

Sasson Sofer, *Zionism and the Foundations of Israeli Diplomacy*, Cambridge University Press, 449 pages.

Reviewed by Emmanuel Navon

Sasson Sofer's *Zionism and the Foundations of Israeli Diplomacy* is a historical inquiry into the origins of the ideological components of Israel's foreign policy. Basing his research on an impressive array of primary sources, the author provides a meticulous description of the *Yishuv's* ideological spectrum, and of the manner in which Israel's founding fathers adapted their lofty ideals to the harsh realities of international relations.

Such a research, regardless of its historical value, could be dismissed by proponents of a rationalist version of political realism (commonly identified with E.H Carr) as purely academic at best: if power and interest are the only considerations that determine foreign policy, why bother looking into other considerations? The book therefore starts with a rebuking of rationalist realism by making the point that "*ideas are important and do have consequences*" on foreign policy, and that foreign policy decisions are influenced both by rationality and ideology.

The last decade of Mandatory Palestine covered a long series of dramatic historical events that critically affected the Zionist project: The Arab Revolt of 1936; The 1937 Partition Plan; The rise of European Fascism and the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact; The 1939 White Paper; The Second World War and the Holocaust; The unexpected hostility of Britain's post-War Labour Government's toward Zionism; The replacement of the European balance of power by a bi-polar international system. This "*terrible decade*", as Sofer calls it, compelled the *Yishuv's* leadership to redefine its diplomatic strategy and adapt its ideologies to a hostile international environment.

These ideologies were diverse, and the author classifies them into five categories: the Zionist Left, the Revisionist Right, the center or Civil Right, the religious sector, and various intellectual groups and voluntary associations. The political ideas prevailing in the *Yishuv* were based on eclectic sources such as Jewish tradition, Marxism, and continental European nationalism, and had little connection with the liberal tradition of the Mandatory power. Despite the variety that characterized the *Yishuv's* ideological spectrum, Israeli politics has been dominated by a rivalry between the Labour Movement and the Revisionist Right since the early 1930s. The center was divided and unorganized, and smaller parties or groups such as the Communists, the orthodox Jews and the academics challenged this system without managing to change it.

The Zionist Left was the *Yishuv's* dominant, if not hegemonic, political organization. Its main component was the Mapai Party (the Workers Party of the Land of Israel), but it also included Ahdut Ha-Avoda (Unity of Labour), Left Po'alei Zion (Left Workers of Zion), and Ha-Shomer H-Tza'ir (The Young Guard), which later came to be known as Mapam (United Workers Party). At the far left of the political spectrum was the Palestine Communist Party (PCP). The Revisionist Right consisted of the Revisionist Party, the New Zionist Organization (NZO), the Irgun (Irgun Zvai Leumi, National Military Organization), and Lehi (Lohamei Herut Yisrael, Fighters for the Freedom of Israel). The center was composed of the Civil Right, which was close to

European conservatism, and of the more liberal Aliya Hadasha (New Immigration) and Ha-Oved Ha-Tzioni (The Zionist Worker). The Civil Right also included small political organizations of merchants, farmers and Sepharadi notables. The religious parties were divided into two factions: the national-religious (Mizrahi and Ha-Po'el Ha-Mizrahi) and the ultra-orthodox (Agudat Israel and Po'alei Agudat Israel). The main intellectual groups and voluntary associations that do not belong to any of the above categories were the Canaanites and Semites, and Ihud (Union). There was no true liberal trend within Zionism, probably because the ideas of the early Zionist leaders were forged in Russia and Continental Europe, and were far remote from John Locke and Adam Smith.

The *Yishuv's* Right-Left divide differed from that of most Western democracies in that the Right did not represent the privileged social classes and the Left did not embody the powerless. In fact, the Left was composed of the ruling class and controlled most public resources.

The *Yishuv's* socialist leaders had little interest in international affairs, and were compelled to make diplomatic decisions in the wake of the “*terrible decade.*” They were disciples of Marx, not of Clausewitz. Israel's founding fathers wanted to create an egalitarian, even utopian society, but the region they chose to build their Utopia soon brought them back to reality. As Abba Eban has written: “*The trouble with Utopia is that it does not exist. Writers who have described the ideal society have usually contrived to situate their Utopias on desert islands or on the peaks of inaccessible mountains, thus avoiding the two conditions that make Utopia impossible: boundaries and neighbors.*”

