Ideology and Israel’s Foreign Policy

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In the political debate surrounding Israel’s relationship with its neighbors, considerations of security have always loomed large: given the Arab threat to Israel’s security and its very existence, this could not have been otherwise. Yet anyone trying to understand both Israel’s foreign policy – and the internal debate in Israel about it – only in terms of security and strategic considerations, will fail to grasp either the intensity of the debate or its nuances. Like both the United States and the Soviet Union, Israel is a credal society, and the ideological ingredient in its policies is considerable. Without trying to assess the relative importance of ideological vs. pragmatic considerations, I will try here to describe a number of specifically ideological considerations central to Israel’s perceptions about its foreign policy.

Three aspects will be discussed: (a) the ideological component in the debate about Israel’s borders; (b) the differing attitudes to questions of power and morality; and (c) the relationship between Israel and Jewish communities in the Diaspora as a factor in crystallizing some of Israel’s foreign-policy decisions. The first two aspects present an internal dichotomy within Israel; about the third there is a basic consensus with only minimal nuances apparent at the margins of the public debate.

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[The Jerusalem Quarterly, Number Thirty-Seven, 1986]
The major political issue in Israel has been, since 1967, the debate about the future of the West Bank and Gaza and Israel’s attitude to what is usually called the Palestinian problem. The debate on the future of the West Bank and Gaza has obvious security dimensions: given Israel’s lack of strategic depth and its basic vulnerability, no Israeli government could remain neutral as to the question who controls areas which are within shooting distance of the country’s major population centers (one ought to be constantly reminded that the whole width of Israel at its narrowest point, north of Tel Aviv, is less than the distance between downtown San Diego and the Mexican border).

Yet if the debate had been solely about security, it could be approached in the same pragmatic way in which the Likud government under Menachem Begin and the National Unity government under Shimon Peres have approached the similarly acute security problems involved in the Israeli withdrawals from Sinai and Lebanon, respectively. Demilitarized zones, areas of limited armed forces deployment, multinational observers or a UN presence could be viewed as possible security measures. Again, if security had been the only issue, then the question of Jewish settlements would not have become so central in the debate about the West Bank and Gaza: while it is clear that some of the settlements do fulfill a security function, the argument about whether Jews have a right to settle ‘anywhere and everywhere’ in the West Bank transcends pure security considerations. Similarly, if the question of the West Bank had been purely a question of strategic control, the semantics of the issue (is it ‘the West Bank’ or ‘Judea and Samaria’; should the areas be designated ‘Occupied’, ‘Liberated’ or ‘Administered’ Territories) would have been utterly incomprehensible.

The truth of the matter is that above and beyond the legitimate security concerns regarding the West Bank and Gaza, the debate in Israel has a much deeper dimension, going back to basic belief systems and ideological commitments. These considerations relate directly to the protagonists’ respective self-definition as Israelis and to their conflicting perceptions of the nature and aims of Zionism. Within this context, simplistic (and imported) terms like ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ tend to obscure the issue at stake and present them in purely pragmatic security terms.

For this reason I will try to suggest an alternative terminology to denote the two major camps in the debate about the future of the West Bank and Gaza and the Palestinian problem. These two camps roughly correspond to the Likud and Labor blocs, though any observer could discern internal nuances, and the typology suggested here, by its very nature, presents two Weberian ‘ideal types’ which in concrete reality sometimes appear, of course, in less ‘pure’ forms.

The first school of thought, basically identifiable with the Likud bloc and its allies, I would like to call the ‘territorial’ school. According to this school, when Israel has to decide about its borders, the
most important consideration which should inform its decision should be to try and maximize Israeli control over as much territory as possible of the historical Land of Israel. An Israel which will encompass more territory of the Land of Israel will be a more Jewish and more Zionist country than a country controlling less of this historical territory. Hence one is more of a Zionist (and a better one) if one claims Judea and Samaria as parts of the Jewish patrimony; conversely, by expressing a willingness to compromise over Judea and Samaria one is, in some fundamental way, unfaithful to one’s own Zionist credo. Hence the right of Jews to settle in Judea, Samaria and Gaza is ‘inalienable’ and fundamental, and is being viewed not solely out of security considerations. Hebron and Nablus are Jewish – in this territorial understanding of the aims of Zionism – as Tel Aviv and Haifa.

