

REVIEW

Has Israel Pushed Realpolitik to Its Limits?

Two new books examine how an isolated state managed to expand its diplomatic horizons.

BY AZRIEL BERMANT | MARCH 26, 2021, 3:36 PM

In 2020, Israel normalized relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco—a major diplomatic achievement. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with the help of the Trump administration, claimed much of the credit for the Abraham Accords amid the growth in formal and informal contacts between Israel and the Gulf States over the past five years, driven in large part by shared concerns over the threat posed by Iran. However, Israel’s diplomats have been working quietly behind the scenes for more than 25 years to nurture ties with these states. As Eliav Benjamin, a senior Israeli diplomat, said, “This what people in my profession work for day in and day out.”

Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone, Uri Bialer, Indiana University Press, 370 pp., \$50, March 2020.

The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel, Emmanuel Navon, Jewish Publication Society, 536 pp., \$36.95, November 2020.

This is a far cry from the Israeli experience in the early years following its establishment in 1948, as both Uri Bialer and Emmanuel Navon remind us in two new books evaluating more than 70 years of Israeli diplomatic history. Israel's policymakers were desperately trying to break the international isolation that was paralyzing the Jewish state in the wake of its traumatic war of independence and the existential threat from the enemies surrounding it. When Israel joined the United Nations in 1949, 42 of the organization's 89 members refused to recognize it. On the eve of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the number had risen to 57.

As Bialer points out in his illuminating and often fascinating book, *Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone*, "minimizing Israel's international isolation beyond the Middle East and securing the recognition that would legitimate its borders and demographic integrity ... have constituted its prime diplomatic objectives."

Israel's natural focus on security considerations meant that its defense ministry and its intelligence bodies had a greater involvement in shaping its foreign policy, for better or worse, while Israel's diplomats were often marginalized. This sometimes resulted in clashes between Israel's diplomats and defense officials who were ready to overlook ethical and moral concerns. This can be seen, for example, in Israel's aggressive promotion of arms sales to totalitarian countries. Israel sold arms to the openly anti-Semitic military junta in Argentina during the 1970s and early 1980s. The fact that Israel was openly supporting a virulently anti-Semitic regime in Buenos Aires raised serious questions about Israel's image as a protector of the world's Jewish population.

In his absorbing and informative book, *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel*, Navon argues Israel's diplomatic accomplishments and challenges can only be understood within the wider context of Jewish history, including the need to strike a balance between faith in its historic mission as a people and its use of power. However, the difficulty facing the Zionist leadership and the future state of Israel was coming to terms with the notion of power when the Jews had been stateless and without power for much of their history.

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Diplomacy involves compromise between ideals and realpolitik, and Israeli diplomacy is no exception in this regard, Navon writes. But how has Israel managed this compromise? Although both authors are understandably impressed by Israel's diplomatic accomplishments in the past 70 years, there is also a recognition that Israel's foreign policy has, to quote Navon, on occasion "pushed realpolitik to its limits."

Indeed, more often than not, concerns over the diaspora Jewish population took a back seat as Israel prioritized issues, such as emigration and arms sales. Thus, Bialer tells us that Israel was so determined to ensure the continued flow of Jewish emigration to Israel from Poland during the 1950s that it collaborated with the Polish government to suppress reports on anti-Semitism within Poland.

Navon maintains that Israel's cultivation of relations with Africa during the 1950s and 1960s was primarily driven by realpolitik. Relations with the newly independent countries in Africa would enable Israel to strengthen its international position and break out of isolation. Golda Meir, Israel's foreign minister at the time, spearheaded this policy with a 1958 tour of Africa, including Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Senegal.

However, things turned sour after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. As Bialer points out, African countries increasingly perceived Israel as an occupying state identified with imperialism, which justified the view of Israel not as a third-world country but as a "white superpower." Moreover, they could not ignore the financial inducements of Arab states that persuaded oil-importing countries to cut their ties with the Jewish state.

Israel's Foreign Affairs Ministry was also highly critical of the defense establishment's practice of cultivating close ties with dictators who violated the human rights of their own citizens, such as then-Zaire President Mobutu Sese Seko and former Ugandan President Idi Amin. When numerous African states abruptly severed their ties with Israel in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it provoked fierce criticism of the Israeli defense establishment by the foreign ministry.

