The Elusive Question: Jews and Jewry in Israeli Foreign Policy

Gabriel Sheffer

All Israel’s noted political leaders – Ben-Gurion and Sharett, Eshkol and Meir, Rabin and Peres, and Begin and Shamir, as well as almost all its lesser political figures, and the officials who have participated in the formulation of Israel’s international policies, have faced the question of the position of the Jewish Diaspora in the state’s foreign policy. Some of these figures have tried to avoid the question as far as they could, some paid lip service to the importance of this factor in Israeli policy and actions, most of them have concealed their true position in this respect, and none has offered a genuine – or for that matter, original – solution to this vexing problem. By avoiding, concealing, and confusing the issue, these leaders further complicated the already highly complex structure of the relations between the ‘Jewish homeland’ and its Diaspora. This ambiguity and confusion is not only characteristic of the official Israeli attitudes but also of the Israeli public at large.

When asked, however, most Israelis, including the leadership, would unhesitatingly say that Israel’s foreign relations should be guided first and foremost by concern for the Jewish communities in their various host countries. But, usually, this is a misleading response, mere lip service rather than a clear political intention. Despite the seemingly widespread consensus about the necessity of a positive posture vis-à-vis the Jewish communities abroad, and despite the importance that Israelis attach to declaring their bond and intimate relations with Diaspora Jews, considerations...

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about Jewry and Jews are, in fact, pretty low on the Israelis’ list of personal and national priorities.

Take for example, the extremely negative attitudes shown by most Israelis towards the Jewish Agency, which, among other things, is supposed to represent Diaspora Jews’ interests and positions in Israel. On the governmental level, this is evident from the directives issued in 1986 by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and circulated to all Israeli embassies. These instructions, which defined the relative significance of various Israeli interests, ranked the Jewish Diaspora factor in fourth or fifth place. And finally, in this context, whoever has heard about the Diaspora Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs? Such a department really exists, but its main function is to follow the activities of Diaspora organizations. In fact, it has no influence whatsoever on the formulation of Israeli foreign policy, and in any case, as has been mentioned, nobody has heard of it.

Thus, in this significant and sensitive sphere of Israeli policy, there are many shady areas. The result is that Israel’s policy towards Jewish communities, and the countries that host them, is usually unclear. It is questionable whether Israeli policy makers themselves are fully aware even of major developments in this labyrinth, towards which the Israeli public displays patent indifference. One factor which may contribute to this situation is the propensity of policy makers in democratic states to do their utmost to keep foreign policy as their private domain, precluding all competing social and political groups from participating in its formulation. They usually do their utmost to isolate foreign policy from domestic politics in order to ensure their own predominance in this sphere.

There are three main reasons why politicians and officials wish to isolate this political area, and ensure their unmitigated freedom in formulating and implementing foreign policy, and in its corollary—the exclusion of the public from this sphere. The politicians’ first unholy goal is to prevent, as far as possible, any connection between domestic, political or social debates and foreign policy. Thus, for example, the Belgian government would try to prevent any linkage between the domestic debates between Flamands and Walloons, and Belgian-French relations on the one hand, and Belgian-Dutch relations on the other. The politicians’ second motivation for decoupling domestic and foreign policies is simple, but no less deplorable. Everywhere politicians like to accumulate more power without sharing it with competitors. Exclusiveness in foreign policy can only strengthen their domestic position. The third reason is to prevent lack of consensus at home from influencing freedom of action abroad.

Consequently, in almost all Western political systems, politicians try to spread a very heavy veil of secrecy and ambiguity over their foreign policy. They try to divert public attention from that
sphere, to prevent public participation in goal setting and in the formulation of strategies and tactics. Since they know very well that in any event major problems are bound to emerge during the various phases of implementation, when there is usually no possibility of concealing decisions any longer, they show no inclination to allow public intervention in their actions in the earlier stages of policy making. Due to this inclination to prevent public involvement, which has no objective reason or justification, many foreign policy issues are excluded from public debate.