Marxist Socialism and nationalism are not compatible, at least in theory, and the *Yishuv's* socialist leaders hoped to solve this contradiction by advocating proletarian solidarity between Jewish and Arab workers. The 1929 and 1936 Arab Revolts, by confirming beyond doubt that the struggle between Arabs and Jews was national and not social, had a lasting impact on Palestinian socialism. As Sofer puts it: “*Socialism in Palestine was a spark produced between the hammer of socialism and the anvil of Zionism.*” From a utopian view of international relations and an ideological perception of the world order (as theorized by Dov Ber Borochoy, Nachman Syrkin and Aharon David Gordon), the Socialist leadership switched in the mid-1930s to political realism and diplomatic machinations. One of Ben-Gurion's declarations in 1937 was revealing of this transition: “*Power, we must have power ... Why should I be concerned about the Arabs?*” Ben-Gurion explicitly rejected socialism while determining his diplomatic stance in 1937. His attitude toward the Soviet Union and the Arab world became completely divorced from the question of class. When he claimed that the Soviets were supporting the Arabs because of the weakness of the *Yishuv*, he was displaying pure *Realpolitik*.

Ben-Gurion ambivalently accepted the 1937 Partition Plan, based on a cold assessment of the *Yishuv's* weakness, but he considered the acceptance of this plan as a step toward the realization of Zionism's territorial aspirations: “*Once we become a mighty force following the establishment of the State, we will annul partition and continue to expand in the entire Land of Israel.*” He further elaborated: “*We must insist on our rights to the full, and be ready to accept a territorial compromise.*”

This switch to realism was characterized by a readiness to accept the constraints of reality, to make decisions based on non-emotional and non-ideological calculations and assessments, and to compromise. It was not adopted by all Zionists Socialists, however, but only by Ben-Gurion's Mapai –which, as it happened, was also closer to power than its Socialist allies and rivals.

The Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad movement dismissed diplomacy, exclusively relied on Jewish strength and was strongly committed to the integrity of the Land of Israel. It rejected Ben-Gurion's concern for external politics and eventually split from Mapai in 1944. It also provided the core of the officers of the War of Independence, including Yitzhak Rabin and Yigal Allon. The Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad was vehemently opposed to the idea of partition. One of its leaders, Yitzhak Tabenkin, had never accepted the separation of Transjordan from Palestine in 1922 in the first place, and the very idea of an additional partition in western Palestine was an anathema to him. Another Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad leader, Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, was definitely more of a nationalist than a realist: *"If we could once again organize a revolt such as that of Bar-Kochba, I would recommend doing so."* Yigal Allon himself had advocated the conquest of all of western Palestine. Shortly before his death he confessed that he had told Ben-Gurion: *"The map on the basis of which the armistice agreements were signed at the end of the war will be the direct cause of many future wars."*

Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza'ir also opposed partition, but for different reasons. It never departed from its socialist principles and advocated a common class struggle between Arabs and Jews against the British. It dismissed the very concept of a sovereign state as a tool invented by the bourgeoisie to maintain its rule, stuck to its Marxist dogma, and was barely affected by the international upheavals of the 1930s. Left Po'alei Zion declined in the wake of the Arab Revolt and the pro-Arab stance of the Comintern. The Communist Party was anti-Zionist, demanding the cancellation of the Balfour Declaration, supporting the Arab Revolt, and opposing Jewish immigration.

The Revisionist Right, led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, had an ambivalent stance with regard to political realism. On the one hand, it identified with the pessimistic normative assumptions of realism, but on the other hand it perceived reality as a malleable element that had to obey the will of the Nation. This contradictory relationship between nationalism and realism probably characterizes any national movement, and Revisionist Zionism was no exception in that regard. Jabotinsky was more of a romantic nationalist than a conservative. His ideological mentors were Mazzini and Croce, not Burke or Tocqueville. He was an exalted nationalist who strongly believed in the power of charismatic leaders to change the face of History. On the other hand, Sofer's research also reveals a realistic Jabotinsky who was acutely aware of the constraints of reality and was willing to bow to them. Relating to the 1937 Partition Plan, Sofer writes: *"Jabotinsky did not reject the partition outright ... and there is a great deal of evidence to indicate that he was prepared to accept the plan, with certain territorial changes."* Jabotinsky's reply to Menachem Begin during the third World Congress of Betar in September 1938 was that of a realist, not of an exalted romantic: *"No strategist anywhere in the world would say that in our situation we can do what Garibaldi and De Valera did. That is idle chatter. Our position is a far cry from that of the Italians or the Irish, and if you think there is no other way than that proposed by Mr. Begin and you have arms –go ahead and commit suicide."* Finally, Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall" strategy, based on the assumption that the Arabs would

never willingly and voluntarily accept a Jewish state in their midst, was closer to reality than the wishful thinking of many socialist leaders who hoped to tame Arab nationalism with economic benefits. Begin, the commander of the Irgun, displayed less realism than his mentor and was convinced that his nationalistic faith would overcome reality. On the other hand, he also claimed that *“there is no escape from the laws of logic.”* His political outlook was not devoid of contradictions, and Sofer seems to get some pleasure in exposing them at length.

