Previous accounts of the arms race in the Middle East during the 1950s have focused on the imbalance that resulted from the ‘Czech deal’ of September 1955. While that transfer of weaponry by the Soviet Union to Egypt constituted both a historical turning point and sharp acceleration of the arms race, it was only one of several changes in the regional strategic balance of that decade. This article makes extensive use of archival material in order to identify five phases of the arms race of the 1950s and analyze the manner in which Israeli policy-makers dealt with the exigencies of procurement during each phase. Except for a brief period following the arms deals with France in 1956 that marked the beginning of the fifth phase examined below, the Israelis never abandoned the attempt to obtain arms from the United States. Israel’s success in maintaining a high degree of independence in foreign policy throughout this period was the result of arms purchases from Britain and France that marked each phase of the arms race examined here. Yet, the Israelis considered arms from both of these Western powers to be temporary substitutes for the arms relationship with the USA that came about during the 1960s.

During the 1950s, arms procurement dominated Israel’s foreign policy agenda. The declassification of a large number of documents in the archives of Israel, Britain, and the United States has made possible a detailed analysis of arms transactions in the Middle East during this decade. Numerous entries relating to arms in the diaries of Israel’s two most prominent leaders of that period, David Ben-Gurion (prime minister and defense minister during most of the decade) and Moshe Sharett (foreign minister under Ben-Gurion and also prime minister during his period of absence), make evident the centrality of weapons procurement for Israel’s policy makers. The guiding principle of Israel’s policy was Ben-Gurion’s determination that the Jewish state remain free of binding ties with any foreign power. The Israelis considered the acquisition of arms vital so that they could maintain the highest possible degree of independence in foreign policy, a goal that they largely achieved by the end of the decade.

Israeli leaders also sought an American commitment to their security that would include a supply of arms at a level similar to the economic aid that the United States provided. Yet, even by the end of the decade and notwithstanding changes in the regional balance of power, successive American administrations refused to assume the role of purveyor of arms to...
Israel. The unwillingness of the United States to provide military hardware and of the Western powers to include Israel in regional defense plans forced Israel to pursue arms from Britain and France.

The Arab–Israeli arms race passed through five phases during this decade, each of which profoundly affected Israel’s perception of its strategic position. France began to sell Israel arms on a large scale in 1956, and in 1958 Britain agreed to sell Israel its most modern tank. Yet, the Israelis considered both Britain and France poor substitutes for arms from the United States. The Israelis harbored great concerns regarding the reliability of Britain and especially France as sources of arms and continued to press the United States for arms even after procurement from France largely redressed the imbalance that the Czech deal of 1955 had created. In Israel’s view, failure to secure US arms before the Sinai campaign of 1956 meant that the arms balance continued to favor the Arab states. Moreover, the near complete lack of success of procurement in Washington from 1957 to 1961 (the end of the second administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower) heightened the Israeli perception that only a very precarious balance obtained after the 1956 military campaign.

Israel’s View of the Arms Balance in the 1950s: Five Phases

The Czech arms deal of September 1955 (Soviet arms to Egypt) was the greatest single transformation in the regional arms balance but only one of several changes during this decade. In Israeli eyes, the Arab states had achieved an advantage in arms by the end of 1949, and the period from the end of 1949 to the end of 1952 marks the first phase of the Arab-Israeli arms race of the 1950s.

At the end of 1952, significant weapons transfers to the region tilted the balance further against Israel, marking the beginning of a second phase that lasted until mid-1954.

From the Israeli point of view, the strategic configuration deteriorated further in 1954, and the period from mid-1954 to September 1955 constitutes a third phase in the arms race of that decade.

The fourth phase began with the announcement of the Czech deal in September 1955 and came to a close in April 1956, when Israel signed its first large arms deal with France. French arms were Israel’s answer to Egypt’s Soviet-supplied arsenal, and they allowed the Israelis to attack Egypt at the end of October 1956. Yet, both the arms balance and the nature of relations with France remained the greatest sources of concern for Israel’s policy-makers even after the arms deals in 1956, and they continued to petition the United States for arms.

Thus, the fifth phase of the arms race of the 1950s begins with the end of the Sinai campaign of 1956 and closes with Prime Minister David Ben-
Gurion’s last attempt, in May 1960, to convince President Eisenhower to sell arms to Israel.

The United States left the Middle East arms market of the 1950s almost entirely to Britain and France. Washington was willing to sell arms to countries of the Middle East only in the framework of an alliance with the Western powers. In May 1950, the United States, Britain and France signed the Tripartite Declaration, which, by means of the Near East Arms Coordinating Committee (NEACC), coordinated arms sales to the Middle East among the three Western powers. Yet, in 1949, Britain had sold Egypt 23 Vampire and Meteor jets, making it the only state in the Middle East to possess jet aircraft. This was of grave concern to the Israelis. The Egyptian air force had bombed Tel Aviv in 1948, and the Israelis considered Britain’s transfer of jets to Egypt a gross violation of the balance that had obtained (briefly) since the end of the first Arab–Israeli war. In December 1950, Britain turned down Israel’s request to purchase jets in order to close the gap with Egypt. This phase ended in early 1953, when Britain sold Israel its first jet fighters. The Israelis bought these jets in a transaction that they viewed, paradoxically, as deleterious to their security.

The exigencies of the Korean War brought Britain to halt sales of aircraft and tanks to all states in the region. But by mid-1952, London was once again prepared to sell jets to countries of the Middle East, and this ushered in a second phase in the arms race of the 1950s. In October 1952, the British offered Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel 14 Meteor jet fighters each. The Israelis stated their preference of a complete embargo of arms to the Middle East to a Western policy of balancing each Arab state separately against Israel.