These observations apply to many issues of Israeli foreign policy. Thus, for example, Israel's policy in regard to Star Wars (the Strategic Defense Initiative – SDI), or non-proliferation, or South Africa, was not discussed by the public prior to the decisions taken by the government. Even more so, these observations apply to Israeli policy concerning Diaspora Jews. However, the explanation that has been offered here for secrecy in foreign policy making and its implementation does not completely and satisfactorily answer the question why Israeli-Jewish relations, in particular, has become the 'hidden problem' in Israel's politics. For in addition to the ambiguity characteristic of many other aspects of Israeli foreign policy, there has been an unusual amount of hypocrisy, duplicity, unclarity, and disregard in the attitudes of various Israeli governments towards Diaspora Jews.

But, before plunging into the stormy, turbid waters of Israeli-Diaspora relations, it is worth mentioning that by no means is the Jewish Diaspora the only modern ethnic dispersion maintaining problematic relations with its homeland. Many ancient and newer nations – the Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Italians, Poles, Greeks, and Turks, to mention only a few – have Diasporas. Their Diasporas have been formed either as a result of imposed or voluntary migrations out of their homelands. Nevertheless, in all these cases there has been no doubt about the location of the predominant national center. This center has always remained in the homeland. Thus, in all these cases the homelands have maintained the legitimacy as well as the power to impose policies on their Diaspora.

II

The Jews serve as an outstanding example of a different pattern characteristic of a smaller group of modern Diasporas. The argument here would be that this different pattern necessitates an alternative model in the relations between the Jewish state and its Diaspora. And, in this context, it is significant to understand and remember that unlike the cases mentioned above, it was the Jewish Diaspora that, in the 1930s and 1940s, established the Jewish community in Palestine and that the same Diaspora was
probably the most important partner in the creation of the Jewish state. The Diaspora loyally supported, and continues to support, the Jewish state in many respects. In an unprecedented manner, the Jewish Diaspora has lavishly provided Israel with economic (both unilateral transfers and investments), cultural, human, and political resources. At best it is highly questionable whether Israel has been able to contribute significantly to Jewish well being, except for national pride. Cynics would say that Israel is a Jewish liability rather than asset. In this case, and from this perspective, the situation is unique. As should be expected, such a situation is bound to create tremendous problems both in the shorter-term daily relations between the Diaspora and its "homeland", and in the historical longer run. These special relations foster a great deal of national camaraderie, but they also create behavioral mutations and social and political pathologies. This anomalous situation has facilitated, in its turn, the emergence of hypocrisy, duplicity, and ambiguity in Israeli relations with its Diaspora.

Why, and how, hypocrisy in Israeli-Diaspora relations? At least pro forma most of the Israeli leaders and politicians believe that Israel has been established as the state of, and for, the entire Jewish people. That is, according to this often stated belief the state is intended to serve the Jews who live there, those who intend to immigrate there, those who remain in their host countries and are identified as nationalist Jews, and especially those who suffer in their host countries because of their national affiliation and identification.

Now, theoretically, predicated on this fundamental Zionist belief, Israeli foreign policy must be geared first and foremost to the needs of the Jewish Diaspora. In view of this principle, the state's international policy should closely follow developments affecting the Diaspora, and supply adequate answers to the difficulties facing it. However, already in the stormy 1930s, and especially during the disastrous days of World War II, the Yishuv leaders did not behave in accordance with these declared Zionist maxims. There is no doubt that during the Holocaust, leaders of the Yishuv determined their policies vis-à-vis the Jews in Europe primarily on the basis of calculations pertaining to the needs of the Yishuv itself. This has been known as the Palestino-centric approach to foreign policy. Not that these leaders did not care about the fate of European Jews under the Nazi yoke, but under the strong impression of their own traumas during World War I, and during various periods of disturbances in the 1930s, they cared more about the fate of the small Jewish community in Palestine. This was not the only contributing factor to the behavior of the Yishuv leadership, who also felt helplessness in view of the diabolical cruelty of the Germans, confusion in view of the Allies' apathy, and deep frustration in view of their pitifully
limited resources. Nevertheless, the ideological and practical tensions between the Palestinocentric approach to foreign policy and a more balanced one to the issue existed even during that calamitous period for the Jews.

