
Book Review

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Emmanuel Navon (2020), *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel*, The Jewish Publication Society, Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-8276-1506-9, Price: US\$36.95, 536 pp.

Israel's politico-diplomatic journey has seen several twists and turns since its formation in 1948. Scholars on Israel have concentrated on its internal sociopolitical dynamics and the evolution of its foreign relations. There is ample literature on its diplomatic ties and relations with different countries. *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel* by Emmanuel Navon is the first to traverse into the “historic” dimension of Israel's diplomacy, its roots, going back several centuries even before the modern state of Israel was born.

Navon has traced the roots of Israel's diplomacy to thousands of years ago and linked them to contemporary foreign relations. He has delved deep into the rich Jewish civilizations to reflect on the values and praxis of Israeli foreign policy. The neatly structured chapters and the eloquently expressed arguments make for an interesting reading. The book is divided into four parts—*Israel and the Nations in the Hebrew Bible*; *Jewish Diplomacy from Antiquity to Modernity*; *Rebirth of Israel and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*; and *Israel on the World Scene*—explaining different facets of Israel's diplomatic journey under both favorable and difficult circumstances, considering the hostile neighborhood.

The Star and the Scepter provides a comprehensive overview of the Jewish state's diplomacy from biblical to modern times. The book has made good use of historical accounts of the Jews before 1948 to shed light on how that helped it connect with different nations. Another striking feature is the linkages made between the Jewish civilizations and their impact on Israel's foreign policy. The arguments, backed by meticulous details, reflect how these civilizational and traditional values influence Israel's diplomacy and foreign policy. An uninitiated reader will encounter difficulties in comprehending the discussions in the first two parts of the book, considering the reliance on ancient texts, Jewish history, and tradition.

The first two parts of the book focus on the centrality of the Hebrew Bible in shaping the foreign policy of Israel, an idea that has mostly remained unexplored. Navon explains:

There is much to learn from the Hebrew Bible about the foreign policy of the ancient kingdoms of Israel. Furthermore, I believe one cannot understand Israel's interaction with the world without a basic knowledge of the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish psyche was shaped and continues to be influenced by the founding document of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood. (p. xvii)

An interesting aspect highlighted in the book is the "balancing" Israel has maintained for ages. As the author notes:

The name Israel is given to Jacob after he proves his ability and willingness to fight for his spiritual legacy in the real world. Yet even after receiving his new name, Jacob/Israel continues to oscillate between assertiveness and submissiveness. Even after Jacob is renamed Israel, the Torah continues to use both names alternatively. This apparent contradiction suggests that the name Israel is an ideal to be fought for by way of a delicate and never-ending balancing act between idealism and realism, between values of power. (p.15)

The inclusion of several maps, especially of the Kingdom of David and Solomon, 1000–925 bc, add pictorial illustrations of the region's history.

The book shares some commonality with other scholarly works. The issues and plights faced by Jews in Europe have been discussed over several chapters. In the section, "Jewish Vulnerability in Europe," Navon has highlighted various sociopolitical problems encountered by the Jews in Christianity-dominated Europe, including massacres and pogroms forcing them to migrate to different parts of the world, including the United States. Another commonality the book under review shares with others is the emphasis authors place over the enlightenment of the Jews. Navon further delves into how "the reaction to Zionism" became a "key factor in the emergence of a Palestinian Arab Nationalism" (p.78). Navon also describes the emergence of the Zionist movement and diplomatic efforts in the post-World War I international system to navigate the British Mandate.

In Part three, Navon brings attention to a host of issues and challenges that the newly established state encountered. He highlights the developing Cold War rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union and Israel's "diplomacy had to face the conflicting interests of the superpowers, as well as a hostile Middle East" (p. 126). Noting Britain's waning role and influence before the creation of Israel, Navon discusses the role of some of the European, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries in the then evolving political crisis between the Jews and the Palestinians. He mentions their role in the important milestones in the history of Israel, namely the role of the Peel Commission, United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), and the Partition Plan.

