained indefensible, Zionism *per se* had never reached a consensus over defining the territorial dimensions of the Jewish state. While a cross-party consensus justified retention of territories captured in the June 1967 war both on strategic grounds and in the absence of peace overtures from surrounding Arab states, a confluence of interest emerged between Revisionist Zionists, who believed *a priori* in the unity of *Eretz Yisrael* on historical grounds, and religious-nationalist Zionists, who regarded the capture and settlement of the Occupied Territories in eschatological terms.¹³

Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), formed in 1974, became the most high profile of such groups. Indeed, between 1977 and 1983, *Gush Emunim* enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the government of Menachem Begin. Settlements associated with the movement were accorded the same status as *kibbutzim*, a move that allowed public money to be used in the process of ideological construction while suggesting that *Gush Emunim* were now seen officially as the true inheritors of the pioneering ideals behind Zionism. In 1980, *Yesha* (Council of Jewish Settlements in Judea, Samaria and Gaza), an umbrella organisation representing all settlements and settlers in the Occupied Territories, was formed. There is little to distinguish *Gush Emunim* from *Yesha* but, if anything, *Yesha* is more influential in terms of the direct influence it can exert upon government policy towards the territories. This is because several of its members represent nationalist parties in the *Knesset* that have included in the past *Tehiya* and the NRP.

The discourse surrounding the issue of the territories continues to be cloaked in the language of national security. Certainly, for organisations representative of the ideological and religious right in Israel, policy towards the territories remains internal to the Jewish state. Recognition of the future status of the Occupied Territories as constituting a foreign policy issue negates claims over sovereignty inherent within the very concept of *Eretz Yisrael*. In this regard, the emphasis placed upon national security disguised the core debates surrounding the West Bank by justifying settlement policy in terms of protection against the ‘other’, rather than dealing with the recrudescence of a debate concerning the very identity of the Jewish state. It is such concerns over the debilitating impact of the occupation on Israel’s political culture and social cohesion that first led to the emergence of peace groups in Israel such as *Shalom Achshav*. The emergence of such organisations has proved to be symptomatic of a broader evolution away from the

traditional demands of self-sacrifice incumbent within the original concept of *mamlachtiyut* and continued during the *Intifada* as questions of moral rectitude undermined the mantra of national security as justification for Israel's brutal response to violent – though for the most part non-lethal – expressions of Palestinian identity.¹⁴ As such, the Oslo Accords were as much about the need to assuage increased tensions within Israeli society, as any attempt to deal with the national aspirations of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The Accords represented, in effect, an attempt by Rabin's government on behalf of the State of Israel to seek security from itself.

Israel's foreign relations 1948–1993: the search for security

Ever since the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, all Israeli governments have, as Shibley Telhami notes, followed a dual strategy in their foreign relations. With regard to its immediate environment, Israel always sought strategies that would prevent the Arab world uniting both politically and militarily. In this regard, divisions in the Arab world have always been viewed as advantageous to Israel. At the apex of this strategy was the desire to see Egypt, the clear hegemonic leader in the Arab world, removed as a threat to the Jewish state. Secondly, Israel has always sought the patronage, if not outright support, of a great power.¹⁵ This dual strategy was designed to ameliorate what were perceived as Israel's key vulnerabilities: its small geographical space, vulnerable borders, finite economic resources, few natural resources, and vast demographic asymmetries with surrounding Arab states.

While Israeli leaders always regarded close ties with the United States as the best guarantor of Israel's security, several factors impeded the development of the 'special relationship' that today marks bilateral ties between the two countries. Washington had been the first state to offer *de facto* recognition of Israel on 14 May 1948, and had agreed to lend Israel \$100 million the following year. Yet at a time when the Cold War had begun to shape global politics, Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, remained acutely aware that much of the Jewish *diaspora* remained behind the Iron Curtain. Moreover, many within the new-born polity held open sympathies for the position of the Soviet Union, partly out of ideological affiliation and partly out of recognition of the huge suffering incurred by Moscow in its struggle to crush the nemesis of the Jewish people, Nazi Germany.

By 1950, however, Israel had begun to openly identify with the West. With the outbreak of the Korean war, Ben-Gurion considered seriously the dispatch of a small military contingent as a means to cement closer ties with Washington, while offers were also made to the United States that would allow for the pre-positioning of American military supplies in the Negev desert.¹⁶ All were rebuffed by Washington. The initial grace that had met the establishment of the Jewish state under the Truman adminis-

tration – a position influenced heavily by the need to harness the American Jewish vote to the Democratic party cause – gave way to a sober reassessment of United States foreign policy interests in the Middle East with the election of the Republican candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower, to the White House in 1952. His new Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, argued that the ability of Washington to contain Moscow in the Middle East and ensure the unfettered flow of oil to the West had been undermined by Truman's support for Israel. In short, attempts by Washington to cohere the Arab states into some form of anti-Soviet alliance could not be reconciled with Israel's own security interests.

Accordingly, the 1950s was marked by periodic tensions in bilateral relations between Washington and Tel Aviv. Israel's policy of cross-border incursions into neighbouring states brought sharp rebukes from the United States. While justified by the Israelis as response to terrorist assaults against civilian settlements, the scale of the retribution exacted by the IDF was often out of all proportion to the initial attacks. Such attacks were met with vocal condemnation from Washington, mindful that such attacks undermined its attempts to promote an anti-Soviet alliance among the Arab states.¹⁷ Ben-Gurion, realising that access to American arms and security guarantees remained a distant prospect in the short to medium term, looked increasingly to an alliance with France to secure his military requirements. Paris was able to supply Israel with advance fighter aircraft and armour, but it was in the field of nuclear technology that French aid proved crucial. Under help and guidance offered by Paris, Israel constructed its own nuclear test facility at Dimona in the Negev desert. While maintaining that its function remained directed towards peaceful purposes, overwhelming evidence exists that Dimona has, since its construction in 1957, been used by Israel to develop its own nuclear weapons capability.¹⁸

Both Paris and Tel Aviv remained concerned at the direction of Egyptian foreign policy under President Gamal Abdul Nasser, who had taken over the reins of power in Cairo in 1954. A man of extraordinary charisma, Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism struck a popular chord throughout the Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa. While never forged into a coherent ideology, 'Nasserism' remained inimical to what was perceived as the continued colonial usurpation of Arab rights and sovereignty. Israel was commonly perceived through this popularist if simplistic mindset, but such ideas also began to influence the struggle against French rule in Algeria. In short, both Israel and France had a shared interest in cutting Nasser down to size. In an episode that still provokes fierce historical controversy today, Israeli military intelligence initiated sabotage operations against both American and British targets and property in Egypt in 1954, in the infamous 'Lavon Affair'. Aside from the historical controversy of an operation initiated without formal Israeli government approval, the episode is of note because it undermined secret contacts between Israeli foreign ministry officials acting on behalf of the new Israeli Prime Minister,

Moshe Sharett, and emissaries representing Nasser. The Egyptian President, believing at the very least that Sharett could not control his own defence ministry, promptly broke off these exploratory talks and looked to strengthen Egypt's own defence posture.