Those Israeli diplomats who had argued against developing ties with the white apartheid regime in South Africa eventually lost out during the 1970s, when Israel established extensive military cooperation with Pretoria.

In recent years, as Netanyahu has exerted ever-greater control over foreign policy while weakening the standing of Israel's foreign ministry, any prudence and compromise that existed has increasingly given way to the pursuit of naked self-interest. As Nimrod Goren, founder of the Israeli think tank Mitvim has pointed out, Netanyahu has deliberately weakened Israel's foreign ministry for political reasons. It has been understaffed while budgets have been slashed, with its responsibilities

stripped away and given to other smaller ministries. For many years, it also lacked a full-time minister. This has damaged Israel's national security and weakened the ministry's ability to fulfill its mission.

Netanyahu's imprint can be seen especially clearly in Israel's

cooperation with governments that have a questionable record on human rights and anti-Semitism. Israel has strengthened its ties with the countries of Eastern Europe who are generally opposed to the traditional policies of the EU on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The governments of Eastern Europe have become useful as a means to counterbalance unwelcome EU votes, thereby enabling Israel to use "divide and rule" tactics to prevent an EU consensus on issues like Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Navon maintains these calculated ties with Eastern European governments "do serve Israel's national interests." Yet, he also points out that there are drawbacks for Israel in backing populist governments that are opposed to free trade and may be more inclined to support Russia than the United States. Since the EU is Israel's primary trade partner and a close ally of the United States, Israel would not gain from a Europe dominated by "pro-Russian mercantilists."

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Indeed, Netanyahu has taken this policy to extremes by aligning himself closely with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—a leader who enthusiastically rebels against the EU consensus. Orbán has expressed admiration for the Hungarian wartime leader, Miklos Horthy, who was an ally of Hitler. As well as indulging in anti-Semitic tropes with his attacks on Jewish philanthropist George Soros, Orbán has eroded Hungary's democratic institutions and has been a leading opponent within Europe for the provision of sanctuary for refugees and other migrants. The vast majority of Hungary's Jewish community stands against Orbán's Fidesz party.

Netanyahu has, no doubt, calculated that Orbán's Hungary, as well as countries like the Czech Republic, Poland, and Lithuania, can be key players in Israel's strategy to neutralize what he perceives as an unfavorable EU policy toward the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. However, Israel has benefited in the past from EU support on key issues like the imposition of sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program, so this policy is likely to be counterproductive and harmful in the long run. By aligning itself with illiberal and authoritarian forces, Israel could find itself increasingly isolated among those prizing liberal-democratic values. This echoes Israeli readiness to collaborate with Warsaw in the 1950s over the suppression of reports of anti-Semitism.

Although Israel has a strong interest in maintaining understandings with Moscow amid the ongoing threat posed by Iran, it has tried too hard to stay on the right side of the Kremlin, even at the expense of its relationship with its Western allies. In May 2018, Netanyahu was Russian President Vladimir Putin's guest of honor at the ceremony marking the 73rd anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany—as Navon notes, a ceremony that most Western leaders stayed away from in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Israel's diplomats controversially stayed away from a key U.N. General Assembly vote in March 2014 condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea, in spite of U.S. requests for Israel to vote for the motion. Israel sent its ambassador in November 2020 to present his credentials to Putin's ally Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko. The *Economist* described this as “a slap to the Belarusian people” amid mass protests against Lukashenko.

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of Netanyahu's control over foreign policy can be seen in Israel's bilateral relationship with the United States. As Avi Gil, the former director-general of Israel's Foreign Affairs Ministry, has pointed out, the Netanyahu government's embrace of the Republican Party and former U.S. President Donald Trump has damaged the bipartisan consensus over Israel in the United States, by turning it into a divisive issue associated with the Republican Party and Christian evangelicalism.

It didn't have to be this way. Since Gabi Ashkenazi of the Blue and White party was sworn in as foreign minister in May 2020, he has won plaudits from Israel's diplomats by empowering the foreign ministry and working to enhance its influence in national decision-making. He has also improved the country's relationship with the European Union. It helped that he was able to neutralize Netanyahu's worst excesses by signaling to world leaders that normalization with Arab states would be more advantageous than annexation of the West Bank. Ashkenazi's party has taken

credit for scuttling Netanyahu's annexation plans and promoting the Abraham Accords in its place.

