



The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel

by Emmanuel Navon. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society (JPS) and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021. 508 pp., including bibliography and index, \$36.95 hardcover. ISBN 082761506X

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BOOK REVIEW

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Compared to numerous and detailed publications on Israeli military strategy, the diplomatic history of the Jewish state has received sparse attention from academics and researchers. The exceptions cover selected issues (e.g., peace negotiations), limited time frames, or relations with major powers such as the US, Britain or France. In contrast, Emmanuel Navon's volume has a very broad sweep. It not only covers the diplomacy of the modern state, but also sets its analysis in the framework of 4,000 years of Jewish history. Part 1 sets the stage with short chapters on the Biblical foundations of the Israelite nation, the contractual connection of the founders to the Land of Israel, and the lessons derived from complex relations with nearby powers. The author then applies the successes and failures of strategies that ranged from appeasement to resistance during the five centuries of monarchic leadership to an examination of Zionist and Israeli diplomacy.

Building on this structure, Part 2 consists of five chapters that span some 2,000 years from "antiquity to modernity." Under the heading of the transition from "powerlessness to empowerment," Navon's focus shifts to the diplomacy of the Zionist movement, which was largely shaped by Herzl and which was amplified during and after World War I. The emergence of Great Britain as the dominant power in the Middle East as well as Chaim Weizmann's success in guiding the process that produced the Balfour Declaration in 1917 proved essential to the eventual emergence of Israel as the embodiment of Jewish sovereign equality among the nations. For the next forty years, as the Arabs and their allies sought to force the British to abrogate on their commitment to a Jewish home in Palestine, the leaders of the Zionist movement, particularly David Ben Gurion and Ze'ev Jabotinsky, pushed back, using whatever sources of power were available to them. While the two leaders pursued different strategies, they never wavered from their objective of establishing an independent state.

With the end of World War II, the United States replaced Britain as the main power in the region although it was challenged by the Soviet Union and had to contend with the emergence of the United Nations in the central diplomatic arena. The Zionist leadership was able to navigate in this new international system, and this culminated in the UN partition vote of November 29, 1947, which was followed by the declaration of the State of Israel in May 1948. The nascent Israeli military succeeded in holding off invading Arab armies and expanded beyond the indefensible borders that had been envisioned for it under the partition plan. Nevertheless, immediately after the First Arab-Israeli War ended and under the banner of promoting peace, the political pressures on Israel increased. Seeking to reverse the Israeli achievements, Arab leaders rejected any form of recognition and legitimacy for Israel and ignored the armistice terms, which called for permanent peace agreements with the Jewish state. It was only in 1979, with the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty, and later the Jordanian agreement in 1994, that this situation began to change.

The book's third section focuses on Israeli diplomacy, and here, in particular, Navon does an excellent job of selecting and analyzing the specific events that highlight the core issues as well as the important shifts in direction. Ben Gurion followed a strategy of political realism, which sought advantages when opportunities arose, while making concessions when necessary. Regarding tactics, Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett often took a more cautious or dovish stance, but as Navon notes, Sharett's approach was also anchored in pragmatism as he "did not believe in a full resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict." Indeed, Sharett's framework was "conflict reduction," which is known as "conflict management" in today's diplomatic parlance (241).

The Israeli leaders who followed Ben Gurion followed similar diplomatic paths. In 1977, Menachem Begin became the first prime minister from the right of the political spectrum, but he also proved to be a realist, notwithstanding his strong ideological background. Begin's successful cooperation with Egypt's Anwar Sadat, including his willingness to remove settlements and withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for a full and formal treaty, led to the most important breakthrough in Israel's diplomatic history.

Following the return of the Labor Party to power under Yitzhak Rabin in 1992; however, Israeli diplomacy drifted away from pragmatism. While a weakened Yasser Arafat signed declarations using the language of peace in return for gaining a foothold in Gaza and the West Bank, hopes for anything more than a temporary respite from the leader of the Palestinian terror movement were not anchored in reality. As the author notes, the Palestinians openly referred to the Oslo process as "a Trojan horse," which would "eventually liberate all of Palestine 'from the river to the sea'" (214). In Navon's words, in addition to mass terror, the main outcome of Oslo was "to shed light on Arafat's deviousness, as well as the unbridgeable gaps between Israel and the Palestinians" (213).

Since that time, a series of externally led attempts to progress toward "a two-state solution" have reached dead-ends. The most notable of these occurred at the 2000 Camp David summit and with its final postscript at Taba. In each case, when the Israelis made concessions, Arafat refused to reciprocate regarding the 1948 refugee issue and on the always explosive topic of Jerusalem. Navon's focused summary cites Dennis Ross, who led the American government's peace team, and who rhetorically asked: "How many times did Arafat have to tell us no before we heard no?" (224). Regarding the failures on the Israeli side, Navon notes that while Israeli leaders had come to negotiate a compromise centered on 1967, "for the Palestinians, the real issue is 1948" (229).

Navon organizes Part 4, which constitutes almost half of the book, on a regional basis. He devotes chapters to Israeli diplomacy *vis-à-vis* Europe, the US, Russia (or the USSR for most of the period), Asia, Africa, and the United Nations. With respect to Europe, Navon summarizes a history full of complexities and paradoxes. Thus, he points out how the Europeans and Israelis managed to cooperate based on their shared interests, but, that at the same time, friction existed between them, particularly regarding the former's support for the Palestine Liberation Organization. In contrast, the author's chapter on Israel's relationship with the United States highlights the importance of warm personal connections, notably including those with Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, particularly after the 9/11 attacks. (The analysis stops before Trump.) On the other hand, cold interpersonal relationships, as in the cases of Dwight Eisenhower, Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, and Barack Obama, contributed to increased friction between the two countries.

In summary, Navon's book provides a solid overview of Israeli diplomacy and of its historical, Jewish foundations. The more recent phenomena of public diplomacy and soft power, in which non-governmental organizations (which are often funded by

governments), agenda-driven journalists, and social media are important actors, and where Israel's traditional approach to diplomacy has struggled, will require another volume. In the meanwhile, *The Star and the Scepter* fills an important niche and is a recommended reference, particularly for those with a limited knowledge of the history and complexities of Israeli diplomacy.

Notes on contributor

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