ZIONISM AND THE GREAT POWERS: 
A CENTURY OF FOREIGN POLICY

by Jchuda Reinharz

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In 1939, in the period preceding and following the publication of the White Paper on Palestine by the British Government, the Zionist movement embarked on a process of re-examination of its foreign policy. During the next years the leadership of the movement began to forge political connections with the United States, aiming to garner the support of the Jewish and non-Jewish public sectors. Thus began the American era in Zionist foreign policy. It was a road encumbered by many obstacles, but it held to one general direction and has continued to this very day.

My aim is to examine the many expressions and the broader implications of this general phenomenon, namely, the attachment of the Zionist movement, and later of Israel, to a great power. As a political principle, it harks back to the beginnings of political Zionism, at the end of the nineteenth century. Much research has been done on its various manifestations, from Theodor Herzl’s time onwards. Nevertheless, as a political phenomenon, the great-power connection of Zionism (and later of Israel) has attracted little attention. The present-day researcher will look in vain in the documents of the past for a formal expression on this matter, such as a decision or a resolution of the Zionist leadership (or later, the Israeli government), or at least for a debate on the issue. This, in spite of the fact that in time the great-power connection acquired historical dimensions and a quasi-ideological significance. A possible reason for this lacuna is that the connection of political Zionism to a great power was so basic an article of faith that it caused little debate in the movement. The Zionist/Israeli connection to a great power became much more than a matter of political convenience. Seen from a broader historical perspective it acquires a significance of its own and may provide new insights about the foreign policy of the Zionist movement and later of the State of Israel.

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The idea of an association with the great powers was first formulated in Theodor Herzl's *Der Judenstaat*, published in 1896. It was formulated thus: "The governments of all countries scourged by antisemitism will be keenly interested in obtaining sovereignty for us."

The general support of the European powers was considered vital for the future of the Zionist enterprise, and Herzl sought contacts in all the major European capitals. It soon became clear that whatever support the Zionist leader was able to drum up in Berlin, Rome, London or even in St. Petersburg, at the turn of the twentieth century, the political keys to Palestine were held in Constantinople.

The failure to attain any promises from the Sublime Porte that it would aid the Zionist cause and the growing pressure on the Jews in Eastern Europe forced the Zionists to consider a new alternative, the Uganda Plan. The possibilities of a Jewish settlement in East Africa were fiercely disputed at the Sixth Zionist Congress, in 1903. As is well known, the Uganda Plan was rejected. The main consequence of the debate was that the Zionist movement became definitely wedded to a Palestino-centric orientation.

Two additional consequences should be mentioned. First, the great-power principle was implicitly recognized by the movement. Whatever the merits of the Uganda option, it was intrinsically linked with the sponsorship of a major European state - in that case, of Britain. The second consequence of the Uganda debate was that it led to attempts to formulate a program of Jewish settlement without Palestine and without great-power support. These plans were formulated by the Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO), formed in 1905, after Herzl's death and the final demise of the Uganda Plan at the Seventh Zionist Congress (1905). Led by Israel Zangwill and endorsed by ex-Zionists and non-Zionists in Europe and in America, the Territorialists sought a territory for Jewish settlement in any feasible part of the world. ITO never made any headway. Historically seen, its main weakness was the abandonment of the idea of *shivat-zion*, the return to the Land of Israel. A matter for further consideration is how much the departure from the great-power connection was a factor in undermining any possibilities for success of the Territorialist movement.

The decade from 1905 to 1915 has been described as the period when the Zionist movement was adrift. This view needs more nuanced consideration. These were years of internal consolidation of the movement. Ideological controversies between political, cultural and practical Zionists were overcome. A new ideological position, synthetic Zionism, emerged around the time of the Eighth Zionist Congress (1907). After 1911, when the Central Zionist Office was transferred to Berlin, the organizational structure of the movement improved markedly. A Palestine Office of the World Zionist Organization, ably led by Arthur Ruppin, was established in Jaffa in 1908. The Jewish agricultural and communal settlements of the Second Aliyah were established and served as models for future waves of immigrants. The Jewish community in Palestine almost doubled in size. Capital flowed into the country from non-Jewish and Jewish sources. These were the years of increased presence on the part of the European states, especially in Jerusalem. The Italians, French, British and especially the Germans broadened their consular activities and built churches, hospitals, schools, and the German Templars even built settlements. A Hebrew cultural renaissance was in evidence everywhere and at the Eleventh Zionist Congress (1913) the foundation of a Hebrew University in Jerusalem was approved and practical plans for its implementation were considered. Until the eruption of the Great War, in 1914, the Zionist enterprise in Palestine had experienced gradual and promising progress.

Nevertheless, on the political front the situation was stagnant. The Turks ruled Palestine with a heavy hand. No significant further contacts took place between the Zionists and any of the European powers. This did not mean that the idea of the great-power connection had lost its significance or attraction. Indeed, in the years prior to the war there was a significant conceptual development regarding this issue. In connection with the plans to build a university in Jerusalem, the question arose as to which of the great powers ought to be approached for political patronage over the project. The leadership of the movement was well aware of the political significance of the growing presence of the European states in Palestine. In the correspondence among the Zionist activists, a general consensus emerged that British protection for the university project was to be preferred and sought, concomitant with a parallel unwillingness to consider a German option - even among the German Zionists themselves. Why the preference for Great Britain? Possibly because the Uganda offer was remembered. Even if Uganda was rejected by the movement, it had been the first and only time that the Zionists had obtained a concrete proposal for a territorial entity from one of the major states. At the same time, it was not the first time that the plight of the Jews had found a sympathetic ear in Britain. English public opinion had condemned the persecutions against the Jews in Russia in the late nineteenth century. The ex
ploits of British adventurers such as Laurence Oliphant in Palestine were described in the Jewish press in Eastern Europe in terms that were as complimentary as they were unrealistic. Whatever the reasons, it should be observed that an Ottoman option was rarely mentioned as opposed to a “foreign” - i.e. European - protection. It amounted to an additional step in the awareness of the necessity of a great-power link to the Zionist movement.

