

# Before It Was Special

## The Gradual Shift in US-Israel Relations in the Final Years of Eisenhower's Presidency

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### Introduction

Much has been made of President John F. Kennedy's private December 1962 statement to Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir that "The United States has a special relationship with Israel in the Middle East really comparable only to what it has with Britain over a wide range of world affairs."<sup>1</sup> Scholars from both countries, as well as others from around the world, have nearly exhausted the topic of America's "special relationship" with Israel, questioning the prudence of an alliance with such a disputed little state,<sup>2</sup> or, more often, attempting to elucidate just when and how that relationship developed. Some, like David Schoenbaum and Salim Yaqub, portray a fundamental continuity in the "special relationship" from the very conception of the State in 1947 during the Truman presidency, through the Eisenhower years, and

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1 *FRUS 1961-1963, Near East, 1962-1963*, 5, 18; Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 183.

2 See, for example, Stephen Green's accusatory but insightful *Taking Sides: America's Secret Relations with a Militant Israel* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984).

beyond.<sup>3</sup> Others, noting Eisenhower's rejection of Israel's persistent requests for U.S. arms and security guarantees throughout the stormy decade of the 1950s, characterize Eisenhower's presidency as a "sad story" for Israel, in which Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's desperate attempts to cultivate a favorable relationship with the United States were a complete failure.<sup>4</sup> Still others examine more carefully the Eisenhower period and find in it a subtle but substantial shift in the dynamics of the US-Israel relationship. These scholars generally see the years from 1957 to 1960 as a "period of incubation" in which "the seeds of change in the very essence and intrinsic nature of American-Israeli relations had not only been planted, but also had begun to bear fruit".<sup>5</sup>

Part of the dilemma arises from lack of consensus on a definition of a "special relationship". Abraham Ben-Zvi's explanation offers two separate but juxtaposing paradigms through which to analyze the question. He distinguishes between the "American national interest"

- 3 See David Schoenbaum, *The United States and the State of Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Also Salim Yaqub, "Imperious Doctrines: U.S.-Arab Relations from Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush," *Diplomatic History* 26.4 (2002): 571-91.
- 4 Zach Levey, *Israel and the Western Powers: 1952-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Levey's use of the phrase "sad story" is from Mordechai Gazit in 1983. See also Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985); Warren Bass, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Finally, Yaakov Bar-Siman-Tov, "The United States and Israel since 1948: A 'Special Relationship'?" *Diplomatic History* 22. 2 (1998): 231-263.
- 5 Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3. See also Isaac Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel: United States-Israeli Relations, 1953-1960* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993). Likewise, Peter L. Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Finally, Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Chapel Hill: The University North Carolina Press, 2002).

paradigm and the “special relationship” paradigm. Noting a general, “widespread fund of goodwill toward Israel [in American public opinion] that is not restricted to the Jewish community”, he argues that the “special relationship” paradigm refers to a steady American interest in the well-being of the State of Israel throughout the period of 1950s. It was the “American national interest” paradigm that sometimes created tension in US-Israeli relations. For Eisenhower, in contrast to Truman, “Whenever the two paradigms diverged, it was the national interest paradigm that downgraded and outweighed the special relationship orientation.”<sup>6</sup> The experienced World War II general, concerned over the potential of communist encroachment into the region, viewed Israel and the Middle East through the prism of the Cold War. Outright support for Israel could prove disastrous for his New Look policy of Soviet containment in the Middle East; as a result, Eisenhower became reticent in his initial willingness to develop warm relations with the troublesome Jewish state.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, despite moments of bitterness over Israeli (and even more so, British and French) actions during the eight years of Eisenhower’s presidency, particularly in the climactic Suez Crisis in 1956-1957, the president’s perception of Israel was never one of outright dislike, as Warren Bass has insinuated.<sup>8</sup> Nor did the “special relationship” skip a generation. Understanding Eisenhower’s presidency through the lens of strategic relations, it is evident that, although he remained committed to Israel’s existence, the new president indeed viewed Israel early on as a liability to his policy of Soviet containment in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> Since he remained convinced of Israel’s military advantage over her neighbors, Eisenhower’s first term was marked by a policy of insistent neutrality regarding Israel and her hostile neighbors, particularly Egypt.<sup>10</sup> Indeed,

6 Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition*, 5-7.

7 Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 50, 56; Levey, *Israel and the Western Powers*, 3; Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 37, 48.

8 Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 35.

9 Levey, *Israel and the Western Powers*, 3; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 51, 54; Little, *American Orientalism*, 88-9.

10 Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 54; Peter L. Hahn, “Commentary:

throughout this period, Israel's leadership often agonized over its inability to make headway in securing arms or any kind of formal guarantee from the United States.<sup>11</sup> It would be an oversimplification, however, to characterize Eisenhower's entire presidency as a period of complete disinterest in Israel as a strategic ally. In fact, documentary evidence and careful analysis of regional realities reveal that Eisenhower's second term heralded a significant shift in his perception of Israel, from liability to asset.<sup>12</sup> Careful consideration of key documents illustrates not only this subtle shift, but also Ben-Gurion's acute perception and exploitation of this shift to nurture the strategic relationship with the United States for which he had so longed during the rocky period of 1950s. Thus, although the seeds of the "special relationship" planted during Truman's presidency suffered through a period of infertility, they began to bud in the later years of the Eisenhower presidency, and then blossomed with Kennedy.

## Part One: 1953-1956

### Eisenhower and the Middle East: Cold War Policy and Strategy

When Dwight D. Eisenhower entered the White House in early 1953, he brought with him a change not only in leadership, but also in perspectives and policies regarding the United States and the Middle East. One of the most pervasive differences between Ike and his predecessor was his view of the Cold War and the centrality of the Middle East in containing Soviet influence.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to Truman's fluctuating policy

Special Relationships," *Diplomatic History* 22. 2 (1998): 263-72.

11 Levey's book expounds this point.

12 Little argues convincingly for the pinpointing of the origins of "special relationship", from a strategic standpoint, in regional changes and conceptions beginning in 1957. Ben-Zvi likewise argues this point, further contending for a compelling framework that sees continuity between Eisenhower and Kennedy, rather than skipping from Truman to Kennedy, as Bass maintains.

