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ISRAEL'S RELATIONS WITH SOUTH AFRICA: 1948-1973

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Since the early 1970s the Israeli-South African connection has become a focus of international attention and criticism. As one study has put it: 'UN resolutions linking Israel and South Africa are at least in part an outgrowth of international political developments that followed the October 1973 War in the Middle East.' It is nevertheless, clear that a 'special' relationship of sorts had existed for almost 25 years prior to that war. Moreover, notwithstanding the dearth of literature concerning the pre-1973 period, this period certainly remains the more interesting one, given Israel's greater room for political manoeuvre and its paradoxically greater sensitivity to Third World pressures. It was a time when options had to be more delicately balanced and a variety of considerations - ones which would later lessen in importance or disappear altogether - had to be taken into account in the process of policy formation. In fact, the moral and diplomatic dilemmas that were to confront Israel in the post-1973 period with regard to relations with Pretoria, were already present prior to the war, albeit in more acute form.

This article will try, from an Israeli viewpoint, briefly to trace the Israeli-South African connection from the late 1940s until the early 1970s, and by so doing seek to clarify those factors which, on the one hand accelerated, and on the other hand retarded, the development of this relationship. Specifically, it will attempt to glean from the evidence available how the Israeli government balanced Third World pressures and its own qualms about relations with the apartheid state against the need to take into account the implications of its policies for the wellbeing of the South African Jewish community — a community numbering over 100 000 people. The significance for this equation of strategic conceptions and economic considerations will be referred to, as well as how the various dilemmas reflected themselves within Israel's foreign policy establishment.

POLARISING PRESSURES: THE THIRD WORLD AND THE JEWISH FACTOR

It is the contention of this paper that Israel's policy towards South Africa during the period in question was conditioned by two opposing tendencies. First, the perceived political and security benefits to be found in close relations with the Third World - in this case specifically Black Africa. Secondly, the recognition by Israeli policymakers that Israel, being a Jewish State, must take it upon itself to strive for the wellbeing of Jewish communities in the diaspora - in this case, the wellbeing of the South African Jewish community. The former tendency led Israel to pursue policies that aimed at denouncing the South African regime and keeping it at arm's length; the latter consideration led Israel down the path of placating the Pretoria government and to the realization that some form of working relationship was going to be necessary.

1. The Push to the Third World

Since its establishment as a state, Israel's main foreign policy goal has been the maintenance of its security and physical survival. The way it has sought to achieve this has been varied. Following its declaration of statehood in 1948, Israel attempted to stay out of the Cold War through a policy of 'non-identification' with the superpowers and alignment with those who sought to steer clear of both camps. The Korean War saw an end to this policy but not to the desire to befriend the developing world. Yet, Israel's need to befriend the European powers as well and the Non-Alignment movement's desire to court Nasser, prevented any Israel-Third World linkup. Thus, while achieving a breakthrough with Burma in 1953, Israel was still to find itself excluded from the Bandung conference of 1955 and the Asian Socialist conference the following year. Israel's collusion with Britain and France at Suez further retarded any move towards the Third World.²

Surrounded by a seemingly impassable Arab propaganda wall, new strategies had to be devised. It was now that Africa began to be seen as an area of opportunity. For, not only was it relatively free of Arab influence, but it also was in need of the type of aid that Israel could well provide. It was through Africa that Israeli policymakers believed they could enter the Third World and it was thus Black Africa that during the 1950s and 1960s became the crucial lynchpin in the Israeli foreign policy strategy. Under Foreign Minister Golda Meir, agricultural and technical aid packages as well as military assistance programmes became the means by which Israel ingratiated itself amongst the Black African states.³

The benefits of Israel's acceptance in Black Africa soon became visible. For, not only were investment and trade opportunities extended and Israel's self-esteem enhanced, but diplomatic support was garmered in the UN and other international bodies. Through the African countries, contacts were made with Asian and Latin American states and Israel, in many cases, became a model for social and economic development.