The proposed sale of Meteor jets created a dilemma for Israel. The Israelis estimated that by 1954, the combined Arab air forces would be in possession of 120 jets, and they resolved to achieve a qualitative advantage. The Meteor was nearly obsolete by the end of 1952, and the Israeli Air Force preferred to delay the purchase of jets until it could acquire a more advanced aircraft, such as the American Sabre (F-86), the Swedish Saab J-29, or the French Mystère-2. The sale of Meteors to the Arab states would force an economically distressed Israel to invest in an inferior weapon and at the same time tilt the regional arms balance against it.

Foreign Minister Sharett’s protests to Britain that the Meteor sales had elevated the arms race in the region to a dangerous level were of no avail. British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden stated, “It should not be assumed that the decision to release these aircraft … provides precedent for further releases of jet aircraft to Mideastern states.” Yet, the British admitted that their method of distribution compelled the Israelis to purchase the jets, and in December 1952, Israel applied for the purchase of an additional 15
Metros. Thus, the beginning of 1953 marked the commencement of the second phase in the arms race in the Middle East, as the sale of jets to several countries at once brought the states of the region to intensify their procurement efforts.

The urgency for Israel of competing with the Arab states extended to other major types of arms. In mid-1953, Israel had some 315 artillery pieces, compared with 567 for the Arab states. In the British view, this was a balance clearly in Israel's favor, as the number in Israel's possession exceeded that of any Arab country. Moreover, Britain took into account Israel's advantage in handling such weapons. Yet, the Israelis viewed this as a dangerous situation, as they considered the proper balance to be parity between Israel and all of its Arab opponents combined. By 1953, Britain had begun to sell Centurion medium tanks to Egypt, and this exacerbated Israel's fears of a growing gap in armor as well. In mid-1953, the mainstay of Israel's armor was some 120 outmoded Sherman medium tanks, to which the more modern Centurions were far superior. Only American assent to sell the Patton (M-48) tank or British agreement to sell Centurions would allow Israel to cope effectively with the threat from Egypt. In June 1953, the Israeli government applied for the purchase of 30 Centurion tanks.

On 14 October 1953, Israeli forces carried out a retaliatory raid against Jordan in the West Bank village of Kibye. Jordan had a defense treaty with Britain, and the British regarded the deterioration on the Israeli-Jordanian border as a threat to their interests in the region. The British Foreign Office had already decided against the sale of Centurion tanks to Israel, but used the attack at Kibye as a pretext for its refusal to sell them. The British also turned down an Israeli request on 24 November 1953 for the purchase of 50 Sherman tanks. The Israelis wanted to buy fully armed Shermans in order to augment the Centurions they hoped Britain would soon permit them to buy. This additional refusal bode ill for Israeli procurement in Britain. In August 1954 (during his temporary retirement), David Ben-Gurion itemized Israel's three-year armament plan. British hardware was prominent on this list. The Israelis wished to acquire 150 fully-armed Shermans (from Britain), 9 Meteor jets, 250 half-tracks, 2 destroyers, 4 torpedo boats, 50 25-pounder guns, 5 155-mm artillery pieces, and 15 Mystère-2 jets (from France). In London's view, Israeli demands for arms had reached 'alarming proportions'. The British were willing to sell Sherman tanks to Israel only if they were scrap hulks and would release no more than ten operable units.

By mid-1954, Western plans to arm Iraq and Anglo-American progress toward rapprochement with Egypt convinced the Israelis that the arms balance was about to turn more sharply against them. The Israeli embassy in Washington lobbied unsuccessfully against the American plan to supply
arms to Iraq in the context of a Northern Tier alliance (this became the Baghdad Pact in April 1955, which Britain, but not the United States, joined). On 21 April 1954, the US confirmed a program of direct military aid to the Baghdad regime. General Trudeau, United States assistant army chief-of-staff for intelligence, told the Israelis of American intentions to equip and train two divisions in Iraq and of similar plans with regard to other Arab states.

The Israelis regarded this as a grave threat, and this perception became more acute in July 1954, when Britain reached agreement with Egypt on the withdrawal of all British forces from that country by June 1956. The Anglo-Egyptian Agreement provided for the removal of a buffer vital to Israel’s security, and the withdrawal gave Egypt the opportunity to purchase equipment at the large British base at Suez, including radar facilities. These developments were the catalyst for a third phase in the arms race of that decade. In July 1954 Teddy Kollek, director-general of the prime minister’s office, noted that arms constituted the fundamental issue with which Israel had to deal: “The change in the balance of power... forces us to stress arms acquisition and is liable to throw us back to the crisis situation from which we emerged several years ago.”

During 1954 and 1955 (the third phase of the arms race of the 1950s) Israel’s procurement efforts met with little success. The regional policies of Britain and France severely circumscribed the type and quantities of arms they were willing to sell to Israel. By mid-1954, the deterioration along the Israeli-Jordanian border had altered Britain’s view of the arms balance. The Foreign Office acknowledged that the general intention of the NEACC was a balance between Israel and the Arab states as a whole but nevertheless moved closer to the War Office view that Israeli military strength should be equal only to the Jordanian Arab Legion. By early 1955, Britain allowed Israel what it called a “trickle” of arms, and its sales to Israel had become negligible. In December 1954, the Israelis again requested Centurion tanks. On 28 February 1955, London authorized the release of six of these tanks, but that same night Israel launched the Gaza raid against Egypt and the Foreign Office canceled the authorization.