The resulting Czech arms deal of September 1955 – so called because Moscow used the Communist government in Prague as a front for the deal – was perceived by Israel as a clear threat to its national security. Ben-Gurion, having once again become Prime Minister in November 1955, believed war remained the only viable option for Israel if its national security were not to be permanently undermined. Time was of the essence since the Chief of Staff, Moshe Dayan, believed that Israel had to strike against the Egyptian army before it could master the Soviet weaponry. Moreover, Ben-Gurion believed that Washington would not supply Israel with the types of weapons Israel believed necessary to offset the scale of the Czech arms deal. As Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov notes, Ben-Gurion now felt free to 'disregard US calls for Israeli self restraint'.¹⁹

Other international and regional factors pointed increasingly to the use of force as the best means to secure Israel's position. While the Eisenhower administration remained distant from Tel Aviv, its relations with Cairo had become tense. Washington and London had agreed originally to provide loans to Cairo to facilitate the construction of the Aswan Dam, a key infrastructure project for Nasser if the modernisation of Egyptian agriculture and industry was to progress. With Nasser's decision to recognise the People's Republic of China, both the United States and Britain withdrew their financial backing. In response, Nasser decided to nationalise the Suez Canal company, the majority shares in which were held by the British and French governments. The belief in both London and Paris that Cairo would never be able to operate the company effectively – its revenue was earned by ensuring the safe navigation of international shipping through the canal – was soon disabused. Military force to deal with Nasser was viewed with increasing favour by Britain and France. It was a position that conflated neatly with the policy aims of Israel, who believed that decisive military action against Nasser had now become essential following the signing of a tripartite military agreement with Jordan and Syria.²⁰

On 29 October 1956, Israel invaded the Sinai peninsula in secret collusion with London and Paris. British and French troops occupied the canal basin around Port Said. While successful militarily, the operation soon turned into a political fiasco. Under severe financial pressure from the United States, London was forced to withdraw its troops, soon to be followed by Paris. The Suez crisis marked the end of British paramountcy in the Middle East, but the outcome was more propitious for the Jewish state. Firstly, Israel had seized all of the Sinai peninsula, including the Straits of Tiran that had previously guarded access to the Red Sea and the Israeli port of Eilat. These Straits had been closed to Israeli shipping, making it difficult for Israel to develop both the port and alternative trade routes to Asia and

Africa. Secondly, the IDF had captured or destroyed massive amounts of Soviet weaponry, thereby undermining the modernisation of the Egyptian military. Thirdly, while Eisenhower used financial as well as political leverage to force an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai, Tel Aviv made important political gains. Washington, albeit grudgingly, recognised Israeli concerns over freedom of navigation, thus ensuring that the Straits of Tiran could not be closed to Israeli shipping. Golda Meir, then Israel's Foreign Minister, made it clear that any future closure of the Straits would be seen as an act of war by Israel and that the Jewish state would act accordingly. Moreover, Israel gained the partial demilitarisation of the Sinai, with a United Nations Observer Force stationed along the border between Israel and Egypt.

These gains aside, Israel drew one important lesson from Suez. Power in the Middle East no longer lay in the European capitals but with the United States. While relations were to remain close with France until at least the mid-1960s, Israel began to court the United States more assiduously, a process that included supporting more vigorously lobby groups on Capitol Hill that could influence United States foreign policy towards the region. Most notable among these, the American–Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) was to play an increasingly influential role in determining Washington's policy towards the Arab–Israeli conflict. Today, AIPAC is reckoned to be second only to the National Rifle Association in the influence that it can exert over senators and congressmen in Washington.

The phrase 'dormant war' was used by Yitzhak Rabin to describe Israel's external relations with the surrounding Arab states between 1957 and 1967. In the immediate aftermath of Suez, Nasser's position at the apex of Arab politics remained unassailable. The recipient of substantial Soviet aid, Nasser appeared set upon laying the foundations for wider political unity among the Arab states. Yet the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958, seen as the first concrete step towards this goal, foundered upon inter-state rivalries. Syria, a supposedly equal partner in the UAR, proved unwilling to accept the increased domination of its political structures by Cairo. By 1961, the experiment in greater unity had collapsed. Moreover, Nasser's intervention in the Yemen Civil War in September 1962, brought about by the overthrow of the Royal Family by Yemeni army officers holding Republican sympathies, highlighted the bifurcation of inter-Arab politics. Monarchical or dynastic regimes, most notably Saudi Arabia and Jordan, rallied to support the deposed Imam, while Egyptian intervention on the side of the Republicans included the dispatch of 50,000 Egyptian troops. Poorly trained and ill equipped to cope with the insurgency tactics of the Royalist forces, the Egyptian army soon found itself mired in a conflict it could not win.

The splits in the Arab world only served Israel's interests. Allegations have been made that Israel, through third parties, helped supply Royalist forces in the mountains surrounding the Yemeni capital San'a.²¹ Whatever the truth, the debilitating impact of the war upon Egypt certainly benefited

Israel. During this period, the IDF underwent both modernisation and expansion, with emphasis placed upon building up the air force and armoured corps. Politically, however, Israel had begun to forge closer ties with Washington. In this they were undoubtedly aided by the election of the Democrat John F. Kennedy into the Oval Office in 1960. For Kennedy, the perception of Nasser as a close ally of the Soviet Union and a threat to conservative Arab states, reduced the risk of Arab opprobrium as Washington approved closer ties with Tel Aviv. Kennedy, moreover, acknowledged Israel's security dilemma, though his willingness to discuss arms sales to Israel was in part driven by a desire to use weapon sales to dissuade Tel Aviv from 'going nuclear'.²²

Under Kennedy, the first steps were taken towards the establishment of their special relationship with the sale of Hawk surface to air missiles to Israel. Kennedy was also the first American President to give open verbal assurances regarding Israel's security, declaring that the United States would come to the aid of Israel if the Jewish state were to be the victim of aggression. Such support, while welcomed by Israel, was contingent upon Tel Aviv recognising that Washington had its own interests in the region and that, accordingly, Israel should refrain from undertaking policies that would threaten those interests.²³ The assassination of Kennedy in November 1963 did little to alter the upward trajectory of bilateral ties between Washington and Tel Aviv. The new incumbent at the White house, Democrat Lyndon Baines Johnson, remained alarmed at Cairo's drift into the Soviet orbit, a process underlined by the conclusion of a \$500 million arms deal between Egypt and the Soviet Union in June 1963.

The result was a massive boost to Israel's conventional arsenal. Levi Eshkol, the Israeli premier, gave assurances over Israel's nuclear development. In return, Washington authorised the sale of armour and aircraft to Israel. It should be noted that Eshkol's assurances regarding Israel's nuclear activity were not conclusive. The IDF High Command in particular remained wary of agreements that in any way impeded Israel's ability to undertake actions or policies designed to ensure its own security independent of any other actor. This has become an enduring theme of Israeli national security. Even today, Israel has still to conclude a formal strategic alliance with the United States, fearing the terms of such an alliance would constrain any latitude for independent action. Accordingly, while allowing some limited inspection of its nuclear facilities, Israel adopted the position that it would not be the first state to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East, an opaque statement that remains crucial to Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity.