WORLD WAR I: THE LINK WITH GREAT BRITAIN

The beginning of the Great War, in August 1914, caused a period of uncertainty in the Zionist movement. Within the Zionist leadership there were diverging positions regarding the conflict. There was a pro-German tendency among certain sectors of the Zionist leadership. On the other hand, there were those who feared that the movement might be too closely identified politically with Germany, especially since most of the Zionist institutions had their headquarters in Berlin. By the end of 1914 the Zionist executive decided that the movement should remain neutral in the conflict between the European countries. At a meeting of the Larger Actions Committee in December 1914, it was decided to establish a provisional Central Office in Copenhagen and to disperse the members of the Smaller Actions Committee among the various capitals of the great powers. For the first time, some Zionist activities were transferred to the United States. Neutrality was a tactical step; it made good sense. It aimed to protect the Zionist movement which had branches among the warring parties. Nevertheless, some Zionist leaders (Yehiel Tschlenov for example) adopted a stance of neutrality that went farther and believed that the Zionist movement should keep itself uncommitted, not for tactical reasons but on principle.

Neutrality, however, was a short-lived phenomenon. Leading Zionists perceived that in the changing circumstances of the war a correct decision about foreign attachments might be vital for the future of the movement. Men such as Louis Brandeis, Vladimir Jabotinsky, Chaim Weizmann, Nahum Sokolow and Ahad Haam calculated early in the war the probable demise of the Ottoman Empire. Motivated by personal sympathy and sober calculation, they decided that the time had come to attach the fortunes of Zionism to those of Great Britain.

The interest was mutual. Past positive expressions in England about the restoration of the Jews to Palestine had not been fortuitous, but expressed ideas that had been popular in certain British circles. Originally, it had been a concern of predominantly religious character. In the changing conditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the interest acquired a predominantly secular and political dimension. During World War I, the opportunity arose to give those sentiments a practical expression. The British wanted to strengthen their standing in the Middle East, and a political collaboration with the Zionists seemed a possible means to that end.

The opportunity was recognized early on by one of the Zionist leaders, Chaim Weizmann. Grasping that the combination of long and short-term factors had brought Zionist and British goals closer, Weizmann knew how to give the final delicate push that made it possible for both sides to act in concert as political allies. A situation thus developed where mutual sentiments together with shared interests merged to achieve similar political ends. The result was the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917. The British period in Zionist policy had thus commenced.

In later years, the British connection with the Zionist movement was much criticized. In fact, it should not be understood as a relationship of a uniform character, but as one that underwent three different phases. The first period, from 1917 to the early 1920s, was the most creative. It started with the Balfour Declaration and continued with the Zionist Commission in 1918, the appearance of the Zionist delegation before the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919, the elaboration of the text of the British mandate in 1919-1920 and the San Remo decisions on Palestine in April 1920. It was characterized by a measure of collaboration between Weizmann and his Zionist associates in London with high-ranking British statesmen or their professional staff that represented an extraordinary phenomenon in British as well as Zionist political history. The San Remo Conference was perhaps the high point of this relationship; it was decided there to abolish the military administration in Palestine, which in the opinion of the Zionists had proved to be unsympathetic to their demands, and to establish a civil administration headed by none other than Sir Herbert Samuel, a Jew and active supporter of the Palestine policy based on the Balfour Declaration.

The second period, from 1922 to 1939, witnessed a gradual deterioration in the British-Zionist understanding. Ironically, it was Samuel, the Jewish High Commissioner, who formulated the main tenets of
that second period in the Churchill Memorandum of 1922. The document quoted the principle of “double obligation,” meaning that the British Government had a responsibility of equal weight to both the Jews and to the Arabs living in Palestine. It was also stated that it was not the intention of the British Government to foster the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The aim of British policy, it was now declared, was to develop in the country an administrative framework within which Jews and Arabs would collaborate peacefully, for the benefit of all the inhabitants of Palestine.

The Zionists recognized that the Churchill Memorandum had opened a new and less favorable period in the Zionist-British relationship. Nevertheless, they decided to acquiesce to the terms of the Memorandum, due to the sober realization that any other option might turn out worse. The period from 1922 to 1939 was the years of gradual and then accelerating British retreat from an understanding with the Zionists. Led by Chaim Weizmann, the Zionists did their best to retard the erosion of British support for their aspirations in Palestine. In hindsight they were successful. After all, these were the years when the foundations of the Jewish National Home were laid and developed. Chaim Weizmann, the president of the World Zionist Organization, declared in 1931 that the fact that the Jewish National Home had not moved closer to realization was the fault of the Zionist movement and the Jewish people, rather than that of the mandatory power. In the 1920s and even the 1930s, Zionist policy calculated that the British mandate still represented an acceptable framework for the development of the Jewish National Home. Even so radical a Zionist like Jabotinsky, in spite of his deep disagreement with British policies in Palestine, thought that in principle Great Britain was the right choice as the mandatory. When the Peel Commission proposed a partition solution in 1937, its reception in the Zionist movement was only lukewarm. The majority of the Zionists believed that time was still on their side, within the framework of the connection with Britain. In hindsight it was, of course, a terrible mistake, but it made much sense when analyzed in light of the Palestinian realities of that time. Due to the immigrants of the Fifth Aliyah, the Jewish community had been growing at an impressive rate during the 1930s. The forecast of population trends for Palestine prepared for the Peel Commission showed, by extrapolation of immigration data, that a Jewish majority in Palestine was foreseeable in ten to fifteen years. If so, why not wait with any partition schemes? In spite of all the difficulties, the association with Great Britain seemed to lead to the goals outlined by the Zionist movement.

1939: THE CRISIS IN THE ZIONIST-BRITISH RELATIONSHIP

The Zionists’ expectations from the advantageous association with Great Britain were dashed by the 1939 White Paper on Palestine. Its passage began the third and last period in the British-Zionist relationship, the period of confrontation, which was to continue until the end of the British mandate in Palestine in 1948, and the creation of the State of Israel.

Until 1939 - despite increasingly tense relations - the continuing development of a Jewish National Home in Palestine had been a main foundation of British policy. The 1939 White Paper clearly revised this policy. As noted in a statement of the Jewish Agency from May 31, 1939, it proposed...“first, by permitting Jewish immigration after the lapse of five years only if the Arabs of Palestine acquiesce in it, to relegate the Jews in Palestine to the position of a permanent minority; secondly to prohibit Jewish settlement altogether in certain parts of Palestine, and to restrict it in other parts; thirdly, to terminate the Mandate and to convert Palestine into an independent State, thereby placing the Jewish National Home under the domination of the Arab majority. The White Paper in effect abrogates the recognition, expressed in the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate, of the special status of the Jewish people as a whole in relation to Palestine.”