This ‘territorial’ philosophy, one should point out, is very clearly focused on Eretz Israel, the historical Land of Israel: It is not an automatic claim for indiscriminate territorial aggrandizement without qualification. Hence the ‘territorialist’ government of Menachem Begin had no basic ideological problem of giving up all of Sinai at Camp David: Sinai is not part of the historical Land of Israel, and therefore the negotiations with Egypt could be conducted in the relatively pragmatic spirit of seeking practical security guarantees with regard to this area; and the international boundary between Egypt and Mandatory Palestine could be viewed, from the very outset, as a mutually acceptable borderline. For this very reason, the Begin government also had no ideological problem in uprooting about 10,000 Israeli settlers from the Yamit salient, nor did it shy away from dismantling their settlements and ultimately razing them to the ground before the region was returned to Egypt in the Spring of 1982.

Settlements on the West Bank, on the other hand, are viewed by the ‘territorial’ school in a totally different light: they are an expression of a fundamental Jewish claim to the territory of the Land of Israel; hence Mr. Begin himself several times expressed ‘a sacred vow’ that these settlements will never be dismantled, and the Likud program expressly states that no foreign form of sovereignty will ever be permitted in ‘any part of the Land of Israel’. Foreign observers who interpreted Mr. Begin’s ‘dovishness’ with regard to Sinai as a model for his possible ultimate behavior with regard to West Bank negotiations were sorely disappointed: they had overlooked the deep-seated ideological commitment involved in the ‘territorial’ school’s understanding of the aims of Zionism and Israel.

The ‘territorial’ school is of course aware of the existence of 1.2 million Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza, and it realizes the implications of their integration into the Israeli body politic. In order to avoid such consequences, the ‘territorial’ school has come up with numerous approaches to that problem, and the most detailed and sophisticated among them has been the autonomy plan.
put forward by Menachem Begin during the Camp David negotiations. What this plan tried to achieve in the long run (and this was not always realized by some of the participants at Camp David) was to combine maximal territorial control of Judea, Samaria and Gaza with minimal integration of the Palestinian population there into the political fabric of Israel proper. As understood by the Likud government, autonomy would mean (according to the [unpublished] Ben-Eliessar paper which became the most authoritative Likud government position on the issue) that Israel would continue to maintain territorial control of the area; Israel would be responsible for security; public land will be under Israeli jurisdiction; natural resources will be controlled by Israel; and Israel will have the exclusive right to decide about where and when to put up new Jewish settlements. The local Palestinian population, for its part, would be left with its own municipal government and control over education, health services, religious institutions and the like – in other words, the Palestinian population would be able to control everything pertaining to the conduct of its affairs except having control over its territory. When Mr. Begin reiterated his view that his conception of autonomy referred to ‘autonomy for the population’ but not ‘autonomy for the territory’, he was not quibbling: this was the quintessential meaning of the ‘territorial’ approach. Without ever making the analogy, what the Likud was ready to offer the Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and Gaza was a status almost identical to that of a millet within the old Ottoman Empire: neither more nor less.

So much for the ‘territorial’ approach. The other school in Israel, the one identified with Labor, I would like to call the ‘sociological’ or ‘societal’ school. This school does not deny that there is a deep Jewish historical link to Judea and Samaria: after all, such a link cannot be historically denied, as these areas were the cradle of the Israelite nation. But according to the ‘sociological’ school, the most important consideration for Israel should not be the extent of its territory but the internal structure of its society. And here a paradox presents itself: according to the ‘sociological’ school, an Israel which would be territorially larger (by incorporating the West Bank and Gaza) would not be more Jewish and more Zionist. From the vantage point of the ‘sociological’ school the opposite would be true: such a greater Israel would be less Jewish and less Zionist than a smaller Israel, because the greater Israel will encompass not only more territories – but also more Palestinian Arabs. An Israel controlling the West Bank and Gaza would comprise – given the present population figures – a country whose population would be 60 per cent Jewish and 40 per cent Arab: such a country would be less Jewish than a smaller and more compact Israel (more or less within pre-1967 borders, plus East Jerusalem – about which there is no debate) with merely 15 per cent Arabs. According to the ‘sociological’ school, the ‘territorial’ approach is not going to constitute a
bargain but a catastrophe for Israel, as with the extra territory comes a fundamental change in the sociological and demographic nature of the society.