During all of 1955, the only arms in any major category that Britain sold Israel were 2 Z-class destroyers, 9 Meteor jets, and 20 disarmed scrap Sherman tanks. The Israelis had spent most of that year attempting to convince Britain to balance its arms sales to Egypt with parallel sales to them. Yet, in November 1955, (before Egypt actually began to receive Soviet arms), a considerable imbalance existed between Egypt and Israel in two major arms categories: jet aircraft and medium tanks. At that time, Egypt had 67 jet fighters to 30 in Israeli hands. Israel had a numerical advantage with 212 medium tanks to 161 in the Egyptian arsenal. But 41 of
Egypt's tanks were Centurions, while a large number of Israel's Sherman tanks were fit only for cannibalization.³⁵

Israel's procurement in France during this third phase fared little better, despite the intensive work of the Israeli Foreign Ministry vis-à-vis the Quai d'Orsay (the French Foreign Ministry) and the creation by Shimon Peres, director-general of the Israeli Defense Ministry, of 'back channels' to the French defense establishment. By 1954, it was clear that Egypt was aiding the rebellion against France in Algeria. The Israelis were well informed on events regarding Algeria and provided the French with intelligence.³⁶ Nevertheless, in late 1954, France transferred only 18 of 26 155-mm howitzers that the Israelis had requested in late 1952, and in 1955 few French arms reached Israel. During 1955, France delivered only 5 of 30 AMX-13 light tanks for which Israel had secured a contract in late 1954.³⁷ The 55 Sherman tanks obtained from the French in 1955 were scrap hulks shipped from Britain.³⁸ Moreover, Israel had by the end of 1955 not yet received any jet aircraft from France.

Thus, the Israelis viewed the period between mid-1954 and September 1955 as one in which their position deteriorated despite unremitting efforts to redress the arms balance. Yet the fourth phase of the arms race of the 1950s, which began with the Czech deal of late 1955, increased the imbalance to a point the Israelis considered a threat to their national survival.³⁹

Soviet arms to the Nasser regime brought about a radical change in the arms balance and were a profound shock to Israel. According to the terms of the Czech deal, Egypt would receive more than 200 jets, 100 heavy tanks, torpedo boats, submarines, and a large quantity of heavy artillery, small arms, and ammunition.⁴⁰ On 12 October 1955, Prime Minister Sharett delivered an emotional call in the Knesset (Israel's parliament) for arms to Israel.⁴¹ On 23 October, Ben-Gurion (he was defense minister and at the beginning of November 1955 again assumed the prime ministership) and Chief of Staff Major General Moshe Dayan drew up plans for a preventive strike (named Operation 'Omer') to be carried out at the beginning of January 1956, before Egypt absorbed the Soviet arms. At the beginning of November 1955, the Israeli government rejected the plan. In fact, Ben-Gurion was ambivalent regarding such an operation. He feared the ostracism of the Western powers, which would not accept the validity of an Israeli strike on grounds of an imbalance in arms.⁴²

Nevertheless, on 3 November 1955, Ben-Gurion authorized a raid at Al Auja that left 50 Egyptians dead. The moderate Sharett, who opposed the 'activist' Ben-Gurion over the frequency, scope, and political wisdom of Israel's retaliatory raids, reflected that such a blow strained the credibility of Israel's image as a beleaguered little country and damaged the chances of obtaining arms.⁴³ Yet, Ben-Gurion viewed Israel's right to strike at its Arab neighbors in retaliation for terrorist raids as inviolable.⁴⁴
On 23 October 1955, Sharett departed for Geneva and Paris, where the foreign ministers of the United States, Britain, France and the Soviet Union convened until late November 1955. Sharett presented Israel’s case for arms to each of the foreign ministers. On 26 October, Britain’s foreign secretary, Harold Macmillan, told Sharett that Britain would not be responsible for a balance in arms between Israel and Egypt.\textsuperscript{46} On 31 October, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles rejected Sharett’s appeal for arms ‘pronouncedly defensive in nature’; anti-aircraft and antisubmarine systems.\textsuperscript{49} Two weeks later, Dulles turned down the Israeli foreign minister’s request for a large quantity of modern arms, including 48 F-86 jets and 60 Patton tanks,\textsuperscript{50} noting only vaguely that the Israelis should get ‘something’.\textsuperscript{51}

Sharett met later the same day with the Soviet foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, whose response to an Israeli query regarding arms was evasive. As Bialer writes, ‘it is indicative of the gravity of Israel’s defense situation as 1955 drew to an end, that ... she might approach the Soviet Union for military aid.’\textsuperscript{52}

Yet, Sharett’s meeting on 25 October 1955 with France’s prime minister, Edgar Faure, produced hope and a measure of astonishment. Sharett thought there was little chance of obtaining arms from France. Faure’s government was unstable, and it seemed unlikely that the Israelis could circumvent a vigilant French Foreign Ministry. But Faure agreed to supply everything the Israelis requested, including Mystère-4 jets. Sharett was amazed at the alacrity with which the French prime minister assented but also suspicious. Did such hasty assent not demonstrate irresponsibility?\textsuperscript{53}

On 10 November 1955, Peres secured a contract from the French Defense Ministry. The contract did not include the Mystère-4, but French defense officials agreed to supply 60 AMX-13 light tanks, 40 Super-Sherman medium tanks, hundreds of bazookas, and 1,000 SS-10 anti-tank missiles.\textsuperscript{54} The contract ired the Quai d’Orsay, which used an Israeli retaliatory raid as a pretext for blocking the sale.\textsuperscript{55} During the night of 11 December 1955, Israeli forces attacked Syrian positions on the northeastern shore of Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee). The French considered their interests in Syria vital and the Israeli raid a blow to the regime in Damascus. France joined the United States and Britain in an arms embargo on Israel until February 1956.\textsuperscript{56} Sharett referred to Ben-Gurion’s depression over this embargo.\textsuperscript{57} Sharett’s diary reveals a degree of schadenfreude at the discomfort of both Ben Gurion and Peres but also his feeling that the raid was a ‘stab in the back’ for Israel’s arms procurement efforts.\textsuperscript{58}