Consequently, it is not surprising to find that the existence of these relations was not taken lightly in Jerusalem, nor were they taken for granted. Israeli sensibilities to African desires could not be expected to be easily overriden by extraneous factors. The issue of South Africa was to prove to be a crucial problem.

2. The Jewish Factor in Israeli Foreign Policy

According to Rosenne, the Jewishness of Israel has a fourfold impact on its foreign policy. Firstly, it is Israel's policy to aid Jews who wish to immigrate to Israel; secondly, Israel is concerned with the wellbeing of diaspora Jewry; thirdly, Israel is interested in maintaining continuous

contact with Jews abroad and; finally, Israel is in need of financial aid from world Jewry for the running of the state. 4

It is clear that over and above the more traditional goals of foreign policy Israel concerns itself with issues normally to be found very much within the purview of foreign countries' domestic policy. The major implication of this is that if Israel wishes to achieve the four goals outlined above, little purpose can be served by antagonising a 'host government'. Furthermore if a specific country has a less than strong democratic tradition and the position of its Jewry is perceived to be less than secure (or has that potential), even more care must be taken. South African Jewry was to represent such a problem area; its existence was inevitably to serve as a stumbling block to any Israeli attempt to distance itself completely from Pretoria.

On the other hand, another element of the Jewish factor in Israeli foreign policy served to counterbalance this tendency to appease the South African regime: this we may call the 'light unto the nations' component. The belief amongst many Zionists that Israel had a unique role to play in international politics and that Israel should be an example of moral rectitude to the world, obviously led away from too close a relationship with Pretoria. (It also gave the policy of aid to the newly developing countries a moral significance.) Ben Gurion for example wrote of 'the universal attachment to social and universal justice (that is) deeply ingrained in the nation's soul'. Apartheid, therefore, could in no way be condoned. Whether moral considerations were ever the only considerations in the decision making on any issue is dubious; that they influenced policy, is however, apparent.

Finally, mention must be made of the issue of Zionist-Socialism. For the dominant Mapai party the socialist vision was an important and real one. It carries with it its own view of justice and equality to which the South African racial system represented an anathema. Black Africa, on the other hand, presented an area in which such an ideology could be propagated. Again, however, the degree of relevance such an issue had for decision-making in regard to the South African problem (other than in a very general sense) is questionable.

THE ISRAEL FOREIGN POLICY ESTABLISHMENT AND SOUTH AFRICA

Unlike many important foreign policy decisions in Israel, it was the Foreign Ministry and not the government that took the lead. This no doubt stemmed from the peripherality of South Africa for Israel's immediate security concerns.

Within the ministry, debate was lively and as Haim Yahil, its Director-General from 1960 until 1964 has pointed out, 'on no issue - among those not directly concerning Israel's vital interests - do I remember more discussions than on apartheid'. He maintains that during the 1950s and 1960s a majority within the ministry pushed for a strong line against South Africa while only a minority stressed the welfare of South African Jews and thus cautioned restraint. This was also reflected in the highest ranks of the department; Sharett demanded a strong line against South Africa 'on principle', while Golda Meir stressed the implications of any move for Israel's African strategy.

The government's approach seems to have been mostly reactive to Foreign Ministry policy and took the form of defending it in the Knesset (parliament). Ben Gurion, in an address to the Knesset in 1961, stated that the condemnation of apartheid was necessary because of the 'moral heritage of the Jewish people, the interests of the oppressed Jewish communities and the interests of the state.'8

As may be expected, Michael Brecher's study on Israel's foreign policy system has also shown that amongst the political parties, the more leftwing the party, the more anti-South African was its position. Some of the socialist parties (as well as the communists) demanded even stronger positions than the Foreign Ministry was prepared to take. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Herut party always remained adamant that the interests of South African Jewry should remain paramount and strong relations with South Africa should be maintained. South Africa's strong anti-communist line also endeared the regime in Pretoria to the Herut. The religious Mafdal too, evinced concern over the future of the South African Jewish community and thus was to demand caution when it came to criticising South Africa and its policies. Nevertheless, by virtue of the fact that these parties remained small or in opposition, and with the Foreign Ministry dominating the decision-making, these views were to be contained.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A RELATIONSHIP