Between 1965 and 1967, Israel received some 210 M60 tanks and 100 Skyhawk jets from the United States. This weaponry helped give Israel a qualitative edge that it was to deploy with devastating effect in the June War of 1967. Like much else in the Middle East, the origins of the war remain the subject of bitter debate. Tension on the Syrian–Israeli border had resulted in

a number of armed clashes from late 1966 onwards. Israel accused Syria of deliberately shelling *kibbutzim* in the Galilee region, while Damascus argued that Tel Aviv was provoking such attack by encouraging Israeli farmers to plough in the demilitarised zone that had separated the two sides since 1949. Whatever the cause, the intensity of these clashes resulted in rising tension between Egypt and Israel. Nasser, stung by Syrian criticism of inaction in the face of Israel's belligerency, increased his rhetorical threats against Israel. In retrospect, it seems that Nasser had no clear intent to go to war, but hoisted by his own petard and acting on Soviet reports of Israeli troop movements that proved totally inaccurate, the Egyptian President blundered into a crisis that was to lead to war.²⁴

According to Telhami, Israel felt it could not allow such provocative statements to go unchallenged 'lest other Arab states be emboldened to follow suit'.²⁵ Indeed, Nasser's decision to close the Straits of Tiran and order the removal of UN observers from the Sinai was viewed by Tel Aviv as a *casus belli* for war. A central tenet of Israel's foreign policy has been to prevent an effective alliance among Arab states emerging to challenge its sovereignty. The conclusion of a military pact between Jordan and Egypt on the eve of hostilities presented Israel with just such a scenario. The IDF, aware of the asymmetry it faced in terms of manpower and resources, as well as the vulnerability of its borders, argued that Israel only had a limited 'window of opportunity' in which to launch a decisive pre-emptive strike before mass mobilisation began to cripple the economy.²⁶ On the eve of the war, Meir Amit, head of the Israeli intelligence agency *Mossad*, was sent to Washington to gauge Johnson's opinion regarding the crisis. According to United States Defence Secretary Robert McNamara, Israel was told that 'if it acted alone, it would be alone. It was a very clear statement'.²⁷

The June 1967 war proved to be one of the most devastating military campaigns of the twentieth century. Between 5 and 10 June 1967 Israel captured the whole of the Sinai peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank of the River Jordan including East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Overnight, Israel more than doubled the size of the territory under its control. While it was a traumatic event for the Arab world, Israel emerged as the dominant military power of the region, a position that witnessed its ties with Washington grow ever closer. The Arab states presented little in the way of a viable military challenge. Indeed, Abba Eban, then Israel's Foreign Minister, recalled how many within his ministry expected a phone call from the Jordanian monarch, King Hussein, offering to open negotiations over the return of the West Bank.²⁸ But if June 1967 remains Israel's greatest moment of triumph, securing as it did a strategic depth it had hitherto not known, it also contained the seeds of internal dissent that has come to mark Israel's domestic political agenda.

Until 1967, Israel's foreign policy was determined by the need to survive among the animus of a largely Arab Middle East. The clear external dangers and the demands of *mamlachtiyut* had limited the extent to which domestic

factors influenced foreign policy. After the June 1967 war this position began to change. Debates over the captured territory were initially dominated by strategic concerns, but increasingly, groups and organisations such as the Land of Israel Movement began to lobby against the return of territory, particularly the West Bank, which was seen as the cradle of Jewish civilisation. It was between 1967 and 1970 that the first Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories were established. While for the most part these were collective farms, located in the sparsely populated area of the Jordan Valley, they set a precedent for the establishment of a permanent Israeli presence in the Occupied Territories that has come to bedevil relations between Israel and the Arab world. Indeed, the fate of over one million Palestinians now living under Israeli occupation changed the dynamic of conflict in the region. From 1948 to 1967 the Arab–Israeli conflict had been dominated by inter-state rivalries. Now, with the issue of the Palestinians to the fore and with it, irreconcilable claims to sovereignty over the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, Israel faced an intra-state conflict, the conduct of which came increasingly to dominate its relations with the Arab world and beyond.

Still, the regional hegemony that Israel enjoyed between 1967 and 1973 negated any serious attempt to find a diplomatic solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict. While faced with a rejuvenated Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), as well as a bitter war of attrition with Egypt along the banks of the Suez Canal between 1968 and 1970, Israel's regional supremacy was never seriously challenged in this period. While United Nations Resolution 242, passed in November 1967, called explicitly for Israel to return territories captured in June 1967 in exchange for Arab recognition of the Jewish state, few politicians on either side appeared willing to accept the resolution as the basis for settlement. Certainly, Israel felt sufficiently strong to rebuff attempts by William Rogers, the US Secretary of State, to link Israeli territorial retrenchment to Tel Aviv's requests for more advanced American weaponry. Rogers' plan, based on UN Resolution 242, was also undermined from within the White House. A new President, Richard Nixon, had been elected in 1969 and with his preoccupation with the Vietnam War, the formulation of policy towards the Arab–Israeli conflict came to be influenced heavily by his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger.

Kissinger very much saw the Arab–Israeli conflict through the prism of the Cold War. In the aftermath of the June 1967 war, both Washington and Moscow had undertaken massive arms supplies to their respective clients in the region. Kissinger saw Israel as a reliable ally and a regional power whose strength was key to undermining Soviet influence in the region. According to Bar-Siman-Tov, Kissinger felt that: 'Only when the Arab states, particularly Egypt, realized the futility of the military option and of Soviet military aid would they choose the diplomatic option'.²⁹ That diplomatic option was reliance upon the United States to secure a resolution to the Arab–Israeli conflict.

By 1973, therefore, Washington had come to regard Israel as a strategic asset in its competition with Moscow. The strong geo-political ties with the United States that Tel Aviv had always desired had come to fruition as a result of the exigencies of the Cold War. Between 1971 and 1973 American aid to Israel totalled \$1.5 billion, the bulk of which was earmarked for military purposes. The strength of Israel's ties with Washington was certainly noted by Cairo. The death of President Nasser in September 1970 brought Anwar Sadat to power. Sadat, anxious to rebuild the Egyptian economy as well as regain the Sinai peninsula, made tentative diplomatic overtures towards Washington. The United States failed to appreciate the true significance of Cairo's moves, even when it expelled the bulk of Soviet advisers from Egypt in the summer of 1972. Early the following spring, Sadat began to draw up joint plans with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad for a simultaneous attack on the Sinai and the Golan Heights. For Sadat at least, recourse to the use of force had become the only means to break the diplomatic impasse.

Both Israel and the United States failed to see the coming war. Israel, perhaps blinded by perceptions of its own military superiority, only mobilised its reserve forces on the eve of the joint Egyptian and Syrian attack. Some have suggested that Tel Aviv's preoccupation with Palestinian terrorism, and in particular, tracking down those deemed responsible for the murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, had blinded Israel's intelligence services to the dangers of war.³⁰ On 6 October 1973, the eve of Judaism's holiest day, *Yom Kippur*, Egyptian troops stormed across the Suez Canal, breaching Israeli defences and inflicting severe losses upon the IDF. The success of these initial assaults was matched by Syrian forces who came within an ace of breaking through to Lake Kinneret. After three weeks of bitter fighting, Israel had regained the upper hand, crossing the Suez Canal and encircling the Egyptian Third Army. Having pushed Syrian forces off the Golan Heights, the IDF came within 40 kilometres from Damascus before a ceasefire came into effect.³¹

Both Moscow and Washington undertook extensive resupply operations to their respective allies, but it was the United States which was to accrue the greater diplomatic advantage at the cessation of hostilities. Washington had already demonstrated its power to control the Israelis by threatening to transfer its support to Cairo should the IDF attempt to destroy the trapped Third Army. Such leverage set the pattern for the diplomatic moves following the cessation of hostilities. Egypt, its tarnished military honour much restored, found Washington more receptive to its demands in the aftermath of the war. Undoubtedly, the energy crisis in the winter of 1973 and 1974, and Cairo's ability to influence the oil-producing states of the Arabian Gulf, helped focus Washington's attention on Egypt's wider aims. It was a diplomatic shift that had implications for Israel's standing in wider United States foreign policy. From Washington's perspective,

