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ISRAEL AND THE WORLD POWERS
Diplomatic Alliances and International Relations beyond the Middle East

EDITED BY
COLIN SHINDLER
For Hillel, Pinchas, Uriel, Amitai, Racheli, Goldie and Yoav

Whoever teaches his child, teaches not alone his children, but also his children’s children – and so on to the end of all generations.

(Babylonian Talmud)
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This book has had a long period of gestation. The idea behind it gradually crystallised in the aftermath of a conference, ‘Israel and the Great Powers’ at SOAS, University of London in March 2008. The prospect of elucidating the relationship between Israel and a specific country – tortuous or otherwise – lent itself to individual scholars writing a dedicated chapter. It allowed them to marry their expertise of two countries and to produce an overview often stretching back into the nineteenth century. For some states, the relationship began with anti-Jewish stereotypes of fin de siècle Europe during the period of the Dreyfus affair. For others it commenced with the rise of Israel in May 1948. For still others, it started with the downfall of the USSR, the election of Yitzhak Rabin and the Oslo accord in the early 1990s.

Each chapter therefore is a stand-alone history, evaluation and analysis. Yet it will undoubtedly lead the reader to an inquisitive reading of the other chapters to view the entire picture of Israel’s international relations.

It has not been an easy task to coordinate the efforts of thirteen busy scholars worldwide. Yet all have unstintingly given of their time. My personal thanks to all of the contributors who have felt that this is a worthwhile project. I must finally express my gratitude to Maria Marsh of I.B.Tauris who continually drew my attention to the smallest of details and who has been the guiding force behind this book.

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Since the idea for this book was first mooted, back in 2008, the concept has evolved considerably. The world has moved on. Barack Obama was then a marginal outsider for the presidential prize. Thus, the ideas at the heart of this book have gone through an extensive process of being reformulated, updated and fully developed. It is intended that this collection will prove to be an accessible work for the specialist and the student, the serious reader and the plainly curious. The relationship between Israel and a particular country is governed by a multitude of factors – some worthy and beyond politics; others are in turn self-serving, cynical and anchored firmly in the national interest. Outside of polemics, this is interesting because any study of Israel, regardless of views, is stimulating, often controversial and poses new questions. Indeed Zionism – in its socialist definition – gave rise to a workers’ republic in May 1948. Its emergence was unacceptable to the American far right, feudal Arab kingdoms and those who hankered after the good old days of British imperialism. Zionism was unique theoretically – and proved difficult to fit into conventional Marxist theory. This mirrored the problem of enlightened Europe to emancipate fully the Jews. As Max Nordau commented in 1897:

The philosophy of Rousseau and the encyclopaedists had led to a declaration of human rights. Then this declaration, the strict logic of men of the Great Revolution, deduced Jewish emancipation.
They formulated a regular equation: Every man is born with certain rights; the Jews are human beings, consequently the Jews are born to all the rights of man. In this manner the emancipation of the Jews was pronounced, not through a fraternal feeling for the Jews, but because logic demanded it. Popular sentiment rebelled, but the philosophy of the Revolution decreed that principles must be placed higher than sentiments. Allow me an expression which implies no ingratitude. The men of 1792 emancipated us only for the sake of principle.¹

The rise of modern anti-Semitism persuaded Jews in fin de siècle Europe that a new way had to be found. They understood that they had to take matters into their own hands – auto-emancipation rather than emancipation by others. This led to a plethora of solutions to the Jewish problem and in its territorialist answer spawned a host of Jewish homelands – from Angola to Tasmania, from Kimberley to Uganda. And of course Palestine where the Jewish odyssey traditionally began. Such a move to channel the lessons of the Enlightenment into a specifically national direction did not endear the Jews to liberals, universalists and utopianists. Why, they asked, did the Jews have to separate themselves? Why could they not devote themselves to repairing the world? Many therefore said Zionism was simply wrong. Many Jews responded that it was not wrong, it was different. A difference generated by the reality in which the Jews found themselves.

This difference was inherited by the State of Israel. Its birth was further complicated by a host of factors. The late emergence of Jewish nationalism had coincided with the rise of Arab nationalism in an epoch of national liberation struggles against colonial powers. Palestinian Arab nationalists had therefore to struggle against both Zionist Jews and British rule. In addition Arab socialism did not fully develop and gave way to Arab nationalism and Islamism. Indeed Israel was excluded from the first conference of the non-aligned nations in Bandung in 1955 because of the threat of the Arab world not to attend if an Israeli representative was present. Nehru and Tito were thereby forced to include the feudal kingdoms of Saudi Arabia, Libya and Yemen, excluding social democratic Israel, which would have, under other circumstances, seemed to many to be a more natural ally. The empowerment of the Arab states through their oil revenues in the 1970s persuaded many newly independent states in Africa to break their diplomatic ties with Israel – even though
cooperation in many areas continued below the radar. One consequence was to push Israel unwisely into the arms of apartheid South Africa.

Israel's isolation extended to Eastern Europe. Whereas it had been in the Soviet Union's national interest to relegate the Leninist approach to Zionism to a lower rung and support the emergence of a state of the Jews in 1947, twenty years later it was not. It therefore broke off diplomatic relations, following Israel's military victory over several Arab states in June 1967. Many East European states dutifully followed suit. However, the popular sentiment in Warsaw was that 'our Polish Jews have vanquished the Russian Arabs'. This anti-Soviet sympathy for Israel even persisted after 1991 during the post-Soviet period. Such isolation by the Arab world, the developing world and the Soviet bloc pushed Israel closer towards the Americans and into numerous alliances with unsavoury regimes. Moshe Sharett's desire to remain unaligned and to support neither East nor West was still-born. The dream of making the African desert bloom was marginalised and regarded now as irrelevant – as Israel's national interests took over. This was one factor in the demise of labour Zionism and the rise of an overt nationalism under Menachem Begin.