Zionist-South African relations can be traced back prior to the declaration of Israeli independence in 1948. Its roots are to be found in the Zionist sympathies of Smuts¹⁰ and the staunch Zionist orientation of the South African Jewish community.¹¹ The combined influence of these two factors resulted in Pretoria granting Israel de facto recognition on May 24, 1948. From an Israeli point of view this was quite an achievement because, as President Weizman was to point out in his memoirs, Bevin was pressurizing the Dominions to withhold recognition from the Jewish state.¹² It was also a matter of luck, for two days later Smuts was defeated by the anti-British, but also apparently anti-semitic National Party of D.F. Malan.

Little evidence can be found of an in-depth discussion in Israel of the implications of the Nationalist victory for South African Jewry and Israeli foreign policy. This was not surprising given the war situation in Israel and the fact that South Africa represented a minor consideration in these calculations. In any event, the South African government began giving off very mixed signals with regard to Israel and South African Jewry. For, on the one hand anti-semitism never became a major issue in South Africa and this could only have been heartening for the Israelis. On the other hand, relations between the two countries developed more slowly than had been anticipated.

The logical step after Smuts's granting of <u>de facto</u> recognition was the granting of <u>de jure</u> recognition. Yet, in November 1948, Pretoria explained its reluctance in taking such a step by maintaining that the government did not intend to grant recognition before the Palestine problem had been settled. It want on to state that the policy of the South African government was one of 'Strict neutrality'.¹³ It was clear to Israel that South Africa was intent on not antagonizing its Commonwealth partners as well as on keeping open the possibility of future relations with other Middle Eastern countries. When these attempts failed and Pretoria was prepared to grant <u>de jure</u> recognition in 1949, Israel was happy to receive it.

The fact that Israel regarded this as a diplomatic victory reflected a room for manoevre with regard to Pretoria that would only dissipate with decolonization. In the early 1950s, while South Africa was subject to international criticism, it was not the international pariah it was later to become. With the developing world still under the colonial yoke, Israel could proceed (like many other countries) with the development of relations with South Africa unencumbered by international condemnation or pressures.

This relationship took diplomatic and economic forms, and while small, was not insignificant. In 1952 Malan became the first Prime Minister in the British Commonwealth to visit Isreal — no mean diplomatic scoop for the new state. 14 Israel was to be represented by a legation in Pretoria and a Consulate General in Johannesburg. South Africa was to be represented in Israel at first through the British embassy, though this was later to be replaced by its own consular offices.

South Africa — for its own ideological, domestic, political and diplomatic reasons — went on to grant Jerusalem priviliges that it gave to no other country. For example, South African Jewish reserve officers were allowed to go and serve in the Israeli army. ¹⁵ Even more importantly, during the early 1950s, the Nationalist government allowed South African Jews to transfer much needed currency to Israel. As Shimoni shows, special agreements regularised the transfer of 'gift funds' and the export to Israel of surplus South African goods against payments in rands. Shimoni points out that these transfers averaged about 1 million rand every six months. ¹⁶ Given the extreme economic difficulties Israel underwent in the early 1950s, this aid was not lacking in importance.

The closure of the Suez Canal to Israeli use as well as to ships bound for Israeli ports, inhibited the development of extensive economic ties between the two countries. Yet, with the opening of the Straits of Tiran following the Sinai Campaign of 1956 and the subsequent building of the port of Eilat, an increase in bilateral trade took place. Indeed, for most of the 1950s one witnessed the steady development of a relationship relatively unconcerned by issues other than those of mutual benefit and specifically from Israel's point of view, the need to keep an open line to the South African Jewish community.