At the beginning of February 1956, Guy Mollet formed a new socialist-led government in France. Christian Pineau became foreign minister and the pro-Israeli Radical Maurice Bourgès-Manoury defense minister. When these men took office, the French were negotiating with Syria for the sale of
50 AMX tanks, 20 105mm self-propelled guns, 10 105mm howitzers, and
15 155mm guns.69 On 10 February 1956, Pineau told Israel’s ambassador to
France, Jacob Tsur, that France would also honor outstanding arms
contracts with Egypt.70 France’s representatives at the NEACC had in
November 1955 requested authorization to sell Egypt an additional 30
AMX-13 tanks and 30 155-mm howitzers.71 French concern for Syria and
Pineau’s policy of rapprochement with Egypt led the Israelis to believe that
even with this change of government in France, they would fall further
behind in the arms race.

In fact, the Mollet government pursued a contradictory policy on arms.
Thus, on 2 February 1956, Pineau decided to end France’s part in the
embargo on Israel and to release the arms for which the Israelis had a
contract.66 The French told the British that the sale of 12 Mystère-4 jets to
Israel was justified in light of the Soviet sale of MiG fighter jets to Egypt.72
Rapidly growing hostility to France in Syria, fueled by Damascus’ close
ties with Cairo and Soviet arms transfers,64 also made it more difficult for the
Quai to present concern for Syria as reason to withhold arms from Israel.65
Bourgès-Manoury brought Mollet and Pineau to agree that Egyptian
hostility and the deterioration of France’s position in Algeria justified
accelerated arms sales to Israel.69

On 18 March 1956 Ben-Gurion warned that ‘war within a few months
could not be avoided unless Israel got the arms needed to counter Egypt’s
weapons.’67 At a meeting on 3 April that included Ben-Gurion, Sharett,
Peres, and Dayan, the chief of staff noted what he claimed were the
achievements of Peres alone with regard to procurement in France, to which
Sharett reacted angrily.68 Ben-Gurion attributed what he claimed was
Sharett’s failure to secure the large arms deal with France to the latter’s
disagreement with the view that a clash with Egypt was inevitable.69 Thus
the April 1956 meeting foreshadowed Sharett’s resignation, which Ben-
Gurion forced, on 18 June 1956.

On 11 April 1956, the Israelis received the first three of the initial dozen
Mystère-4 jets. On 23 June Peres and Dayan met with French defense
officials and signed a deal for a large quantity of modern arms for which
Israel would pay $80 million. This was the principal arms transaction with
France in 1956, the French agreeing to provide Israel with 72 Mystère-4
jets, 120 AMX-13 tanks, 40 Super-Sherman tanks, artillery pieces,
ammunition, and spare parts.70 Bourgès-Manoury saw in a well-armed Israel
France’s most effective deterrent against Egypt,71 although even Nasser’s 26
July 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal did not immediately bring
French leaders to contemplate military action.72

During September 1956 the French initiated discussions with Israel on
Israeli participation in an Anglo-French operation against Egypt.73 The
French agreed to another large-scale arms deal in October 1956, and this had a great effect on Ben-Gurion’s willingness to consider a military partnership. In this second arms deal, the most important items were 100 Super-Sherman tanks, 200 armored personnel carriers, 300 six-by-six trucks and 20 tank transporters. Israel would remain at a numerical disadvantage vis-à-vis Egypt, but aircraft from France partly redressed the qualitative imbalance that Soviet jets in Egyptian hands had created.

French arms to Israel in 1956 brought to a close the fourth phase in the race of the 1950s, during which Soviet military hardware to Egypt had created a gap the Israelis viewed as a threat to their national survival. French willingness to continue to provide arms was a major factor in Israel’s agreement to participate in a joint military venture. Ben-Gurion was convinced that refusal to participate in the campaign would jeopardize Israel’s arms relationship with France. The decision to accept this cooperation points up the centrality of arms in Israel’s foreign policy and bears out what an Israeli diplomat told the French ambassador to Israel at the beginning of 1956: ‘Only the country which supplied arms in amounts worthy of that term would have the privilege and opportunity to find a listening ear among Israel’s leaders.’

Yet, Israeli cooperation in late 1956 did not result in British arms, while whatever euphoria existed among Israel’s leaders over relations with France dissipated shortly after the Suez campaign of October–November 1956. The Israelis doubted the long-term viability of their relationship with France and continued to pursue a strategic relationship with the United States with a view toward obtaining arms.

**France in Israel’s Foreign Policy: Ally or ‘Broken Reed’?**

Israel viewed its relationship with France as a means to procure the arms the United States would not provide and Britain sold in insufficient quantity and quality. Ben-Gurion saw inherent dangers in reliance upon France, which in his view pursued only its own narrow regional interests. The large scale of arms that France provided beginning in 1956, military cooperation with France that year, and the close support of certain French political and defense figures have contributed to the myth of a ‘French orientation’ in Israeli foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s. In truth, Israeli leaders and diplomats believed that France was no longer a regional power, as the French claimed, but ‘a broken reed’. The Israelis viewed the rebellion against France in Algeria as an opportunity to obtain arms in Paris. At the same time, the Israelis were aware of the great resistance of the French Foreign Ministry to arming Israel. Shmuel Ben-Dor, the counselor at the Israeli embassy in Paris, warned of the risks inherent in dependence upon France: ‘We must for the
moment exploit the existence of mutual interests [but] must act carefully lest our ‘partner’ disappoint us at a critical moment, either because of domestic weaknesses or vacillating diplomatic considerations. In truth, Ben-Gurion too feared that the ‘unorthodox diplomacy’ of ties with pro-Israeli defense figures in France was a temporary state of affairs and knew that such diplomacy would undermine long-term relations with the French foreign policy-making establishment.

