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ISRAEL BETWEEN EAST AND WEST, 1948–56

The two main issues in Israel's foreign policy are relations with the Arab world and relations with the Great Powers, and there is extensive literature on both. But whereas the literature on relations with the Great Powers is marked by a broad consensus, the literature on relations with the Arab world is dominated by a deep and often acrimonious debate. A major landmark in the evolution of this debate was the emergence in the late 1980s of a school of "new," or revisionist, Israeli historians. Among the members of this group were Simha Flapan, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, and the present author.¹ We were called the "new historians" because we challenged the traditional Zionist narrative of the birth of Israel and of the first Arab–Israeli war. The momentous events that unfolded in 1948 were the main focus of the debate.² Subsequent books by some of these authors extended the critique of Israel's policy in the conflict to the post-independence period.³ The debate between the "old" and the "new" historians has been going on for nearly two decades, and it is still going strong.

By contrast, the literature on Israel's international orientation has been much less contentious and much less controversial. While differences on specific issues and episodes undoubtedly exist, there is no alternative school of thought about the shift in Israel's posture from non-alignment in 1948 to close alignment with the West by 1956. Agreement on the broad contours of the story of how Israel came to be aligned with the West should not be confused, however, with lack of progress in scholarship on the subject. On the contrary, the declassification of official documents in Israeli, Western, and Soviet archives makes it possible for scholars to write in much greater detail and depth than in the past about Israel's relations with both East and West in the first decade of statehood.⁴ The purpose of this article is to review Israel's policy in world politics during this critical decade in light of some of the new evidence that is now available.

One of the original imperatives of Zionist strategy in world politics was an alliance with a Great Power. External support was essential for the project of building an independent Jewish state in Palestine. From the very beginning, toward the end of the 19th century, the Zionist movement displayed two features that were to be of fundamental and enduring importance in its subsequent history: the non-recognition of a Palestinian national entity, and the quest for an alliance with a Great Power external to the Middle East. Theodor Herzl, the visionary of the Jewish state, exemplified both of these features. He assumed that the Zionist movement would achieve its goal not through an understanding with

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the local Palestinians but through an alliance with the dominant Great Power of the day. And he was tireless in his search for an external sponsor. In the formative period of the movement, the weakness of the Yishuv, the pre-independence Jewish community in Palestine, and the growing hostility of the Palestinians combined to make the reliance on a Great Power a central element in Zionist strategy. The dominant Great Power in the Middle East changed several times in the course of the 20th century: first it was the Ottoman Empire; after World War I it was Great Britain; and after World War II it was the United States. But the Zionist fixation with enlisting the support of the Great Powers in the struggle for statehood and in the consolidation of statehood remained constant.

The birth of the State of Israel in 1948 coincided with the onset of the Cold War between East and West. In 1947, as the struggle for Palestine entered its critical phase, the United States and the Soviet Union came out in support of the establishment of an independent Jewish state. Both superpowers voted in favor of the United Nations resolution for the partition of Palestine and the establishment of a Jewish state in what was a rare occasion of agreement between them during the Cold War. This was followed up with political support, diplomatic recognition, and, in the case of the Soviet Union, the supply of vital military aid to the fledgling state. Israel thus came into the world under uniquely propitious international circumstances: it enjoyed the support of both East and West in its struggle for independence.

But the new state's international position was paradoxical in a number of ways. In the first place, faraway countries accorded it diplomatic recognition while its immediate neighbors did not. Geographically, it was located in Asia, but culturally it regarded itself as part of the West. To stay on good terms with both East and West, the newly born state adopted a policy of *i-hizdahut*, or non-identification in the global struggle between the two camps. Michael Comay, a senior official at the Foreign Ministry, summed up both the dilemma and the solution: "[a]t the birth of the state there were two godfathers—the United States and the Soviet Union. To try to retain the support of both, we adopted a posture of non-identification, of keeping out of the Cold War."⁵

There were other, no less compelling reasons for the posture of non-identification. One was Israel's sense of responsibility for the fate and welfare of Jews everywhere. Second, there was Israel's desperate need for 'aliyah, immigration, coupled with the fact that the two rival blocs contained large numbers of Jews. Third, Israel's involvement in a bitter conflict with its neighbors made it vital to secure access to arms. The Eastern bloc served as the country's main arms supplier during the War of Independence, but there was the hope and the expectation of acquiring arms from the Western bloc, as well. Fourth, from the very beginning Israel was heavily dependent on external economic aid. The United States was the most coveted source of aid, but prudence dictated keeping all options open.

In addition to these essentially practical considerations, Israel's internal political and ideological makeup made it reluctant to take sides in the emergent Cold War between East and West. Many of Israel's founding fathers had come from Russia and Eastern Europe. Not only the Israeli Communist Party and the Marxist-Zionist party Mapam but a significant part of the mainstream labor party, Mapai, looked to Moscow for inspiration and guidance in the international arena. A foreign policy of non-identification helped to preserve the internal balance between Mapai, the ruling party, and its left-wing coalition partners. It also dovetailed with a sincere desire shared by all the major parties to make

their state a positive force for peace and to refrain from doing anything that might exacerbate international tensions.⁶ Non-identification thus reflected, to some extent, the messianism latent in the Jewish soul and the hope that a new era of peace and goodwill was about to dawn. Yet in the final analysis, non-identification was a pragmatic policy designed to serve the Israeli national interest rather than an ideological conception of neutrality in world politics.