Yet this isolation was magically broken through a concatenation of events – the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the election of Clinton in the US and Rabin in Israel as well as Arafat's weakened position, following his calamitous praise for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The success of the Oslo Accords in 1993 opened up the floodgates as far as diplomatic relations with Israel was concerned. The new Russia, China, India, many Arab states, new countries such as Slovenia and Slovakia – all rushed to establish ties with Rabin's Israel. Since the end of the peace process of the 1990s, the outbreak of violence and the stagnation of politics generally, there has been a real frostiness in relations between Israel and many a country, including the Obama administration. The expansion of settlements on the West Bank has cemented a distancing from Israel. During a period of economic hardship, there has been a resigned acceptance of a situation where there is no apparent light at the end of the tunnel. A multi-faceted, changing situation has therefore been described and documented by the contributors to this book.

The Imperial Powers and Germany

Neill Lochery and François Lafon write about the vexed relationship between the imperial powers, Britain and France, and Israel. Britain,
of course, was the Mandatory power and took months to come to the inevitable decision to recognise Israel. In general, the UK was always prepared to sell arms to the Arabs, but not to Israel. The British Foreign Office was popularly regarded as being institutionally anti-Israeli. Neill Lochery indicates that the situation was in fact more complex. While Britain identified strongly with the survivors of the Holocaust, it could not circumvent the fact that trade with and the import of oil from the Arab world was in British national interests. By the mid-1970s, the UK’s thirst for oil was acute. The basic line, exemplified by the *Craigium Dictum*, was that British national interests lay with the Arabs, but Israel’s security should not be compromised. Moreover Britain had to cope with the underlying feeling that many Arab states blamed the UK for the establishment of the state.

Different British Prime Ministers tried to balance their personal approach to Israel with what was perceived as the national interest. Wilson and Thatcher were viewed as sympathetic while Heath and Callaghan remained cool towards Israel. Neill Lochery shows that the traditional picture of Thatcher’s sympathy for Israel whilst the Foreign Office was antagonistic is in fact rather superficial. The Venice Declaration of June 1980 was the first time that the Europeans had spoken about the right of the Palestinians to self-determination. This was the culmination of the move of the British Foreign Office towards such a position. Following the Lebanon war in 1982, Mrs Thatcher moved towards a more critical approach. Ironically she was closer to Labour’s Shimon Peres than to Prime Minister Menachem Begin. In terms of identifying with Israel’s situation, Tony Blair was seen as a second Harold Wilson. Even so, following the decision to send British troops to Iraq in March 2003, the UK had to be more sensitive to Arab concerns.

François Lafon begins his overview by detailing the responsibility of historians to both the subject they are examining and to their readers. He also documents the remarkable fluctuations in official French attitudes. France has always felt an obligation to supervise the affairs of Palestine. Indeed the rivalry between Britain and France was utilised by Chaim Weizmann to persuade the British to support the Zionist experiment in Palestine and to issue the Balfour Declaration in 1917. By the early 1920s France had to accept that its mandate only extended over Syria and Lebanon while the British ruled a swathe of territories to their south including Palestine.

Since Napoleon first landed in Egypt in 1798 in the hope of locating the splendour of the lost civilisation of the Ptolemies, France believed
that it had a special mission in the Holy Land. From this flowed the argument that it therefore had to have privileged relations with the Arab world. Yet other factors intervened, such as the persecution of French Jews by the Vichy regime and the deportations to the East by the Nazi occupier. Significantly France voted for UN Resolution 181 on 29 November 1947 in support of a two-state solution while Britain abstained. Leon Blum and Jean-Paul Sartre passionately advocated the cause of a progressive Israel in the immediate post-war period.

France moved much closer towards Israel when Nasser was perceived as aiding the FLN. Under Guy Mollet, Israel clandestinely received vital weapons during the Soviet arms build-up in 1955. A year later, it colluded with Israel in the amateurish deception practised at Suez. De Gaulle was brought back to the Elysee Palace to solve the Algerian question. His fiercely anti-British attitude was partly responsible for a rapprochement with the Arab world. And, of course, his seemingly defamatory description of Jews as ‘an elite people, sure of themselves and domineering’ was seen as insensitive and offensive. This alignment with the Arab world was continued under his successors Georges Pompidou and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. As with Britain, the questions of trade and oil imports loomed large. The coming to the fore of the Palestinian cause in the 1970s also began to influence public opinion. Thus France assisted in the construction of the Osirak nuclear reactor in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The election of the socialist François Mitterand in 1981 saw a move away from an automatic pro-Arab stance, yet the warmer relationship with Israel was conditional on the policies enacted by right-wing Israeli governments. The ambiguous nature of French policy was reflected in the refusal to sell arms to Israel, but to do so to Hafez Assad’s Syria. Since 2000, the changes in French policy have become even more dramatic. Whereas Jacques Chirac espoused closer ties with the Arab world as a result of the al-Aqsa Intifada, his successor, Nicolas Sarkozy advocated the same with Israel. Yet as François Lafon points out, Sarkozy’s Mediterranean region policy initiative collapsed with the advent of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ in late 2010 and early 2011, and the historic French cultivation of relations with Ghaddafi and Assad now became an obvious embarrassment. While François Hollande has acted very quickly to condemn attacks against Jews by home-grown Islamists, when it comes to policy towards Israel, he seems to be following the British approach of offending neither side while promoting French national interests.

As Michael Wolfssohn succinctly points out in his contribution, Germany is the most special of special cases in terms of a country’s