

# Ben-Gurion, the Korean War, and the Change in Israeli Foreign Policy

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## Introduction

The Korean War was the first direct military confrontation between the Eastern and Western Blocs during the Cold War, and therefore opened a new page in twentieth century history.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it spurred noteworthy change in the nature of Israel's foreign policy. The "non-identification" policy, which the Israeli government had worked to maintain since the dawn of statehood, was challenged after the breakout of war in the Korean Peninsula and the subsequent United Nations resolutions and forceful intervention in favor of South Korea. Fierce debate broke out in Israel, particularly in the Knesset, about the stance Israel should adopt in light of these developments. Under the leadership of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who compromised with the moderates and surmounted all dissenting views, mostly from Israel's political left, the Israeli government decided to side with the UN resolutions. Historians

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1 For the influence of the Korean War on international Cold War history, please see William Stueck's (ed.) *The Korean War in World History* (University Press of Kentucky, 2004) and Bruce Cumings' *The Korean War: A History* (Random House, 2010).

who have analyzed the change in Israel's foreign policy during early statehood often emphasize the decisive effect of the War, which erupted in 1950 on the opposite side of the continent.<sup>2</sup> Some, such as Michael Brecher and Young Sam Ma, maintain that the outbreak of the Korean War led Israel to abandon its neutrality, which was evident in its almost immediate endorsement of the UN resolutions.<sup>3</sup> In fact, however, Israel's "non-identification" policy remained intact for several months after the war began. Although Ben-Gurion had already resolved to forgo neutrality at this time, key members of the Israeli cabinet such as Moshe Sharett successfully vetoed the prime minister's more activist objectives and allowed Israel to maintain the orientation of its foreign policy, at least until mid-1951.

### **The Establishment of the State of Israel and its Priorities following the First Arab-Israeli War**

Soon after its establishment in 1948, the young State of Israel was attacked by five neighboring Arab countries. The provisional government of Israel led by Ben-Gurion successfully integrated different Jewish military and paramilitary groups, especially following the Altalena Affair, into one organized and efficient army, winning major victories on the battlefield before signing armistice agreements with its Arab adversaries. Nevertheless, the possibility of a "second round" of Arab-Israeli confrontation was still imminent even after the cease-fire announcement in 1949. Israel was also lacking in both food and foreign currency, not only due to the war's destruction but also to the influx of mass immigration. Within three years, from 1948 to 1951, immigration

2 Avi Shlaim, "Israel between East and West, 1948-1956," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 36:4 (2004): 660; and Uri Bialer, "Top Hat, Tuxedo and Cannons: Israeli Foreign Policy from 1948 to 1956 as a Field of Study," *Israel Studies*, 7:1 (2002): 31.

3 Michael Brecher, *Israel, the Korean War, and China: Images, Decisions and Consequences* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1974), 16. See also Young Sam Ma, "Israel's Role in the UN during the Korean War," <http://israelcfr.com/documents/4-3/4-3-0-Contents.pdf>, 87 (Accessed 10/27/2013).

doubled the Jewish population of Israel and left an indelible imprint on Israeli society.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the foremost priorities of Israel's leadership at the outset of the 1950s included obtaining foreign capital and aid to absorb new immigrants, and defending the State from the next incident of Arab aggression, if not avoiding it completely.

Israel's diplomatic strategy reflected these priorities, as most citizens of the nascent state recognized the importance of maintaining access to both camps, whose leaders, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S., had greatly contributed to Israel's independence and triumph over powerful adversaries; access that could only be achieved by adhering to the non-identification policy.<sup>5</sup> Ben-Gurion, Israel's most influential figure, explained that the Jews are "the weakest nation on earth", and that Israel must therefore make every effort to "find understanding, if not friendship, anywhere in the world"—despite his fairly strong tendency to distrust the Soviets.<sup>6</sup>

## The Outbreak of the Korean War and the UN Resolutions

As the first Arab-Israeli War came to a close, another conflict was escalating on the other end of Asia set to erupt into full-scale war.