Moshe Sharett, Israel's first foreign minister, was the principal proponent of the principle of non-identification with either of the contending blocs in the emergent Cold War. To his Mapai colleagues, during the struggle for statehood, Sharett repeatedly stressed the importance of avoiding exclusive affiliation, of "knocking on every door," of seeking help from any quarter. In the early years of statehood, he elevated this principle to the status of official doctrine and expounded it on numerous occasions. Indeed, Sharett was one of the first statesmen of the newly independent states of Asia and Africa to articulate the idea of non-alignment. Yet Israel was not regarded as a non-aligned state, nor was it accepted into the councils of the Third World.⁷

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and a shrewd practitioner of power politics, was in full accord with Sharett about the importance of keeping all options open. On 27 September 1948, with the war still in progress, Ben-Gurion declared before the Provisional State Council, "We have friends both in the East and in the West. We could not have conducted the war without the important help we received from several States of East and West . . . the interests of the Jewish people are not identical with those of any State or any bloc in the world. . . . There is no identification between a small and a big nation, except if the small nation completely subordinates itself, or if the big nation is composed entirely of angels. We do not want to subordinate ourselves to anyone, and we do not believe that angels rule anywhere." This tenet was officially promulgated on 9 March 1949 in the Basic Principles of the Government Programme. The first of the five principles of foreign policy read, "Loyalty to the principles of the United Nations Charter and friendship with all freedom-loving states, and in particular with the United States and the Soviet Union."⁸

Keeping a balance between East and West was for Ben-Gurion the beginning of wisdom in foreign policy. His own personal inclination was strongly pro-Western, but a utilitarian calculation of Israel's interests made him conceal these inclinations and cultivate good relations with the Soviet Union. For him, international orientation was intimately linked to Israel's basic problem: the hostility of the Arab world. All his life, Ben-Gurion worried about Israel's security and its prospects of survival against a vast and hostile Arab world.⁹ "There are sixty or seventy million Arabs," he used to say to his colleagues, and in his room he had a large map of the Middle East showing the Arab states in red and tiny Israel in blue. Israel's integration into the Middle East did not appear to him as a remotely realistic project. But Israel's isolation within the Middle East weighed very heavily on him. External support, especially from the superpowers, was needed to lessen this isolation, and the policy of non-identification was designed to maximize external support. Despite his strong pro-Western leanings, Ben-Gurion therefore avoided for as long as he could an explicit diplomatic identification with the West.

The abandonment of non-identification was a gradual process and was largely forced on Israel by external circumstances.¹⁰ Initially, Israel escaped from the paradoxes and

contradictions of its place in the world by firmly fixing its orientation on the United Nations. But disenchantment with the world body and the intensification of the Cold War left it floundering. Moscow's friendly attitude toward Israel was replaced with a more critical line, of which only one example was the vote at the United Nations on 9 December 1949 for the internationalization of Jerusalem. Washington, however, was suspicious of Israel's links with the Soviet bloc and generally became less tolerant of non-alignment as the Cold War intensified. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, the efforts at conciliation ended in failure, and the arms race continued at a disturbing pace, feeding fears of a second round.

On 25 May 1950, the United States, Britain, and France issued a joint declaration on the Middle East. The aim of the Tripartite Declaration, as it came to be known, was to regulate the supply of arms and to preserve the territorial status quo in the region. In the context of the Cold War, however, this was essentially an attempt by the Western powers to establish a monopoly over the supply of arms to the Middle East and to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining a toehold in the region.¹¹ In Israel, this declaration was received with mixed feelings: the guarantee of the existing borders was seen as being of some value in discouraging a second round, but the arms-control regime was seen as wholly unfavorable to Israel.

Ben-Gurion, in a statement in the Knesset on 31 May 1950, officially welcomed the initiative of the three Western powers as a modest contribution to security and stability in the Middle East. In his diary, however, he noted that "[i]t is a matter for surprise that the press has triumphantly hailed the declaration of the three. The most outstanding hater of Israel could have signed this declaration. It contains an unqualified permission for the supply of arms to the Arab states—and there is no obligation whatever to give arms to Israel. Possibly there is some good in the declaration against the use of force to change the borders of the armistice agreements, but this cannot be relied upon. All the rest can be interpreted as giving permission for the supply of arms to the Arabs and a refusal to give arms to the Jews."¹²

The outbreak of the Korean war in June 1950 prompted—or, at least, enabled—Israel to abandon the policy of non-identification. The decision was made easier for Israel by the fact that the Soviet Union was allied to the North Korean aggressors whereas the United States fought under the banner of the United Nations to repel the aggression and restore the status quo ante. In the Knesset, on 4 July 1950, Ben-Gurion presented Israel's vote for the resolution condemning the North Korean aggression as a vote for the United Nations and for the principles it embodied. He rejected the suggestion of left-wing members of the Knesset that Israel should abstain, arguing that Israel was a full-fledged member of the community of nations with a duty to make a stand, on this as on any other international issue, based on the dictates of its conscience. His government, however, did not offer to send troops to fight under the United Nations banner in Korea. The real significance of its stand in the Korean conflict therefore was that it marked the decisive break at the declaratory level with the policy of non-identification.