On the far Right, Lehi had an even more contradictory approach to realism. On the one hand, it advocated a total submission of reality to the will of the Nation. On the other hand, it adapted its radical agenda to the constraints of reality with a cold-blooded realism that was beyond cynicism. Israel Eldad, one of Lehi’s ideologues, claimed that Zionism is *“an expression of the national will to change the face of reality”* and that *“romanticism, which does not take facts into account”* will win the battle of History. But Lehi’s leader, Avraham Stern (Yair), seemed to believe in the need to cope with reality in order to achieve his aims. In fact, he advocated political alliances for the sake of power, and went as far as to attempt to reach an agreement with the Axis powers.

Between the Socialists and the Revisionists stood a frail conservative movement with weak ideological commitments but strong economic interests. The Civil Right represented farmers and house-owners, Sepharadi notables and central European liberals, artisans and merchants. These social groups had little in common but were united in their aversion for Socialism. They hated Marx but were no disciples of Burke. Israel was founded by Russian, not Anglo-Saxon, Jews and British conservatism never took ground in British Palestine. As Sofer puts it: *“A political Right with a liberal world-view never evolved in Jewish society.”* The Civil Right’s lack of clear ideology and wide social support eventually led it to its cooptation by the Revisionists in the early 1960s. The Civil Right did have some political thinkers, however, among them Yitzhak Gruenbaum whose ideas in foreign policy definitely reveal a conservative realist. He believed in adapting his ideals to reality, and not the other way round. He accepted the 1937 Partition Plan and dismissed both the pro-Soviet orientation of the Left and the messianism of the Right. His acceptance of the Partition Plan was based on his assessment that the *Yishuv* could not achieve more in the context of the late 1930s’ and that a nation generally does not start its independence with all the territory to which it aspires: *“We are not relinquishing anything, a nation never abandons its aspirations ... Our task is to undertake this generation’s mission and lead the Zionist enterprise to a safe haven in these stormy times.”* As Sofer concludes: *“The world-view of the Civil Right was basically conservative ... Today it has been totally swamped by the nationalist and populist Right.”*

The two other ideological families that composed the *Yishuv*’s political spectrum were the religious and the intellectuals. Religious Jewry was split between the ultra-orthodoxy of Agudat Israel and the religious nationalism of Mizrachi. The latter’s political outlook was influenced by the teachings of Rabbi Kook. If Marx attempted to “put Hegel on his feet,” Kook attempted to make him closer to heaven. History is motioned by God’s will, and its direction is both linear and positive. Kook described Zionism as a transitory stage in which it was necessary to take part until its secular

aspect would be replaced by its religious Jewish character. This compromise was a necessary prelude to redemption.

The political ideas of the *Yishuv's* intellectuals and artists were eclectic and eccentric. The poet Yonathan Ratosh, the leading figure of Canaanism, advocated a purely secular nationalism completely detached from Jewish history. He perceived the British, the Arab and the Jews as the enemies of his "Hebrew revolution." After Israel's independence, Ratosh supported the Arabs in the wars they launched against Israel, claiming that the time had come for a victory over Judaism and Zionism. Uri Avineri, who started out on the fringes of Revisionism and the Irgun, was attracted to Canaanism at an early stage before founding his own "Semitic Revolution" movement. He believed that Arab and Jewish nationalism were about to wane and that the time had come to merge them into a "Semitic National Movement." He ended up at the very left of Israel's political spectrum, and always stayed remote from any kind of political influence and intellectual stability.

Martin Buber and Yehuda Magnes, the two leading figures of Ihud, represented the academic elite from the Hebrew University. They had an ambivalent, if not contradictory, position on Jewish nationalism, were extremely critical of Ben-Gurion, and rejected political realism as an immoral way of conducting foreign policy. Ihud regarded nationalism as a threat and a plague. It opposed the establishment of a Jewish state and advocated a bi-national Jewish-Arab confederation. The US born Magnes firmly opposed the use of violence in international relations and supported pacifism during the First World War. He was representative of the most idealistic component of American liberalism. Buber, for his part, was a German-born idealist who refused to undertake any political course of action that would affect his moral standards. In theory, Buber was prepared to support the establishment of a Jewish state, but not to accept the injustices that would ensue –which is what he opposed it in practice. He believed that Jewish and Arab nationalism were compatible and even complementary. He was also an internationalist, seeing in the state an interim stage prior to the establishment of a community of nations. Another famous Hebrew University professor, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, used to call Buber "a ladies' philosopher." If idealism consists in looking at reality not as it is but as one wishes it to be, it is a euphemism to say that Buber was an idealist.