An underlying British assumption of the White Paper was that a thriving Jewish National Home had been established in Palestine. Consequently, it was considered by the British that His Majesty’s Government had fulfilled its moral and political obligations to the Jews under the terms of the Mandate. With war in Europe looming on the horizon, the British were keen to set up new political arrangements in Palestine, in accord with what they saw as the new realities in the country and Great Britain’s interests in the Middle East. Those interests dictated that close political ties be established with the various Arab leaders and countries in the Middle East. And if those intentions did not square with the Zionists’ aspirations regarding Palestine, so much the worse for the Zionists.

From a Zionist viewpoint, a clear disproportion had arisen in the preceding two decades between the internal and the external political goals of the movement: internally, the Zionists had demonstrated a much higher level of ingenuity and development. The
social and political institutions of the Yishuv showed a degree of creativity hardly matched by any other national movement. Although small and in many ways still embryonic, the Jewish community in Palestine had built one of the most sophisticated political and social systems attempted in the twentieth century. The kibbutz, the moshav, the multi-faceted Histadrut, the sophisticated party system, the religious structure, the educational system - together they already embodied a basic social and political infrastructure capable of supporting, as time would show, the future Jewish state. This social and political construct was connected to and supported by large sectors of world Jewry through an additional framework equally sophisticated, namely the Jewish Agency, founded in 1929. All those institutions were supported and justified by elaborate ideologies. This impressive edifice had been erected in only two decades. It represented original Zionist and Jewish creation, without intervention and only indirect influence of non-Jewish or non-Zionist factors. Indeed, historical sources clearly show that the British administration in Palestine had but a dim understanding of these remarkable developments, and the Arabs, almost none.

The situation was quite different regarding the foreign policy of the movement. Since the Churchill Memorandum of 1922, Zionist policy vis-à-vis the mandatory power had taken a defensive posture. As noted, its underlying premise was to slow down as much as possible the progressive erosion of British support for the Zionists' aspirations. In general, the Zionists had succeeded: after all, it was within the framework of the British mandate that the internal developments cited above had taken place. Nevertheless, a dichotomy arose between the two main directions of Zionist policy, the external and the internal. In their relationship with the British, the Zionists had lost the initiative. Although Jewish statehood in Palestine was an article of faith of political Zionism, the issue had been raised only twice in the late 1950s - but by the British, not by the Zionists. In 1937 it had been the partition proposal, in 1939 in the form of a future Palestinian state with a Jewish minority. Regarding partition, the Zionists hesitated and the British soon shelved the idea for their own reasons. Now, in 1939, to accept the planned Arab-dominated state would have meant for the Zionists political suicide, something national movements do not engage in. It was obvious that Zionism had reached a moment of truth.

It was a difficult situation. The positive aspects of their past relationship all but gone, the Zionists and the British were still locked in an embrace from which both sides wanted to free themselves.

The situation was complicated by the start of World War II. Although tied to Great Britain in the war against Nazi Germany, it was obvious that the long-term understanding of the Zionist movement with England regarding Palestine had reached an end. From the point of view of our theme, the principle of the great-power connection of the Zionist movement, the 1939 developments did not bring about an abandonment of the idea itself. Now, however, it shifted away from the political association with Great Britain - in a new direction.

**THE SEARCH FOR AN AMERICAN CONNECTION SINCE 1939**

That the Zionist movement gravitated from 1939 onwards toward America was both a matter of experience and expediency. Many Zionist leaders had spent some time working for the movement in the United States. David Ben-Gurion had lived there during and immediately after World War I and both he and Weizmann were frequent visitors to the country and had good connections with its Jewish organizations and leaders. The Roosevelt Administration seemed receptive to the Zionist case - or so it was assumed by the leadership of the movement. Not without good reason: two committed Zionists served on the Supreme Court of the United States, Louis D. Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter. Benjamin V. Cohen, who in 1919-1920 had worked with Weizmann in London on the drafting of the Mandate for Palestine, was since 1922 one of the important advisors of President Roosevelt. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, perhaps the most popular leader among the American Zionists, had close relations with the President. American Jewry was large and relatively wealthy, and many Zionists believed that it was possible to rally it in support of the Jewish National Home.

In addition, there was the collective memory of the first American Jewish Congress, which had existed from 1916 to 1926. For a short time, the Congress had brought together all the major segments of American Jewry, and in 1919 had sent a delegation to the Paris Peace Conference where it advocated for Jewish and Zionist causes.

Now, on the eve of World War II, Weizmann and Ben-Gurion came to the United States to seek the backing of the Jewish community for Zionist aims in Palestine. As during World War I, their present plan was to bring about the formation of a broadly representative Jewish body which would also enjoy the support of the American
government. Ben-Gurion even gave ideological reasons for an understanding between the Zionist movement and the United States: he waxed imaginatively on the similarities between American and Jewish democracy. Less ideologically inclined, Weizmann tried during his visits in 1940 and 1941 to reach an understanding with the American Jewish Committee, the organization which represented the wealthier and more influential segment of the Jewish community.

Weizmann’s and Ben-Gurion’s efforts failed. The Jews in the United States were split along a complex ideological and political spectrum and proved difficult to organize. As their next step, the Zionists decided to create a political platform that articulated their new goals and was supported by the broadest representation possible of American Zionists. This took place at the Biltmore Conference in May 1942. A political program was approved whose central tenet was a declaration that the Zionist movement strove to transform Palestine into a “Jewish Commonwealth” at the end of the war. The next step, accomplished through the good offices of Henry Morgenthau, the president of the Order B’nai B’rith, was to call the American Jewish Conference (August 1943), which hosted the major organizations of American Jewry. The Zionists managed to convince the delegates present to approve the Zionist program for Palestine. But it was a pyrrhic victory: it brought about the resignation of its non-Zionist participants. Recognizing that the support of the non-Zionists could not be counted on, the American Zionist leadership decided to form a Zionist body with broad support - the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC) - to organize and lead the political activities in the United States for Jewish statehood in Palestine. Led by the forceful Abba Eban, the AZEC would emerge as the main political instrument of the Zionist-affiliated sector of the Jewish community in the coming years.