[T]he special relationship with Israel had compelled the Arabs to appeal to the United States, but once that was accomplished, Israel's strategic importance declined. Israel again became a special US client, but only because its control of the territories made it crucial in US strategy. The United States valued Israel not for its military strength, but for its readiness to make territorial concessions that would reduce the Arab–Israeli conflict and establish US dominance in the region.³²

In an effort to induce such territorial concessions, American aid to Tel Aviv totalled \$5.4 billion between 1974 and 1976, much of it used by Israel to maintain, and indeed increase, its qualitative edge militarily. But if such aid was meant to induce greater Israeli flexibility towards territorial concessions, developments within Israel dictated otherwise. First, many within the Jewish state realised that tremendous pressure would be placed upon any Israeli government over territorial retrenchment. Already, under the 1974 disengagement agreements brokered by Washington, Israel had conceded control of roughly one-third of the Sinai peninsula. For many in Israel this set a dangerous precedent. In response, settler organisations such as *Gush Emunim* were established to forestall any such concessions. Secondly, the balance of power in Israeli politics shifted dramatically with the election of Israel's first right-wing coalition government in May 1977 under Menachem Begin. With his core belief in the sovereign unity of *Eretz Yisrael*, Begin's politics were, in appearance at least, inimical to further territorial concessions. This view seemed confirmed following the shock visit of President Anwar Sadat to Israel in November 1977. The first open visit by an Arab head of state to Israel, and one still technically in a state of war with Tel Aviv, Sadat's visit was met with rapturous approval by the Israeli public. Yet the approbation heaped upon the Egyptian leader in his attempt to break the impasse in negotiations over the Sinai failed to move Begin.

Begin, however, now had to deal with Jimmy Carter, the new Democratic President. Elected into office in November 1977, Carter favoured closer ties between Cairo and Washington. Many within Washington policy circles, including officials in the Pentagon, had come to question the perceived wisdom of Israel as a strategic asset.³³ Certainly, Carter believed in Israeli territorial retrenchment and a comprehensive solution to the issue of the Palestinians and believed that Israel should be more forthcoming towards the dramatic overture of President Sadat. A clear paradox was now apparent in Israel's position. Through mediation by Washington, it was on the verge of securing a formal treaty with the most powerful state in the Arab world, thereby dealing a grave blow to a united Arab front against Israel. However, the price that would be extracted from Tel Aviv, territorial retrenchment, was clearly inimical to the ideological disposition of Prime Minister Begin.

In an attempt to frame an agreement, Carter hosted talks between Sadat and Begin at the Presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland, in

September 1978. After tortuous negotiations in which Carter linked continued American military aid to greater flexibility on the part of Israel over territorial concessions, a deal was finally struck. The Camp David Accords, signed on 26 March 1979, did much to cement closer ties with Washington. The United States pledged to take any measures deemed necessary to ensure the security of the Jewish state should the treaty be violated. This included protecting Israel's freedom of navigation in international waters. In return, Israel agreed to return all of Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty by 1982 while promising autonomy for the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as an intermediate solution before final negotiations commenced on the final status of the Occupied Territories.

Throughout the whole of the Camp David process Begin proved to be recalcitrant. It was only the urging of Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and Defence Minister Ezer Weizmann that finally persuaded him to part with the Sinai.³⁴ But with regard to the autonomy proposals for the Palestinians, Begin preferred to place the emphasis upon 'civil' rather than 'political' autonomy. The fact that the PLO rejected the Camp David Accords out of hand spared Israel the outright opprobrium of the international community as it continued to expand settlement construction throughout the Occupied Territories. Indeed, it was securing the future of the West Bank as part of Israel's dispensation that now determined the contours of Israel's foreign policy.

The atrophy that marked relations between Moscow and Washington in the early 1980s provided a more permissive environment for Tel Aviv to pursue an aggressive foreign policy. Carter, humiliated by the Iranian revolution and the American hostage crisis, had been replaced by Republican Ronald Reagan. On entering the White House in 1981, Reagan made clear his determination to contain and 'roll back' the Soviet threat globally, a policy that entailed active support for regional allies facing Soviet client states. The result was the signing of the November 1981 Strategic Co-operation Agreement between Washington and Tel Aviv that provided for joint military co-operation, the pre-positioning of American military supplies in Israel, and increased grants for military research and development. The agreement was not a formal military alliance, however, as Tel Aviv continued to eschew any agreement that would circumscribe its freedom of action. As Israel's bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak on 6 June 1981 demonstrated, recourse to unfettered unilateral action remained central to Israel's national security.

The close strategic ties with Washington, coupled with the peace treaty with Cairo, now produced an ideal environment in which Israel hoped to deal with the PLO. While never threatening the survival of the Jewish state, the presence of the PLO in southern Lebanon had produced periodic bouts of high tension and violent confrontations along Israel's northern border. In June 1981, Begin won a second national election. His new cabinet included Ariel Sharon, a former general and now Defence Minister, who made clear

his intention to deal a crushing blow against the PLO in Lebanon. It was felt that such a blow would achieve a number of political objectives. Firstly, by driving the PLO from Lebanon and removing the Syrian military presence, Israel could reassert Maronite Christian domination of Lebanon's political structures. Israel would then have a dependable Lebanese ally. Secondly, by destroying the PLO in Lebanon, Israel would be freed from any serious obligation to invest the Palestinian autonomy proposals under the Camp David Accords with the diplomatic energy required. Thirdly, and closely connected, it was hoped that the very destruction of the symbol of Palestinian nationalism would be so total, that a more pliant Palestinian leadership would emerge in the Occupied Territories that would accept Israel's ingestion of the West Bank in return for some limited form of autonomy.³⁵

Israel's invasion of Lebanon on 6 June 1982, 'Operation Peace for Galilee', achieved none of these objectives. In a war that bitterly divided public opinion, the IDF succeeded in forcing the removal of the main body of PLO fighters from Lebanon but failed to realise its grand strategy. Sharon distorted the true aims of the invasion, claiming military necessity had forced Israel not only to clear PLO forces to a line 40 kilometres from Israel's northern border, but to engage Syrian forces on the Beirut–Damascus highway. Given that this was a war of Israel's choice, the steady flow of casualties appeared incongruent in what was portrayed as a defensive operation.³⁶ This inconsistency was further underlined following the massacre of over 2,000 Palestinian men, women and children by Christian militiamen in the refugee camps of Sabra and Chatilla. The fall-out from this appalling crime, carried out under the noses of IDF troops, led to a mass demonstration of 400,000 Israelis organised by Peace Now against the war. Such was the scale of popular opposition to the war – both among civilians and a high proportion of the troops serving in Lebanon – that Ariel Sharon was forced from office and an official enquiry, the Kahan Commission, was established to ascertain the level of Israeli culpability in the massacre. The scale of Israel's invasion served only to undermine any attempt at the restitution of Christian hegemony. The assassination of Israel's chosen President elect, Bashir Gemayel, sparked bitter intercommunal fighting which served only to radicalise the competing communities or confessions in Lebanon. The origins of *Hizb'allah* (the Party of God) can be traced directly to the impact that Israel's invasion had upon a Shi'a community already affected by the radical influence of the Iranian revolution. Far from achieving a grand strategic design, the invasion of Lebanon polarised political opinion, exposing rifts within a society previously assuaged by the more immediate exigencies of national security.