From this diverse ideological map, Mapai and the Revisionists emerged as Israel's two largest parties. The *Yishuv* had no liberal tradition capable of competing with socialism and radical nationalism. The Civil Right was weak both ideologically and socially, and eventually became a minority within the union it formed with the nationalistic Right.

On the Left, only Mapai departed from the Marxist dogma and decided to play the game of *Realpolitik*. Ben-Gurion understood that if he wanted a Jewish state in the hostile context of the "*terrible decade*" he had to mitigate his ideology with strategy. His ability and readiness to depart from dogma for the sake of political gains enabled him to successfully attain his goal, although at the expense of many of his socialist ideals. As Sofer puts it: "*When the Zionist Left proclaimed Israel's independence ... its revolutionary ardour was almost completely spent. The spirit of 1948 was conservative, not radical.*"

It is precisely because the Labour leadership was ready to detach diplomacy and strategy from ideological considerations that it was criticized by the parties and movements that never converted to *Realpolitik*. Ihud condemned Ben-Gurion for being a Jewish Bismarck at the expense of Jewish ethical values. The radical Left lamented his disregard for the socialist vision of peace. And the Revisionist Right accused him of abandoning the land of Israel for the sake of political gains.

Although insightful and masterly, Sofer's analysis calls for a few comments. The fact that the Right criticized the Left for conducting a realistic foreign policy constitutes a political anomaly. Accepting reality as it is constitutes a conservative motto, while liberals and socialists generally view reality as a malleable system which man can change according to his ideals. For the realist, the statesman should either give up his ideals or adapt them to reality. For the idealist, by contrast, the statesman ought to impose his ideals upon reality. This is why in Western political culture, political realism is generally advocated by the Right. It is indeed a paradox that in Israel, Mapai adopted the role and principles of European conservatism: on social issues it represented the interests of the ruling class, and on diplomatic issues it adopted policies that were certainly closer to the views of Bismarck or Kissinger than those of Jean Jaurès or Jimmy Carter.

This anomaly can be explained by two main reasons. First, being the party in power, Mapai was naturally more inclined to fully understand and apply Machiavelli's advice. Secondly, the Revisionist Right, especially its radical elements represented by the Irgun and Lehi, had an ambivalent attitude toward realism and had a tendency to dismiss the constraints of reality and to believe that the will of the Nation would eventually prevail. The Civil Right was certainly closer to European conservatism and had a realistic approach to foreign policy, but its impact and influence on Israeli politics was marginal.

Labour's bizarre identification with realism eventually waned, however. During the Lebanon War, Yehoshafat Harkabi claimed in his political tract *The Bar-Kokhbah Syndrome* that in Israeli politics the Right was romantic and irresponsible while the Left had a monopoly of political realism. To some extent, he had a point: admitting that the Greater Israel ideology would eventually undermine the Jewish and democratic foundations of the State if Israel was a realistic attitude that was endorsed by the Left and mostly rejected by the Right. However, the inheritors of Mapai gradually departed from political realism precisely in the 1980s. Shimon Peres, a Ben-Gurion protégé who in his early political career had a purely Hobbesian approach to Middle East politics, radically changed his outlook in the late 1980s. His book *The New Middle East* displays a worldview that wholeheartedly believes in the capacity of the statesman to change reality according to his ideals and therefore rejects the basic tenets of political realism.

The disastrous outcome of the Oslo process, moreover, proved that in the Middle East looking at reality as it is does not only consist in admitting that the Greater Israel ideology is not compatible with the Jewish and democratic identity of the State of Israel. It also consists in admitting that the true essence of the Arab-Israeli conflict is not territorial but existential, in other words that this conflict is not due to a territorial dispute but to Israel's very existence. In that regard, the Oslo architects were no less dreamers than the Greater Israel advocates. The dreams of Greater Israel and Middle

East peace are beyond reach, and in that regard both the Israeli Right and Left can claim their share of political realism. But being a political realist does not necessarily entail abandoning ideals. Rather, a great statesman is a visionary who knows how to adapt his vision to reality rather than the other way round. As Sofer puts it: "*The greatness of statesmen often derives from their ability to find a path through a situation that is complex and confusing without betraying the principles that underlie their nation's political ideals.*"

*Zionism and the Foundations of Israeli Diplomacy* is indispensable to understand the political divides of Israeli society and leadership over foreign policy issues. It constitutes a masterly and thorough analysis of the ideological origins of Israeli diplomacy, and thus a required reading for the study of Israel's foreign policy.

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