For an avid researcher or watcher of the Israeli–Palestinian or Arab–Israeli conflict, some of the portions of the book would appear as mere repetitions or reinvention of the wheel. This being said, an interesting account is on the "nearly no experience and expertise in diplomacy" of the foreign ministry of the newly established country (p.134). Although it seems to be another set of repetition, Navon details the security challenges that cropped up in Israel after its statehood.

It could be duly mentioned that non-recognition, exclusion from regional groupings in the Middle East and elsewhere, periodic condemnations in multilateral forums, such as the UN, and non-invitation to various Afro-Asian gatherings have been the hallmarks of Israel's foreign policy challenges. The author has highlighted these limitations by citing the experiences Israel had to undergo during the 1950s, the period that witnessed a greater bonhomie, especially between Egypt and the Soviet Union in military–security spheres.

In recent years, there seems to be the reappearance of such an erstwhile peripheral diplomacy due to the commonality of threat perceptions among Israel and the Gulf Arab states. Navon makes a crucial observation that “the periphery policy designed by Ben-Gurion six decades ago eroded over time due to regime changes and policy upheavals, his idea is still relevant as Israel faces new challenges and attracts new allies in the Middle East and beyond” (p.62). He has termed this emerging trend as a “New Periphery,” under which Israel is warming up to countries like Azerbaijan, Greece, Cyprus, and a few Persian Gulf countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Bahrain.

The book gives a broad overview of Israel's regional policy over the decades, including discussions on the Suez Crisis, the Six-Day War, the October War, and the Israel–Egypt Peace Accord. While these issues could be found covered in similar literature, the author's inclusion of numerous details—facts and figures—make it interesting and informative. Developments such as the First Intifada (1987–1993), Second Intifada (2000–2005), Israel–Lebanon wars, as well as Madrid Conference, the Oslo Accords, and other attempts to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, including President Donald Trump's “deal of the century,” have been discussed in great detail. The author has made good attempts at explaining different types of challenges, including prevailing regional and international geopolitical dynamics and Israeli–Palestinian differences obstructing any agreeable formula to resolve the century-old conflict.

After examining the historical and regional dynamics, Navon concludes with a fascinating chronicling of Israel's diplomacy with the wider international community. The topics that have been discussed in Part four signify their centrality in the overall conduct of Israeli diplomacy and foreign policy. The regional case studies, including Europe, America, Russia, Asia, Africa, and Latin America, have been an integral part of Israel's politico-diplomatic journey for several decades. It is, moreover, timely that Navon has made serious efforts to analyze each of these region's past and recent developments in their ties with Israel. This is especially informative as many of these nations continue to remain crucial partners for Israel. The newer insights by Navon build on the existing literature on the subject.

Tellingly, Navon critically examines Israel's relations with the UN, which is transforming from that of “celebration” to “castigation” (p. 368). Another equally critical topic, which the author has examined, is the influence of the Jewish diaspora in Israel's internal and external policies. Navon believes that in recent times, the influence of American Jews, for instance, “is increasingly split along religious and political” lines (p. 399). The author wraps up by flagging Israel's energy exploration and energy exports. When most energy-exporting Persian Gulf countries are reducing their dependence on hydrocarbon-based economy,

Israel is gradually emerging as a natural gas exporter. Rightly mentioned by the author that energy is going to become an important asset for Israeli diplomacy and foreign policy.

In this seminal work, Navon comprehensively analyzes the history of the Jewish state's foreign policy. A copious amount of work on similar topics has already been conducted, but nuanced discussions related to the historical background to Jewish diplomacy and foreign policy have been a missing dimension for long. An insightful journey through Israel's foreign relations labyrinths and its foreign policies and diplomacy is another novel aspect of the book. This research gap, to an extent, has been filled by this book, and it is going to serve for the academia concerned with studies on Israel, its politico-diplomatic efforts, and the overall contours of its foreign policy. This timely published book will certainly leave a long-lasting impact on the minds of the readers.

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