The removal of the PLO from Lebanon undoubtedly proved a sobering experience for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. While Shlomo Gazit has noted that it dealt a final blow to the efficacy of the 'armed struggle', it did not make Palestinians any more inclined to accept the Israeli occupation

as an enduring reality.³⁷ The outbreak of the Palestinian *Intifada* throughout the Occupied Territories in December 1987 demonstrated the futility of Israel's attempts to solve the Palestinian issue by military means. A popular uprising born of frustration at the impasse in any tangible peace process, the *Intifada* was also a clear demonstration of a vibrant Palestinian nationalism that Israel had refused to recognise. It was a conflict where the enduring image of Palestinian youth confronting the IDF with little more than stones did much to erode the perception of Israel as a bastion of liberal-democratic values amid the otherwise autocratic regimes of the Arab world.

The *Intifada* served only to deepen political cleavages still further over the efficacy of territorial compromise. From 1983 onwards, a series of national unity governments (NUGs) had effectively stymied any tangible peace initiatives on the part of Tel Aviv. Following the resignation of Menachem Begin, leadership of the *Likud* passed to Yitzhak Shamir, a man who had opposed the Camp David Accords and whose belief in the integrity of *Eretz Yisrael* effectively denied the exchange of land for peace as the diplomatic palliative to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Attempts by Shimon Peres, leader of the Labour Alignment, who occupied the portfolios of Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in NUGs throughout the 1980s, to pursue a negotiated agreement with Jordan over the future of the West Bank foundered precisely over such differences. The *Intifada* was to drag on for at least another five years, but new geo-political realities were to create regional conditions that proved instrumental in breaking the political impasse in Israel.

At the international level, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev brought about the retrenchment of Moscow's position in the Middle East, removing what remained of any ideological threat posed by the Soviet Union to the region. The change brought with it both benefits and potential costs for Israel. Of benefit were the growing numbers of Soviet Jews who were now allowed to emigrate. While championing their right of migration, the decision of the United States to impose strict immigration quotas meant that Israel remained the only viable destination. But equally, with the demise of the Cold War, Israel's role as a key strategic asset for Washington came to be questioned by events elsewhere in the Middle East.

On 2 August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. The resulting crisis divided the Arab world as the United States assembled a multinational coalition to initially defend Saudi Arabia and access to its oil fields, and later, to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In Washington, any Israeli involvement in the conflict was seen as counterproductive to the stability of the coalition. It was clear that in this crisis, Israel was a clear strategic liability for the United States. Accordingly, attempts by Baghdad to fragment the coalition by launching missile attacks on Tel Aviv and Haifa in January and February 1991 resulted in the United States exerting enormous political and financial leverage on Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to desist from retaliation. For

many Israelis, the failure of their government to respond in kind to Iraq's attacks undermined both Israel's deterrence capability as well as conceding Israel's defence to another sovereign power. But Israel was also struggling to absorb over 200,000 new immigrants from the Soviet Union and required financial support from the United States to fund the costs of absorption.

Prior to the Gulf crisis, the government of Yitzhak Shamir had been refused loans of \$400 million by President George Bush because of the acceleration of settlement construction in the Occupied Territories. The Bush Administration proved unusually tough on Israel and Washington's refusal to authorise the money without a prior cessation in Israeli settlement activity was described by Shamir as tantamount to a declaration of war.³⁸ Now, in recognition of Israel's restraint in the face of Iraqi missile attacks, the Bush Administration authorised the release of the money but Secretary of State James Baker made it clear that any further requests for funding would be conditional upon Israel adopting a more forthcoming attitude towards any future peace process. Baker was well aware that progress towards some resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict had to be addressed in the aftermath of the Gulf conflict. Washington's insistence on Iraqi compliance with a whole raft of UN Security Council resolutions sat uneasily with what was perceived as a reluctance to enforce Israeli compliance with UN Resolution 242 or UN Resolution 425, passed in 1978. This resolution called for a full Israeli withdrawal from the security zone that it had established in south Lebanon in conjunction with surrogate Lebanese militia forces.

In the wake of the the Iraqi defeat, Baker engaged in an intensive round of shuttle diplomacy in a bid to convene an international peace conference to deal with the Israeli–Palestinian issue. Shamir had tried to resist a conference which he knew would place considerable pressure upon Israel to at least entertain the real possibility of territorial compromise. Moreover, Shamir opposed the idea of an international conference that would result in Israel having to engage in multilateral talks with all Arab states, rather than conducting talks on a bilateral basis as Israel had always preferred. The idea that Israel would sit down at a conference table with Palestinians who openly represented the PLO was anathema to Shamir and contrary to Israeli law which proscribed contact with what was still deemed to be a terrorist organisation. But the immediate financial burden imposed by the continuing *aliyah* from the Soviet Union proved beyond Israel's ability to cope. The spring of 1991 saw Israel submit a request for loan guarantees worth \$10 billion to fund the absorption of Soviet Jews. The scale of the request allowed Baker to make access to such loans conditional on Israel at least attending the proposed international conference. Even so, Shamir extracted what he considered to be two key concessions from Baker: that the Palestinian representatives, drawn from the Occupied Territories, should not be affiliated with the PLO and would only attend as part of the Jordanian delegation. In addition, after the preliminaries of the conference were over, the multi-

lateral forum would give way to bilateral discussions with Israel negotiating on an individual basis with those Arab representatives present.³⁹

On 30 October 1991, the Middle East Peace Conference opened in Madrid. While mutual rancour marked the opening speeches of some of the delegations – most notably those of Israel and Syria – the Madrid conference at least paved the way for further talks. Between October 1991 and June 1992 a further five rounds of talks were held in North America, Europe and Japan. It was clear, however, that the maximum Israel was willing to place on the negotiating table did not meet the minimum demands of the Palestinian delegation. For example, during talks held under the Madrid framework in February 1992, Tel Aviv proposed self-rule for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories but failed to include any proposal for the election of a Palestinian authority to oversee the transition to self-rule. Nor did the proposal include an Israeli military withdrawal from the West Bank or the dismantling of settlements. In short, Israel's plans were seen by the Palestinians as a mechanism to legitimise Israel's continued rule over the Occupied Territories.⁴⁰ It is doubtful if Shamir was ever sincere over Israel's participation in the Madrid process. Nonetheless, the fact that Israel, under pressure from Washington, was at least discussing the possibility of exchanging land for peace proved too much for some of Shamir's more extreme right-wing allies in his coalition government. The *Tehiya* and *Moledet* parties resigned from the coalition, forcing Shamir to bring forward the date of the next national election from November to June 1992.