Following the outbreak of the Korean war, Israel moved toward *de facto* alignment with the West. In the words of Michael Brecher, a prominent analyst of Israeli foreign policy, "[T]hat shift was catalyzed by the need for arms and economic aid, rationalised by the perception of renewed Soviet hostility, and eased by the indifference of the Third

World. The last merits attention, particularly because it is rarely noted in analyses of Israeli foreign policy, by practitioners and scholars alike.”¹³

Three factors facilitated Ben-Gurion’s tilt from East to West. First was the dwindling number of immigrants from Eastern Europe to Israel. These immigrants tended to vote for Mapai. Once immigration from the Eastern bloc slowed to a trickle, the support and goodwill of the Soviet Union became less important. Second, Ben-Gurion was desperate to win the support of the whole of American Jewry, not just of American Zionists, for the State of Israel. The Zionists were a minority among American Jews. Distancing Israel from the Soviet Union in the Cold War was a means of enhancing Israel’s appeal to American Jews. Third, Ben-Gurion sought reparations from the Federal Republic of Germany for the crimes that Nazi Germany had committed against the Jewish people. He knew that there was virtually no chance of success in this controversial venture without American backing.¹⁴

Once the policy of non-identification had been abandoned, Ben-Gurion felt free to approach the United States for arms and for economic assistance in meeting the cost of absorbing the immigrants who arrived in large numbers from Eastern Europe and from the Arab countries. He also dropped heavy hints that Israel would like to be included in any military alliances that the Western powers might develop with the anti-communist forces in the Middle East.

Toward the end of July 1950, Ben-Gurion informed the American ambassador of his intention to build with American assistance an army of a quarter of a million men “capable and anxious” to help the United States, the United Kingdom, and Turkey in resisting Soviet aggression. He added that if Russia attacked Israel’s strategic air fields, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) would be able to hold on until the arrival of the American and British forces. In his report on this conversation, the American ambassador underlined that the prime minister could not have been more explicit about his desire to commit Israel unreservedly to the West.¹⁵ Nor can there be any doubt that this message constituted a fundamental change in the international orientation of the young state. The tilt toward the West was probably inevitable from the start, but it occurred in a surprisingly sudden manner.

The first Western country to express interest in defense cooperation with Israel was not America but Britain. On 19 February 1951, General Sir Brian Robertson, the commander-in-chief of the British land forces in the Middle East, arrived in Israel on an official visit. The political thinking behind this visit was conveyed by Sir William Strang, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, to Eliahu Elath, Israel’s ambassador to London, over lunch at the Travellers Club. Strang explained that Britain was preparing new plans for the defense of the Middle East in the event of a Soviet attack and that it wanted to include Israel in those plans. The two specific ideas Strang mentioned were a British base in Gaza with a corridor to Jordan through Israel and the building of British bases in Israel with a treaty on the basis of complete equality.

Ben-Gurion rejected the idea out of hand and even called it “an insulting proposal.” But despite his mistrust of the British in general, and of Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin in particular, he was prepared to hold secret talks about the defense of the Middle East and about ways to strengthen Israel’s industrial capacity so that it might be better placed to contribute to Western defense plans.¹⁶

During his visit to Israel, General Robertson had two meetings with the prime minister and his advisers. Robertson wanted to know whether Israel would join the Western powers if Soviet aggression looked imminent and whether British forces would be allowed to go through the country and use its airfields. Ben-Gurion did not answer these questions directly and merely stressed the importance of developing Israel's economy and military power and of resolving the conflict between it and Egypt. At the second meeting, when General Robertson pressed for answers, Ben-Gurion surprised him by saying that in an emergency he would see Israel's role as if it were part of the British Commonwealth, and that he would want to be treated by the British as such, as if Israel were Australia or New Zealand. He did not suggest that Israel should join the Commonwealth but that the relations between the two countries should be developed on the basis of common values, mutual trust, and genuine equality.

¹⁶⁸ Israel's, correct?

After considerable hesitation, Robertson replied that he was only a soldier and that a reply to the prime minister's suggestion could only come from the British government.¹⁷ The government's reply, sent two months later by Herbert Morrison—who in the meantime had succeeded Bevin as foreign secretary—was lukewarm and failed to address Ben-Gurion's main point concerning the establishment of a special relationship between the two countries.¹⁸ All that Britain offered Israel was an association through the back door in a regional defense organization. This was not good enough for Ben-Gurion, who insisted on full membership.¹⁹

Britain's special relationship with the Arab states continued to strain its relations with Israel and to bedevil its plans for the defense of the Middle East. In October 1951, Britain and America jointly put forward a plan for a Middle East Command. Egypt was invited to participate as a founding member. Israel was merely promised that its interests would be taken into account. Even when Egypt declined the invitation, Israel was not asked to join. The British continued to envisage a largely passive Israeli role in providing bases and facilities in time of war, whereas the Israelis hoped for a more active role in the defense plans for the region.

A British military delegation visited Israel in October 1952 but failed to break the deadlock. Ben-Gurion's efforts to persuade the Americans to let Israel play a major role were also to no avail. Faced with insurmountable difficulties, Britain and America abandoned the idea of a Middle East Command in favor of a more modest plan for a Middle East Defense Organization. But this plan, too, faded away in the course of 1953 and with it Israel's hope of becoming integrated into some sort of a military alliance.²⁰

The year 1953 was an eventful one in Israel's relations with both superpowers. In that year a Republican administration headed by Dwight Eisenhower came to power in Washington. All the early signs pointed to a reversal of the Truman administration's friendly attitude toward Israel and an attempt to strengthen America's position in the Arab world—especially in Egypt, which had been under the rule of the Free Officers since the revolution of July 1952. To help formulate a new policy toward the Middle East, John Foster Dulles, the new secretary of state, visited several Arab states and Israel in May 1953. It was the first visit by an American secretary of state to Israel. His visit gave Israel's policy-makers an opportunity to present to the new administration their thoughts on the defense of the Middle East and to renew their request for American aid.

Prior to Dulles's arrival in Israel, the Political Committee of Mapai held a meeting to discuss the country's foreign policy. Sharett gave a lecture that lasted two hours.