THE RISE OF THE THIRD WORLD AND STRAINS WITH PRETORIA

The Bandung conference of 1955 heralded the rise of the Third World. the reasons outlined earlier, Israel sought to ensconce itself amongst these countries, specifically the Black African states. The initial relationships between Jerusalem and the newly independent African states followed on an invitation in 1957 by Foreign Minister Sharett to Gold Coast The success of this visit and the growth of a trade union leaders. relationship between Israel and Ghana resulted in Israel finding the breach into Africa it so desired. By the mid-1960s Israel had relations with 33 African countries and had signed co-operation agreements with 20 of them 17 for educational, medical and military training. Marketing, technical advice on city planning, water development and afforestation projects were undertaken by Israeli technical experts in Africa. Between 1958 and 1971. 2 763 Israeli experts served in Africa while 6 797 Africans trained in Israel. 18

If we, however, look at trade figures taken from a study by Susan Gitleson, we note that Israeli trade with Black Africa hardly ever amounted to more than three percent of its total trade in any one year during the 1960s. Concomitantly, trade with South Africa amounted to even less, never reaching more than 0.7 percent of total trade for any given year during the period in question. The point is that while it can be argued that Black Africa held out far more economic promise than South Africa and that this helped lead Jerusalem away from too close a relationship with Pretoria, the actual paucity of the amounts concerned tends to reveal that economics was probably never the major consideration (though of course still a factor) in Israeli relations with any part of the African continent. Rather, economic gains came in second place to political and ideological considerations—namely, the need to identify with the Third World and the desire not to endanger the position of South African Jewry.

Significantly, the ideological and political import that Israel attached to its relations with Black Africa was reciprocated from the Black African side. From their point of view Israel became an acceptable partner and aid provider by virtue of the fact that it was a newly developing country itself with no colonial heritage and in fact, an anti-colonial

past. The effect of this was to be that while the significance of the relationship was not indicated by the smallness of the economic component, it was to become highly sensitive to ideological forces.

The major problem, of course, proved to be apartheid. Not surprisingly, Black African States refused to separate their relations with the outside world from the issue of South Africa. All their foreign relations were to be subject to pressures calling for the isolation and overthrow of the Pretoria regime. Israel, because of its relatively isolated international position, was a vulnerable object and the African states recognised this very quickly.

Israel, too, was quick to recognize the emotional nature and political significance of the apartheid issue. Thus, in 1961, following a visit to Israel by Leopold Senghor of Senegal, a joint statement was issued condemning racial discrimination in South Africa. In October of the same year, following a speech by Eric Louw in the General Assembly, Israel went on to break with the United States and Western Europe (which abstained) and voted with the Afro-Asian bloc in calling for the speech to be struck off the record. One month later, Israel was again to break out of the security of the United States-West European fold and support an Afro-Asian resolution put before a UN Special Committee which called for strong diplomatic and economic sanctions against South Africa. 20

While it appears that Pretoria was well aware of Israel's desire to ingratiate herself amongst the Black African states at her expense, it was not until the declaration of a Republic in May 1961 and her exit from the Commonwealth soon thereafter, that greater international isolation led her to react against it. It certainly did not go unnoticed in Pretoria that Israel, because of her relatively isolated international position and the existence of a sizeable Jewish community in the Republic, was much more vulnerable than others to South African pressures. 1961 saw the South African Treasury now refusing to consider a request by South African Jewry for transfer facilities. Consequently, the sending of gift funds and local South African goods to Israel was halted.²¹

This move by Pretoria must have caused at least some consternation amongst Israeli diplomats - not because of any economic considerations, but rather because of the feared implications for South African Jewry. This fear was stengthened following Verwoerd's much publicised letter to a prominent Jewish South African, A.S.A. East, in which he warmed that following Israel's anti-South African behaviour in the United Nations, the relations between Israel and South Africa had become 'fluid'. He went on to state that these developments had given rise to a new line of thinking towards Israel within government circles. Equally as ominously, Verwoerd is reported to have added that the heavy Jewish vote for the Progressive Party and the poor Jewish support for the Nationalists had not gone unnoticed. ²²

This tactic of getting at Israel through the local Jewish community and that community's defensive reaction towards these threats seems to have led to a toning down of Israel's statements at the United Nations. This was reflected in 1962 when the Afro-Asian bloc placed before the General Assambly a resolution calling for severe economic and diplomatic sanctions against Pretoria. Israel, which previously would have easily supported such a move, this time became extremely hesitant. According to Israel's representative at the UN, Jerusalem was not convinced that sanctions were the answer. It believed that each government must decide for itself what steps to take. Nor could Israel support South Africa's expulsion from the IN, 23