The result of the election of 23 June 1992 has been described as a *mahapach* – an upheaval that changed the whole dynamic of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Under the leadership of Yitzhak Rabin, a reinvigorated Labour Alignment won enough seats to form a government without reliance upon the more extreme national or religious parties in the *Knesset*. Rabin's victory resulted from several factors. According to David Kimche, Israelis had tired of the Occupied Territories and the incumbent security burden imposed by the *Intifada*. Indeed, the scale and intensity of the Palestinian uprising did much to disabuse Israelis of the sagacity of *Likud's* concept of *Eretz Yisrael*. In short, there could be no going back to the situation that existed before 1987.⁴¹ Moreover, the social dislocation caused by the mass migration of Soviet Jewry allowed parties of the centre-left to highlight the apparent disparity between continued investment in settlement construction in the Occupied Territories and the lack of housing and employment opportunities in Israel proper. One of Rabin's first acts as Prime Minister was to freeze construction of new settlements, a move that prompted Washington to allow Israel access to the \$10 billion in loan guarantees requested previously.⁴²

Rabin had promised that he would reach an autonomy agreement with the Palestinians within six to nine months of taking office as well as advancing negotiations with Syria and Jordan. The Madrid process, however, had not produced the hoped-for breakthrough. It was clear to Rabin's Foreign

Minister, Shimon Peres, that the previous Israeli strategy of only dealing with regional state actors to achieve peace remained flawed. Peres realised that until the issue of the Palestinians was addressed, Arab states would never accept the legitimacy of the Jewish state. Moreover, the profile of the ongoing *Intifada* gave Israelis grave cause for concern. The days of mass clashes between IDF troops and stone-throwing youths in the Occupied Territories had given way to more deadly confrontations with *Hamas* (*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*), the radical Palestinian Islamist movement.

Rabin realised it was easier to deal with the secular nationalists of the PLO than with *Hamas*, who rejected the very idea of a Jewish state. Indeed, the Israeli premier knew that in spite of the façade of a joint Jordanian–Palestinian delegation, the Palestinian representatives to the Madrid process represented the PLO. In November 1992, Rabin had ordered the mass deportation of 400 alleged *Hamas* activists to south Lebanon following the murder of an Israeli border policeman. The growing appeal of *Hamas* with its network of social services contrasted sharply with the fortunes of the PLO. It was an organisation on the verge of bankruptcy, both financially and politically, weakened by Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein during the Gulf crisis. The growing strength of *Hamas*, particularly among young Palestinians, produced a symbiosis of interest with Israel to ensure that some tangible gain emerged from the peace process.⁴³

Secret contacts had already been made between Israelis acting on behalf of Shimon Peres and representatives of the PLO in July 1992. Rabin had hoped that the Madrid process would lead to an agreement with the Palestinian delegation, but it was clear by the spring of 1993 that the positions of the two parties, operating under the public gaze of the international community, remained far apart. The Palestinian delegation, for example, insisted on full territorial autonomy and that UN Resolution 242 be applied to East Jerusalem. While Rabin acknowledged the need for autonomy proposals to go beyond the confines of the Camp David proposals, the Palestinian position was clearly unacceptable to Israel. Indeed, when Arafat informed the Palestinian delegation that they should temper their demands, three members of the delegation threatened to tender their resignations in protest.⁴⁴

Realising that the Madrid process was moribund, Rabin agreed to invest diplomatic capital in the secret channel that had been established by Peres. From January to August 1993, tight secrecy surrounded fifteen separate meetings between representatives of the PLO and Israel held outside the Norwegian capital Oslo. Israel's parliamentary opposition was never informed of the discussions lest it mobilised public opposition to any agreement. Indeed, the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid talks remained oblivious to the secret negotiations. It was also noteworthy that Washington was excluded entirely from these negotiations. The choice of Norway helped create a level playing field where both sides could 'dispense with dramatic

posturing' and try to tackle the substantive issues in a more benign environment.⁴⁵

On 13 September 1993, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat formally signed the 'Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements between Israel and the PLO', or more simply, the Oslo Accords, in Washington. Just prior to the signing of the Accords, the PLO and the Israeli government had exchanged notes of mutual recognition. The Accords themselves were not a formal peace treaty, but laid down principles and confidence-building measures designed to facilitate agreement towards such a treaty. Israel agreed to evacuate an enclave around Jericho as well as most of the Gaza Strip. The more substantive issues – East Jerusalem, water rights, the return of Palestinian refugees, the location of borders, the future of Israeli settlements – were to be discussed in final status negotiations no later than the third year after the signing of the agreement.

The basis of the Accords has been tested severely since 1993. Religious extremists on both sides have perpetrated atrocities, while Rabin himself fell victim to a young religious zealot following a peace rally in Tel Aviv on 4 November 1995. Opponents of the Oslo Accords were quick to point out that more Israelis had been killed in terrorist acts between 1993 and 1996 than in the fifteen years prior to the signing of the accords. Given that maintaining national security remains an enduring theme in Israeli politics, the rash of suicide bombings represented a strategic threat to the very basis of the Oslo Accords. The ferocity of such attacks did enough to persuade Israelis, albeit by a tiny majority, to elect a right-wing *Likud* government to power in May 1996. The new premier, Binyamin Netanyahu, known for his antipathy towards the Accords while in opposition, made further progress on Israeli territorial concessions contingent on the Palestinians doing more to 'fight terrorism'. Against what criteria this was to be measured remained vague, allowing Netanyahu to apply a subjective criterion in determining the extent to which further concessions, if any, should be given to Arafat.

If the Oslo process is still to produce a final agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, it certainly created a more benign regional environment for the Jewish state. A full peace treaty with Jordan signed in October 1994, as well as low-level but open contacts with Arab states stretching from the Atlantic to the Gulf, would not have been possible but for the Oslo Accords. Even the difficult progress made in negotiations with Syria over future sovereignty of the Golan Heights would not have occurred without the Oslo Accords. Throughout, Washington has remained a staunch supporter of the Accords, facilitating and occasionally pushing the process forward. Beyond this, it has remained fully supportive of Israel's search for security. It is a search that is now determined as much by domestic constraints, as it is facilitated by external opportunities.

Israel's foreign relations in the contemporary world

While acknowledging the unipolar character of the post-Cold War world and the subsequent Arab loss – at least among the so-called ‘radical Arab states’ – of a superpower patron, Israelis regard the Middle East as a region still wracked by turmoil in which, despite the strides made towards regional accommodation, recidivist tendencies still determine inter-state relations. As Efraim Inbar has argued:

[A]ttempts to establish a new Middle East order have failed and it is still a region where the use of force is widely considered a policy option and one which receives popular support. The negative effects of the systemic changes on the international arena and on the Middle East have been similarly overlooked. Israel's [security] predicament has hardly changed. It is still a small state facing various challenges from powerful regional foes.⁴⁶

It remains a moot point as to whether continuity, rather than change, does indeed define Israel's security predicament in the post-Cold War age. But the efficacy of this perception has meant that all Israeli governments continue to place the utmost emphasis upon maintaining Israel's technological superiority in weapons procurement and deployment. It is in the area of nuclear weapons that Israel remains the regional power *par excellence*. All Israeli governments since the 1960s have embraced ‘nuclear ambiguity’ by stating that the Jewish state will not be the first to introduce such weapons to the region. Such opacity aside, Israel is believed to possess some 200 nuclear weapons and appears set on developing a survivable deterrent capability. Apart from advanced delivery platforms based upon the indigenous Jericho 3 ballistic missile system and American supplied F15I strike aircraft, Israel has taken delivery of three Dolphin class diesel attack submarines from Germany. The importance of these boats is that the IDF is thought to be developing a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile system which, if fitted to the Dolphins, would give Tel Aviv a survivable nuclear triad and thus enhance its deterrent capability vis-à-vis the second and third circles of Arab and Muslim states.⁴⁷ Given the belief that nuclear weapons compensate Israel for the demographic and territorial asymmetries it faces in the Middle East, it is unsurprising that Israel has yet to become a signatory to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Israel has also developed its own space-based *Ofek* (Horizon) satellite systems. By harnessing its missile capability to provide a launch platform, Israel now has three *Ofek* satellites in geosynchronous orbits, allowing real-time intelligence to be gathered. It is a capability unique to Israel among the states of the Middle East and is meant to give warning of impending attacks, particularly from missiles. Indeed, the threat posed by missile attacks, as demonstrated during the Gulf war, would appear to be the main preoccupa-

tion of Israel's defence planners. Countering this threat has led Israel to develop the Arrow (*Chetz*) anti-ballistic missile system. The Arrow has yet to be fully deployed, but meeting its research and development costs, estimated at \$1.6 billion, would not have been possible without Washington meeting at least two-thirds of the expense incurred.⁴⁸ As such, Israel places a high premium upon maintaining the 'special relationship' with the United States. To quote Robert Bowker, 'The maintenance of a clear qualitative military edge over all potential adversaries and open guaranteed access to U.S. technology are basic elements of [Israeli] government policy'.⁴⁹