Ambassador Tsur viewed with great circumspection any aid extended by France. Even the sale of arms that French defense officials arranged behind the back of the Quai d’Orsay came only because of their hostility to Egypt and were thus ‘out of hatred of Haman rather than love of Mordechai’. As Tsur wrote in March 1956, ‘Despite our achievements – and they are by no means insignificant – I do not predict a rosy future for procurement in France. The Algerian struggle has put a card in our hand and aroused a wave of admiration for Israel in France. Yet this is admiration born of desperation … Sympathy for Israel and honest concern for its fate are diluted by the fear of a chasm between France and the Arab world.’

Israeli success in procuring arms in France in 1956 brought one British official to remark that the NEACC had become ‘a committee for the rearming of Israel’. Yet, the Israelis knew that the French Foreign Ministry set as its goal a radical change in France’s arms policy toward Israel at the first opportunity. Pierre Maillard of the Levant Desk at the Quai apprised the Israeli embassy in Paris of the deep anti-Israel sentiment among high officials there: French-Israeli friendship was based ‘solely on the blood spilled in North Africa and bound to change at any moment’.

The arms deals in 1956 meant that France had become virtually Israel’s only source of modern weaponry. The Israelis harbored serious misgivings regarding this situation even after cooperation between the countries in the war of 1956. In February 1957, Ben-Gurion told Dayan of his fear that France ‘would desert, leaving Israel completely alone and without arms’. In early March 1957, the prime minister warned the Central Committee of his party, Mapai, of the danger in not submitting to a French proposal that Israel withdraw from the Sinai peninsula and Gaza Strip on its own initiative. Foreign Minister Golda Meir denied that the French had actually threatened to ‘abandon’ Israel if it did not agree to the proposal. Ben-Gurion reminded the committee that whatever misgivings the Israelis had about relations with France, Paris was, in the meantime, Israel’s only source of arms.

Israeli fears seem exaggerated in light of the figures on French arms and technology transfers to Israel from 1956 to 1961. At the beginning of 1957, three of the four Israeli front-line air squadrons were equipped solely with French jets, whereas only one was made up of the older British Meteors.
Israeli tank units were equipped mainly with French 75mm guns in either old Shermans or new French AMX tanks, and all of Israel's artillery, French-supplied, was of recent manufacture. By June 1958, Israel's arsenal of French jets included 20 Ouragan fighters, 57 Mystère-4A fighters, and 15 Vautour-2 light bombers. In July 1958, the French agreed to sell Israel 24 Super-Mystère B-2 fighters (the answer to Egypt's Soviet MiG-19s) on credit over three years, interest-free.

On 3 October 1957, France and Israel signed an agreement whereby France would provide the blueprints, technical assistance, and materials necessary for the building of a 24 megawatt nuclear reactor at Dimona in the Negev desert. The French Foreign Ministry objected to the arrangement and insisted that the Israelis commit themselves to consultation with France on every matter related to the construction of this reactor. Shimon Peres, the key Israeli figure in these negotiations, promised that Israel would use the reactor only for peaceful purposes. At the end of December 1957, Ben-Gurion told the Central Committee of Mapai that the development of nuclear power for military purposes was not an option for Israel. Nevertheless, certain researchers present a strong case for the assumption that the Israelis, and especially Ben-Gurion, did in fact create a military nuclear option based on the reactor that France provided.

The fall of the Mollet government in May 1957 heightened Israeli anxieties about the durability of the relationship with France. Israel's fears were to some extent allayed when in that same month, a new French government under Bourges-Manoury urged the Israelis to submit an arms procurement plan for the next few years. This, noted Ben-Gurion, would reduce Israeli vulnerability to the political vicissitudes of the French Fourth Republic. The Israelis maintained close ties with the French Army and Defense Ministry. Yet, the French emphatically denied that they would help Israel militarily in the event of a new round of hostilities.

Thus, despite the success of arms procurement in France, the great uncertainty regarding relations with that country made the continuing quest for a politically stable supply of arms Israel's paramount concern. Ben-Gurion warned the Foreign Affairs Committee of Mapai against harboring 'illusions' about the relationship with France. The prime minister drew a comparison of Israeli relations with France on one hand and the United States on the other and left no doubt as to where Israel's long-term interests lay. The duration of Israel's relationship with France (and the arms supply from that country) would necessarily be limited to 'a few short years'.

The French continued to supply arms to Israel even after Charles de Gaulle became president of the Fifth Republic in May 1958. However, the change in the relationship with Israel that de Gaulle brought about included a curtailing of cooperation on the nuclear plane. In May 1960, France
demanded that Israel make public its nuclear plans and submit to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). A demand Paris made after the United States disclosed that Israel was building a reactor with French help. Ben-Gurion met de Gaulle in France in June 1960. As a result of their discussions, de Gaulle agreed that the French would drop the demand for international safeguards at Dimona while disengaging themselves (publicly, at least), from Israel's nuclear development.

Israel continued to receive conventional arms from France until early 1969. The most important purchase of military hardware from France during this period was the Mirage-III-CJ interceptor, of which Israel received 72 between the years 1962 and 1964. This, however, was the last Israeli purchase of jets from France. In February 1966, Israel obtained American consent to the sale of 48 A-4H Skyhawk jets underscoring Israel's intention of purchasing US military hardware whenever possible.