13 It should be noted, however, that Eisenhower did not discard all of Truman's policies regarding the Middle East. One of Truman's most enduring legacies

of the Middle East, Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles quickly developed and doggedly adhered to a policy whose Cold War perspective caused them to feel the need to safeguard the Middle East from Soviet military and political expansion and protect it for US interests.<sup>14</sup> State Department calculations that Israel's military prowess meant that it no longer faced existential threat, combined with an awareness of Arab resentment regarding Western influence in Israel's founding and survival, caused the new president and Dulles to conclude that all-out support for the Jewish state would significantly undermine the American neutrality policy. They consequently formulated a policy of detached amicability in relation to the hostile countries.<sup>15</sup> Eisenhower expressed sympathy for Arab "legitimate aspirations", and persevered in a policy of neutrality, despite a "firestorm of protests from Israel" as Arab economic warfare directed at the fledgling state threatened to break it.<sup>16</sup> In his effort to block a Soviet thrust into the region, Eisenhower refrained from any move that illustrated de facto support for Israel.<sup>17</sup>

in American policies regarding the conflict in the Middle East was the 1950 Tri-Partite Declaration, which Eisenhower upheld. Conceived between the three major Western powers, the United States, Britain, and France, the Tri-Partite Declaration conditioned arms supply to any Middle East state on its willingness to pledge nonaggression. Thus, Middle East states could receive arms from these countries, provided they could illustrate their necessity for internal security and legitimate self-defense purposes. Any state that broke the nonaggression pledge would experience immediate action from the three powers, "both within and outside the United Nations". This agreement allowed the three Western powers to maintain a presence in the region and, for Truman in particular, popularity in public opinion on the domestic front. See Hahn, *Caught*, 74.

14 Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 50, 56.

15 *Ibid.*, 54, 147, 245. Most of the other scholars also note Eisenhower's objective of curbing the influence of the Soviet Union, notably Alteras and Ben-Zvi. Levey points out that the State Department saw Israel as more than a match for their Arab antagonists. See page 773 of Zach Levey, "Anglo-Israeli Strategic Relations, 1952-1956," *Middle Eastern Studies* 31. 4 (1995): 772-802.

16 Hahn, *Caught*, 147, 151, 179.

17 Abraham Ben-Zvi, "The July 1958 Jordanian Crisis and the Origins of the

This change in policy dismayed Israeli leadership, who felt that America clearly had no sense of the tiny state's true vulnerability.<sup>18</sup> During Eisenhower's eight years, Israel repeatedly attempted to obtain a security agreement and arms deals with the emerging world superpower, but to no avail.<sup>19</sup> Only toward the end of Eisenhower's presidency did America finally begin selling minor arms to Israel; never during that time did the United States formalize a security guarantee.<sup>20</sup> Painfully aware of the policy change under Eisenhower, Ben-Gurion lamented in 1956, "I have no doubt that [Truman] would have [destroyed Nasser]."<sup>21</sup>

## From Detachment to Coercion: Operation Alpha

Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles quickly realized, however, that passivity and evenhandedness caused more problems than they solved.<sup>22</sup> Becoming increasingly convinced that the Arab world was suspicious of the West, animated by a "fierce nationalism", and divided by political disputes and racial differences, the Eisenhower administration viewed the peoples of the region as "tinder for Communist conflagrations".<sup>23</sup> Washington watched nervously as Khrushchev nurtured closer relations with Egypt that might threaten American and Anglo interests in the region.<sup>24</sup>

In November of 1954, the British Foreign Office approached the

American-Israeli Alliance: A New Perspective," *Journal of Israeli History: Politics, Society and Culture* 24. 2 (2006): 215-28; Little, *American Orientalism*, 88-9.

18 Uri Bialer, *Between East and West: Israel's Foreign Policy Orientation, 1948-1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 211, 265.

19 Ben-Zvi, "1958 Jordanian Crisis," 218.

20 Levey, *Israel and the Western Powers*, 97.

21 David Ben-Gurion, "Ben-Gurion's Diary – the Suez-Sinai Campaign," edited and introduced by S. Ilan Troen, in *The Suez-Sinai Campaign: Retrospective and Reappraisal*, ed. S. Ilan Troen and Moshe Shemesh (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 289-332, esp. 324-5.

22 Hahn, *Caught*, 181.

23 Memorandum from Dulles, cited in Hahn, *Caught*, 150.

24 Hahn, *Caught*, 150.

American State Department with an initiative of “coercive diplomacy” aimed at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, and hopefully easing political tensions that inflamed nationalist sentiments and opened the door to Soviet, anti-Western, influence.<sup>25</sup> Outlined in early 1955, this attempt at coercive diplomacy, originally a top-secret endeavor known as Operation Alpha, was designed to pressure both Egypt and Israel into cooperation and reconciliation.<sup>26</sup> In exchange, the countries would be offered security guarantees and financial incentives.<sup>27</sup> Both Ben-Gurion and Nasser refused the initiative, which Caplan argues was in any case doomed to fail due to a combination of factors, including Soviet influence in Egypt and the irreconcilable attitudes of Israel and Egypt.<sup>28</sup>

The reasons for David Ben-Gurion’s rejection of the plan lay in his conception of Israel’s security. With the memory of Israel’s desperate war for independence a mere seven years old, he understood that the conflict had not been a final win that guaranteed Arab acceptance of the Jewish state, nor was it possible for Israel to attain such a win, no matter how many military victories the state might achieve. The same was not true for the Arab side, however, as one final win could mean the attainment of their goal: Israel’s annihilation. The fledgling state could not afford a single defeat, even after several victories.<sup>29</sup> Convinced that Egypt was simply waiting for an opportunity to resume the war and destroy Israel, as evidenced by the increasing number of cross-border raids, Ben-Gurion concluded that the only way to guarantee Israel’s existence was through a policy of deterrence.<sup>30</sup>

25 Neil Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy, Vol. 4: Operation Alpha and the Failure of Anglo-American Coercive Diplomacy in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1954-1956* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 81; Hahn, *Caught*, 182.

26 Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, 128-9.

27 Hahn, *Caught*, 183.

28 Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, 281-2.

29 Shlomo Aronson, “Leadership, Preventive War and Territorial Expansion: David Ben-Gurion and Levi Eshkol,” *Israel Affairs* 18. 4 (2012): 526-545, esp. 527.

30 David Tal, “The American-Israeli Security Treaty: Sequel or Means to the Relief of Israeli-Arab Tensions, 1954-1955”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 31. 4 (1995): 828-848; Aronson, “Leadership”, 528.

Rather than offer Israel any assurances, Alpha only increased Israel's sense of isolation and vulnerability. Likewise, Eisenhower's refusal to show any break with his commitment to impartiality by providing Israel with American weapons only exacerbated Israel's fears.<sup>31</sup> The American president's commitment wavered only momentarily in the spring of 1956, when Eisenhower, observing Soviet arms supplies arriving in Egypt and Syria, and being somewhat convinced that balancing Soviet weapons with American arms in Israel would lessen the immediate threat of war, stated that "We were being too tough with the Israelis with respect to arms,"<sup>32</sup> Yet, Dulles convinced the president that he should not bow to the heavy pro-Israel lobby, and in April of 1956, Eisenhower wrote to Ben-Gurion that US arms sales would not "serve the cause of peace and stability in the world".<sup>33</sup>

For Israel's part, documents of the period reveal its leaders' deep sense of desperation, vulnerability, and frustration with the American stance. In February of 1956, the Israeli foreign office sent a 21-page memorandum to Washington explaining Israel's position and complaining of Washington's indifference to Israel's plight, as well as of its failure to comply with its duty as stated in the Tri-Partite Agreement of 1950.<sup>34</sup> The memorandum argued that a US effort to balance Soviet arms to Egypt with arms to Israel would, in fact, create stability in the region and advance peace.<sup>35</sup> Referring to Eisenhower's insistence that in case of attack, Israel must work through the channels of the United Nations for redress, the memo noted that such action is ineffective and offers no assurance of immediate protection. Likewise, it opens much room for uncertainty that an aggressor might exploit.<sup>36</sup> Israel, it assured Washington, would not accede to Alpha, because that would amount to

31 Hahn, *Caught*, 193.

32 FRUS 1955-1957, Near East, 15:260-261; Hahn, *Caught*, 189.

33 Eisenhower to Ben-Gurion, 30 April 1956, FRUS, 1955-1957, Near East, 15, 589.

34 *The Crisis in the Middle East: The Israel View*, 14 February 1956, Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection, 3.

35 *Ibid.*, 7.

36 *Ibid.*, 13-4.

submitting to “imminent and mortal danger”.<sup>37</sup> In a tone of desperate defiance, the memo insisted that no territory would be ceded under the pressure of a security threat, and instead offered five recommendations to resolve the mounting conflict with Egypt.<sup>38</sup> These include a correction of the imbalance of arms currently in favor of Nasser’s Egypt, and direct negotiations between Israel and the Arab states, with no prior conditions. The clear implication of the recommendations is that the Alpha style of coercive diplomacy was not appreciated.

The memo reflects the fundamental security conception that prevented Ben-Gurion from acquiescing to American pressure, despite his desire to appease and foster relations with the desired ally. In the Middle East arms race of the 1950s, unlike Washington, Israel considered its position in relation to all of its Arab neighbors. Israel required arms more than just equal or superior to those of any one of its neighbors; it must have an advantage over all of them combined.<sup>39</sup> This was more than simply an insatiable hunger for power on the part of Ben-Gurion. Growing Arab nationalism might allow the Arab states to attack Israel with much more unity than they had mustered in 1948, which would, in Ben-Gurion’s reckoning, spell the death of the Jewish state.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, America’s insistence on territorial concessions from Israel, particularly in the Negev where the idea was to create a land bridge between Egypt and Jordan, was rejected outright by the Israeli leadership. Helping unite the Arab world was anathema to Israel’s security conception.<sup>41</sup>

The language of the memo also hints at another, much less public, aspect of Ben-Gurion’s weapons aims: nuclear capability as a deterrent force much more powerful than military might, accession of territory, or, particularly, UN promises. Aronson explains that “Nuclear deterrence,

37 *Ibid.*, 16.

38 *Ibid.*, 20-1.

39 Bialer, *Between East and West*, 265; Zach Levey, “Israeli Foreign Policy and the Arms Race in the Middle East, 1950-1960,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 24. 1 (2001): 29-48, esp. 32.

40 Aronson, “Leadership,” 527.

41 David Tal, “Israel’s Road to the 1956 War,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28. 1(1996): 59-81.

in Ben-Gurion's concept, would guarantee Israel's existence in the case of an all-out effort to destroy it and might even serve as a ladder via which the Arabs could descend from their high perch and accept Israel within its 1949 borders.<sup>42</sup> Although later in his presidency Eisenhower would become suspicious of Israeli nuclear ambitions, it was a problem that would be much more troublesome to Kennedy than Eisenhower.<sup>43</sup>

## The Suez Crisis and Its Implications

Despite American efforts to defuse Middle East tensions through diplomacy, the situation became progressively less stable. In fact, Hahn concludes that Alpha's effect was to increase tensions.<sup>44</sup> Although Israel finally gave up fostering amicable Soviet relations for immigration purposes, it still found itself unable to establish a firm security relationship with the United States.<sup>45</sup> Despite his reiterated commitment to Israel's survival, Eisenhower would not antagonize the Arabs by favoring Israel,<sup>46</sup> even as Fedayeen raids from Gaza continued to threaten Israel's security and leave large numbers of casualties. Israel's A 5 April raid on Gaza in retaliation for prior attacks incurred stern condemnation from the international community, including Washington. A 9 April message to the Israeli prime minister warned Israel of the grave consequences of its "retaliatory action", and insisted that Israel avoid such provocation in the future.<sup>47</sup> The president was further alarmed by talk of Israel using Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, with the accompanying restrictions on the passage of Israeli ships through the canal, as justification for inciting war with either Egypt or Jordan.<sup>48</sup> Concerned about such an eventuality, Dulles approved of the sale of

42 Aronson, "Leadership," 528.

43 Little, *American Orientalism*, 95-6.

44 Hahn, *Caught*, 192.

45 Bialer, *Between East and West*, 144, 179.

46 Bar-Siman-Tov, "The United States and Israel since 194,8" 234; Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 128.

47 Telegram from Eisenhower to Ben-Gurion, 9 April 1956, Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

48 Hahn, *Caught*, 197.

some minor arms to Israel in August of 1956, citing the need to balance Nasser's acquisition of Soviet arms.<sup>49</sup>

Ben-Gurion, defense minister in 1955, recognized that the continued raids undermined his ultimate goal of achieving a more stable relationship with the United States, but to Prime Minister Moshe Sharett's dismay, Ben-Gurion was unwilling to relinquish Israel's "inviolable right to retaliate against terrorist raids".<sup>50</sup> In a seeming exercise in futility, Sharett consistently pursued a security guarantee from the United States throughout 1955, but to no avail.<sup>51</sup> Citing its disapproval of the continuing raids, the State Department retained its neutrality by refusing Israel arms or security guarantees.<sup>52</sup> Ben-Gurion remained convinced that the retaliatory raids not only offered effective deterrence against the increasing terrorist incursions, but also helped him build "a generation of fighters".<sup>53</sup> Further, although the defense minister hoped and worked for security guarantees from the United States, he insisted on Israel's independence from foreign influence.<sup>54</sup> He repeated the need for Israel to remain free of binding ties, even as he pursued arms and security guarantees from various Western powers.<sup>55</sup> Thus, as the border incursions continued, so did the retaliatory raids, despite Western disapproval and frequent sanctions.<sup>56</sup>

Further complicating matters was a situation developing in Jordan, where infiltrators had killed six Israeli soldiers and seven civilians in September 1956. Israel quickly retaliated, killing sixty-nine Jordanian soldiers and destroying three Jordanian army posts.<sup>57</sup> King Hussein of Jordan responded by deploying his entire army to the West Bank,

49 *Ibid.*

50 Levey, "Anglo-Israeli Strategic Relations," 34.

51 *Ibid.*, 41.