Netanyahu's appearance in front of the U.S. Congress in March 2015, in which he attacked the Obama administration's planned nuclear deal with Iran, was without precedent. The late Maj. Gen. Meir Dagan, the former Mossad chief, maintained Netanyahu had caused Israel strategic harm by treating the Iran nuclear threat as an Israeli problem when the danger posed by Tehran was clearly a global one that required Israel to keep a low profile.

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Previous Israeli Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert understood this and acted accordingly. The collapse of the nuclear agreement has resulted in the unraveling of restrictions that had previously constrained Iran's nuclear activity. In the meantime, Iran has stockpiled large amounts of enriched uranium, is rebuilding its nuclear facilities, and is blocking access to international inspectors.

Interestingly, Bialer views Israel's development of its own nuclear option as one of its greatest foreign- and defense policy accomplishments. Israel's early military cooperation with the French—which supported its advancement of a nuclear capability—and the development of its arsenal under the nose of U.S. inspectors, followed the adoption of nuclear opacity policy in the face of U.S. opposition to global nuclear proliferation. This was seen as a diplomatic and scientific sleight of hand that bore fruit. Israel had also managed through covert means to acquire nuclear materials from various sources, including Norway, South Africa, and Argentina.

The International Panel on Fissile Materials has recently unveiled satellite evidence of new construction at Israel's nuclear facility in Dimona. Amid the prospect of proliferation in the Middle East, Bialer suggests that since Israel may have to come to terms with a nuclear-armed Iran, this deterrent is especially relevant today. Nevertheless, he shies away from a discussion of whether Israel's officially denied but well-known nuclear capability has actually deterred its enemies. Egypt and Syria, for example, were apparently not deterred when they launched their surprise attack in October 1973—at a time when Israel had already developed a nuclear option.

It should be remembered, however, that Israel's deterrence policy was forged by its founding leader, David Ben-Gurion, when Israel was isolated and threatened from all sides. This is simply not the case today. As Navon points out, nearly 70 years after the establishment of Israel, "a frail and threatened state in its early days eventually became a powerful country with global clout. Today, despite the unsolved imbroglio with the Palestinians, Israel has gained the upper hand in its conflict with the Arab world. ... It has also become a major power coveted by Arab states that fear Iran's nuclear ambitions."

Earlier in his book, Navon quotes from the doyen of Israeli diplomats, the eloquent and liberal statesman Abba Eban, who wrote: "For many years, Israel was so starved for friendship that it had to look for it wherever it could be found. We could not have maintained even a restricted foothold in world diplomacy if we had made the acceptance of Israel's social ideals a condition of our friendship."

This certainly made sense during the early years of Israel's existence, but it rings hollow today. As Bialer points out, the failure to achieve peace with the Palestinians left Israel facing "nonrecognition islands"—blocs of states around the world that did not recognize it and made it hard for the state to advance other foreign-policy goals.

This is no longer the case. Although the conflict with the Palestinians remains unresolved, Israel has developed new partnerships not only with the Gulf states but has also fostered trade and cooperation in the fields of defense, energy, and technology with countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, which has helped enhance Israel's regional standing. It has also accelerated security cooperation with states in Central Asia, such as [Azerbaijan](#).

Navon argues that the two-state solution, which was first proposed in 1937, has worked in theory but cannot work in practice. Yet this doesn't change the fact that Israel is still occupying a Palestinian people that has no national and political rights. There is a risk that the normalization trend that has brought Israel so many diplomatic dividends in the past year will come to a halt if there is no progress in resolving the Palestinian issue. The Saudis have already made it clear there will be no normalization agreement with Israel before the Palestinians achieve statehood.

Navon also warns that annexation would involve granting Israeli citizenship to some 2.5 million Palestinians, thereby doubling Israel's Arab population and turning Israel into a binational state. He concludes that although Israel has only bad options on the Palestinian issue, prudence and patience have proved to be a wise policy choice in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and conflict management is the safest option for now.

Judging from yet another inconclusive election result in Israel that has also seen strong support for parties on the right, which pour cold water on the notion of any

deal with the Palestinians, it appears that many Israelis would agree with this perspective.

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