BEN-GURION AND JEWISH FOREIGN POLICY

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This essay examines the Jewish basis of David Ben-Gurion's foreign policy. For Ben-Gurion, Israel was the sum and substance of everything Jewish. Therefore, his foreign policy was totally Israel-centric — ideological when it came to matters of Israel's centrality and pragmatic when it came to Israel's survival. Ben-Gurion developed a unique interpretation of Judaism which enabled him to adopt policies and make decisions that would be compatible with his own version of Judaism while at the same time serving the collective interests of the new Jewish state. Such foreign policy issues as non-alignment, reaction to the alleged Jewish doctors' plot in the USSR, rapprochement with West Germany, attitudes towards South Africa, anti-Semitism in the diaspora, and the Eichmann trial are analyzed in this light. In practice, when Israeli interests contradicted the interests of Jewish communities in the diaspora, Ben-Gurion tended to favor Israel's interests. Yet, in cases where Israeli interests were not at stake, Ben-Gurion was ready to support the Jewish cause.

Introduction

Following the challenging question posed by Sandler, "Is There a Jewish Foreign Policy?,"[1] this essay examines the Jewish basis of David Ben-Gurion's foreign policy. According to Sandler, the two basic tenets of a Jewish foreign policy are normative and actual. At the normative level exist Jewish norms and values. The actual dimension was divided by Sandler into three categories: "Jewish communities in distress...anti-Semitism...and the security and well-being of the State of Israel."[2]

For Ben-Gurion, Israel was the sum and substance of everything Jewish. Therefore, his foreign policy was totally Israel-centric — ideological when it came to matters of Israel's centrality and pragmatic when it came to Israel's survival. Both these aspects were reflections of his understanding of the true Jewish interest. According to this unidimensional perception, Ben-Gurion's foreign policy must be treated as entirely Jewish at the normative level. Yet, when the three categories of the actual dimension mentioned by Sandler are taken into

account, only one of them, the security and well-being of the State of Israel, is clearly found in Ben-Gurion's foreign policy.

Ben-Gurion was an extreme case of a basically pragmatic statesman who was committed to an ideological political style. The fact that Judaism is a highly complex phenomenon, consisting of several interpretations, was easily used by him. He developed a unique interpretation of Judaism which enabled him to take part in the permanent debate on the essence of Judaism, and at the same time to adopt policies and make decisions that would be compatible with his own version of Judaism and would serve the collective interests of the new Jewish state.

The most important components in Ben-Gurion's interpretation of Judaism were pointed out by Liebman and Don-Yehiya: belief in the primacy of the spirit; belief in messianic redemption; recognition of the Jewish people as the only ally on whom Israel could rely; rejection of the cultural significance of that part of the tradition which originated in exile; emphasis on the importance of the Bible and the biblical period.[3] These beliefs reflect a typical moralistic approach which is far from Ben-Gurion's basic *realpolitik* orientation.

One aspect of this *realpolitik* approach was what Avi-Hai labelled "Israelocentrism." According to this doctrine, which was designed by Ben-Gurion, "all which is done by Jews in Israel is central, vital, critical for the Jewish people and for Jewish history. The converse is also true: what is done by Jews in the diaspora is transient, secondary and ultimately wasteful."[4]

The superiority of Israel's interests over those of diaspora Jewry was expressed by Ben-Gurion in 1966:

> It was always my view that we have always to consider the interests of diaspora Jewry — any Jewish community that was concerned. But there is one crucial distinction — not what they think are their interests, but what we regarded as their interests. If it was a case vital for Israel, and the interests of Jews concerned were different, the vital interests of Israel came first — because Israel is vital for world Jewry.[5]

In fact, this dialectical argument meant that primacy would be given to Israel's urgent need to enlarge its population by massive Jewish immigration. The specific Israeli interest in Jewish immigration was translated into a basic principle of Israel's foreign policy which supported the right of every Jew to emigrate in order to settle in Israel. The primacy of the population enlargement factor already existed before the establishment of the State of Israel. In a speech in 1935 at the Zionist Executive Committee, Ben-Gurion stated that "the Aliya which Hitler caused has a Zionist blessing...and some good Zionists do not come even now — because the danger of the Hitlers has not approached them."[6]