52 Levy, *Israel and the Western Powers*, 30.

53 Bialer, *Between East and West*, 268.

54 *Ibid.*, 207.

55 Levy, *Israel and the Western Powers*, 5, 80.

56 See Levey, "Anglo-Israeli Strategic Relations" for a more detailed account of this process.

57 Levy, *Israel and the Western Powers*, 198.

and later requesting that King Faisal of Iraq send fifteen thousand Iraqi troops to Jordan to deter an Israeli attack. This alarmed Washington, which, despite growing fears of a collapse of Hussein's government in Jordan, sought to assuage tensions on both sides.<sup>58</sup> Along with the rest of the world, Eisenhower was, as yet, unaware that Ben-Gurion's attention would soon be turned southward, where Israel would launch a surprise attack in collusion with Great Britain and France to topple Nasser.

Anyone listening to the Knesset debate on 15 October 1956, might have guessed that Ben-Gurion was in a frame of mind to make secret plans for attack.<sup>59</sup> In his address to the Knesset, Ben-Gurion cited Israel's grievances and the threat from Egypt, including the Czech (Soviet) arms deal with Cairo, the Suez Canal crisis, and the Fedayeen attacks from Gaza and Jordan. Referring to Nasser as "the Egyptian tyrant", then "the fascist tyrant", with a direct reference to Hitler, Ben-Gurion highlighted Nasser's public pretense at peace, all the while preparing for a "second round" in which the Arabs would annihilate Israel.<sup>60</sup> Ben-Gurion then emphasized that the Israelis must not attack Cairo, as some had suggested, but reinforce the IDF as a deterrent and prepare for self-defense.<sup>61</sup> Whether that call for peace, two weeks before the Sinai invasion, was a disingenuous attempt to mislead international observers and placate dissenters, or whether it represents some ambivalence on the part of Ben-Gurion regarding the wisdom of becoming the aggressor, is less important than the veiled message communicated through his reading of a poem by Nathan Alterman. The poem, Ben-Gurion remarked, in a clear statement of its importance, "deserves to be recorded permanently in the *Knesset Record*, as an enduring treasure of the state and the IDF".<sup>62</sup>

It is a long poem and cannot be cited here in its entirety, but certain lines suggest that Israel would not always remain passive in the face of

58 *Ibid.*, 199-200.

59 Ben-Gurion, Knesset Speech, 15 October 1956, *Major Knesset Debates, 1948-1981, Vol. 3: Second Knesset 1951-1955, Third Knesset 1955-1959*, ed. Natanel Lorch (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1993).

60 *Ibid.*, 942.

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*, 944.

the Arab threat surrounding it.

When the time comes, and peace reigns in the land,  
When the East is quiet, someone might then ask out loud:  
When—after 1948—did the Jews decide once again  
To break the ring surrounding them?  
Then some will answer one way and others another,  
While a few will suddenly recall a rolling beach  
The sound of the sea and a few shadowing figures  
Moving silently beneath an autumn moon.<sup>63</sup>

The reference to “break[ing] the ring surrounding them” and “shadowy figures moving silently beneath an autumn moon”, offers an allusion not only to the unloading of French arms in 1948, but also seems to hint strongly that Ben-Gurion was considering Israel’s military options, assuring those clamoring for war with Egypt that he would not remain passive forever, and that action was imminent. Also telling is the subsequent reference to Jewish receipt and use of weaponry, and “Its strength increas[ing] ten-fold in intensity – Because it has felt the touch of necessity!”<sup>64</sup> “That night,” quoted the prime minister, “may be a dream, but waking and in fact – It dispels the fear of the disparity – Between us and the power of destructiveness.”<sup>65</sup> Ben-Gurion himself, while making no direct reference to any plan of attack, commented on the poem by noting that “There has been substantial improvement of the IDF’s capacity,” but that “Egypt alone still has a tremendous advantage in fire-power on land, in the air and at sea.”<sup>66</sup> This is especially interesting considering that the French offer of arms support in exchange for Israeli collaboration against Nasser had yet to be extended, although it would come a mere two days later.<sup>67</sup>

Following the poem, the Old Man, as he was known in Israel, reiterated

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*, 945.

65 *Ibid.*, 946.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Avi Shlaim, “The Protocol of Sevres: Anatomy of a War Plot,” *International Affairs* 73. 3 (1997): 509-530, also see p. 6.

Arab designs to destroy Israel, and condemned the world powers, particularly the Soviet Union, for aggravating the situation by sending offensive arms to the “Egyptian tyrant”.<sup>68</sup> He listed the cross-border raids by Fedayeen and other threats to Israel’s security, and then turned to possible international recourses for Israel. While the small diaspora communities throughout the world had their value, Israel needed the support of world powers, but such support was a struggle to receive, he insisted, because Israel does not share with them “a common language or religion . . . or even a common enemy”.<sup>69</sup>

Our enemies—the Arab countries—are eagerly courted by almost all the Great Powers, some of which evince hostility to Israel solely for this reason . . . The firm basis upon which we may acquire friends and allies can only be . . . the illumination of our creative and liberating enterprise, the fact that we are an example for other nations, and our ability to help backward countries through scientific, cultural and technical aid without any fear that we seek to take control.<sup>70</sup>

It is this poignant lamentation for the absence of an alliance with a world power that most clearly illustrates Ben-Gurion’s sense of Israel’s vulnerability and its need for an incentive that would bring alliance with a world power. The prime minister would cite many of the same points (particularly Israel’s value as an example to other nations and its ability to help developing nations) in his January 1959 appeal for greater American support for Israel, this time with much more confidence and success.<sup>71</sup>

Ben-Gurion’s evident aspiration for greater security through weapons, particularly nuclear weapons, and an alliance with a world power, is also significant in light of the fact that, in exchange for Israel’s role in the collusion over Egypt, it would receive from France not only weapons,

68 Ben Gurion Knesset Speech, 15 October 1956, 947.

69 *Ibid.*, 950.

70 *Ibid.*, 951.

71 Letter from Ben-Gurion to Dulles, 19 January 1959, Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

which it had already been receiving since April, but nuclear technology and the security of an alliance with a world power.<sup>72</sup> The importance of this French contribution must not be understated. While Ben-Gurion had already decided to go to war, as indicated ambiguously in his speech and later confirmed by Israeli Colonel Mordechai Bar-On (Dayan's adjutant and present at Sevres), the French request and offer gave Ben-Gurion the confidence to move quickly forward, and then linger for five months in the Sinai and Gaza, in defiance of repeated demands by the UN and Eisenhower himself to retreat. Ben-Gurion insisted that the Israeli military would not withdraw until it had received guarantees that the Egyptian military would not be allowed into the Sinai and Gaza.<sup>73</sup>

Various exchanges between Eisenhower and Ben-Gurion illustrate the tension between the two leaders during this period. On 8 November 1956, Ben-Gurion clearly states Israel's conditions for withdrawal, which included the UN calling upon Egypt to

[renounce its constant declaration] of war with the State of Israel, to abandon its policy of boycott and blockade, to cease the incursion into Israel territory of murder gangs and, in accordance with its obligations under the United Nations Charter to live at peace with member states, to enter into direct peace negotiations with Israel.<sup>74</sup>

For his part, Eisenhower continued to demand unconditional Israeli withdrawal.<sup>75</sup> A 3 February 1957 letter from the president to the Israeli prime minister invoked an earlier 7 November message, demanding that "Israeli forces be withdrawn to the General Armistice line, in accordance with the United Nations General Assembly Resolution of November 2".<sup>76</sup> He again called on Israel to comply with that and subsequent UN

72 Shlaim, "The Protocol of Sevre," 523.

73 In an interview cited in Shlaim, "The Protocol of Sevres," 524; Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 294-5.

74 Letter from Ben-Gurion to Eisenhower, 8 November 1956, Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

75 Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 295.

76 Letter from Eisenhower to Ben-Gurion, 3 February 1957, Ben-Gurion

resolutions, and cautioned that Israel's noncompliance would "almost surely lead to the invoking of further United Nations procedures which could seriously disturb the relations between Israel and other member nations including the United States."<sup>77</sup> An urgent 18 February telegram from Ben-Gurion to Dulles revealed his distress at the UN measures, asking Dulles "in all earnestness to sense [the] deep feeling of our entire people that withdrawal under [the] present circumstances will spell disaster for us".<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, insistence on withdrawal without security guarantees and assurances against further Egyptian incursions would likely strike "the fatal blow" at the "moral foundations of the international organization".<sup>79</sup> Eisenhower responded, in a televised broadcast to the American people on 20 February, that it was Israel's unwillingness to withdraw that could prove to be the fatal blow to the United Nations itself.<sup>80</sup> "If the United Nations once admits that international disputes can be settled by using force," he affirmed, "then we will have destroyed the very foundation of the Organization, and our best hope of establishing a real world order. That would be a disaster for us all."<sup>81</sup> Since the United Nations "must not fail", it had "no choice but to exert pressure on Israel to comply with the withdrawal resolutions".<sup>82</sup>

The president's pressure eventually proved successful, and in early March, Israeli forces withdrew. A decade later, however, Eisenhower would retrospectively regret his intransigence regarding Israeli withdrawal from Sinai and Gaza during the Suez Crisis. Both Max Fisher, a prominent Jewish leader, and Richard M. Nixon, Eisenhower's vice president, quoted Eisenhower as saying that he regretted how he had handled that situation. According to Fisher, he said, "You know, Max, looking

Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

77 *Ibid.*

78 Telegram from Ben-Gurion to Dulles, 18 February 1957, Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

79 *Ibid.*

80 Text of the Address by the president to the American People, 20 February 1957, Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

81 *Ibid.*, 4.

82 *Ibid.*, 5.

back at Suez, I regret what I did. I should have never pressured Israel to evacuate the Sinai.”<sup>83</sup> Something more than regret, however, resulted from the president’s experience with Suez. On 24 November 1956, at the height of the embroilment, Ben-Gurion wrote about a communication received from General Lucius Clay, adviser to the Pentagon, who informed him of the US position. What the prime minister heard must have been encouraging and likely helped to soften the severe rhetoric coming from Washington and the international community. According to this communication, although the US government would not “abandon the Moslem world into the hands of the Soviets”, and “must beware of losing its influence and prestige in the Arab world that has not yet been enslaved to Nasser”, it “views Nasser as a most negative factor and would like to see his downfall, but the way taken by France and England only achieves the opposite results”.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, “Israel’s military success has been most impressive and is worthy of military appreciation despite the differences of opinion concerning the wisdom of the initiative.”<sup>85</sup> After Israel’s withdrawal, Eisenhower himself told Philip Klutznick, “You know, the one thing I learned from that lesson watching the way Israel’s forces performed and the way Britain and France performed is perhaps we’ve got the wrong allies”.<sup>86</sup>

## **Part Two: 1957-1960**

### **The Eisenhower Doctrine: Reassessments**

Throughout 1956 and 1957, Eisenhower continued to drift toward an interest in renewing stronger ties with Israel. As early as January 1957, Eisenhower was looking for a new, more effective strategy than MEDO (Truman’s legacy)<sup>87</sup> or Alpha to fill the vacuum of influence in

83 As quoted in Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 302.

84 Ben-Gurion Diary, 24 November 1956.

85 *Ibid.*

86 Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Waging Peace: The White House Years, 1956-1961* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 178.

87 MEDO stands for Middle East Defense Organization. Originally named Middle East Command, policy makers from both Britain and the United

the Middle East before it would be completely occupied by the Soviets, and possibly to prevent an all-out Arab-Israeli war.<sup>88</sup> He introduced the *Eisenhower Doctrine*, in which he proposed to dispense two hundred million dollars in economic and military aid and to commit armed forces to defend any Middle Eastern country seeking assistance against international communism.<sup>89</sup> Although Hahn sees the administration's efforts as an attempt to exclude Israel, Alteras notes that, as opposed to earlier agreements such as MEDO, Israel would now be included as a country in the Middle East, a fact that marked a minor turning point in US-Israel relations.<sup>90</sup> Still, although the president had decided "not to compete with the Soviet Union for Egypt's loyalty", he also dismissed suggestions of creating a security apparatus in Israel, which he was convinced would push the rest of the Arab world into the hands of the Soviets.<sup>91</sup> Israel, Eisenhower believed, was relatively secure against the threat of communism anyway.<sup>92</sup>

Despite America's attempts to strengthen ties with Middle Eastern, particularly Arab, countries, the Eisenhower Doctrine proved ineffective. The insistence on Arab nations "[choosing] between freedom and communism", epitomized in popular slogan, "Stand up and be counted", carried little favor with Arab populations.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, it had quite the opposite effect. Despite the State Department's confidence that its intervention in Suez would improve America's image in the Middle

States in 1950-1951 set out to create an organization similar to NATO in the Middle East. The organization proved incapable of defending the Middle East, and eventually failed when it could not overcome objections from both Israel and Egypt. See Hahn, *Caught*, 78.