Since the establishment of the Jewish state Israeli governments have not changed their basic attitudes towards Diaspora Jews. Repeatedly, Israeli leaders made vociferous public declarations about their commitments to the Diaspora, and promised that Israel would pursue foreign policies which take into account Jewish interests. But, behind these verbal smoke screens, those same Israeli leaders acted on the basis of purely Israelocentric calculations. At best, Diaspora considerations came third or fourth in the Israelis’ order of priorities. Furthermore, while an agreement had been concluded between the first Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, and the President of the American Jewish Committee, Jacob Blaustein, about the political autonomy of the Diaspora, about respect towards Diaspora interests and about non-intervention and non-interference in Diaspora internal politics and in its relations with host societies and host governments, Israeli representatives all over the world did not stop intervening and meddling in internal Diaspora affairs or embarrassing Diaspora Jews with their pursuit of unfavorable policies. The Pollard affair is only the latest and most noted in a string of such occurrences.

Examples for the hypocrisy and cynicism that have characterized the attitudes of the leaders of the Yishuv and Israel towards the Diaspora are abundant. Although the leaders of the Yishuv declared that Diaspora calculations had been uppermost in their policy concerning demands for Jewish immigrants’ entrance certificates into mandatory Palestine, in fact purely Palestinocentric calculations determined their actual requests for quotas; this approach guided the Yishuv when during the early phases of World War II its leaders asked that the Jewish units in the British army be deployed primarily to protect Palestine, rather than participate in the battles in Europe where most of the Jews were under German occupation; part of the considerations concerning the rescue operations of refugees in the wake of World War II were made within such a ‘Palestine first’ frame of mind; after the establishment of the Jewish state the approach to the question of fund raising in and by Diaspora communities was determined by pure Israeli needs almost heedless of local Jewish needs; bilateral relations with many friendly and hostile host countries, such as the Arab states, the Soviet Union, and South Africa, were made without sufficient regard for the interests of the local Jewish communities. Finally, in this context, the rejection of the demands made by many Jewish liberals in the Diaspora for greater moderation and flexibility in regard to the Palestinians and negotiations with their representatives, is based on the notion that Israeli interests
come first, and that the needs and desires of Diaspora Jews should be relegated to a lower place in the national order of priorities.

While before the establishment of the state there were certain feelings of respect towards Diaspora Jews, whose support for the Yishuv and for the actual creation of the state had been vital, after 1948 the attitudes towards Diaspora Jews were radically changed. The ideological Palestino-centric approach was translated, both by Israeli leaders and their followers, into a sense of superiority to Diaspora Jews. Pretty soon afterwards, these notions also created disregard for the political needs of these communities. Nevertheless, Israel needed the continued and redoubled support of Diaspora Jews, and therefore constantly increased its own demands from various Jewish Diaspora communities. Furthermore, Israeli representatives increased their blatant interference in the daily affairs of the major Jewish communities.