Ben-Gurion formulated in writing thirteen assumptions and read them out. The first assumption was that Israel could not remain neutral in the event of a third world war, because even temporary occupation by Russia would sound the death knell of Zionism and the State of Israel. Second, if war broke out, Britain and America would need Israel almost as much as Israel would need them. Third, there was a tremendous difference between Israel's military and political value to the free world: the former was great; the latter was nearly zero, in contrast to the Arabs, whose military value was almost zero whereas their political value was huge. Fourth, military value is discovered only in wartime—hence, the political dangers awaiting Israel. Fifth, only the fear of imminent war would induce the new world to turn to Israel. Sixth, Israel needed immediate military aid and not only in the event of a world war, because it faced an Arab danger, as well. Seventh, any arms given to the Arabs would be used against Israel, whether or not a world war broke out. Eighth, England could no longer be a decisive power in the Middle East either in peacetime or in wartime. Ninth, England's policy in the Middle East was hostile to Israel, and this had to be made clear in talks with the Americans. Tenth, in relation to America, Israel had two levers: its military significance in the Middle East and the power of American Jewry. Eleventh, peace was the supreme interest of the State of Israel, but it was essential that America (and the Arab League) know that they could not discuss with Israel territorial concessions, the internationalization of Jerusalem, or the return of the Palestinian refugees. Twelfth, England could not be given bases in Israel because it would not protect the Israelis and would only help the Arabs. As for America, it had to be made clear that the whole of Israel could be a base. Thirteenth, Israel had no interest in a regional arrangement but only in an arrangement with America or with the whole of the North American Treaty Organization.²¹

Underlying this set of assumptions was Ben-Gurion's despair about forging a special relationship with Britain and his keen desire to forge a special relationship with what he saw as the rising power in the Middle East, the United States. At a meeting with senior officials to prepare for Dulles's visit, Ben-Gurion again unveiled the cornerstone of his foreign policy: Israel is a Western bastion in the Middle East. The officials present were asked to stress that Israel was part not of the Middle East but of the West and that they would fight against any communist attack and consolidate their democratic regime in all circumstances.²²

During his brief visit to Israel, Dulles had a number of meetings, the most important of which were with the foreign minister and the prime minister. Sharett discussed with him the main issues in the Arab–Israeli dispute, whereas Ben-Gurion concentrated on the Soviet threat and Israel's role in the defense of the region. Two weeks later, on 1 June, Dulles made a major speech in Washington. The speech confirmed Israeli fears of a new direction in American foreign policy. The main conclusions that emerged from the speech were that the United States had to do something to dispel the deep anger that the very creation of Israel had caused in the Arab world, that the policy of the previous administration had to be changed, and that for the sake of peace both sides would have to make concessions. In the months that followed, America turned down Israel's request for a loan and condemned a number of Israeli actions, such as the moving of the Foreign Ministry from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the diversion of water from the Jordan River, and the raid against the Jordanian village Qibya.²³

As Israel moved toward a more openly pro-Western position in the Cold War, its relations with the Soviet bloc suffered further deterioration. In November 1952, a show trial was conducted in Prague against a number of left-wing Jews and Israelis in the course of which Zionism was denounced as a reactionary movement and Israel as the agent of American imperialism. In January 1953, Moscow announced the arrest of nine doctors, six of them Jewish, on charges of trying to kill Soviet leaders, but this time Israel was not mentioned. Sharett made a statement in the Knesset on 19 January severely condemning the Soviet authorities for their anti-Semitic and anti-democratic practices. This speech was a further step in Israel's retreat from non-identification.

In the midst of the commotion provoked by the "doctors' plot," a bomb was lobbed into the Soviet Consulate building in Tel Aviv. On 11 February, in response to this incident, Moscow broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, although it had received an official apology from the Israeli government. A gradual thaw in Soviet-Israeli relations occurred after the death of Josef Stalin in March 1953. Israel initiated a dialogue with Moscow that led to the resumption of diplomatic relations in late July. Jerusalem responded to a Soviet demand by stating that *it* would not be a party to any alliance or agreement directed against the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union announced its intention to maintain friendly relations with Israel.²⁴ Although the immediate quarrel was patched up, the rift between the two countries was probably beyond repair. The policy of non-identification that had served Israel so well in the early years of independence had been replaced by an explicit pro-Western position by the end of 1953.

The received wisdom of the Israeli political elite at the time was that the loss of Soviet cooperation was due to circumstances beyond Israel's control. Soviet policy toward the Middle East was said to be determined by what Sharett once termed its own "developmental logic." According to this version, the Soviet Union supported the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state simply as a means of undermining the British position in the Middle East. This objective was achieved with the establishment of the State of Israel, and the subsequent shift in Moscow's policy in favor of the Arabs was inevitable. In other words, the rift between Jerusalem and Moscow was brought about by Moscow, not by Jerusalem.

Uri Bialer has convincingly challenged this deterministic explanation of the course of Soviet-Israeli relations in the early 1950s. In the first place, he points out, Soviet proxy military aid to Israel in the form of Czech arms sales continued for longer than would have been necessary had the Soviet Union merely wished to ensure the creation of a Jewish state. In Bialer's opinion, the Soviet attitude toward Israel changed only when Israel publicly supported the American position on Korea in 1950 and when signs of Israel's growing alignment with the United States became unmistakable. In other words, Soviet aid was related to Israel's foreign-policy orientation to a greater degree than had commonly been assumed.²⁵

Israel's relations with the United States were also affected by some miscalculations and mistakes. As always, internal politics had a major impact on the country's external behavior. Two schools of thought were competing for control over policy in the conflict with the Arabs: the school of retaliation and the school of negotiation. The former was led by Ben-Gurion and included virtually the entire defense establishment, while the latter was led by Sharett and included most of the Foreign Ministry. Sharett became prime minister as well foreign minister upon Ben-Gurion's "temporary" retirement in

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December 1953. But Moshe Dayan, the newly appointed chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, assumed Ben-Gurion's mantle as the chief proponent of the policy of hard-hitting retaliation in response to infiltration across Israel's borders from the neighboring Arab states.

The practice of military retaliation had serious consequences for Israel's relations with the Great Powers. Both the Eastern and the Western blocs frowned on this practice, and the four permanent members of the United Nations Security Council frequently voted for resolutions condemning specific Israeli raids. Sharett's first year as prime minister was difficult for Israel both on the diplomatic front and on the day-to-day security front along the borders. In the course of 1954, Israeli-American relations deteriorated due to the U.S. decision to supply arms to the Arab states and base its military plans for the defense of the Middle East increasingly on Iraq and Egypt. Israel, as a consequence, felt marginalized. Britain's agreement with Egypt to withdraw its forces from the Suez Canal Zone was also a cause for concern in Israel. Along Israel's borders the situation deteriorated, with more incidents of infiltration, theft, murder, and sabotage, which the United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization (UNTSO) was unable to prevent. These developments combined to make Israelis feel isolated and ignored, and this intensified the conflict between the two approaches. Sharett became active on the American diplomatic scene in an effort to stop military aid to the Arabs and to procure arms and a security guarantee for Israel. For Dayan, however, the solution lay in military action to deter the Arabs.²⁶

In February 1955, Ben-Gurion returned from his desert retreat in Sede-Boker to assume the defense portfolio in the government headed by Sharett. Sharett spearheaded the efforts to obtain an American guarantee of Israel's security. On the need for an American guarantee there was no real difference between the two leaders. Discussions between the two countries had started in August 1954 against the background of the Anglo-Egyptian agreement on Suez and the American decision to supply arms to Iraq. All that was envisaged at that stage was an American declaration or an exchange of letters between America and Israel. But after Iraq and Turkey took the first step toward the Baghdad Pact in early February 1955, Dulles offered Israel a mutual defense pact, provided that it undertook not to expand its borders by force and refrained from military retaliation against its neighbors.

Ben-Gurion and Sharett appeared willing to accept the first condition, but they could not accept the second. A mutual defense pact with a superpower was attractive as a way of ending Israel's international isolation, guaranteeing its territorial integrity and long-term security, and inducing the Arabs to settle peacefully their dispute with the country. At his very first meeting with Edward Lawson, the new American ambassador, Ben-Gurion told him that the three things dearest to his heart were the security of Israel, peace in the Middle East, and friendship between Israel and America. It was in America's power, he added, to realize all three things in one move: by concluding a mutual defense pact with Israel.²⁷

Dayan opposed the idea of a defense pact with America from beginning to end. He saw no need for an American guarantee of Israel's security, and he was strongly opposed to America's conditions that Israel should forswear territorial expansion and military retaliation. Military retaliation was regarded by Dayan as life blood. Dayan was at least consistent in his creed of self-reliance and in his rejection of an external guarantee,

which is more than can be said for Ben-Gurion. The latter was keenly interested in a pact with the United State but rather reluctant to pay the price for it.

One of Ben-Gurion's first acts as minister of defense was to order the IDF, on 28 February 1955, to carry out a large-scale attack on the Egyptian military headquarters in Gaza City—"Operation Black Arrow." Thirty-eight Egyptian soldiers were killed and thirty-one were wounded in this devastating attack. The raid seriously destabilized the military regime headed by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser embarked on a desperate quest for arms that culminated in the Czech arms deal in September 1955. Thus, by pressing its military advantage too far, Israel inadvertently helped to push Egypt into the arms of Moscow. The Gaza raid had far-reaching ramifications both at the regional and international level. It started a chain of action and reaction, mounting violence, an arms race, and new alignments with the Great Powers that, within a year, plunged the Middle East into another major war.

In the aftermath of the Gaza raid, Israeli diplomats shifted the emphasis in the talks with their American counterparts from a defense pact to the supply of arms. But once again, Israel's aggressive military policy toward the Arabs served to confirm the American refusal to supply arms. This refusal in turn increased the support within the Israeli defense establishment for the option of a preventive war against Egypt. In November 1955, Ben-Gurion became prime minister, Sharett reverted to his old post as foreign minister, and Dayan continued as chief of staff. All three men recognized that their country's basic security was affected by the Czech arms deal with Egypt. But they held very different views about the appropriate policy for preserving the country's security. Dayan wanted a preventive war against Egypt; Sharett was firmly opposed to war; and Ben-Gurion was undecided. It would take a year almost to the day to resolve this question, and the Sinai Campaign was the answer.

Dayan's basic assumption was that a second round was inevitable and that Israel should therefore prepare for war and not for peace.²⁸ His main concern was to ensure that the timing and conditions of the next war were convenient for Israel. Following the Czech arms deal, this became a pressing concern. Dayan estimated that the Egyptian army would be in a position to fight a war in the summer or autumn of 1956. His aim was to force a showdown before the military balance shifted in Egypt's favor. He did not advocate launching a pre-emptive strike because this would have cast Israel in the role of aggressor. Rather, his strategy was to use military reprisals on a massive scale to provoke Egypt to go to war before it was ready. The aim of these reprisals was not to force the Egyptians to keep the border quiet. On the contrary, it was to create the conditions for an early war. To prepare the IDF for full-scale war, Dayan considered it essential to keep it constantly engaged in military operations in peacetime. It was no coincidence that he referred to these reprisals not as retaliation but as peacetime military operations. In short, Dayan wanted war; he wanted it soon; and he used reprisals both to goad the Egyptians into war and to prepare his army for that war.²⁹

In sharp contrast to Dayan, Sharett's basic premise was that war with Egypt was not inevitable and that everything should be done to prevent it. Realizing the great potential for escalation inherent in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Sharett urged caution and restraint. He feared that provocative or careless behavior might lead to a major explosion. He recognized that the dangers confronting Israel were serious, but he did not think that Israel's very survival was on the line. His policy aimed at containing the conflict and

minimizing the risks of escalation.³⁰ Like Dayan, Sharett understood very well that the policy of reprisals carried a high risk of escalation. The difference was that Dayan needed escalation to bring about war, whereas Sharett sought to avoid escalation to prevent war.³¹

Another major difference between Sharett and Dayan concerned the acquisition of arms. Both men were, of course, strongly committed to arms procurements for the IDF, but they went about it in very different ways. Sharett believed that the best chance of persuading the Western powers to supply arms to Israel lay in abiding by the rules of international law, cooperating with the United Nations observers, and behaving like a reasonable and responsible member of the international community. Dayan believed that, if Israel behaved itself, it would definitely not get arms, whereas if it misbehaved, it might be given some arms as an incentive to improve its behavior. He thought that Israel had a nuisance value, and he wanted to capitalize on this to induce the Western powers to give Israel arms in the hope that it would stay out of mischief. In other words, he considered military activism a factor that was more likely to help than to hinder the quest for arms.³²

These initial differences over arms acquisition were to develop gradually into two rival foreign-policy orientations. Although Sharett achieved the first breakthrough in France, he pinned his highest hopes on America. Sharett's foreign policy had an American orientation in that he looked to America for political support, a security guarantee, economic aid, and arms. Arms acquisition was thus linked to a broader diplomatic strategy of working closely with America in the Middle East to promote common objectives—notably, stability and peace. Shimon Peres, the director-general of the Ministry of Defense, doubted all along that America would supply arms to Israel and worked assiduously to cultivate the French connection. In doing so, he went not through the normal diplomatic channels but directly to the French defense establishment. Dayan was quick to join Peres both in resorting to unorthodox methods and, eventually, in advocating a French orientation. At the beginning, the question of orientation did not seem relevant to Israel's security needs. All of Israel's leaders agreed on the need to strengthen Israel's military capability, and they were willing to take arms from anywhere they could get them. Later it would emerge that the source did make a considerable difference: France offered arms in the hope of inducing Israel to go to war against Egypt, whereas America allowed its allies to supply arms to Israel on condition that Israel did not go to war.

On 2 November 1955, Ben-Gurion presented his new government to the Knesset while the IDF launched an attack on the Egyptian positions in al-Sabha, killing fifty soldiers and capturing forty others. Code-named "Volcano," this attack marked the beginning of a change in the defense and foreign-policy orientation of the government, which would develop the drift toward war. In the words of Ben-Gurion's biographer, "Thus began the process of disengagement from the defence policy of Moshe Sharett which was based on restraint, efforts to communicate and attempts at mediation by foreign bodies—the United Nations, the powers, Asian and African countries. From this process also emerged, to a large extent, a new line of policy: gradual turning away from the United States and drawing closer to France. France, which during those years turned into the great opponent of the Arab states, and especially of Egypt, also became Israel's principal arms supplier along the road to confrontation with the same Egypt. . . . The new policy line—towards preventive war, towards leaning on France—crossed the previous policy

³² Should this lengthy quotation be set as a text extract?

line, the line of restraint and of reliance on the United States. For a while, it was possible to discern in the foreign and defence policy of Israel both tendencies at the same time; at a certain stage, they came into an acute confrontation. But in the end, towards the summer of 1956, took hold the activist line which led to the Sinai Campaign.”³³

In the meantime, the activist policy seriously undermined Sharett’s efforts to get closer to the United States with a view to obtaining arms. A striking example of the negative consequences of the policy of reprisals was provided by Operation Kinneret. On the night of 11 December, a paratroop brigade under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Ariel Sharon raided the Syrian gun positions on the northeastern shore of Lake Kinneret, better known outside Israel as Lake Tiberias or the Sea of Galilee. This was the IDF’s fiercest and most brilliantly executed operation since the 1948 war. The paratroop brigade killed more than fifty Syrians and took thirty prisoners, at the cost to the Israelis of six dead and fourteen wounded. In the course of the battle, all of the Syrian positions were reduced to rubble.

The decision to authorize Operation Olive Leaves—the code-name for the operation—had been taken by Ben-Gurion alone. He had not consulted or informed the cabinet. Nor had he consulted anyone in the Foreign Ministry. Sharett was on a mission to the United States in a desperate bid to secure arms, and Ben-Gurion became acting foreign minister in addition to his other posts. On 27 November, Sharett had called Ben-Gurion to caution him that any reprisals could damage the negotiations, which had got ten off to a good start.³⁴ A definite American answer was promised by 12 December, and Ben-Gurion called Sharett and asked him to stay in Washington until he received the State Department’s answer. Yet the day before the American answer was due, Ben-Gurion authorized the assault on the Syrian positions. Sharett’s bitter comment on the decision-making process was, “Ben-Gurion the defence minister consulted with Ben-Gurion the foreign minister and received the green light from Ben-Gurion the prime minister.”³⁵

Ben-Gurion must have known what the American reaction would be when he authorized the raid. This was presumably his reason for not consulting anyone in the Foreign Ministry or the cabinet. By authorizing the raid he not only sabotaged Sharett’s efforts to obtain American arms for Israel but also the orientation on America and the entire political strategy that went along with it. A popular witticism in IDF circles at the time was that the biggest explosion of Operation Kinneret was the one that went off under Sharett.