In spite of his tendency to use moral reasoning and to justify his policies in ideological terms, Ben-Gurion considered action and implementation as the most significant parts of the political process, while he perceived statements, declarations and phraseology as marginal. He expressed this tendency in the Knesset thus: "We do not have much trust in the value of statements, declarations and declamations…if it is not attached in fact to a commitment to daily action, and if the action does not lead to the fulfillment of the declamation."[7] This point is important in any analysis of Ben-Gurion's perceptions and policies. His decisions and deeds are much more important than his words.

Furthermore, it is impossible to understand the direct impact of Jewish values on practical foreign policy. Therefore, this essay concentrates on practical elements of Ben-Gurion's foreign policy rather than on his thinking on foreign policy. Nevertheless, a few remarks concerning his thinking on foreign policy must be made.

Ben-Gurion's Thinking on Foreign Policy

Ben-Gurion considered foreign policy as a vehicle for achieving various aims. In January 1949 he stated: "A foreign policy which does not serve our security, our Aliya and our settlement — is not a foreign policy of the State of Israel, but of foreign agents."[8] Moreover, Ben-Gurion could hardly distinguish between security and foreign policies. In 1949 he initiated the inclusion of security and foreign affairs in one parliamentary committee, in spite of the support of all Israeli political parties for constituting separate parliamentary committees for security and foreign affairs. Security policies were the most important issues, while foreign policy was considered by him as secondary and minor.

Avi-Hai argued that since 1956 Ben-Gurion was conscious of the "total subordination of foreign policy to security."[9] Such priorities might be explained by the fact that Ben-Gurion headed the Defense Ministry and not the Foreign Affairs Ministry. Yet, an alternative explanation might concentrate on the interrelation between foreign policy and passive-declarative politics, on the one hand, and between security policy land active-initiative politics, on the other hand. Ben-Gurion clearly preferred active-initiative politics. He felt that foreign policy had primarily a symbolic significance, but that its impact was quite limited. It would therefore be useless to try to find Jewish remnants in a foreign policy which hardly existed on its own and was totally subordinated to security considerations.

Since security considerations were less salient in the pre-state period, it is necessary to look at Ben-Gurion's perceptions of foreign policy before the establishment of the State of Israel. In a speech delivered in

1941 at the Mapai Council, Ben-Gurion explained the differences between Zionist policy and the theological conception which was dominant in the exile period. Jews who were separated from their homeland developed an orientation of Jewish uniqueness. Jews, according to this orientation, stood apart from the rules of nature and history. Therefore, the world was dichotomously separated between Jews and non-Jews. Zionist policy, according to Ben-Gurion, represented an antithesis to this orientation which reflected basic weakness. Zionists did not perceive the world as being dichotomously separated between Jews and non-Jews. The Jewish people were subordinated to the rules of nature and history. It could thus be concluded that Zionism was the political expression of normalization processes which the Jewish people had been undergoing. Using Ben-Gurion's arguments would lead to the rejection of any unique Jewish content in the foreign policy of the Zionist movement and Israel. In fact, *realpolitik* was the name of the game. Since the United States and Britain were going to lead the world after the fall of Germany, Zionism should make every attempt to influence public opinion in those two countries, including the recommitment of the Jewish communities there to promote the Zionist cause.

Ben-Gurion argued in 1941 that until the emergence of Zionism there was no such thing as "Jewish policy." Zionism was based on the assumption that there was a Jewish people and that this people had its own policy. Non-Zionist Jews assumed that there was a Jewish people but that it did not have its own policy. Thus, Ben-Gurion concluded that Jewish policy was in fact Zionist policy. No Jewish policy which was basically non-Zionist could exist. That meant that Zionism had the monopoly on any political expression of the Jewish people.

Ben-Gurion disallowed any attempt by Jewish organizations, even Zionist ones, to intervene in Israel's foreign policy. Since Israel was the only vehicle of Zionism, no other organization would be allowed to develop an independent policy relating to Israel's foreign affairs. