

Author Q&A

Emmanuel Navon – The Star and the Scepter

Describe your book

The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel is the first all-encompassing book on Israel's foreign policy, with a wide historical perspective going back to biblical times. The book originated in a class I have been teaching for many years at Tel Aviv University and at the Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya (IDC). I came to realize that a comprehensive book on Israel's foreign policy was missing and that a gap needed to be filled. When I started writing the book, however, I



was faced with a challenge: I undertook to write a diplomatic history of Israel, yet that history did not begin with the independence of the modern State of Israel in 1948. The Jewish people constitutes a unique historical case, as it was stateless during nearly two-thirds of its three-thousand-year-old history. This is why I decided to write a diplomatic history that includes the ancient kingdoms of Israel, as well as what I call “Jewish diplomacy” in exile. Such an endeavour was admittedly ambitious, but it was also necessary. Reviewing three thousand years of diplomatic history brought me to the conclusion that the Jews have been successful in handling their relations with other nations when maintaining a delicate balance between a strong sense of historical mission (symbolised by the star) and a healthy dose of political realism (symbolised by the scepter). Hence the title of the book, inspired from the verse “A star rises from Jacob, a scepter comes forth from Israel” (Numbers 24:17).

Why did you decide to publish it with a university press?

Because I thought that an academic press was more appropriate for a carefully documented reference book which I hope shall become standard reading for syllabi related to Jewish history, to Israel, to the Middle East, and to diplomacy.

Do you enjoy the writing process?

I learn a lot from writing, and I do enjoy the effort required by the writing process. I write mostly in English, and I wrote this book in English, even though my mother tongue is French (I was born in France) and even though my daily language is Hebrew (I live in Israel). Over the years, writing in English has become natural to me, yet I sometimes have to put extra thought to find the right word or make sure that a sentence would not sound awkward (being married to a native English speaker, I often find myself asking my wife to give me her feedback when I’m in the middle of writing a sentence). But besides the accuracy of the language itself, I find that writing is an excellent exercise to ponder your thoughts and to search for precision. Seventeenth century poet Nicolas Boileau formulated thus the connection between clear ideas and clear writing: “What is well-conceived is clearly enunciated and then words come to you easily” (“Ce qui se conçoit bien s’énonce clairement et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément”).

What piece of advice might you give to young academics looking to follow in your footsteps?

Be true to what you think and believe, admit your mistakes when you are proven wrong, beware of groupthink and of fads, and be willing to pay a personal price for saying the truth.

What's next?

The next thing after writing a book is to promote it... In the Zoom age, that means giving lectures online from your desk to the remotest destinations. I am also spearheading the book's translation and publication in other languages. It is currently being translated into Hebrew, French, and Chinese, and I expect more translations to follow. My next book is already on my mind, but I am not sure I will have a chance to write it in the near future. I have gotten involved into efforts to achieve regime change and political stability in Israel, and there have been major changes in my personal life. As the old Yiddish goes, "Man plans, God laughs." So I guess the best plan is to have a good laugh...

Emmanuel Navon is an international relations expert who lectures at Tel-Aviv University, at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, and at Israel's military academy. He is a fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and at the Kohelet Policy Forum and is a foreign affairs analyst for an Israel-based news TV channel. An expert on Israel's foreign policy, Navon has published dozens of articles and three books, including *The Star and the Specter* (University of Nebraska Press 2020), *From Israel with Hope: Why and How Israel Will Continue to Thrive* and *The Victory of Zionism: Reclaiming the Narrative about Israel's Domestic, Regional, and International Challenges*.

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