- 4 Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. Population, by Religion and Population Group 2013, [http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ\\_shnaton\\_e.html?num\\_tab=st02\\_01&CYear=2013](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_01&CYear=2013) (Accessed 10/28/2013).
- 5 The initial five principles of Israeli foreign policy, as approved by the Knesset on 8 March 1949, are as follows:
  - 1) Loyalty to the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter and friendship with all peace-loving states, especially the United States and the Soviet Union;
  - 2) Efforts to achieve an Arab-Jewish alliance based on economic, social, and cultural co-operation within the United Nations framework;
  - 3) Support for all measures strengthening peace and the rights of men;
  - 4) Insistence on the right of Jews to settle in Israel - and to leave their present state of residence;
  - 5) Effective preservation of the independence and sovereignty of Israel. *Divrei Ha-knesset*, I, 8 March 1949, 55; cited in Brecher, *Israel, the Korean War, and China*, 13-14.
- 6 Uri Bialer, *Between East and West: Israel's Foreign Policy Orientation 1948-1956* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14.

To this day, there are vehement disagreements regarding nearly every critical aspect of the Korean War, with the exception of two fundamental characteristics: First, that it was a watershed in post-war international affairs that militarized Eastern and Western Bloc competition, and extended the Cold War contest for worldwide dominance; and second, that the Korean conflict began at least as early as the end of World War II.<sup>7</sup> Which side of Korea should take more responsibility for the War remains debated, as the leaders of both Koreas, Syngman Rhee and Kim Il-Sung, were intent on reunifying Korea under their respective political systems using military means, and had launched continual border skirmishes and raids for an entire year before the outbreak of war.<sup>8</sup> However, the indisputable fact is that on 25 June 1950, a full-scale war broke out in the Korean Peninsula and on that same day, the United Nations Security Council unanimously condemned the North Korean invasion of the Republic of Korea with United Nations Security Council Resolution 82.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet Union, a veto-wielding power, had been boycotting the Council's meetings since January 1950 in protest of the fact that the Republic of China, rather than the People's Republic of China, held a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Two days later, the Security Council published Resolution 83 recommending that member states provide military assistance to South Korea,<sup>10</sup> as President Truman simultaneously ordered U.S. air and sea forces to intervene in favor of the South Korean regime.

7 James Matray, "Korea's war at 60: A survey of the literature," *Cold War History*, 11 (2011): 1.

8 For a look at the origins of the Korean War, please see Allan R. Millett's *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005) and *The War for Korea, 1950–1951: They Came from the North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

9 UN Security Council, Resolution 82 (1950) of 25 June 1950, S/RES/82 (1950), <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f15960.html> (Accessed 10/26/2013).

10 UN Security Council, Resolution 83 (1950) of 27 June 1950, S/RES/83 (1950), <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f20a2c.html> (Accessed 10/28/2013).

## Israeli Responses to the UN Resolutions: Decision, Debate, and Compromise

The UN resolutions won the attention of Israeli government and media from the start. The *Jerusalem Post* praised these resolutions, stating that “Now, for the first time, military sanctions are being used against aggression . . . The people of this country [Israel], themselves victims of aggression as of only two years ago and still openly threatened with a renewal of aggression, cannot but welcome this turn of events.”<sup>11</sup> Within the close leadership circle, both the “moderates” led by then Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett and the “activists” led by then Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, agreed it was in Israel’s best interest that the UN play a bigger part in preventing any form of aggression. They worried about the possibility of future aggression against Israel and emphasized the necessity of the U.N. Security Council’s intervention.<sup>12</sup>

On 2 July 1950, a week after the outbreak of the Korean War, President Chaim Weizmann presided over a special cabinet meeting held at his home in Rehovot, which included Ben-Gurion and all fellow cabinet members. The leaders had met to discuss the status of the Korean problem and its implications on Israel’s foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> The meeting concluded with an announcement that the Israeli government maintains its stance against “the aggressor” and supports the UN Security decisions.<sup>14</sup> However, the government spokesman later reported to Israeli media that this statement “does not mean the government’s neutral policy in the Cold War is being abandoned,” and that as a member of the UN, Israel

11 *The Jerusalem Post*, “Israel and U.N.,” 3 July 1950, 4. Jerusalem Post Historical Archive (ProQuest). <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/929404389?accountid=9703> (Accessed 10/28/2013).

12 Protocol of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee meeting (meeting No. 43/2) 3 July 1950. Ben-Gurion Archive; cited in Ma, “Israel’s Role in the UN during the Korean War,” 82.

13 *The Jerusalem Post*, “Opposes Aggression from Any Quarter,” 3 July 1950, 1. Jerusalem Post Historical Archive (ProQuest). <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/929404335?accountid=9703> (Accessed 10/27/2013).