Israel's relations with the United States

Israel has been a huge beneficiary of Washington's munificence, being the single largest recipient of United States economic and military aid, estimated to have totalled some \$65 billion for the period 1948 to 1996.⁵⁰ This would suggest a dependency relationship, and one that limits severely the sovereign autonomy of the Jewish state. The fact, however, that the relationship is deemed 'special', negates dependency as the determining feature of bilateral ties. Rather the relationship has been constructed around both 'soft' and 'hard' variables. Soft variables include the identification of Israel with democratic, western values, and more tangibly, the influence that American Jewry, and in particular, powerful pro-Israel lobby groups on Capitol Hill, can and do exercise in both Houses of Congress. Hard variables centre on the shared strategic interests of the two states, a position, however, that has yet to be enshrined in a formal strategic or defence treaty between Washington and Tel Aviv. Indeed, the extent of financial assistance given to Israel has not always produced a linear subservience to Washington's foreign policy aims or aspirations. Israel's decision in April 2000 to sell advanced aircraft-mounted radar systems to China was made despite strong protests from Washington who were concerned that such technology gave Beijing a qualitative military advantage in its dispute with Taiwan.

As such, it is perhaps inaccurate to describe Israel's relationship with Washington as falling within a traditional patron-client paradigm. Despite the huge inflows of American capital the relationship between Israel and the United States has immunised the Jewish state to a very large extent from the great power leverage usually associated with core-periphery relations in international politics. Yet strong ties with the United States remain crucial to Israel's ability to make peace with the Arab world. While the Oslo Accords were negotiated without Washington's participation, the very fact they were signed on the lawn of the White House underlines the importance Tel Aviv attaches to American support for, if not outright involvement in, the peace process. Israel's conclusion of peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan were both concluded with the full support of the United States, while the Clinton administration

invested a great deal of diplomatic capital in trying to facilitate a peace agreement between Syria and Israel. Moreover, Israel has come to rely heavily upon Washington to retain a qualitative edge militarily, particularly in air power. The strength derived from its alliance with Washington and its own economic, technological and military capabilities have helped sustain Israel's position as the dominant power in the region. Indeed, the shift among Arab elites towards tacit acceptance, if not formal recognition, of the Jewish state would have been impossible without the development and maintenance of a 'special relationship' in which 'soft variables' continue to transcend any overt reliance on the cold realism of shared strategic interests as the main determinant of ties between the two states.

Israel's relations with Europe

A clear paradox is discernible in Israel's approach towards the European Union (EU). While the EU provides Israel with its largest overseas market, it has remained circumspect over the political role that the EU should play in regional diplomacy. Such circumspection has its roots in the perceived bias towards the Palestinians displayed by the EU, as well as Israel's often turbulent relations with individual EU member states.

As an intergovernmental organisation, the EU has undoubtedly been critical of Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories. A growing Euro-Arab dialogue in the wake of the October 1973 war resulted in the 'Venice Declaration' of 13 June 1980. The declaration repeated calls for the implementation of UN Resolution 242 but, in addition, called for the inclusion of the PLO in future peace negotiations. It was a declaration designed to place clear water between the position of Europe and that of the United States. The declaration was met by an angry response in Tel Aviv, and with a decidedly cool reception in Washington. As Philip Gordon notes, as if to demonstrate its defiance of the Declaration, Israel almost at once announced the passing of a law through the *Knesset* which recognised *de facto* Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967.⁵¹

Israel in the past has, however, been helped by divisions among the Europeans themselves over how to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict, allowing Washington's dominance as the facilitator of the peace process to continue. Berlin, for historic reasons associated with the holocaust, remains reluctant to place undue pressure upon Tel Aviv, a position supported by Holland and Denmark who have traditionally maintained close ties with the Jewish state. Britain's relations with Israel were long blighted by the legacy of the Mandate years and a perception among Israel's policy-making elite that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was dominated by Arabists hostile to Israel. The premiership of Margaret Thatcher undoubtedly did much to thaw bilateral ties, but British commercial and strategic interests in the Arab Gulf states continue to place clear limits on London's ability to influence Israel. While sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinians

in the Occupied Territories, Britain remains wary of Europe undermining Washington's predominant role, a legacy of its own special relationship with the United States and a reflection of the dilemma London now faces in either following an Atlanticist or European orientated foreign policy. The French have been the most vociferous in their criticism of Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories, its wide trading relations with its former colonies in Arab North Africa, as well as historic ties to Lebanon and Syria, resulting in Paris being particularly outspoken regarding Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

The EU has made some progress in trying to adopt a coherent policy, rather than just a series of agreed-upon declarations, towards Israel and the Palestinians. To this end, it has appointed a European envoy to co-ordinate with both Israeli and Palestinian negotiating teams, while Israel has a fully accredited ambassador to the EU in Brussels. The EU fully supported the Oslo Accords and has proved the biggest donor of funds to the Palestine National Authority (PNA), giving \$1.5 billion between 1993 and 1998.⁵² Yet lacking the unified decision-making structure of a single-nation state imposes clear limits on the political influence that the EU should be able to exercise given its economic power. It is a position that, at present, suits Israel well. Tel Aviv fully supports EU aid to the PNA, realising that economic aid to the self-rule areas remains vital to ensuring the stability of the PNA. Equally, while threatening to impose limited sanctions against Israeli products originating from the Occupied Territories, the EU remains open to Israeli goods and services without any political pre-conditions that can be readily enforced. It is a win-win situation from the Israeli perspective since the tangible economic benefits it accrues from trade with the EU cannot be tied to the very cornerstone of its foreign policy: its special relationship with Washington.

Israel's relations with the Middle East

Shimon Peres, perhaps more in hope than expectation, made much of a new order emerging in the Middle East following the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, a new order based on a regional multilateralism 'in which people, goods and services can move freely from place to place'.⁵³ Certainly, the Oslo Accords allowed Israel to build bridges to the wider world, with Tel Aviv establishing open, albeit low-level relations with the Gulf states of Bahrain, Oman and Qatar as well as Morocco and Tunisia. Moreover, Tel Aviv rekindled old diplomatic ties with a plethora of African states that had previously been severed. For many Israelis, however, Binyamin Netanyahu's acerbic declaration that Israel lives in a 'tough neighbourhood', provides a description of the Middle East more immediately recognisable than the hubris of Peres.