Israel's Pursuit of Arms from the United States, 1950–1960

Israel's leaders believed that in the long term, only American arms could provide an answer to the growing volume of US arms in the hands of the pro-Western Arab states and the Soviet-supplied arsenals of the USSR's Arab clients. Moreover, both Israel's economic and military-strategic circumstances created the perception that the survival of the Jewish state depended upon the United States. The United States refused, throughout the 1950s, to forge military ties with the Israelis or to grant them a security guarantee. Yet for Israel, the procurement of arms from the United States was a long-term goal. Israel applied for arms from the United States at the beginning of 1950, a request the Truman administration turned down.

In mid-1953, Israel applied to the new Eisenhower administration for arms. The request was modest; 25 155mm howitzers, 30 105mm, 12 3in, and 12 90mm antiaircraft guns. The United States approved only the last item.

In June 1954, in view of the American intention to sell arms to Iraq and the heightened threat to their security, the Israelis again applied to the State Department for arms. This time, the Israeli request was more ambitious. Israel wished to purchase 24 American F-86 (Sabre) jets, a bid the Americans rejected.

The consistent American refusal to sell Israel arms forced the Israelis to focus procurement efforts upon Britain and France. But while the bilateral arrangements Israel sought with Britain and France were limited to arms transfers, this was not true of relations with the United States. In September 1954, Israel's ambassador to Washington, Abba Eban, presented the Israeli request for a security guarantee to US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Eban stated that he was making no formal application, but there was no
doubt as to Israeli intentions. The Israelis made this request despite the view of both Ben-Gurion and Sharett that the chance of obtaining such a guarantee was slight and would, if granted, commit the United States to little.  

Both Ben-Gurion and Sharett wished to retain a free hand in foreign policy. Ben-Gurion feared that a security guarantee would mean an American 'mandate' that would compromise Israel's sovereignty. Moreover, Ben-Gurion considered Israel's right to strike at its Arab neighbors in retaliation for terrorist raids as inviolable and would not relinquish it in order to obtain a security guarantee. Nevertheless, Ben Gurion did not object to the attempt to acquire an American security guarantee if this was nonbinding upon Israel and included arms. Sharett's view of relations with the United States was that Israel would 'demand arms for defense but not anticipate the issue of military-political attachment'. But Sharett believed that Israel's chances of obtaining both arms and a security guarantee were in direct proportion to its willingness to refrain from frequent, large-scale retaliatory raids. Sharett hoped that achievement of a security guarantee and especially a supply of American arms would enable him to stay the activism of which Ben-Gurion was the main proponent.

Ben Gurion's return to the government as defense minister in February 1955 portended a rise in Israeli activism and a weakening of Prime Minister Sharett's more moderate approach. On 28 February 1955, Israeli forces left 43 Egyptian soldiers dead in a retaliatory raid in Gaza. Sharett protested to Ben-Gurion that such raids damaged Israel's chances of obtaining arms from the United States. Sharett continued to pursue a security guarantee in the hope that it might include arms and thus provide a solution to both Israel's isolation and his own deteriorating political position. In April 1955, Sharett submitted to Dulles Israel's formal request for a security guarantee. Sharett wanted '... a guarantee [of] the territorial integrity of Israel and ... an arms supply corresponding to that offered the Arab states'. On 26 August 1955, Dulles delivered a speech in which he left but a narrow opening for a guarantee. The Israeli attempt to obtain a security guarantee would probably have died quietly if not for a new phase in the arms race ushered in by Czech deal of September 1955.

Israel's appeals to the United States for arms following announcement of the Czech arms deal elicited neither an American commitment nor a clear negative answer. From early January until late March 1956, the Israelis petitioned the State Department for arms in increasingly agitated fashion. On 10 February 1956, Eban confronted Dulles and asked whether Washington was merely delaying or planning to reject altogether the Israeli request for arms. Dulles's response was evasive but essentially negative. On 29 February, Sharett and Ben-Gurion met with Lawson, the American ambassador to Israel. The Israelis wanted a 'yes or no answer'.
Gurion appealed the same day directly to Eisenhower for arms. On 30 April, Eisenhower answered in perfunctorily negative fashion.

Foreign Minister Sharett had hoped all along that receipt of at least some arms from the United States would aid him in opposing the activism that Ben-Gurion pursued. Lawson summed up Sharett’s position in a report in March 1956: ‘He [Sharett] finds in ashes his basic approach to the problem of Soviet arms to the Arabs, which was one of maintaining a workable defense posture through the acquisition of a minimal number of high quality defensive arms from the United States.”

When Dulles met the foreign ministers of the NATO countries in May 1956, he urged the French and Italians to provide arms to Israel. On 13 August 1956, the United States granted Canada authorization to sell Israel F-86 jets, but the Canadian government agreed to the sale only in late September. By that time, Israel had a contract for 72 Mystère-4A jets from France. The Israeli Air Force did not want (at that time) to purchase another type of jet, and Israel could not afford the jets that Canada now offered in addition to those from France.

Yet, Ben-Gurion always recognized the paramount nature of Israel’s long-term relationship with the United States. Arms from France in mid-1956 temporarily obviated the need to petition the United States and after the Suez crisis, Israel acquired virtually all of its armament from France and Britain. But after the crisis, Israel continued its pursuit of a strategic relationship with the United States. Even at the highwater mark of arms procurement in France, ‘Israel never abandoned the hope that the arms stores of the United States would not be closed to her forever.”

During the fifth phase of the arms race of the 1950s, Israel hoped to obtain military hardware from the United States first as a reward for adherence to the Eisenhower Doctrine and later in the framework of an association with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In Israeli eyes, Western competition with the Soviet Union in supplying arms to the Arabs heightened the fecklessness of the Eisenhower Doctrine, while on 10 August 1957 the United States turned down an Israeli request for purchase of C-82 transport planes, half-tracks, machine guns, and ammunition.