14 *Ibid.*

is “merely abiding by the Security Council’s decision” as required by Article 25 of the UN Charter.<sup>15</sup>

The cabinet decision roused immediate criticism by Israel’s political left. The leftist opposition even attempted to unseat Ben-Gurion in light of the government’s support of the Security Council’s involvement in the Korean affair. During the Knesset debate on the issue, two left-wing parties, Mapam and the communist Maki, opposed the government’s decision, claiming it was a “contradiction of the principles of Israel’s independence”,<sup>16</sup> and arguing that Israel should never offer its support to Syngman Rhee whose regime had committed the “murder of workers”.<sup>17</sup> Some radicals even called for Israel to help North Korea.<sup>18</sup> The debate finally reached a stalemate between the leftists and those in support of the government’s decision.

At this point, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion entered the discussion. He claimed the Security Council’s intervention in Korea would “postpone the threat of a third world war for years”, and that this was “the only criterion for Israel”.<sup>19</sup> He used history to corroborate his claim; stating that had Great Britain and France exhibited such a firm stance during Hitler’s invasion of the Ruhr in 1936, the Second World War might have been prevented. Debating whether the government of South Korea was good or bad, was a lesser concern.<sup>20</sup>

Ben-Gurion’s words played a decisive role in the debate’s conclusion; and even won the surprising vote of the right-wing opposition parties.

15 Ibid.

16 Yitzhak Ben-Aaron (“Mapam”), Protocol of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee meeting, 3 July 1950. Ben-Gurion Archive; cited in Ma, “Israel’s Role in the UN during the Korean War,” p.83.

17 *The Jerusalem Post*, “Knesset Votes Confidence in Gov’t on Korea Resolution: Right-Wing Opposition Votes with Coalition.” 5 July 1950, 1. Jerusalem Post Historical Archive (ProQuest). <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/929397580?accountid=9703> (Accessed 10/25/2013).

18 Ma, “Israel’s Role in the UN during the Korean War,” 83.

19 *The Jerusalem Post*, “Knesset Votes Confidence in Gov’t on Korea Resolution: Right-Wing Opposition Votes with Coalition”.

20 Ibid.

The Mapam and communist parties' no-confidence motion was finally overruled 79-19. A resolution by Mapai members approving the government's UN support was later passed 68-20.<sup>21</sup>

After his government successfully weathered the no-confidence crisis, Ben-Gurion followed up with a far more activist initiative, proposing to the cabinet that Israel dispatch military units to Korea.<sup>22</sup> Sharett firmly opposed the idea, as he believed this would not only spur dissatisfaction in the IDF and risk military adventurism, but also further damage Israel's relations with the Eastern Bloc.<sup>23</sup> This time, the cabinet unanimously supported Sharett, leading Ben-Gurion to utter his famous, caustic remark, "Even the majority has the right to be mistaken."<sup>24</sup> Ben-Gurion did agree to compromise, however, and did not push any issues related to the Korean War for several months. The prime minister's willingness to compromise may have been rooted in his politically astute observation that most Israelis were not ready for such a dramatic change in foreign policy at the time. As Theodore Kollek, chief of the American Department of Israel's Foreign Office, explained to the Americans – the vast majority of his country's people still ardently hoped Israel would cultivate an international position "similar to that of Switzerland" and did not wish to see this possibility "destroyed by an alignment with any group of nations".<sup>25</sup>

## The De Facto Change in Israel's Foreign Policy

The end of 1950 marked a dramatic change in the Korean War, as the Chinese army intervened and successfully pushed the UN Command and South Koreans back to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. British Prime Minister Clement

21 Ibid.

22 Gabriel Sheffer, Moshe Sharett, *Biography of a Political Moderate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 549.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 550.

25 Memorandum of Conversation, 31 August 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1950 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), V: 987.