88 Hahn, *Caught*, 224-225; Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, p. 304.

89 Hahn, *Caught*, 225; see also, Peter L Hahn. "Securing the Middle East: The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36. 1 (2006): 38-47.

90 Hahn, *Caught*, 226; Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 304; see also Bar-Siman-Tov, "The United States and Israel," 235.

91 Hahn, "Securing the Middle East," 40.

92 Hahn, *Caught*, 226.

93 Yaqub, "Imperious Doctrines," 573.

East, the Arab public rallied around Nasser and his Soviet orientation.<sup>94</sup> This provoked consternation in Washington, where administration officials were “outraged by what they saw as a total lack of gratitude on the part of Egyptians and other Arabs”.<sup>95</sup>

## Israel: From Strategic Liability to Strategic Asset

Ben-Gurion identified cause for hope in Washington’s attitude toward both Egypt and Israel, and relations between the US and Israel continued to improve from the dark days of the Suez Crisis.<sup>96</sup> According to Alteras, the Israeli prime minister, who observed the White House’s anxiety at Nasser’s drive against the West, detected openings for Israel-US alignment based on their joint interest in containing Soviet-fueled Nasserism.<sup>97</sup> Ben-Gurion began to explore the possibility of forming a “periphery alliance” that could dam the surge of Nasserism in the Middle East. In late 1957, secret emissaries departed from Israel on a series of meetings with leaders of Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia, to discuss an agreement in which Israel would be the “linchpin”.<sup>98</sup>

Ben-Gurion also sensed a shift in the American public’s attitude toward Israel since it had withdrawn from the Sinai and Gaza and had subsequently met with further attacks from Egyptian infiltrators. He subtly manipulated that opinion, to great success.<sup>99</sup> A letter in July 1958 from Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr. to the US president illustrates the magnate’s positive impression of Ben-Gurion. Having spent two months in the Middle East during the spring, Vanderbilt apparently took some interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict. He wrote to Eisenhower, “In talking with leaders from all sides I found the down to earth opinions of Mr. David Ben-Gurion among the most lucid. He is a realist. He has done wonders for his little country.”<sup>100</sup> Vanderbilt continued, almost as if

94 *Ibid.*, 574.

95 *Ibid.*, 575.

96 Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 307.

97 *Ibid.*

98 *Ibid.*, 307-8.

99 Bar-Siman-Tov, “The United States and Israel since 1948,” 235.

100 Letter from Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr. to President Eisenhower, 16 July 1958,

prompted by the Israeli prime minister himself, “Ben-Gurion doesn’t want US aid or bases as such; but he would like an expression from someone in authority to the effect that ‘if an enemy were to encroach upon Israel, the USA would not consider the area from whence the enemy came as a privileged sanctuary’.”<sup>101</sup>

Vanderbilt also commended Eisenhower’s decision to send US troops into Lebanon to prevent the government from falling to Arab nationalists. This brief reference to events in Lebanon somewhat belies the seriousness of the situation for Eisenhower, who also coordinated to save King Hussein of Jordan from Nasserists. This was the first time that Eisenhower’s commitment to intervene in the Middle East as outlined in the 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine was put to the test. Although the unrest began as early as 1956 when Lebanon’s president, Camille Chamoun, a Christian elected in 1952, refused to withdraw his support of the West over the Suez Crisis, it began spiraling out of control in early 1958 when Chamoun attempted to amend Lebanon’s constitution to allow him to serve a second six-year term.<sup>102</sup> When Chamoun asked the United States to intervene, Eisenhower was presented with a dilemma. On the one hand, Eisenhower felt reassured by Britain’s approval of American intervention, and *The New York Times* warned that a “Lebanese Anschluss” by Nasser would gravely destabilize the Middle East.<sup>103</sup> On the other, the White House feared that intervention by the United States could lead to another Western-supported state “surrounded by a sea of Arab hate—almost a second Israel”.<sup>104</sup> When Iraq fell to a bloody coup in mid-July, Eisenhower reluctantly sent American soldiers to Lebanon. They withdrew in late October, having accomplished their mission, although Chamoun was replaced by the less-Western-friendly Chehab.<sup>105</sup>

This crisis coincided with a similar situation in Jordan. After the coup in Baghdad, Britain had proposed joint US-British intervention to save

Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

101 *Ibid.*

102 Hahn, *Caught*, 240-241.

103 “Lebanon: Mideastern Austria”, *The New York Times*, 9 July 1958, 26.

104 Dulles to Eban as quoted in Hahn, *Caught*, 242.

105 Hahn, *Caught*, 242.

King Hussein. Recognizing that a power vacuum in Jordan would likely produce an Israeli-Iraqi clash, Eisenhower endorsed British action in Jordan, but declined to send in US troops, and would not approve “a big operation” in Iraq or Syria.<sup>106</sup>

Despite the potentially disastrous circumstances in which Israel found itself, increasingly surrounded by growing Arab nationalism and Nasserism, it was these circumstances that allowed Ben-Gurion to push forward his plan for a periphery alliance against Nasser, and interest Eisenhower in its potential benefits. Ben-Zvi goes so far as to insist that the 1958 Jordanian crisis was the trigger event that made Israel a de facto partner of the United States in their shared strategy of curbing pro-Soviet Nasserism.<sup>107</sup> The United States requested the Israeli government’s permission for British and American planes to fly over Israeli airspace to carry troops and supplies to Jordan.<sup>108</sup> Ben-Gurion acquiesced, although he suspended the flights for a short time when the Soviet Union threatened involvement, only to allow resumption on 5 August citing the “value of US friendship”.<sup>109</sup>

It was these circumstances that allowed Ben-Gurion to achieve his goal of finding a strategic, not merely cultural, incentive for a US alliance with Israel. According to Ben-Zvi, this shift in perception came about at this particular moment for several reasons. First, through his deft creation of the periphery alliance, Ben-Gurion had proved Israel to be a major strategic contributor to forces halting the rapid spread of Nasser’s pro-Soviet and anti-Western Arab nationalism.<sup>110</sup> Both Turkey and Iran,

106 *Ibid.*, 243.