On 6 October 1957, Foreign Minister Meir broached to the Americans the subject of strategic cooperation and the possibility of US support of a greater role for NATO in the Middle East. Meir told the Americans that Israel wanted US aid in expanding Israel’s airfields and ports so that Israel could play a role in regional defense. In fact, Ben Gurion’s main concern was arms, but when Meir met with Dulles on 8 and 12 October, she got nowhere with her requests for arms and additional money for Israel to purchase arms.

A visit to Israel by US General Alfred Gruenther, former NATO chief, provided another opportunity to petition the Americans for arms. On 16
November 1957, Shiloah of the Foreign Ministry proposed to Gruenther Israeli coordination with the US Sixth Fleet. But when Shiloah brought up the sale of submarines to Israel as an answer to those in Egyptian possession, the general told him that Israel would have to rely on the Sixth Fleet for protection.

The Israelis made another bid for US arms in February 1958, this time with the claim that the United States was obliged to balance Israel’s military capability with that of the new Iraqi-Jordanian union. The Americans responded to an Israeli request for 106mm recoilless rifles by noting that they had no intention of selling Israel ‘anything that shoots’. In fact, the United States agreed to sell Israel 100 of these guns in late August 1958, after Israeli assent to American and British overflights of its territory that provided aid to the beleaguered King Hussein of Jordan. But this was a one-time deal, and these anti-tank rifles were defensive in nature. In late May 1960, President Eisenhower reiterated the American refusal to take on the role of principal arms supplier to Israel, affirming a policy that remained consistent throughout his presidency. Eisenhower’s restatement of policy accompanied US agreement to the only other American arms sale to Israel during this period: $10 million in electric (mainly radar) equipment.

**Conclusion**

At the end of December 1957, Ben-Gurion emphasized to the Central Committee of Mapai the advantage of Israel’s independence of treaties and binding alliances. No European country, he noted, was as free as Israel, with the exception of Switzerland. There were, he pointed out, no foreign bases on Israel’s soil, no control over its army, and no political dependence. At the end of 1958, the Israelis discussed among themselves the question of requesting free military aid from the United States. Israel based the decision to refrain from doing so upon considerations that had guided policy when the Israeli government had examined this possibility some years earlier: Israel did not want an American military mission ‘poking around’ its defense facilities. Yet even had the Israelis been willing to pay this price, the American answer would have been no. The State Department in mid-1959 instructed the new American ambassador to Israel to refrain from visits to Israel: Defense Forces establishments and to ‘avoid as well any activity that can be interpreted as support or sympathetic interest in the IDF’.

Ben-Gurion’s pride in Israel’s independence in no way mitigated his view of the exigency of pursuing arms from the United States. At the end of 1957, the prime minister told his party that Israel was not likely to receive arms from the United States within the next three years (that is, before the end of the Eisenhower administration). However, the Israelis considered
obtaining arms from the United States to be their primary policy goal and during the months following Ben-Gurion's March 1960 meeting with Eisenhower, Israel continued to press its case for purchase of the Hawk anti-aircraft missile. Secretary of State Christian Herter conveyed the American refusal of Israel's request for these missiles in a personal letter to Ben-Gurion on 4 August 1960.\(^\text{124}\)

The results of Israel's procurement efforts in the United States during the 1950s were, in the words of Mordechai Gazit, "a sad story".\(^\text{140}\) Yet, as Pinhas Lavon told the Political Committee of Mapai in October 1955, Israel would not 'shoot only with American rifles and if they don't give them to us, recite Kaddish'.\(^\text{150}\) Israel's intensive diplomatic efforts in Washington during the 1950s failed to achieve either a strategic relationship or obtain arms from the United States. Only in August 1962 did the Kennedy administration approve the sale of Hawk missiles to Israel.\(^\text{151}\) Nevertheless, the United States was instrumental in bringing about the sale of 55 Centurion tanks by Britain to Israel in October 1958,\(^\text{152}\) and between 1962 and 1965 the Americans again facilitated tank sales to Israel (some 150 Patton tanks from Germany).\(^\text{153}\)

The gravest doubts attended Israel's dependence upon the French for arms. Yet the arms relationship with France endured for more than 11 years. Between 1955 and 1967, Israeli expenditures on arms from France totaled more than an estimated $600 million, including $75 million for the Dimona reactor.\(^\text{154}\) French arms in 1956 and subsequent contracts during the following allowed Israel to close the qualitative (though never the quantitative) gap in arms vis-à-vis the Arab states, and Israel obtained these arms on the nonbinding terms that Ben-Gurion deemed essential to Israeli security. The goal of a strategic relationship with the United States eluded the Israelis, but by the end of the 1950s, they had secured the arms that allowed them to 'take care of themselves' while maintaining the independence in foreign policy to which they aspired.