If Israel maintains control of the West Bank and Gaza, the 'sociological' school argues, it will ultimately be faced with an agonizing dilemma, with one of the alternatives being the granting of full civil and political rights to the 1.2 million Palestinian Arabs in the area. This means that 40 per cent of Israel's citizens would be Arabs. Sooner or later 40 per cent of the Israeli electorate would be Arabs, as would 40 per cent of the members of the Knesset and 40 per cent of the public servants, teachers, students, and soldiers. Such a state, the 'sociological' school argues, is not the Zionist dream: it is virtually a bi-national state, not a Jewish state.

Alternatively, if Israel seeks to prevent such a 'bi-nationalization' of the Jewish state, it will have to deny full civil and political rights to around 40 per cent of its population. This, the 'sociological' school argues, would turn it into something like South Africa, and this is not the Zionist dream either.

It is out of these considerations, embedded in its own understanding of the nature of Israeli society, that the 'sociological' school is ready for a territorial compromise on the West Bank and Gaza which would try to assure Israel's legitimate (but limited) security concerns in the area, while giving most of the area, and almost all the population, back to an Arab (preferably Jordanian-Palestinian) authority. If Israel, on the other hand, will maintain its control over the West Bank and Gaza with their 1.2 million Palestinians it will either cease to be Jewish or cease to be democratic; this was the harsh choice succinctly expressed by the late Yigal Allon during his term as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the pre-1977 Labor government.

The 'sociological' school adds a further dimension to Israel's continued retention of the West Bank and Gaza: given the socio-economic differentials between the Jewish and Arab population, the integration of the West Bank and Gaza into Israel would mean that sooner or later social stratification will overlap with ethnic differentiation: most Arabs would form the working class in a society where most Jews would belong to the middle class. One of the main aims of Zionism as a revolution in Jewish history has always been to re-structure the social stratification of the Jewish people: the abnormal circumstances of Jewish existence in the Diaspora have historically meant that most Jews were to be found somewhere in the middle class, be it the commercial or the intellectual one. The aim of Zionism, and especially of Labor Zionism, was to create in the Land of Israel a more equitable balance, with Jews to be found all over the socio-economic scale, in labor and agriculture as much as in traditional Jewish middle-class occupations. Hence the insistence of Labor Zionism on Jewish labor and *avoda atzmit* ('self-labor') in the Jewish community in Palestine, so as not to create a *colonial*
society with Jewish land owners and Arab agricultural workers. The ‘sociological’ school is keenly aware that since 1967, with the availability of Arab labor from the West Bank and Gaza, this model of a Jewish society has been severely attenuated, and certain sectors of the Israeli economy, especially in some agricultural areas, begin to resemble southern California or the border areas of Texas. The ‘sociological’ school, sensitive as it is to social issues due to its socialist background, looks with horror at what Israeli society would become in terms of social/ethnic cleavages if the 1.2 million Palestinians were integrated into the Israel economy. Hence, again, we find a willingness to compromise in order to liberate Israeli society from such a burden, as much as to liberate the Palestinians from Israeli control.

The debate about Israel’s borders is thus far more complex than the debate about security guarantees: it goes to the very essence of how Israelis see themselves as a society and a nation. Hence also the deep divisions and the occasional acrimony which has crept into these debates: by debating the borders of their nation, the Israelis realize that they are arguing about its very nature. In this sense the debate about the West Bank and Gaza is a continuation of the pre-1948 debate about partition – with Labor accepting it and the Revisionists (the progenitors of the Likud) rejecting it. Then as now it was a debate about the nature of the Jewish state, not just its borders.

The second major ideological difference between Labor and Likud has historically been their distinctly different attitudes to the question of the use of force in the context of the realization of the aims of Zionism and, consequently, their respective views on the relationship between force and morality. Specifically, this meant different attitudes to the use of force first vis-à-vis the British Mandatory government in Palestine and then its application in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Labor was never committed to an explicit pacifist philosophy, nor did it subscribe to anything resembling Gandhi’s tactics in his struggle for Indian independence. But for Labor, with its humanistic and universalist traditions going back to European nineteenth-century socialist ideas, the use of force was always considered to be the last resort, to be applied most reluctantly and with a heavy heart, and always greatly circumscribed in its scope. It was once said that Labor’s attitude to the use of force resembled the Victorian attitude to sex: not that it was not practiced, but it was always accompanied by a feeling of shame: this gave rise to a lot of hypocrisy, but also meant that there were barriers, deeply embedded in the public consciousness, about its indiscriminate application.

Likud, on the other hand (and its historical parent organization, Jabotinsky’s Revisionists) never shared this ambivalence about force. For the Revisionist school, force was a legitimate expression
of sovereignty and independence, perhaps the expression of a nation's place in the sun. They gloried in it, revelled in it and—literally—wrote hymns to power and force.

On the symbolic level, this can be gleaned even from the names of the underground para-military organizations affiliated with the two major camps. The two underground organizations of the Revisionist camp (i.e., the Likud), were called *Irgun Zva'i Leumi* ("The National Military Organization") headed by Menachem Begin, and *Lohamei Herut Yisrael* ("Fighters of the Freedom of Israel"), headed by Yitzhak Shamir. The underground organization identified with Labor was called *Haganah* ("Defense"), politically responsible to David Ben-Gurion. Begin was known within his organization as *Ha-mefakéd* ("The Commander"); Ben-Gurion was known to his men as *Ha-zakén* ("The Old Man"). There are many other telling differences in the language used by both camps.

On the practical level this meant a very different *modus operandi*. During the 1936–39 Arab Revolt in Palestine, which brought about an indiscriminate use of terror by the Palestinian Arabs against the Jewish population, the Haganah, after much deliberation and self-doubt, reverted to a policy of not only defending Jewish settlements, but also hitting at Arab terror bases: the policy was, however, heavily circumscribed—only headquarters of Arab paramilitary organizations were to be hit. Targets were defined in a limited way, attempts (not always successful) were made to hit only combatants, i.e., terrorists, and not innocent civilians. The Revisionists' underground organizations, on the other hand, reacted to Arab terror with terror: Arab civilian buses were attacked, bombs and car-bombs were exploded in Arab markets, etc.

A similar operational difference characterized the two camps' strategy in their struggle in the 1940s against Britain: again, the Haganah was slow to confront the British by using force, and when it did, tried to limit its attacks on installations (railway bridges, depots, etc.) and not on military personnel. The Revisionists' organization declared 'total war' against the British, publicly announcing that all British soldiers (and civilian administration personnel as well) were enemies and would be treated accordingly. Hence attacks against British military, police and administrative personnel; hence the kidnapping and hanging of two British sergeants in retaliation for British execution of IZL members convicted of terrorist activities; hence also assassinations, and attempted assassinations, of British officials. These included the assassination of Lord Moyne, the British Minister in Cairo; the attempted assassination of the British High Commissioner in Palestine, Sir Harold MacMichael; and in the transition to independence in 1948, the assassination of the UN mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, who was considered pro-Arab; all undertaken by the Revisionists' organizations.

These different philosophies can be discerned also in the way
Labor and Likud governments related, respectively, to the problem of war with the Arab countries. During Labor's hegemony (1948–1977), war was considered the last resort, perceived—and propagated—as something to be done only if there is no other choice (ein breirah): hence the soul-searching, for example, in the wake of Nasser's closure of the Gulf of Elat in May, 1967 and the attempts, which proved to be futile, to solve the question through diplomatic means. The Lebanon war of 1982, on the other hand, is an example of the Likud's resort to force without the self-doubts and internal restraints which have characterized Labor's historical responses to similar dilemmas in the past. During the Lebanon war itself, in August, 1982, then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin, in a speech to the graduating class of the Military Defense College, drew a sharp distinction between 'wars of choice' and 'wars of no-choice', arguing that there are no moral dilemmas involved in 'wars of choice'; on the contrary. The Lebanon war was described by Begin as a 'war of choice' par excellence, justified as such, and the patriotism of anyone looking askance at its legitimacy was called into question by Begin. Only the weak and the timid, Begin argued in his speech, are pushed into a corner out of which they can extricate themselves later only by 'wars of no-choice'.

My third and last point will deal with the ideological ingredients in Israel's foreign policy beyond the immediate inner circle of Israeli-Arab relations. Here there may not be great differences between the two major political camps in Israel, though nuances may perhaps be discerned. But by and large this area reflects an Israeli inner consensus which derives directly from Israel's self-perception as a Jewish state.

While the nature of Israel, as a Jewish state, is open to many contradictory interpretations in Israel itself, and certainly raises a host of theoretical issues sometimes used quite skillfully by Israel's international adversaries, it does mean, as a lowest common denominator, that Israel cannot develop its foreign policy solely on the basis of its own raison d'état: the lot of Jewish communities outside of Israel, while not exactly determining Israeli foreign policy, cannot remain outside the scope of Israel's decision makers. This is an extremely complex issue, hitherto almost totally overlooked even in some of the most detailed studies of Israel's foreign policy. This Jewish ingredient is an enormous asset (viz., American Jewry) but in many cases it involves Israel in political liaisons which are not necessarily conducive to its own well-being as a nation and transcend any conventional understanding of power politics and raison d'état.

This point was most forcefully expressed by David Ben-Gurion when he addressed a meeting of Israeli ambassadors on July 17, 1950:
So long as there exists a Jewish Diaspora ... Israel cannot behave as other states do and take into account only its own geographic and geopolitical situation or limit its concerns to its own citizens and nationals only. Despite the fact that the Jews living abroad are in no legal way part and parcel of Israel, the whole Jewish people, wherever it resides, is the business of the State of Israel, its first and determining business. To this Israel cannot be neutral: such a neutrality would mean renouncing our links with the Jewish people.

Obviously, many cases could be cited in which Israel did not follow in reality such a policy to its utmost consequence: Ben-Gurion was also known to overstate his own beliefs. Yet the idea behind this reminder – that Israel cannot remain alien to the concerns of Jewish minorities the world over – has entangled Israel in many complex relationships: and since Jews suffer, by definition, not in open and liberal societies, but in totalitarian and authoritarian ones, it follows that Israel sometimes feels itself a hostage of some of the nastiest regimes that happen to populate the globe. A few examples will suffice, yet since this is one of the most sensitive issues involving Israeli foreign policy, not all the details are known, nor do I personally feel free to indulge in a totally free discussion of issues where human lives may still be in jeopardy:

1. *The Soviet Union*. While the present tension between the Soviet Union and Israel is basically fuelled by Soviet global and regional interests, there is no doubt that the existence of a large Jewish minority within the Soviet Union does not simplify matters. In 1948 the newborn and struggling State of Israel had perhaps no choice but to accept gladly Soviet support and arms at a time in which Jewish cultural life in the Soviet Union itself was brutally suppressed and Jewish writers were executed by Stalin’s terror. Today, on the other hand, one cannot imagine a situation in which Israel would agree to abandon its involvement with the fate of Soviet Jewry in return for the resumption of Soviet diplomatic relations with Israel. The only coin in which Israel may pay the Soviets for diplomatic normalization is Soviet Jewry, and it is utterly inconceivable that any Israeli government would be ready to do so. This means that Israel is paying a heavy diplomatic and strategic price for its commitment to Soviet Jewry – a commitment which cannot be wholly understood or explained in terms of *Realpolitik*, but belongs to the realm of ideological Jewish solidarity. Few other countries bear such a cross in their relationship with a world power of the magnitude of the Soviet Union.