Sharett himself was incandescent with rage when he heard the news. “My world became black, the matter of arms was murdered,” he wrote in his diary.³⁶ In a cable of protest to Ben-Gurion, he did not pull his punches. He concluded the cable by questioning whether there was one government in Israel, whether it had one policy, and whether its policy was to sabotage its own efforts and foil its own objectives.³⁷ To Abba Eban, Israel’s ambassador to Washington, Sharett expressed his suspicion that Ben-Gurion had sanctioned the Kinneret raid to deny him a personal victory in the quest for arms. In his autobiography, Eban gives the following account of the crisis:

My own feeling is that whatever remnants existed of Sharett’s ability to work with Ben-Gurion went up in flames in Galilee that night. I, too, found it impossible to understand how Ben-Gurion could reconcile two such lines of action. On the one hand he had asked Sharett to make a big effort

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to secure a breakthrough on our arms request. On the other hand, he had authorized a military operation of such strong repercussion as to make an affirmative answer inconceivable. . . . My discussion with Jerusalem was not a defense of diplomacy against military needs. There was a clash between two military needs—the need for retaliation and the long-term need for defensive arms. It seemed to me that the short-term objective had triumphed unduly over our long-term aims.³⁸

The damage to Israel's international standing was serious. Some observers even questioned the sanity of the Israeli policy-makers. The glaring disproportion between the scale of the Kinneret operation and Syria's alleged provocation put Israel in a worse light than usual. In the Security Council debate on this incident, Israel was more isolated than it had been at any previous debate. All eleven members of the Security Council outdid one another in denouncing Israel and in expressing their appreciation for Syrian's moderation and restraint. On 19 January 1956, the Security Council passed a resolution that strongly condemned the latest incident, recalled earlier Israeli violations of the armistice agreements, called on Israel to respect these agreements, and threatened sanctions in the event of further violations.³⁹

The costliest consequence of the Kinneret raid, however, was the American decision not to supply arms to Israel. In self-defense, Ben-Gurion argued that Dulles would not have given arms to Israel even if the raid had not taken place. Sharett and Eban thought that this was a silly argument because even if Dulles had already made up his mind, it was a gross mistake for Israel to hand him the perfect excuse for saying "no." Ben-Gurion thought that Dulles was simply stringing Israel along over both the security guarantee and arms. By resorting to military action, Ben-Gurion signaled that, if Israel's interests were ignored, it would accept no restraint and behave as it pleased. Sharett and Eban wanted to wait a few days for the promised reply from Dulles without giving him an easy out. They felt that Ben-Gurion's impulsiveness ruined their patient and painstaking diplomatic groundwork.

The release of the official American documents for this period vindicated Sharett and Eban and conclusively disproved the claims of Ben-Gurion, Dayan, and the other defenders of the attack. On the eve of the attack, Dulles had decided to sell arms to Israel. He distinguished between defensive arms and offensive arms, such as tanks and planes, and he proposed to deliver the former immediately and the latter at various stages in the following year. For the time being, he thought, the Tripartite Declaration of 1950 would give Israel reasonable assurance against being attacked.⁴⁰ On 13 December, however, Eban was informed that a decision on Israel's request for arms had been postponed. The main reason given for the delay was the recent incident on the border with Syria.⁴¹

The official documents also reveal that Dulles was not as hostile to Israel as most Israelis thought, and that he most certainly did not want to see Israel destroyed. His view was that efforts to match Israel's military power to that of all its Arab enemies would not guarantee its security. Only peace with the Arabs would enable Israel to survive in the long run. To attain peace, he considered that Israel should be prepared to make territorial concessions and to take back 100,000 Palestinian refugees. Nor was Dulles as inflexible on the arms question as the Israelis made him out to be. He did think that Israel was entitled to receive Western arms of the same quality, if not in the same quantity, as Egypt was promised by the Soviet Union. But he was anxious to avoid

polarization in the Middle East. He did not want the United States to become Israel's sole supplier of offensive arms or to abandon the Arab world to the Soviet Union. His solution to this problem was to encourage France and Canada to sell arms, and especially fighter planes, to Israel. The Kinneret raid occurred just as Western policy on arms supplies was beginning to change in Israel's favor. It killed the prospect of direct U.S. military assistance to Israel. Just as the Gaza raid in February had led Egypt to accept communist arms, the Kinneret raid in December caused Israel to be denied Western arms.

Throughout the early 1950s, Israel's leaders set their eyes on the United States as the most important Western source of economic as well as military support. It was Israel's failure to solidify a partnership with the United States that motivated it to seek ties with France and Britain.⁴² America's rejection of Israel's request for arms had two major consequences: it intensified the drive to procure weapons from France, and it increased the internal political pressure for a pre-emptive strike against Egypt. The conflict between the moderates and the activists was fueled in the spring of 1956 by the conflict over the French connection. Sharett, the leading advocate of the Anglo-Saxon orientation, fought a losing battle against the chief proponents of the French connection: Peres and Dayan.⁴³ Since the alliance with France was predicated on Israel's willingness to go to war against Egypt, the debate over orientation merged with the other great debate on the question of preventive war.

Ben-Gurion was a slow convert to the French orientation, but once his mind was made up, he acted with characteristic speed and decisiveness in transferring complete control over the acquisition of arms from the Foreign Ministry to the Ministry of Defense and in authorizing Dayan to go ahead with secret negotiations in France on far-reaching cooperation, including joint war operations against Egypt.⁴⁴ A week later, Ben-Gurion forced Sharett's resignation from the government, thereby clearing the decks for war.