107 Ben-Zvi, “1958 Jordanian Crisis,” 220-1; see also Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition*, in which he offers a more complete account of how the Eisenhower administration gradually became more interested in an alliance with the Jewish State.

108 Hahn, *Caught*, 243-4.

109 From Ben-Gurion’s journal, as quoted in Hahn, *Caught*, 245.

110 Ben-Zvi, “1958 Jordanian Crisis,” 219-20; see also Moshe Zak and Yosef Yaacov, “The Shift in Ben-Gurion’s Attitude toward the Kingdom of Jordan,” *Israel Studies* 1. 2 (1996), 140-169, esp. 151; Michael Bar-Zohar, “David Ben-Gurion and the Policy of the Periphery,” in *Israel in the Middle East*, ed. Itamar Rabinovitch and Jehuda Reinharz (Waltham: Brandeis University

concerned about the recent union of Egypt and Syria in the United Arab Republic (UAR), had expressed a desire for an informal alliance with the Jewish state.<sup>111</sup> Yet Ben-Gurion realized that the crucial issue would be how to mobilize US support for the alliance; gaining Eisenhower's support became his highest priority.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, this particular Middle East crisis put Israel in the unique position of being a strategic asset rather than a liability.<sup>113</sup> Ben-Gurion could hardly have failed to recognize the ideal timing. He knew that at this moment, considering the US military need for Israel's airspace, and having proven Israel as the "only regional power willing to take risks relieve the situation in the area", especially as relating to its own relations with the Soviet Union, he had newfound cause for hope of a shift in Washington's perception of Israel.<sup>114</sup> He likewise knew of the State Department's growing concern over the UAR, and chalked up these concerns to the growing "community of interests" Israel shared with America.<sup>115</sup> Eisenhower had, in fact, wearied of his unproductive attempts to gain Nasser's favor. Like Ben-Gurion, he focused on the need to contain Nasser's and the Soviets' anti-Western influence.<sup>116</sup>

### The Budding Relationship: 1958-1959

Both Eisenhower's changed attitude and Ben-Gurion's greater assurance can be detected in various personal exchanges from 1958-1959. The Israeli prime minister, now confident of US involvement, wrote to the American president on 24 July 1958, informing him of his efforts at consolidating a peripheral alliance.<sup>117</sup> He first laid out the dangerous

Press, 2008), 191-197, esp. 192.

111 Bar-Zohar, "Policy of the Periphery," 193.

112 Zak and Yaavoc, "The Shift," 142, 148.

113 Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 310.

114 Remarks of Dulles to Eban, 21 July 1958, FRUS 13, p. 69; Ben-Zvi, "1958 Jordanian Crisis," 220; Bar-Zohar, "Policy of the Periphery," 196.

115 Douglas Little, "The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957-1968," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25. 4 (1993): 563-585, esp. 565.

116 Hahn, *Caught*, p. 242; Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition*, 93-6.

117 Described in Bar-Zohar, "Policy of the Periphery," 196.

prospects of Nasser's take-over of the Arab Middle East, with the help of the Soviet Union, which would have "serious implications for the West".<sup>118</sup> Then he explained Israel's success in strengthening ties with neighboring countries in the Middle East, namely Iran, Ethiopia, and Turkey.

Our purpose is a group of states, not necessarily an official and public pact . . . which will be capable of standing firm against the Soviet expansionism with Nasser as its middleman, and which may be able to save the independence of Lebanon; perhaps, with time, that of Syria as well. This group will include two non-Arab Moslem countries (Iran and Turkey), one Christian country (Ethiopia), and the State of Israel.

Ben-Gurion, speaking not in an attitude of complaint or in desperate defiance as in many of his previous communications with Washington, but with confidence in the rightness of the moment, insisted, "I can say that it is within our power to help . . . in those countries."<sup>119</sup>

Eisenhower, as expressed in a letter dated the following day, was "deeply impressed by the depth of [Ben-Gurion's] insight into the grave problems which the Free World faces in the Middle East and elsewhere".<sup>120</sup> Still dedicated to holding on to what neutrality he could in the Middle East, the president offered only noncommittal support of "the integrity and independence of Israel".<sup>121</sup> Ben-Gurion had hoped for more, but a letter from Dulles to Ben-Gurion a few days later encouraged the prime minister to move forward with his peripheral pact.<sup>122</sup> The Old Man received this response with "a great deal of satisfaction".<sup>123</sup>

It was at this moment, on 1 August 1958, that Moscow demanded that Israel halt British and US travel over Israel's territory into Jordan.

118 *Ibid.*

119 *Ibid.*

120 Telegram from Eisenhower to Ben-Gurion 25 July 1958, Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

121 *Ibid.*

122 Letter from Dulles to Ben-Gurion, 1 August 1958, FRUS 13, 78-9.

123 Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 311.

Worried that the Soviets might attack Israel if he refused, Ben-Gurion briefly bowed to Soviet pressure and immediately stopped the overflights.<sup>124</sup> When Dulles frantically discussed the matter with Eban, the Israeli minister countered that, unlike Greece, Turkey, and Italy, who were all members of NATO, “We are not defended by an American guarantee and the Soviet Union is able to wipe us out in five minutes.” Dulles responded by assuring Eban that “The United States is committed to Israel’s existence and would fight for her should an attack by the Soviet Union compel her to do so.”<sup>125</sup> The overflights soon resumed, and Ben-Gurion proceeded to work on consolidation of the periphery pact.<sup>126</sup> Eban later commented that, despite the challenges, he was confident of “a sense of common purpose” developing that would lead the United States “to seek other ways of emphasizing its harmony with Israel.”<sup>127</sup>

Six months later, Ben-Gurion wrote to Dulles about his periphery alliance, as well as Washington’s support. Citing his own letter to the president of the previous July, the prime minister indicated his pleasure at the US response. “Your letter of August 1, 1958, expressing the sympathy of the president and yourself with these objectives, has been of great encouragement to us in our endeavors in that direction.”<sup>128</sup> He noted that Israel’s “military and technological contribution to the cause of world peace and freedom is limited by our physical shortcoming,” but continued, “Small peoples, too, have it in their power to enrich the treasure-house of humanity.” After a brief mention of Israel’s difficult security and immigration challenges, Ben-Gurion then enumerated some of Israel’s contributions to the world. These included “well over a hundred people from close to a score of countries . . . undergoing various courses in Israel”. These people, many of whom are university graduates and professors in their own countries, “have come to study our collective forms of agricultural colonization (*kibbutz*) as well as our