2. *South Africa*. In the complex relationship between Israel and South Africa – currently greatly determined by the fact
that most Black African nations broke off diplomatic relations with Israel in its darkest hour, in the midst of the Yom Kippur War – there are many paradoxical elements. But there is no doubt that considerations dealing with both the relative power and the fundamental vulnerability of South African Jewry play a part in determining both the intensity as well as the limits of Israeli-South African relations. Here again, Israel is paying a heavy international price for a relationship which, at least in part, is inextricably linked with the position and fate of a Jewish community, and not directly with Israel. While this is a totally different situation from that of relations with the Soviet Union, again an element extraneous to Realpolitik, deriving from ideological solidarity, has to be counted among the ingredients of a web of decisions in the sphere of Israel’s foreign relations.

3. South America. Israel’s relationship with the Argentinian military dictatorship before Alfonsin was similarly not free from considerations concerning the fate and safety of Argentinian Jews. In their quest for arms purchases after the Carter embargo, the Argentinian military junta was not averse to hinting, not too delicately, that an Israeli refusal to sell arms might cause anti-Semitic outbursts in Argentina. Such blatant blackmail has to be seen as one of the factors in Israeli decisions about arms sales to Argentina, which pitted Israel not only against liberal public opinion in the West, but also caused a number of confrontations with Israel’s best friend and benefactor – the United States. Conversely, Israel was able to intercede on behalf of some of the desaparecidos in Argentina who were of Jewish origin, and secure their release on condition that they immigrate to Israel. One day, when the story of these unsavory relations is revealed, it will be evident that the self-serving portrayal proposed by Jacobo Timorina will be shown in its utter incompleteness. Timorina himself may yet realize that he owes his life to what were obviously shady deals between the Junta and Israel: in an ideal world, such things should not happen. In the real world, however, even such shady deals are motivated not only by the evident financial considerations of armaments industries which have to survive: in the Argentinian case, an ideological element again caused Israel to pursue a course which sheer Realpolitik might warn against.

4. Iran. When the Iraq-Iran war broke out and it appeared that Iraq was about to crush the Iranians, it was not difficult to see why Israel, for all Khomeini’s anti-Zionist policies, would prefer not to see the emergence of an unquestioned Iraqi hegemony in the Gulf. Reported Israeli arms sales to Iran at the outset of the war could be understood in this context. But the fact that about 50,000 Iranian Jews still remained under Khomeini’s rule did play a role in Israeli deliberations; and Israel’s
fears about their fate (some of the community’s leaders were imprisoned and executed before the war) were consciously played upon by those Iranians who tried, either directly or indirectly, to purchase spare parts from Israel at that time.

5. Ethiopia. Again, Israel may have geopolitical reasons for wishing the only non-Muslim and non-Arab nation in the Horn of Africa to maintain a strong position, even if it happened to be a Marxist dictatorship and anti-Israeli in its policies. But the rescue of Ethiopian Jews from both persecution and famine was an element in numerous Israeli decisions over the last years, and the recent immigration of this Jewish community to Israel is only the latest step which Israel has taken in the last decade in a tangled relationship in which Israel had to balance its strategic interests with its concern for a strikingly unique and problematic Jewish community.

In sum: without trying to propose a universal model, the Israeli case seems to me to suggest a double lesson. First, when trying to understand differences of opinion about foreign policy, anyone looking at issues like the future of the West Bank and Israel’s policy in Lebanon will never understand them if he approaches them merely in terms of disagreements about strategic goals. The debates in Israel over the Palestinian problem are deeply rooted in ideological differences about the self-perception of Israelis and about the meaning of Zionism. Similarly the internal debate about the war in Lebanon was not only a debate about the limits of accepted risks, but also about the limits of the use of force. And in Israel’s relations with outside powers – from superpowers like the Soviet Union to the Argentinian military junta – ideological considerations of Jewish solidarity and the responsibility of Israel as a Jewish state, likewise play a significant role. Any systematizer of international relations – or of the ingredients of the Middle East conflict – should take these elements into account before deciding upon the supremacy or the monopoly of Realpolitik considerations. In the Israeli case, the proliferation of such ideological ingredients certainly makes the task of decision makers even more difficult and complex.