The war against Egypt was intimately connected with the French orientation in Israel's foreign policy. Ben-Gurion had temporarily dropped the idea of a preventive war against Egypt in the early months of 1956. America's final rejection of Israel's request for arms in April was a turning point for him. From that point onward, he looked to France to satisfy Israel's needs for modern arms. Ben-Gurion did not choose France as an arms supplier and as an ally in preference to America. It was only after the hope of receiving American arms had evaporated that he turned to France. The emergence of a French orientation in Israel's foreign policy was thus not a matter of deliberate choice but the result of the failure of the American orientation.⁴⁵ The idea of preventive war re-emerged in the context of the ever closer relations with France.

The relationship between Israel and France began with the supply of arms, developed into political and military cooperation, and reached its climax in the joint war against Egypt. Having a common enemy in Egypt brought the two countries closer together. France was hostile toward the Soviet-backed revolutionary regime in Cairo because of its encouragement of the rebellion in Algeria. In the early months of 1956, Egypt stepped up its support for the Algerian rebels who were fighting through the Front de Liberation Nationale for independence from France. The French military were completely preoccupied with the Algerian problem. Their three top priorities were Algeria, Algeria, and Algeria. They assumed that if only Colonel Nasser—Hitler on the Nile, as they

called him—could be knocked out of the game, the Algerian rebellion would collapse. There was no solid basis for this assumption, but the Israelis nevertheless encouraged it. And as the Algerian rebellion gathered momentum, the French government became less inhibited about supplying arms to Israel in contravention of the Tripartite Declaration of May 1950 of which France had been a signatory alongside Britain and the United States.⁴⁶

But the French expected their pound of flesh. Their arms supplies to Israel were motivated not by altruism or socialist solidarity but by self-interest. The Israelis, for their part, had few illusions. “France will give us arms,” Dayan bluntly told Ben-Gurion, “only if we give it serious help in the Algerian matter. Serious help means killing Egyptians, nothing less.”⁴⁷ In conversations with the French military, Dayan dwelled on the danger that Nasser posed to the entire Middle East and North Africa. Nasser’s goal, he stated, was to eliminate all European influence from the region and to turn Egypt into a forward base for Soviet power. The solution to this problem lay in the elimination of Nasser.⁴⁸

The idea of a coordinated military offensive against Egypt gathered momentum after Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal Company on 26 July 1956. Nasser’s blow was aimed at the Western powers, not at Israel. Britain and France were most directly affected because they were the principal shareholders in the Suez Canal Company. America and Britain urged Israel to keep out of this dispute. Britain in particular was anxious to keep its quarrel with Nasser from getting mixed up with the Arab–Israeli dispute. But the French were equally anxious to enlist Israel’s services in the war they were now determined to launch to topple Nasser.

Here a problem arose. Israel was not prepared to go to war against Egypt without French participation. France was not prepared to act against Egypt without British participation. Britain was committed to joint military action with France but insisted on excluding Israel. To get out of this quandary, the French assumed the role of matchmaker in bringing Britain and Israel together. By the end of October 1956, the tripartite war plot against Egypt had been hatched.⁴⁹

The story of the collusion and of the collision at Suez has been told many times and need not be repeated here. One point worth noting in the context of the Cold War, however, is that by joining Britain and France in the war against Egypt, Israel brought upon itself the wrath of both superpowers. The Eisenhower administration put heavy pressure on Israel to carry out a complete withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. Dulles led the pack against the three aggressors at the United Nations. The Soviet Union was not slow to join in the fray. On 6 November, Nikolai Bulganin, the Soviet premier, sent letters to Britain, France, and Israel, threatening them with rocket attacks and promising volunteers to help the Egyptian army. The letter to Ben-Gurion was particularly brutal in its language. It accused the government of Israel of “criminally and irresponsibly playing with the fate of the world” and of placing in question the very existence of the State of Israel. In his diary Ben-Gurion recorded that the letter could have been written by Adolf Hitler.⁵⁰ The letter was accompanied by a war of nerves and rumors of preparations for Soviet military intervention. Yosef Avidar, the ambassador to Moscow who was in Israel at the time, assured Ben-Gurion that Bulganin was bluffing.⁵¹ Ben-Gurion, however, was haunted by the fear of a Soviet air attack throughout the crisis. And he could not discount the risk that the crisis might escalate overnight into a potential

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global war for which Israel would be held responsible.⁵² He caved in and ordered the IDF to withdraw.

Israel's position in the Cold War thus underwent remarkable change in a relatively short period. At its birth, Israel enjoyed the blessing and support of both of the principal Cold War protagonists. Consequently, during the first two years of its existence, Israel pursued a policy of non-identification in the struggle between the two rival blocs. But given its cultural affinity and economic dependence on the West, the tilt toward the West was probably inevitable. The outbreak of the Korean war provided the occasion, if not the cause, for the abandonment of the posture of non-identification. Over the next few years, Israel made strenuous efforts to integrate itself into the military plans of the Western powers. Its most notable success lay in forging the secret pact with Britain and France to launch the war against Egypt. But this success, if that is what it was, turned into a nemesis, for it brought upon Israel the wrath of both of its original godfathers. Israel's position between East and West had come full circle.

NOTES

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¹⁴I am grateful to Ronald Zweig of Tel Aviv University for making these points in his commentary on my paper at the conference *The Cold War in the Mediterranean*, Cortona, Italy, 5–6 October 2001.

¹⁵*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), 5:960–61 (hereafter, *FRUS*).

⁵² "... entry dated 30 May...?"

⁵³ Israel, correct?

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