One of the tasks of the AZEC was to establish links with the American political establishment. It proved to be a frustrating task. It seems that neither the Zionists nor the non-Zionists in the United States were fully aware of the obstacles facing them when they sought to influence the government. The fact is that during the Holocaust years American Jewry failed to convince the administration to act decisively to rescue the Jews trapped in Europe. Only in later years did it become clear how much the American Jewish leadership had been manipulated by President Roosevelt, be it with regard to help for European Jewry or support for the Zionist plans in Palestine in fact, also after 1945, when the future of Palestine became a matter of international concern, the Zionists received little help from the American policy-makers. In the critical period between August 1946 and May 1948 the American Zionist Executive Council, now supported by a majority of American Jews as well as many gentiles, made strenuous efforts to influence the administration, especially President Truman. In later years a whole historiographic sub-branch developed aiming to explain President Truman’s ideas and policies vis-à-vis the Zionist aspirations in 1947-1948. The interest of scholars was fueled by Truman’s dramatic recognition of the State of Israel on May 15, 1948, eleven minutes after its proclamation in Tel Aviv - this in opposition to the political line supported by the Department of State. One may wonder if such a concentration on a rather micro-historical issue does not lead historians to explanations that although imaginative and sophisticated, strain the limits of common sense. Indeed, some works impart the impression that Truman did little else during that period except fret over the Jewish Question.

I lean toward the view that for Truman and his administration Palestine was only a peripheral issue. It seems more sensible to suppose that aside Palestine the President had some other problems to consider and some other decisions to make although some of them were related to the question of Palestine. In 1947-1948, two major issues preoccupied the President and his senior advisors. One belonged to the realm of internal politics: In 1948, Truman was literally fighting for his political survival. His popularity was at a low ebb. The election of 1946 had been a disaster for the Democrats; for the first time since 1928 the Republicans dominated both houses of Congress and a majority of the gubernatorialships. The Republican candidate for the presidential elections in November 1948, Governor Dewey of New York, was outspoken in his pro-Zionist sympathies. Jewish statehood in Palestine had become an important issue for American Jewry. To antagonize the Jewish electorate would have been, on Truman’s part, quite unwise.

The second issue belonged to the realm of foreign politics. One of the major aims of America’s policy abroad was the containment of Soviet expansion in the still fluid conditions of the post-World War II period. The political and military thrust of the Soviet-backed movements and parties in Greece, Turkey and Iran transformed the Middle East into one of the main arenas of confrontation between Western and Soviet policies. To curb Communist expansion was the essence of the Truman Doctrine, formulated in March 1947.
In regard to Palestine, the question before President Truman and his political advisors was how to turn these two issues - his political plight at home and the containment of Communism in the Middle East - into a coherent policy. The matter was complicated by the difference between the views of the White House and those of many members of the administration. The State Department, key members in the Defense Department, the heads of the United States delegation to the U.N. - in fact, the whole bureaucratic establishment - were against a pro-Zionist policy in Palestine. Their arguments were quite similar to those of the British Foreign Office: the necessity to oppose Soviet penetration in the region, the importance of Middle Eastern oil, the weight and influence of the Arab states. That position, in turn, was opposed by the American Jewish and Zionist organizations, supported by large sectors of American public opinion.

Even if for Truman himself Palestine was not an important issue, it was clear that a wrong decision might result in negative consequences for the President. Such an error, for instance, seemed to be the American change of policy at the Security Council of the UN on March 19, 1948, when the U.S. representative had proposed a United Nations trusteeship for Palestine, instead of partition. The change in American policy was engineered by the State Department. Incidentally, it also showed how little headway the Zionists had made in their political relations with the administration, and to what degree American support for partition had been based on the almost exclusive interest to guarantee peace in Palestine - by whatever means. Faced in early 1948 with the reality of a worsening security situation in Palestine, unconvincing by the advantages of partition, the State Department, supported by the other sectors of the administration, retreated from the partition plan for Palestine without any qualms. The step has been rightly described as "the greatest defeat of Jewish diplomacy since the issue of the White Paper in 1939."18

From Truman's point of view, this reformulation of American policy meant, apparently, that the State Department was trying to force him into a situation that might seriously damage his political chances at home. Clearly, the permanent officials at the State Department were well aware of the domestic problems of the President and the Democratic Party. But they decided to ignore them - even at the expense of the political future of the President - for the sake of what they considered the higher interests of American policy. Their tactics backfired, as the President's recognition of Israel, minutes after the proclamation of the State, was to demonstrate.

Truman's Palestine policy in 1947-1948 has been described as "weak and inconsistent." This judgment seems too harsh, considering the complexities of the issues at stake. The British, experienced and well-established in the Middle East, acted even less consistently than the Americans. From the point of view of the newly-born Israel, Truman's intervention in favor of Zionist and Israeli aspirations was undoubtedly of great importance. Nevertheless, it was the exception, and did not represent the direction of American policy regarding the Middle East.

It remains open question as to whether the activities and tactics of the American Zionist Emergency Council brought the American administration closer to the Zionist point of view. President Truman disliked intensely the leader of the Emergency Council, Rabbi Silver (an active Republican), not least for his aggressive style. The fact that the support of the very influential non-or even anti-Zionist members of the American Jewish Committee could not be assured, did little to enhance the influence of the Zionists. The main problem, however, was the position of the administration, which in the 1940s had little understanding and even less sympathy for Zionist aspirations, or later for Israeli interests. Only gradually, in the late 1950s, did a more positive tendency regarding Israel take shape in the State Department. Only then would the Israeli government succeed in building a true great-power connection with the United States.

THE QUEST FOR AN AMERICAN CONNECTION AFTER 1948

After 1948, the foreign policy strategy of the young State of Israel underwent a period of reevaluation. Several options concerning foreign orientation were considered by leading Israeli politicians, statesmen and by the government, and were debated among the public. A preference for a "nonalignment" policy became popular, although it assumed either a Western or a Soviet leaning. There was a strong anti-British tendency, forcefully represented by Ben-Gurion. It reflected the bitter memories of the end of the British mandate; there was also a justified suspicion that Great Britain had not given up its intention to play a major role in the Middle East, a role that continued to be pro-Arab. There was also a tendency advocated by Nahum Goldmann, since 1956 the president of the World Zionist Organization, calling for the "neutralization of Israel."
There were parties and leaders on the Israeli Left advocating a relationship with a great power but convinced that this great power should be the Soviet Union. Besides the ideological aspect, there were also strong practical considerations for a Soviet connection. The leaders of the yishuv and the Russians shared a wariness over British intentions in the Middle East. From September 1947 until late in 1950, Soviet and Soviet-backed political and military assistance for Israel had been unwavering, and certainly more consistent than American support. While in the first months of 1948 the Americans had proposed new and dubious solutions for Palestine, the Soviet Union had firmly supported partition. While the United States (supported by the British) had in January 1948 declared an arms embargo for the Middle East that clearly worked to the Jews’ disadvantage, the Yishuv had received military hardware from Czechoslovakia, which acted with Russian agreement. This aid was of crucial importance during the Israeli War of Independence. Last but not least, there were hundreds of thousands of potential Jewish immigrants in the countries of the Communist bloc, some two million of them in the Soviet Union alone.

In spite of these weighty arguments, it soon became clear that non- alignment, as understood by the political leadership of Israel, was basically a matter of tactics rather than policy. The acid test came in the second half of 1950, when Israel decided to support the Western bloc in the Korean war. The Israeli reasons were both ideological and practical. The government of the country, its public institutions and its values were democratic and Western-oriented. Besides, the financial difficulties faced by Israel tilted it heavily toward a Western orientation: the absorption of the mass immigration and the security situation, the two main problems of Israel after its creation, involved staggering expenses. The Israeli population doubled in the years 1948–1955 and Arab animosity remained unabated.

One of the most important decisions of those earlier years was the Ben-Gurion-Blaustein Agreement, signed in August 1950. Side-stepping traditional bonds between Israel and the Zionist movement in the Diaspora, Ben-Gurion sought to make inroads into the ranks of influential Jewish circles in the United States, as represented by the American Jewish Committee. This body represented a leading segment of American Jewry whose historical orientation had been anti- or non-Zionist, but which became gradually inclined to support Israel politically and financially. It was the first step on the road that would prove of mutual benefit in the coming decades. Finally, the Reparations Agreement with Germany, based on discussions in Israel and abroad from 1950 to 1953, established yet another economic anchor in the West.

After some vacillation, then, the Jewish state returned to the American orientation which had guided the Zionist leadership in the late 1930s and early 1940s. For quite a few years, however, it was a one-sided effort, and the Israeli approaches were continually rebuffed. In the Eisenhower years, “the United States government showed a consistent and unmistakable reluctance to enter into any exclusive military relationship with Israel.” In fact, to enter into any relationship. In the Eisenhower years, “far from being seen as an important state to woo, Israel was seen primarily as a problem.” In May 1950, the United States, England and France signed the Tripartite Declaration, whose aim was to limit the arms race in the Middle East. In light of the experience with the arms embargo early in 1948, there were many in Israel who feared that such a policy would work to the Arabs’ advantage. In 1950 the Baghdad Pact (CENTO) was signed. CENTO was supported by the United States, although it was not formally a member. In the early 1950s, American Middle Eastern policy continued along the same Arab-oriented lines as during the late 1940s.

By 1956, Israel’s policy of non-alignment had given way to a growing sense of strategic isolation. This was one of the major reasons for the Israeli participation in the Suez adventure in October 1956. What for the Israelis started as a heartening military success, ended as a disappointing diplomatic defeat, but a defeat with a clear lesson for the future. There was no other episode in the early history of the state which emphasized so clearly the wisdom of a connection with a great power, which had guided Zionist diplomacy since its inception. In 1956, Israel acted to some degree alone or with unreliable partners who used Israel for their own purposes. The results were embarrassing, even harmful.

Nevertheless, it was the Suez Affair that prompted the United States to reconsider its policy in the Middle East. In spite of its forceful diplomatic intervention, the episode ended in a political defeat for the West. In the aftermath of Suez, radical Arab regimes in the Middle East, inspired by Nasser and supported by the Soviet Union, came to dominate the region. American reassessment also included a new evaluation of Israel’s importance. American policy-makers began to consider Israel as a political and strategic asset in the Middle East but they were also motivated by internal political support in the United States that had an ideological edge: Israel was described
as an island of political stability in the Middle East and as a representative of Western political and spiritual values. Within a span of eleven years, from 1956 to 1967, American foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel made a turn of a hundred and eighty degrees. The change became quite evident in 1967, during the Six-Day War. What prompted Israel in 1967 to take preemptive military action against Egypt was quite similar to its motivations in 1956: a growing danger to Israel’s security. This time, however, the Americans supported Israel’s actions. The “strategic understanding” between the two countries (or from the Israeli view, the great-power connection) had been nurtured and solidified.

Israel’s victory in the Six Day War established for it an international image of military prowess—exaggerated, as it turned out six years later, in 1973, during the Yom Kippur War. The renewed military explosions between Israel and its neighbors made American policymakers, and especially Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, very much aware of potential dangers of a crisis in the Middle East. The Yom Kippur War brought the two super-powers close to a confrontation, harmed the understanding between the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia, and precipitated an oil-crisis that was of severe consequences for the economies of all Western countries. However, even if the Yom Kippur War dented Israel’s military reputation, it did not weaken its political standing in American eyes. Perhaps the contrary is true: the Americans understood that the United States and Israel had become long-term allies and could not easily separate their foreign policies. They also concluded that it was imperative for the interests of the United States to foster solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict: to achieve, if possible, a peace agreement between the warring parties, or at the very least, to secure a de-escalation of the conflict between them. These goals were related to the two major aims of American policy in the Middle East: to guarantee and protect the oil sources and to put an end to the Soviet position or further penetration in the region.

These premises of the American-Israeli relationship held during the 1980s. Indeed, that decade witnessed some of the most severe differences between Israeli and American policymakers, especially in 1982-1983, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. At the same time, a new level of understanding was reached between Israel and the United States during that decade. Two documents establishing a measure of strategic cooperation were signed: the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in November 1981, and the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in April 1988. While politicians and scholars evaluate these documents variously, especially as regards their practical importance, there can be little doubt as to their symbolic meaning.

In the late 1980s, the end of the Cold War changed the nature and the scope of the relationship between Israel and the United States. As has always been true, the understanding between both countries is now seen somewhat differently by each side. From an American point of view, one of the major premises that brought the association about—the containment of Russian influence in the Middle East—has (so far) disappeared. Nevertheless, the strengthening of American influence in the Middle East continues to be a major aim of the foreign policy of the United States. The oil sources of the region are essential for the economic life of the West. At the same time, the Middle East remains socially and politically volatile, and apt to change radically from one day to the next. What Israel has to offer today is its political stability, the Western-oriented character of its society and institutions and its status as a democratic bulwark in the region. This seems to be one of the major reasons for the continuing special ties between the United States and Israel, though one should not discount the awareness by American politicians of the Jewish-Israeli lobby in the United States. From the Israeli angle, the principle of the great-power connection continues to be as significant as it has been since the days of Theodor Herzl.

**ANALYSIS**

Historical generalization needs at least two examples—one case may well be an exception. Regarding the great-power connection of Zionism and Israel, the two examples are readily available—with Great Britain in the first half of this century, with the United States in the second half. The relationship of the Zionist movement with Great Britain is easier to sum up than the ties between Israel and the United States: the first case is a closed chapter, most of the historical sources are available, and we already have the perspective of half a century. Regarding the relationship with the United States, we are still living in the midst of the process, and what seems obvious today may look completely different tomorrow. Nevertheless, some tentative generalizations may be offered.

As important as the great-power connection has been in Zionist history, other alternatives were considered too. One was the
Territorialist movement (ITO), which in 1905 discarded the Herzlian idea of the centrality of a connection between the Zionist movement and one or more great powers. Another available alternative was political neutrality, which was contemplated seriously twice, in 1914 and again in 1948-1950. At least one political force in the Zionist movement, the Revisionists, placed inordinate weight on Zionist political self-sufficiency and came close to questioning the great-power principle itself. The attitude towards the supporting power (in this instance, Great Britain) was one of the bones of contention between Jabotinsky and Weizmann, as well as between Jabotinsky and Ben-Gurion. In fact, most of the time, Jabotinsky was in favor of the Zionist-British alliance, although he believed that the Zionists were not demanding their just rights. More significant, after 1948 the foreign policy strategy of Israel underwent a period of search, before a pattern, or as diplomats prefer to call it, a "tradition" evolved. Besides the possibility of neutrality, there was also a leftist minority in the country which proposed a Soviet great-power alternative. Finally, Israeli participation in the Suez Canal episode in 1956 also represented a deviation from the great-power principle.

In the 1950s, Israeli foreign policy recognized and accepted the pattern, which, if evaluated historically can be seen as classical: a great-power connection and a pro-Western orientation. The semi-ideological element in the decision seems quite clear: in terms of direct political support, a stronger case could be made (and indeed was) for a pro-Soviet orientation, at least in the initial period after the creation of Israel. Nevertheless, it was an American connection which the Zionists sought. The turn to the United States had convincing objective reasons behind it: after World War II, America emerged as the strongest power in the world, and American Jewry was ready to support the Zionist plans in Palestine. However, there were also subjective and less clear-cut factors in the decision: at some point in the early 1940s the Zionists decided that American support was to be favored, and was to be preferred to any other option.

Strangely enough, that Zionist decision made in the 1940s has apparently colored the analysis of many contemporary historians of the American and Zionist-Israeli relationship. It seems that one can discern here the influence of the "great-power connection factor" itself on historical reasoning: essays and books have been written based on the premise that such a relation between both sides was self-evident. In reality, for many years it was a one-sided affair.

The pro-American tendency by the Zionist-Israeli side was not encouraged by the American government, certainly not during World War II, and hardly in its aftermath. In the American attitude there was nothing of the spiritual background and hence no urge to make the British receptive to an understanding with the Zionists. During World War I, American policy-makers were unsure as to the possible foreign policy of Israel. The State Department was never enticed by the Zionist overtures and even the White House remained ambivalent, in spite of President Truman's eventual helpful hand. Seen from a larger historical perspective, Truman's pro-Zionist actions were the exception in America's Middle Eastern policy during his presidency. In the 1940s, American policy regarding the Middle East was not very different from that of the British. It too was Arab-oriented, although not as crystallized and clear-cut as the British policy.

True, when in 1947 the issue of Palestine came before the United Nations, the Zionist leadership considered American support essential for the success of the partition plan. It was a view reflecting strategic foresight and subjective leanings, and not some profound understanding with the American policy-makers. As a matter of fact, there was more support for partition on the part of the Soviet bloc. Furthermore, the Soviet Union never wavered in its support for partition - while the Americans changed their mind in March 1948. And it was the Soviet bloc which supplied the arms which made victory possible in the war for Israel's independence - while the United States held firm to an arms embargo which was harmful to Israel.

America's lack of response to its overtures and the growing feeling of strategic isolation were among the factors which moved Israel to participate with the British and the French in the Suez Canal adventure in 1956. It was a sobering experience for Israel, because it proved how, without the right foreign support, military success could end in diplomatic defeat. Indeed, it was the only time in a century of foreign policy that the Zionists or Israelis chose the wrong partners for a major international turn of events. Implicitly, it seems that Israeli policy-makers learned their lesson. Never again did Israeli foreign policy deviate from the principle of the great-power connection.

The results of the Suez Canal campaign also represent a turning point for the Americans. Their policy in 1956 had not contained Soviet penetration into the Middle East nor did it enhance American prestige; on the contrary, American policy-makers gradually
came to consider Israel as a Middle East factor which should be positively considered from an American perspective. From then on, there is a perceptible positive change in America’s attitude toward Israel.

Since 1967, the wars of Israel would have been very difficult without American support, at first political assistance, later also through arms supplies and economic help. Furthermore, the measure of peace that Israel has attained in the Middle East has been based on American backing. The Peace Treaty with Egypt in 1979 was as much of a result of American as Egyptian and Israeli diplomacy. The Israeli-American connection is the rock on which the peace talks with the Palestinians and Arab governments in the 1990s are built. The United States prods both sides, neutralizes the international factors trying to disrupt the gradual understanding between them and most of all, gives Israel the backing of a great power which, from the Israeli perspective, makes the whole process feasible. Towards the end of the century, Israel’s great-power connection with the United States is enjoying its fullest flowering.