Atlee made a hasty visit to Washington, after which the heads of the U.S. and U.K. sternly warned they would not appease the North Koreans and their Chinese patrons, and that UN forces would continue to fight in Korea.<sup>26</sup> These developments affected many states, Israel included. Abba Eban reported to the Israeli government that while meeting with him, “State department [U.S.] officials indicated their desire to see UN forces adopt an international character, in order to discount the impression that the U.S. has expansionist aspirations in Korea, as suggested by an occupation army”; adding that the U.S. had approached “many countries in addition to Israel”.<sup>27</sup>

Ben-Gurion viewed these developments as another opportunity to align Israel more closely with the West, the U.S. especially. He began by proposing that the Americans stockpile strategic food and raw materials in Israel “for use during any emergency period”, which Israel would be able to purchase in the event of another war.<sup>28</sup> The prime minister then sent a letter to Gershom Schocken, chief editor of *Ha’aretz* at the time, who had recently published a report in the newspaper stating that Ben-Gurion supported neutrality. Ben-Gurion criticized Schocken in the letter, asserting he has “denounced neutrality from the day the State was established” and opposes the adoption of a neutral stance toward the Korean War specifically.<sup>29</sup> The prime minister wrote that his letter was for the chief editor’s eyes only, and “should not be published under any circumstances”.<sup>30</sup> One month later, however, Ben-Gurion delivered the following message to Israel’s ambassador in Great Britain at the time, Eliahu Elath: “Tell him [Elath] directly that although in times of peace

26 Ibid., 562.

27 A. Eban (Washington) to D. Ben-Gurion (Tel-Aviv) and M. Sharett (Paris). 10 December 1951. *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel*, ed. Yemima Rosenthal (Volume 6 1951). Ben Gurion Archive. <http://bg-idea.bgu.ac.il/ideaweb/9/BG%20Library%20Multimedia/Oded/17200/17261.pdf> (Accessed 10/26/2013).

28 Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett*, 563.

29 Letter by David Ben-Gurion to Gershom Schocken, *Israel’s Position is not Neutral in the Cold War* January 15, 1951. Ben Gurion Archive. <http://bg-idea.bgu.ac.il/ideaweb/21/img/12/21/0000143521001.gif> (Accessed 10/25/2013).

30 Ibid.



we try to maintain political independence [non-alignment], in the event of a world war we stand one hundred percent with the West.”<sup>31</sup>

The change in domestic political atmosphere may have contributed to Ben-Gurion’s vehemence. The recent developments in Korea, and the escalating fear of a third world war, may have awakened Israel’s public to the danger of paying a heavy price for political neutrality in the event of major hostilities, finding itself cut off from the West. “As a result,” postulated the U.S. chargé d’affaires in Israel in a report to Washington, “the bulk of [Israel’s] population is likely ready to support eschewing neutrality completely, if it means political and military alliance with the West.”<sup>32</sup>

On 2 May 1951, Ben-Gurion left Israel for a “private visit” to the U.S. During his long stay, he “unofficially” met President Truman and numerous American politicians, including the Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall and Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson. At the same time, the Americans made an explicit demand that its allies vote in favor of an embargo on weapons and military provisions to China. Once again, Ben-Gurion argued that Israel’s position in the Korean War directly affected the possibility of generous American military and economic aid, as well as U.S. support concerning German reparations and Syria-Israel border conflicts.<sup>33</sup> This time, Sharett had no option but to approve Israel’s pro-embargo vote in the U.N. As several astute political observers noted at the time, this was an outright indication that Israel had finally altered its non-identification policy.<sup>34</sup> Later, in November 1951, even Sharett acknowledged the change in Israel’s approach to foreign affairs and promised U.S. officials that Israel “feels it is an organic part” of the Western cause.<sup>35</sup>

31 See Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett*, 557.

32 The Chargé d’affaires in Israel (Ford) to the Department of State, 5 January 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, V: 561-2.

33 *Ibid.*, 586.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Memorandum of Conversation, 19 November 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, VII, Pt. II: 1853.

## Conclusion

The Korean War period saw a dramatic change in Israel's foreign policy, a process in which Ben-Gurion played a crucial role. This change, however, was not accomplished with a single stroke. Aside from the leftist opposition, the majority of Israel's government and Knesset had initially agreed to support the UN resolutions, as Israel hoped the UN would maintain its role as safeguard of world peace and, if possible, protect Israel from the next incident of Arab aggression. Israel's non-identification policy became flexible in light of its UN support, but Ben-Gurion's activist aims to fully align with the West were initially checked by the Sharrett-led moderates. However, as the situation in Korea developed and America intensified its stance, Israel's non-identification policy could no longer guarantee U.S. aid. It was due to these considerations that Ben-Gurion's proposition to forgo neutrality eventually won the upper hand in the foreign policy debate. Finally, Israel's UN vote in favor of an embargo on China marked a historically significant shift in early statehood foreign policy in Israel.