Shlomo Gazit, former head of Israeli military intelligence, defined the Arab-Israeli conflict from the perspective of Tel Aviv as consisting of

three concentric circles – (1) Israel/Palestine, (2) Israel/Egypt, Syria, Jordan and (3) Israel/Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan – each with its own level of hostility and threat capability.⁵⁴ The great importance of the bilateral peace treaties with Cairo and Amman should not be overlooked, but equally, as Israeli strategists remain quick to point out, this does not discount recourse to the use of force by individual states, or an alliance of all or some of the above to break a perceived political deadlock in the region. Primary concern among Israeli decision-makers centres on the threat, real or otherwise, of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction throughout the region. Iran's attempt to acquire WMD is the most apposite example, and as such is interpreted as a clear threat to Israel and all too congruent with the vitriol of its anti-Zionist propaganda. Ehud Sprinzak, however, has argued that such threat perceptions have been exaggerated. Aside from their own concerns over Israel's nuclear capability, Sprinzak places Tehran's programme within the context of its own circle of regional threats and challenges, not least the continued concerns over Afghanistan, United States forces in the Gulf, Iraq with its record of using chemical weapons, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Accordingly, Sprinzak went on to argue that:

If one adds to this [the perception of an Iranian threat] that psychologically, modern Israeli identity has been formed by the constant presence of an enemy at the gate and the absence of an enemy will automatically prompt an identity crisis, it becomes easy to understand why it is difficult for political figures willing to give up the terrible monster from Tehran. The threat from Iran fits so well into the speeches of the defence minister [Yitzhak Mordechai] for whom the War of Independence has not even ended.⁵⁵

Sprinzak's keen observations aside, effective deterrence remains central to Israel's national security. This includes not just the possession of a nuclear weapons capability, but the maintenance of what has been termed an 'offensive-minded defence posture' with regard to the use of conventional forces. The result has been a tendency towards pre-emption, most visibly demonstrated in the June War of 1967 and the attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak in June of 1981.

This offensive mind-set has also been a feature of Israeli government policy where threats to the security of the state outside any immediate existential danger have arisen. Falling under the rubric of 'regime targeting', the bloody removal of individuals or groups has included the bombing of the headquarters of the PLO in Tunisia in 1985, the killing of Khalil Wazir (*Abu Jihad*) in April 1988, the assassination of *Hizb'allah* spiritual leader Shaykh Hussein Abbas Musawi in February 1992, as well as the attempted politicide of the PLO as an effective symbol of Palestinian resistance between June and September 1982.⁵⁶

Whether such actions can be considered 'rational' remains a moot point, but Israel's military alliance with Ankara, and allegations of developing technological and strategic links with New Dehli, fall within a classic realist paradigm of an order based on power politics and regional alliances.⁵⁷ The close military relationship with Turkey that has developed since 1995 is, according to Neill Lochery, 'as important a development in the Middle East region as any of the peace treaties that [Israel] has signed with the Arabs'.⁵⁸ Tel Aviv has stated its desire to see this axis develop into the dominant security structure for the region, though Ankara has made such development contingent on political progress with the Palestine National Authority (PNA).⁵⁹ Still, given Turkey's history of tense relations with Syria, the alliance with Ankara acts as a natural force multiplier as Israel seeks to maintain both its conventional and non-conventional military advantage over Damascus. It is an advantage that Tel Aviv will not relinquish if it is to withdraw from the Golan Heights.

Long regarded as essential for the security of northern Israel, withdrawal from the Golan Heights back to the boundaries held by Tel Aviv on 4 June 1967 was a position that Rabin was prepared to discuss, if not condone openly, provided a 'full peace' proved forthcoming from Damascus. Meaningful negotiations were held in Washington between January 1994 and April 1995 but an agreement was never finalised. Professor Itamar Rabinovich, appointed personally by Rabin as Israel's ambassador to Washington with a specific mandate to negotiate with his Syrian counterpart, has suggested that President al-Assad missed a window of opportunity to make peace, 'not under the full terms that he would have wanted but under reasonable, acceptable conditions'.⁶⁰ These 'reasonable, acceptable conditions' included demilitarisation of the Golan, early-warning stations, as well as the establishment of full diplomatic relations.⁶¹ More recently, Ehud Barak attempted to revive the negotiations. He was the first Prime Minister to openly declare his intent to return the strategic mountains to full Syrian sovereignty, save for a small strip of land on the banks of the Kinneret that had been controlled by Damascus prior to the June 1967 war.⁶² For Israelis, control of the Kinneret is an issue of national strategic importance, providing as it does nearly half of Israel's fresh water supply. Yet it remains a position at odds with the Syrian demand for Israel to comply fully with UN Resolution 242, and return all land captured during the June 1967 war.

Stalemate in negotiations between Damascus and Tel Aviv inevitably helps to focus attention on the state of relations between Israel and the Palestine National Authority. The hope that the Oslo Accords would result in final status negotiations beginning by the third anniversary of their signing proved hopelessly optimistic. By June 2000, Israel had conceded some 40 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip to Palestinian self-rule, but negotiations between the parties remain mired in bitter disagreement. The terrorist atrocities committed by Islamic extremists undoubtedly did much

to focus Israel's attention upon security, a fixation that allowed for the election of Binyamin Netanyahu in 1996. But equally, the glacial progress of negotiation has done much to undermine the Accords as helping to build a bridge of trust between the two parties. Since the signing of the Declaration of Principles on 13 September 1993, the tortuous path of negotiations has seen a whole raft of agreements signed between the two parties – the Oslo II Accords, the Hebron Agreement, the Wye Accords, and the Sharm al-Sheikh Agreement – all of which have been subject to review or renegotiation by Israel.

These agreements, mostly negotiated under the auspices of Washington, remain focused upon Israel handing over carefully delineated parcels of land to Palestinian control. The more substantive issues – the future of the settlements, the issue of Palestinian refugees, the future of East Jerusalem, water issues – have yet to be addressed. Whatever its conceptual flaws, the Oslo process has seen Israel recognise formally the national aspirations of the Palestinian people. There is substantial evidence to suggest that Israelis have begun to internalise the meaning of peace. Recent surveys have shown that not only do most Israelis now believe that a Palestinian state will emerge, but, more importantly, a majority, albeit small, believe that Palestinians actually deserve such a state.⁶³

But equally, the Accords themselves have become hostage to those on both sides whose very identities, usually expressed in cosmic terminology, remain inextricably linked to the future of the West Bank. Particularly in Israel, such opposition, feeding directly through to Israel's political system, provides a real impediment to any Prime Minister wishing to clearly identify the physical borders of the Jewish state. Because of such bitter internal divisions, the language of national security remains dominant in Israel's approach to discussing the future of the Occupied Territories. It is a language that presents issues in black and white, obviating the need to address other, equally pressing issues that actually determine Israel's approach to the Occupied Territories. The paradox is clear: Israel has the proven capability to defend itself against any external threat. Replicating that capability to defend against threats from within, however, remains Israel's true national security challenge of the future.

Conclusion

Whatever the changes in the political landscape of the Middle East, Israel's foreign policy remains conditioned by a hierarchical foreign policy decision-making structure, biased internally towards the politics, if not the cult, of national security. Israelis argue that it is an approach that has served them well. The establishment of a strong military, including the deliberate policy of nuclear ambiguity, and its close ties with the United States, has not only ensured Israel's continued survival in the Middle East, but its acceptance by

much of the Arab world, however grudging, that it is a permanent fixture in the political constellation of the Middle East.

Notes

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