Yet, Israel could not afford to ignore African wishes entirely. For, at that moment, Israel was attempting to get the Afro-Asian bloc to sponsor a resolution calling for direct negotiations between the Arab states and Israel. Such a resolution would have represented a major payoff for its African diplomacy and through the pressure that would be brought to bear on the Arab states, a major victory for its Middle East strategy.

What was to happen then was an attempt to balance concern for the wellbeing of South African Jewry with the desire to retain African confidence. Thus, when the African states demanded a vote in the General Assembly in order to see if a sanctions—expulsion proposal would be voted on as a totality, Israel abstained, hoping, no doubt, later to support only the more moderate aspects. Unfortunately for Israel, it was decided to vote on the full resolution and the previous hopes of a balancing act were dashed. It then appears that despite pressures from those who feared the implications of Pretoria's reaction for South African Jewry, the incentive of African support for the direct negotiations resolution proved too great. Consequently, it was decided to go all the way and support the African states in their demands.²⁴ The welfare of South African Jewry was once again seen as secondary to Israel's more pressing security needs.

Not surprisingly, in the years prior to the Six Day War, the Pretoria-Jerusalem relationship soured considerably. Shimoni, in his study, shows how various organizations and bodies within South Africa, including the Afrikaner press, went on to condemn the Israeli stance roundly and question the loyalty of South African Jewry. In short, a less than pleasant atmosphere was created.

The Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, while not trying to appease the government in Pretoria, sought to reassure the troubled Jewish community. Thus while Golda Meir was prepared to accede to African requests to close down Israeli air links with South Africa, this decision was never accepted because it was believed that it would have resulted in the cutting off of communications with South African Jewry. This represents a very clear example of how the Jewish community acted as a restraining factor on Israel's drift from Pretoria.

Relations, therefore, never deteriorated to the extent that any irreparable damage was done. In fact, as Gitleson's figures show, prior to the Six Day War, Israeli exports to South Africa decreased only slightly, while South African exports to Israel increased. What is important to note is that when Israel's relationship with Black Africa began to deteriorate, it did so not because of the Jerusalem-Pretoria connection, but because of the implications of the Middle East conflict for African economic and political realities. Room was therefore left open for an improvement in both the tone and the substance of the Israeli-South African relationship. The beginning of this improvement was to be found, not in the aftermath of the October War in 1973, but in that of the Six Day War of 1967.

THE BASIS OF A RAPPROCHEMENT

The 1967 War in the Middle East was interpreted very differently south of the Zambezi than to the north of it. Many white South Africans tended to identify their own problems with the struggles of the Israelis, and took heart from the Israeli victory against seemingly invincible odds. The government in Pretoria, while proclaiming a policy of neutrality, began leaning strongly in an Israeli direction, allowing both travel by South African volunteers and the transfer of funds by South African Jewry to Israel. 27 South African Jewry, like Jewry all over the world, basked in the glory of the Israeli triumph, their earlier discomfiture being all but forgotten.

From an Israeli point of view this was, of course, very welcome, but it was to be more than offset by the negative reactions of the Black African states. The reasons for the beginning of a growing African disenchantment with Israel following the Six Day War, were many and complex. Suffice it to point out that the stress laid by the CAU on the concept of the territorial integrity of Africa, the changing image of the Palestinians from refugees to national liberation fighters and the demand by Arab countries for brotherhood and solidarity with the African states, all fed upon and reinforced a growing disenchantment with regard to the Israeli presence in Africa. 28 While only one African state was to break off relations with Israel, (Guinea in June 1967) it was to serve as the adumbration of further difficulties, difficulties to which the oil weapon in 1973 was to give the fatal and final push.