The interests underlying the American-Israeli relationship can be defined much more easily than the subjective support which the relationship enjoys among large sectors of American public opinion. Surveys indicate that this factor has not wavered even in periods of political tension or debate between Washington and Jerusalem. It cannot be divorced from the backing Israel enjoys from most sectors of American Jewry. In other words, it seems that American public opinion is not only affected by Israel itself, but also by the sentiments and open support of American Jewry for the Jewish state.

Given the existence in the United States of broad public opinion favorable to Israel, it is still unclear as to how and how much this factor actually influences American policies. Historical research has already highlighted this question when analyzing the results of the activities of the American Zionist Emergency Council, back in the late 1940s. The AZEC literally flooded the White House and Congress with petitions for Jewish statehood in Palestine. But it remains an open question as to whether or not these actions moved the American administration toward a more pro-Zionist attitude.

Recently, a scholar, writing on American policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, concluded: “The international system, the bureaucracy, Congress, and interest groups account for the constant picture, but they limit policy; they do not define it. Only by examining the attitude of the presidential elite do we understand why and how policy changes.”

Trying to understand this statement in light of thirty years of strategic cooperation between Israel and the United States, one is left with an unanswered question: namely, what is the nature of the subjective component which buttresses this relationship?

CONCLUSIONS

In historical perspective of some fifty years, the success of the Zionist movement to realize its aim and to create a Jewish state in Palestine has lost nothing of its almost miraculous quality. On the contrary: the more one researches Jewish and Zionist history, the more one becomes aware of the almost insoluble obstacles which hampered the Zionists’ hopes. Nevertheless, as wondrous as Zion Redeemed may appear, there were also some very astute political ideas and strategies which paved the way.

Few were as far-reaching as the principle of the great-power association. The political careers of two of the major leaders of Zionism, Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann, were built on the great-power connection. In fact, the actual failure to translate the great-power idea into reality eroded Herzl’s leadership. The success in creating such a political partnership with Great Britain established and supported the Zionist primacy of Chaim Weizmann in the Zionist movement. Weizmann rose and fell with the Zionism-Great Britain equation. His was one of the most convincing examples of the importance of this basic Zionist strategy. However, the great-power connection had an obvious precondition, namely that the Zionists would choose the right partner. Which they did. In fact, to the extent that they had the freedom to choose, the Zionists’ choices were impeccable. First, it was with Great Britain. Later, after 1939, the gradual turn toward a pro-American Zionist policy was one of the shrewdest moves in the history of the movement, as momentous as the turn to Great Britain had been in 1914-1917.

Today, there are many who see the American connection with the Jewish state as something that is natural. Historically examined, this appears far from self-evident. After the creation of their state the Israelis considered also other options. It seems that only the lessons of the Suez Campaign in 1956 brought them definitely back to the principle of the great-power connection – which by then meant
the American option. On the American side there was even more
wariness. It was only after the Soviet penetration into the Middle
East, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, that American policy under-
went a reevaluation. Only then emerged the idea of a "natural"
understanding between the United States and Israel. It was an idea
welcomed with much enthusiasm by American Jewish public opinion,
and with a measure of surprise (if not bewilderment) by many mem-
ers of the American political elite.

As it matured in the 1990s, the relationship between Israel and the
United States has been recognized as a most unusual one in present
and past international experience. While no formal treaty binds
them, Israel and the United States are tied by interests and sen-
timents that have survived difficulties and disagreements, and acquired
stability. Today there is hardly another country where Americans
and the United States are accepted as naturally as they are in Israel,
or where an American can feel so much at home and so secure.
Israeli intellectuals show nothing of the resistance to American cul-
ture that characterizes so many of their European or Asian col-
leagues. The colonialist or imperialist slogans which moved (and
still move) masses in other countries against the United States, never
acquired any significance among the Israeli population. American
Jewry, with its strong historical and personal ties to Israel certainly
plays a role in the connection between the two countries.

Nevertheless, looking closer, there are surprising incongruities
in the relationship. Considered in terms of historical origin, political
system, ideological orientation, religious patterns, social struc-
tures - Israel is closer to Europe than to the United States. A very
plausible case could be made for a European political connection
with Israel. Which only shows how much the Israeli ties with the
United States are not that "natural," but also have other dimen-
sions.

That was also the case with the Zionist-British relationship. As with
the Americans, it was based on mutual interest, but there was also
something else, factors that were subjective and ideological. There
was a certain positive attitude among many British with respect to
the Holy Land, the Jews, and the bond between both peoples. Re-
garding the United States, the subjective element is harder to de-
fine precisely because the mutual ties are active and in a constant
state of reformulation.

Summing up, it seems clear that we are dealing here with a theme
which is composed of political convenience, quasi-ideological sig-
ificance and historical dimensions. For almost a century the idea
of the great-power connection has run through Zionist and Israeli
foreign policy as an ever-present thread, sometimes obscured, mostly
evident. If so, two conclusions can be added: as far as policies go,
the great-power principle was a very sensible one for the fledgling
Zionist movement and Israeli state. And second, by dint of shrew-
dness and sheer luck, both the Zionist movement and Israel knew
how to place and time their political trust in the hands of the best
partners available to them.

NOTES

1. For a description of the Herzlian and post-Herzlian periods, as
well as the period leading towards the Balfour Declaration, see
Isaiah Friedman, Germany, Turkey, and Zionism. 1897-1918 (Ox-
ford, 1977), chaps. 7, 8, and his The Question of Palestine, 1914-
1918 (London, 1973), especially chaps. 8, 17. David Vital, Zion-
ism: The Formative Years (Oxford, 1982), chaps. 3-5, and his
Zionism: The Crucial Phase (Oxford, 1987), chaps. 4, and espe-
cially 6, 7. Jelena Reinhartz, Chaim Weizmann, The Making of a
Zionist Leader (New York, 1985).