124 *Ibid.*

125 Exchange quoted in Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 312.

126 *Ibid.*

127 Little, “Special Relationship,” 566.

128 Letter from Ben-Gurion to Eisenhower, 19 January 1959, Ben-Gurion Archives, Eisenhower Collection.

cooperation villages (*moshav*)”. He proceeded to describe other studies in cooperative transport, industry, construction, and road-building, and described another group of individuals from various countries, ranging from the Southeast to Europe, to study Adult Education, since Israel has “specialized more than most countries in this sphere, owing to the fact that in Israel there is a continuous process of absorbing people from manifold countries, who come initially without a common language or a common cultural basis. Officers and their families have come to study Hebrew, and then live for a time on a *kibbutz* to learn about defense against border infiltration, others to learn about Israel’s special commando tactics.” Employing ideas that echo those he voiced in the Knesset a little more than two years earlier, just prior to the Sinai Campaign, the prime minister offered his opinion as to why peoples of Asia and Africa sought such cooperation with Israel, and reiterated his commitment to non-binding ties to outside countries: “We are a small country, and those who receive our aid are free from any complications of becoming dominated by military or economic power.”

Next, tapping into America’s sense of moral correctness, the Old Man attributed Israel’s success to its own moral strength, “demonstrated since 1948 in our successful resistance to a sustained and purposeful hostility”. In a subtle but skillful use of flattery, he affirmed “the moral strength of the Israeli people and of *its defenders*” (emphasis added). This he followed with two well-known passages from the Hebrew Bible that, read in this context, allude to the fulfillment of prophecy through not only Israel’s creation, but also international interest in Israel, and Israel’s role as a “light unto the nations”.

And it shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and we will walk in His paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the Law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.<sup>129</sup>

129 Isaiah 2, 2-3.

Followed by:

I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people for a light of the nations.<sup>130</sup>

Referring then to Israel's and the United States' shared spiritual values and love of freedom, "enshrined in the Book of Books", Ben-Gurion asked for confirmation that his sentiments were shared by the secretary as well as the president, and that "in developing our cooperation further with the friendly peoples of Asia and Africa, we would have your goodwill and sympathy." Alteras tells us that Ben-Gurion's efforts for further cooperation with the United States were answered with "wholehearted support and recognition of the United States".<sup>131</sup> While Alteras may be overstating the response, Eisenhower did finally agree to supply Israel with some provisional, essentially defensive, weaponry, and to provide financing for Israel's purchase of tanks from Britain.<sup>132</sup>

This military transaction with Israel marked a significant departure from Washington's previous reticence to show any special favor to Israel. Several scholars have likewise noted subtle changes in this period that signal what had by that time become a budding friendship between the two nations. By the end of 1958, Eisenhower, finally convinced that "making common cause" with the Arabs was simply not as feasible as he had hoped, became more interested in Israel as a strategic ally in curbing Arab nationalism.<sup>133</sup> The attempted coup in Jordan, in particular, convinced him of Israel's ability to help the United States in a crisis.<sup>134</sup> By 1959, although leaving arms off the table, the State Department promised to provide Israel with \$100 million in technical and financial assistance over the next two years, "a sum larger than all previous American aid to Israel since 1948".<sup>135</sup>

130 Isaiah 42, 6.

131 Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 312.

132 *Ibid.*, 313.

133 Yaqub, "Imperious Doctrines," 578; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 88.

134 Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 89.

135 Little, "Special Relationship," 567.

## Conclusion

The good relations culminated in a long-awaited (on the part of Ben-Gurion) meeting between the two leaders on 10 March 1960. The two-hour meeting gave the Israeli prime minister an opportunity to reiterate the shared values, such as democracy and pioneering spirit, that helped build both countries. For his part, the president offered his assurance that the United States would never allow the destruction of the State of Israel. Still, he declined Ben-Gurion's request of even greater US arms deals, citing his hope to avoid an arms race in the Middle East.<sup>136</sup>

Little sees these formal talks as evidence of the warming of relations between the two countries.<sup>137</sup> While Eisenhower had not deviated from his emphasis on a strategic Middle East policy, his realization that neutrality in the region had proved largely unfeasible and ineffective, along with his growing appreciation for Israel's strategic value in stemming the flood of Arab nationalism, caused a shift in his strategic assessment of the Jewish state: The seeds planted a decade earlier had now begun to truly take root and showed signs of promise. From the Israeli perspective, David Ben-Gurion could congratulate himself on essentially achieving the goal toward which he had so struggled throughout Eisenhower's earlier years: (informal) security guarantees from the United States, an acceptable stockpile of arms (largely from France, but soon forthcoming from America), and freedom from binding ties with any foreign nation.

Much of Eisenhower's strategic appreciation of Israel's regional importance would carry over into the Kennedy administration. Ben-Zvi argues, in fact, that it is this "American national interest" paradigm that offers an accurate understanding of Kennedy's willingness to sell Israel American Hawk missiles in the summer of 1962, and his later statement to Meir affirming the "special relationship", a moment that was a "culmination and formalization" of an affinity that had been developing

136 Dana Adams Schmidt, "Eisenhower Gets Ben-Gurion's View on Summit Talks", *The New York Times*, 11 March 1960.

137 Little, "Special Relationship," 567.

as early as 1957, but had never been entirely absent.<sup>138</sup>

Nonetheless, the major issues that plagued Eisenhower regarding Israel also continued into the Kennedy presidency. The most pressing of these concerns was Israel's pursuit of nuclear development. In December of 1957, Deputy Defense Minister Shimon Peres had offered a wonderfully ambiguous assurance to the French Foreign Ministry that the reactor would be used "only for peaceful purposes".<sup>139</sup> Three years later, with the nuclear project well underway, Eisenhower informed Kennedy on 6 December 1960, during a transition briefing, of his distress over the atomic development at Dimona. It was first on Kennedy's list when he met with Ben-Gurion the next day, and remained high on the US agenda throughout the entire decade.<sup>140</sup>

That Kennedy inherited Eisenhower's concerns over Israel's nuclear project as well as a strategic relationship with Israel underscores that the "special relationship" with Israel, so often touted as Kennedy's innovation, is better understood as an inherited appreciation of Israel's strategic value in the troublesome Middle East. Despite chilly conditions, the seeds of mutual appreciation endured throughout the early Eisenhower period, eventually took root, and blossomed in the later 1950s into a bond of shared strategic interests that would produce a mature and stable friendship, and a legacy for Kennedy as well as subsequent generations of world leaders.

138 Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition*, 3-4.

139 Levey, "Israeli Foreign Policy," 39.

140 Little, *American Orientalism*, 95-7.