In the post-1967 period these problems did not lead Israeli policy-makers to strive for an immediate rapprochement with Pretoria. Indeed, Israel tried desperately to recoup its losses in Africa through measures that included periodic diplomatic attacks on Pretoria in the United Nations. These anti-South African reactions were to reach a peak in 1971 when Jerusalem contributed to the OAU Liberation Committee Fund. This latter move, especially, led to anary South African reactions, directed

both at Israel and South African Jewry. 29

The official organs of the South African Jewish community made it clear to Jerusalem the problems they were facing as a result of Israeli actions. However, it is fair to say that it was not these fears, but the fact that Jerusalem was at the beginning of a long retreat from Africa. that laid the foundation for a later rapprochement with Pretoria. For, it became increasingly clear to Israeli policymakers that the only means of stemming the growing African attacks was not going to be the sacrifice of Pretoria's goodwill, but the sacrifice of territory captured in June 1967 a move that Isreal was not prepared to make, even for the benefit of Third World ties and support. Consequently, as African criticism of Israel and her policies continued to mount (Israel's offer to the CAU Liberation Fund was rejected - a stinging humiliation and setback for Jerusalem's African policy). Israeli policymakers appear to have moved over to the realization that, in the final analysis, Israel's relationship with Black Africa was not being determined or limited by its relationship with Pretoria. being the case, the benefits to be gained by closer ties with South Africa outweighed the potential losses.

A trend to the Right within the Israeli polity following the Six Day War further made such a move possible. We note that in 1968 an Israeli-South African Friendship Society was formed in Israel, which aimed at fostering better relations between the two countries. ³⁰ Israeli diplomatic attacks on South Africa became more the exception than the rule and the early 1970s witnessed a steady increase in trade. While the more extensive economic and alleged military ties were only really to become evident following the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the trend had already been set.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE:

What can we learn from this period that can be used in helping us forecast future developments in Israeli relations with South Africa? The major fact evident from an analysis of the period in question is that Israel's policy towards the Pretoria government has been determined in the main not by concern for South African Jewry or by moral considerations, but by the exigencies of its African strategy.

With regard to moral considerations, Jerusalem has certainly been no better nor worse than many countries that maintain relations with Pretoria, and in some senses, less cymical. In terms of the South African Jewish community, this issue has always played a secondary role, especially when measured against the political and diplomatic advantages of Black African support. One should still be careful in drawing hasty conclusions from this point, because one can never really be sure how seriously the Israeli Foreign Ministry took the threat to South African Jewry. It is certainly possible to argue that had there been no Jewish community in South Africa,

Israel would have broken off relations with Pretoria in the mid-1960s and, conversely, had the threat to their wellbeing been less ambiguous, Israel might have been more circumspect in dealing with Pretoria. Nevertheless, from a study of Israel's behaviour prior to 1973, it would seem that if for diplomatic reasons Israel finds it necessary or advantageous to distance itself from Pretoria, the existence of a Jewish community in South Africa may delay but not halt such a move.

Had the African break with Israel been centred on Israel's ties with South Africa, it is possible that Israel would still be maintaining a rigid anti-South African stance today. But this, as shown, was not the case. Where some Israeli policymakers seem to have erred is in their belief that an improved relationship with Pretoria could not greatly exacerbate their already damaged relations with the Third World. What in effect happened was that the ostracism of Israel which pushed it into Pretoria's embrace in the first place was further reinforced by this relationship, a relationship that has helped to create a very negative diplomatic and image situation for the Jewish state. What cannot be over-emphasized is that if Israel can shed this image of itself by disengagement from South Africa, notwithstanding the economic losses this might entail, it will most probably do so.

As the struggle within South Africa escalates, and others begin to distance themselves from Pretoria, Israel must surely be expected to follow suit and not stand alone. More immediately, if her present policy, which seeks a return to Africa, should begin to pay dividends, it could be expected that relations with Pretoria would be downgraded. In short, if it is at all possible for it dramatically to improve its international situation, South Africa is one of the prices Israel may be prepared to pay.

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- 23. (NGA Official Records (176th Session), Special Political Committee, 1.11.1962.
- 24. Shimoni, p. 331.
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