In the 1980s Israeli hypocrisy in regard to the Jewish Diaspora is very clearly evident in the sphere of political connections between the two partners, as well as in the sphere of fund raising. The Pollard scandal has once again demonstrated Israel’s disregard of American Jewish political needs and psychological sensitivities. There is no question that those who had recruited Pollard did not think about the implications of a failure in this adventure for the American Jewish community. The only calculations were those of the benefits for Israel and for its own organizations. Furthermore, the Jewish Diaspora aspects of this affair had not been considered when Pollard and his wife were evicted from the Israeli Embassy in Washington, and the sensitivities of the Jewish community were not taken into account when the Israeli authorities dealt with the American administration after the scandal was revealed. In this context, not much attention was given to Jewish considerations when noted Israeli writers such as Shlomo Avineri accused the American Jewish community of lack of self-confidence, and by implication of cowardice, when they had voiced their utmost dissatisfaction with this Israeli blunder. All these politicians and writers have neglected a ‘small’ fact: Israel is overwhelmingly dependent on the organized American Jewish community for most of the aid it gets from the American government.

While Israel requests political support primarily from the American Jewish community, it gets financial support from the entire Jewish Diaspora. Nevertheless, also in this sphere, Israel has demonstrated a great deal of hypocrisy. On the one hand, the Israelis show a lack of real understanding of the Jewish communities’ local financial needs when they advance their demands for a greater share of the total income from Diaspora fund raising, and on the other hand, they ridicule Jewish fund raising. Israelis mock Diaspora Jews’ purported obsession with materialism, and
they denigrate Jewish 'shnorr'. And yet Israeli leaders do not stop intervening and interfering in fund raising activities. No Israeli government has had the courage to either publicly deplore mockery and denigration of Jewish fund raising, or to state categorically that Israel does not need Jewish Diaspora money.

More generally speaking, despite the famous Ben-Gurion-Blaustein agreement, and repetitive governmental declarations that Israel would not meddle in the Diaspora's internal affairs, Israel aggressively demands its share in the money raised by the Diaspora, it interferes in Diaspora communal affairs and manipulates various Diaspora groups. By its intervention and meddling, Israel is increasing existing gaps and tensions within the Diaspora communities and in their relations with host societies and governments. This struggle over the control of fund raising has reached a peak. It is reflected by the current struggle within the Jewish Agency's assembly and will influence all internal debates within the forthcoming Zionist congresses.

The extensive amount of duplicity in official Israeli policy, as well as in less formal attitudes towards the interests of the Jewish Diaspora, stems from diametrically opposed considerations of Israeli governments and the Diaspora communities in regard to some crucial matters. Probably the most significant of these matters is that of 'dual loyalty'. This is the most pertinent and sensitive issue facing Diaspora Jews, including those who live in open, liberal and pluralistic Western societies. This issue assumes enormous proportions especially, of course, when there is a potential or actual, and an implicit or explicit, conflict between Israeli needs and a host country's interests or policies. For example, Israel and the Jewish people have lost many Russian Jews to prisons and Gulags as a result of the choice that these Jews made in regard to this issue. Similarly, but under more relaxed circumstances, Western Jews are gradually severing their relations with Israel as Israel again and again creates situations in which Jews are compelled to make very painful decisions.

Not only the Jews outside the state, but also the state itself has to honestly wrestle with this painful dilemma. On most occasions Israel has made fairly clear decisions which were unfavorable to these wavering Diaspora Jews. Thus, for example, the files of the Jewish Agency reveal that during the first stages of World War II the leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine did not stage a vehement opposition to the mandatory authorities that had severely restricted Jewish immigration from Nazi-occupied territories into Palestine, under the pretext that among these immigrants there might have been many German spies or collaborators. Although this British claim was extremely wicked and unfounded, the Yishuv leadership preferred its own interests, and refrained from extending the already existing gap between the Yishuv and the British government. Later, consecutive Israeli
governments failed to formulate clear policies towards foreign governments which had compelled their Jewish citizens to make a choice between the host society and the homeland. A good example of this was Israeli policy towards South Africa during periods when South Africa imposed severe limitations on the connections between its Jews and Israel. The same pertains to Israeli policy in regard to the Soviet Union.

Israel's ambivalent policy towards Jewish communities in distress, and towards the governments of these countries, stems also from a general dilemma facing many small countries like Israel. This is the 'independence in dependence' dilemma. Israel, of course, would like to reduce its dependence on Jewish communities, and especially its dependence on the American Jewish community, which limits its freedom of activity. Thus, for example it is true that Israel did not, and in fact could not, 'sacrifice' the British Jewish community, but to a very great extent it did write off support from this community when it had shown hesitancy in its willingness to demonstrate complete loyalty towards Israel in view of British government hostility. Nevertheless, Israel cannot give up Diaspora assistance as long as its economy has not overcome inherent difficulties of low productivity, adverse trade balance, need of unilateral transfers, etc., as well as its tremendous political and military dependence.

Unfortunately, Israeli ambivalence is manifest especially when a Diaspora Jewish community constitutes a heavy political burden, or an undesirable liability for Israel. This happens as a result of the Diaspora's worsening situation in its host country. Usually, in such cases Jewish leaders, or other members of the Diaspora, approach Israeli representatives, or their relatives, or acquaintances, in order to cash in on Israeli government declarations that the state would shoulder responsibility for its brethren in distress. When confronted, however, with such cases, despite their declared public commitments, the Israeli reaction is usually increased disengagement and action in its own perceived interests. Thus, Israeli governments had no remorse in supporting authoritarian regimes which took severe measures against entire Jewish communities, or against certain liberal segments within them, who had openly opposed these regimes, or supported their opponents. Although many Israeli actions in this highly sensitive sphere are still shrouded in heavy secrecy, there are a number of examples which can illustrate these observations. Thus, Israeli relations with the military junta in Argentina, its connections with the dictatorial regime in Chile, and its policies in regard to recent weapons supplies to Iran, substantiate the fact that Israeli policies were predominantly influenced by pure Israelocentric rather than Jewish considerations, and that in these instances, as well as in many others, Israel indeed disengaged itself from local Jewish communities in distress.
In this context a further element should be mentioned: the ‘triangular connection’. That is, the extremely complex connections between Israeli relations with foreign countries, and the welfare and satisfaction of Jewish communities in third countries. Very clear cases of this kind of problem are the implications of dubious Israeli cooperative ventures with the regimes of Chile, South Africa and Taiwan for the political and social position, as well as the moral satisfaction, of the Jewish communities in the United States, Canada and England. There is no doubt that close relations between Israel and isolated, or pariah, states such as South Africa, Taiwan and Chile are bound to create social, political, and moral difficulties for Jewish communities, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world where liberal Jews are in the frontline of the opposition to these repressive regimes. While over the years many American Jewish leaders urged Israel to modify its relations with those isolated states, these demands did not affect Israeli policies in this sphere. Israeli leaders have preferred purely Israeli interests and considerations.

When faced with these fundamental dilemmas, individual Israeli politicians, as well as consecutive Israeli governments, usually use the ostrich tactics of delay and avoidance. These tactics are employed whenever the situation of a certain Jewish community deteriorates and there is an urgent need for Israeli courageous decisions and actions. Thus, for many years Israeli governments avoided the basic issues confronting the Jewish communities of Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Hungary and other distressed communities in the Eastern bloc.

Now Israel and the Jewish Diaspora have reached a crucial crossroads in their relations. The two partners must rethink their attitudes and reformulate their policies. In this process the Israelis must realize the full scope of the problem at hand, and find adequate answers to some of the searing dilemmas that have been mentioned, if the quality of decision making in the sphere of Israeli foreign relations is to improve.

III

The most fundamental philosophical existential dilemma is that of center and periphery in the Jewish nation. Like other dilemmas that will be mentioned here, this is not only a theoretical one. It has many practical ramifications which can and should determine actual Israeli policies. The issue turns around the question of whether Israel should and can continue to act on the basis of the one-dimensional notion that Israel itself is the indisputable center of the nation. A number of simultaneous developments put a huge question mark on this accepted Israeli notion, which has wrongly guided Israeli policy during the last forty years. On the one hand, Israel suffers from a number of crises and setbacks that
adversely influence its central position for world Jewry. Israel is in the midst of a protracted political stalemate, the religious-secular cleavage has been significantly increased and is jeopardizing much of the state’s cultural and social development, and the Israeli intellectual and academic systems are in a deep abyss which incapacitates them and prevents them from making any significant contribution to a spectacular spiritual and cultural Jewish renaissance. On the other hand, there is a continued cultural revival in at least two Diaspora communities—in the United States and in France. This means that culturally there are now at least three active and competing centers in the Jewish nation. It is therefore unlikely that in the future American or French Jews would unquestionably accept Israeli spiritual predominance or political leadership.

The policy implications of an Israeli recognition of this situation are: first, greater Israeli awareness of its true reduced position in the Jewish nation, and second, recognition of the national legitimacy of Diaspora pursuit of their own self-interests, and its corollary, by far greater attention to Diaspora interests when Israeli policy makers determine their foreign policy.

The second dilemma confronting Israel is how to balance more carefully its policies vis-à-vis host countries and their Jewish communities. And the emphasis in this respect should be, of course, on how Israel is going to increase the weight of Jewish considerations in its foreign policy towards host countries of large and smaller Jewish communities. In doing so Israel should not neglect its own vital interests, but at the same time it should respect and carefully consider the interests of the Jewish communities.

The third dilemma is how to solve its ‘independence in dependence’ magic circle. That is, how to maintain its ability to pursue its own policies in view of its dependence on the United States as well as on the American Jewish community. In this context Israel must make some difficult decisions, especially in regard to its relations with the American Jewish community.

Answers to these difficult questions should have tremendous effects on many crucial Israeli policies, including those towards the peace process, and particularly concerning its Palestinian angle—since many Diaspora Jews demand that Israel recognize the Palestinians’ right to self-determination; Israeli policies towards authoritarian and totalitarian regimes; its demands for American military and economic aid; patterns of combat against terrorism; its position in regard to the resumption of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and other East European countries, etc.

The crux of the matter is that not only official Israeli policies are unclear, but that the Israeli public has not clarified its own views or crystallized its positions in this crucial area. Despite the many
changes that have occurred in Israel’s objective, as well as in its subjective positions, especially in the wake of the 1973 war, many Israelis still harbor old sentiments and are not aware of the new trends in Diaspora communities. In this respect, the relations between the Israeli society and the Diaspora Jews have further been complicated by the growing emigration from Israel, especially to English speaking countries. Strictly speaking, these Israeli emigrants who settle side by side with the traditional communities, are, paradoxically, the genuine Israeli Diaspora. In any case, partly under the influence of the official Israeli unfavorable attitudes towards those Israeli emigrants, and partly out of their own considerations, Diaspora communities do not welcome these ex-Israelis. Nevertheless, the negative attitudes shown by many Israelis towards the emigrants are also applied to the older Jewish communities in these countries. There is no escape from the conclusion that, like in other spheres, also in this sphere the Israeli politicians have succeeded in isolating this crucial issue and in reducing to a minimum Israeli public opinion involvement. The net result is that the Israeli public has not demonstrated any urge to influence the government’s or Jewish Agency’s policies towards the Diaspora. Therefore, ‘professional Zionists’ control this aspect of the national policies.

In the final analysis, the Jewish element has indeed become the most elusive aspect of Israeli foreign policy. A small interest group monopolizes this sphere and is preventing any new ideas from penetrating their sacred domain. Warding off public and oppositional attitudes, however, is not going to solve the many dilemmas existing in this area. A continuation of the traditional patterns is bound to further exacerbate the existing problems, especially in view of new trends towards greater autonomy shown in various parts of the Jewish Diaspora. The continued complacency and disregard which official Israel is demonstrating in this area cast a giant shadow on one of the most delicate and significant aspects of the Jewish state. This shadow should be removed, and the sooner the better.