2. Aaron Kliezman speaks about the "One Great Power" doctrine
as one of diverse components of Israeli foreign policy in the
1950s, referring also to its historical roots. In his view, however,
it is only one element among many, and not always a stable one
- see "Zionist Diplomacy and Israeli Foreign Policy," The Jerus-
alem Quarterly, no. 11 (Spring 1979), pp. 100-102. Chapters 3
and 5 in Vital's Zionism: the Formative Years are entitled, signifi-
cantly, "Seeking an Ally."

pp. 27-30.

4. See Michael Heymann, The Uganda Controversy, vol. II (Jeru-
usalem and Tel Aviv, 1977), pp. 5-61 (Introduction); Vital, Zionism:
The Formative Years, chap. 9.

5. See Robert G. Weisbord, African Zion (Philadelphia, 1968) and
Joseph H. Udelson, Dreamer of the Ghetto: The Life and Works of
Israel Zangwill (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1990).


22. The issue is described in great detail in Menahem Kaufman’s *An Ambiguous Partnership. Non-Zionists and Zionists in America 1939-1948* (Jerusalem and Detroit, 1991); see also Samuel Heilprin, *The Political World of American Zionism* (Detroit, 1961); Jchuda Reingart, "The Zionist Leadership Between the Holocaust and the Creation of Israel" (forthcoming).


25. See Yehuda Bauer, *From Diplomacy to Resistance*, pp. 234-248; David H. Shapiro, "The Political Background of the 1942 Biltmore Resolution," in Melvin L. Urofsky (ed.), *Essays in American Zion-


How the United States Came to Recognize Israel (Stanford, Calif., 1979); Shlomo Slonim, “President Truman and the Bureaucracy: The Palestine Question as a Case Study,” in Allen Weinstein & Moshe Mach (eds.), Truman and the American Commitment to Israel (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 122-151; “Truman’s Palestine on the Periphery,” chap. 2 in Steven L. Spiegel’s The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict, Making America’s Middle East Policy from Truman to Reagan (Chicago and London, 1985); Bruce J. Evensen, “Truman, Palestine and the Cold War,” Middle Eastern Studies, 28, no. 1 (January 1992), pp. 120-156. Not only is the present list far from complete, but there are several additional works in preparation.

30. This position is convincingly presented by Spiegel, op. cit., chap. 2. It is corroborated by many examples showing that otherwise, many of the utterances of the American policy-makers relating to Palestine do not make sense. For instance, on May 12, 1948, the President, Secretary of State Marshall and a select group of high officials from the State Department and the White House had an emergency meeting on Palestine, with the British Mandate to end three days later. During the meeting Marshall referred to rumors in the press about a message he had supposedly sent some days earlier to a certain Mr. Ben-Gurion. On May 12, 1948, the President, Secretary of State Marshall had an emergency meeting on Palestine, with the British Mandate to end three days later. During the meeting Marshall referred to rumors in the press about a message he had supposedly sent some days earlier to a certain Mr. Ben-Gurion. On May 12, 1948, the President, Secretary of State Marshall had an emergency meeting on Palestine, with the British Mandate to end three days later. During the meeting Marshall referred to rumors in the press about a message he had supposedly sent some days earlier to a certain Mr. Ben-Gurion.


32. See Spiegel, op. cit., p. 17. Sentiment supporting the pro-Arab position of the State Department was also nurtured by a number of "specialists" who had a missionary background in the Arab lands of the Middle East - see Phillip J. Baram, “A Tradition of Anti-Zionism: The Department of State’s Middle Managers,” in Melvin L. Urofsky (ed.), Essays in American Zionism, 1917-1948 [The Herzl Year Book no. 8] (New York, 1978), pp. 178-194. Baram’s
views are fully developed in his book *The Department of State in the Middle East, 1919-1945.* (Philadelphia, 1978)


35. The question was already asked by Samuel Heilprin, who participated in the activities of AZEC. See Heilprin, *op. cit.,* p. 295.


38. [Nahum Goldmann,] *The Autobiography of Nahum Goldmann. Sixty Years of Jewish Life* (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, 1969), pp. 301-02, 306-07. For Goldmann, the Arab-Israeli conflict was the most serious issue of Israeli foreign policy. In his view, it was only through a collaboration between the two super-powers that a solution could be found. See also his speech "Israel After the Yom Kippur War" (December 1973), in Nahum Goldmann, *Community of Fate. Jews in the Modern World* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 141-157.


42. On Aliyah, see Bialer, *Between East and West*, pp. 57-77.

43. The tactical character of the nonalignment issue is convincingly analyzed in Bialer's *Between East and West*, chaps. 1-2.


45. In his classic work *The Foreign Policy System of Israel. Setting, Images, Process* (London, 1972), Michael Brecher affirms that the Israeli decision for an American orientation, at the expense of a neutral position, "can be explained in part by misjudgment of national interests" (p. 558). It is an opinion I am unable to accept; it seems that historically considered neutrality was the exception, and a great-power connection was the rule.

46. Uri Bialer, "Israel's Global Foreign Policy," pp. 252-39; The theme is analyzed in detail in Bialer's *Between East and West*, chaps. 10-11.


52. Although during the period from 1967 to 1973 there were disagreements between Israel and the United States, there was at least one occasion when Israel proved that it might act by armed force in a matter the United States was highly interested in. I am referring to September 1970, when Israel's threat of armed intervention apparently forced Syria to retreat from its intention to invade Jordan. Slonim, *United States-Israel Relations,* pp. 26-28.


54. The full names were "Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the United States and the Government of Israel on Strategic Cooperation," and "Memorandum of Agreement between the United States of America and the State of Israel Regarding Joint Political, Security and Economic Coop-
eration.” The texts are found in Puschel, *US-Israeli Strategic Cooperation*, pp. 178-183.


58. Steven Spiegel states this generalization, when he writes in *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*: “No matter how high tensions between the two governments might rise, no administration since 1948 [...] had wavered from a fundamental commitment to the security and survival of the State of Israel.” (p. 381)


60. Summing up, Samuel Heilprin wrote: “To what extent the evolving American Zionist power and influence potential chronicled in this study contributed to the creation of the State of Israel is not at all certain. Perhaps little more can ever be claimed than that the Zionist movement [in the United States] was one of the necessary prerequisites for the realization of the Zionist program.” Heilprin, *op cit.* p. 295.