NOTES


2. For figures on the levels and types of United States aid to Israel during this period see Bialer (note 1) p.201; Eldon Ricks, 'United States Economic Assistance to Israel: 1949–1960' (PhD
11. Salmon to Elath, 28 Feb. 1955, ISA 42/13A.
15. Keret to Comay, 9 Jan. 1953, ISA 42/13A.
19. Ibid.
23. See a Foreign Office recommendation exactly one week before the Kibye operation that the Arab states receive arms before any more significant quantities be sold to Israel. Minute by Falla, 7 Oct. 1953, PRO: FO/371 104226 E1192/301.
28. Eban to United States Division, 29 Jan. 1954. ISA 40/18/B.
29. See *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements* UST: 5, 3, p.2497.
30. Israeli Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon's report on his meeting with Trudeau, 17 May 1954. ISA 40/19/A.
33. Kollek to Shiloh, 26 July 1954, ISA 4374/19.
35. Gazit to Elati, 31 Dec. 1954, ISA 40/18/A.
41. See files in PRO: FO/371 115560, 115563.
42. Golani (note 3) p.13.
44. Bar-On (note 1) p.20.
45. Ibid. pp.58, 72.
48. Ibid. p.1251.
49. Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter FRUS), 14, p.683.
51. FRUS, 14, pp.848–9.
58. Ibid. p.1312.
64. The Syrians received 25 MiG-15 jets and 100 BTR-152 armored personnel carriers from the Soviet Union in 1956. See *The Arms Trade Registers*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). (Cambridge, MA: MIT 1975). In late May 1956, the British embassy in Damascus reported that the Syrians were to receive 20 MiGs at an unspecified date. Embassy in Damascus to Foreign Office, 23 May 1956. PRO: 121340 V1192/554.
65. Tsur to Western Europe Division, 7 June 1956. ISA 193/1; Ben-Dor to Tsur, 29 June 1956, ISA 192/2.
70. Ibid. p.205.
71. Bar-On (note 1) p.204.
74. Ibid. p.268.
76. Najar to Tsur, 1 Feb. 1956. ISA 193/1.
77. Ben-Gurion’s diary, 10 March 1957, BGA.
78. See Michael Bar-Zohar, *Bridge Over the Mediterranean: French-Israeli Relations,*
1947–1963 (Tel Aviv: Am Hasefer 1965 (Hebrew), and Crosbie, A Tacit Alliance (note 39).
79. Avner to Ben-Dor. 18 Feb. 1955. ISA 192/41.
81. Ben-Dor to Tsur. 10 Feb. 1955. ISA 192/41.
82. Meeting, Mapai Central Committee, 3 Jan. 1957, Labor Party Archives (LPA).
83. Tsur to Western Europe Division, 24 June 1955. ISA 188/1.
84. Tsur to Elhanan, 22 May 1956. ISA 194/3.
85. Embassy in Washington to Foreign Office. 20 June 1956. PRO: FO/371 121339
V1192/519B.
86. Ben-Dor to Tsur, 11 March 1956. ISA 193/1.
87. Ben-Gurion’s diary. 28 Feb. 1956. BGA.
88. Meeting, Mapai Central Committee, 3 March 1957, LPA. Mapai was the party in which
Ben-Gurion was the dominant figure until 1963 and the faction that headed successive
government coalitions in Israel until the defeat at the polls of the Labor Alignment in 1977.
89. Ibid. 14 March 1957.
90. Meeting, Mapai Central Committee, 2 March 1957, LPA.
92. Ibid.
93. Ben-Gurion’s Diary, 31 May 1958. LPA.
94. Ibid. 3 April 1958.
95. Shlomo Aronson with Oded Brosh, The Politics and Strategy of Nuclear Weapons in the
96. Ibid. For a highly detailed study of Israel’s nuclear development see Avner Cohen, Israel
98. Meeting. Mapai Central Committee, 30 Dec. 1957. LPA.
100. Ben-Gurion’s diary. 27 May 1957. BGA.
102. Meeting, Foreign Affairs Committee of Mapai. 27 June 1957. LPA.
103. Aronson, p. 62.
106. France placed a total embargo on arms to Israel on 3 Jan. 1969, the result of heavy Arab
107. Arms Trade Registers (note 64) p. 63.
109. Ben-Gurion’s speech at a bond drive conference. BBC summary of broadcasts, daily series
110. Bialer (note 1) p. 197.
111. Meir Avidan, Principal Aspects of Israel-U.S. Relations in the 1950s (Jerusalem: Leonard
Davis Inst. 1982, Hebrew) p. 32.
113. FRUS. 9, p. 1574.
114. Elhanan’s report of his meeting with Dulles, 15 Sept. 1954, ISA 40/19/B.
116. Ben-Gurion’s diary, 2 and 11 July 1954. BGA.
117. Sharett, Personal Diary (note 46) p. 1018.
118. Bialer (note 1) p. 262.
119. Ibid. p. 269.
120. Sharett, Personal Diary (note 46) p. 805.
121. Ibid. p. 998.
122. FRUS. 14, pp. 149–50.
123. FRUS. 14, p. 297.
124. FRUS. 15, p. 163.
126. Ibid. p.186.
127. Ibid. p.589.
128. Ibid. p.269.
130. FRUS, 15, p.198.
133. See an account of Israel’s dilemma regarding the Eisenhower Doctrine in Levey (note 1) pp.83–90.
135. FRUS, 17, p.712.
138. Shiloh to Eban, 16 Nov. 1957, ISA 4374/26.
139. Ben-Gurion’s diary, 14 Nov. 1957, BGA.
140. US Division to embassy in Washington, 26 Feb. 1958, ISA 228/6/A.
141. Circular memo by Aharon Yariv, Israeli military attaché (later a general) in Washington. 22 April 1958, ISA 3088/6-II.
144. Ben-Gurion’s speech to the Central Committee of Mapai, 30 Dec. 1957, LPA.
145. Aver to Meroz, 21 Dec. 1958, ISA 3088/6-II.
146. Rountree’s briefing of Ambassador Ogden Reid, 11 June 1959, US National Archives, 611.84/A/6-1159.
147. Ben-Gurion’s speech to the Central Committee of Mapai, 30 Dec. 1957, LPA.
150. Meeting, Mapai Political Committee. 16 Oct. 1955, LPA. *Kaddish* is the Jewish prayer recited for the dead.
151. For a comprehensive and fully-documented account of the Hawk sale and Kennedy’s policies toward Israel see Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition* (note 1).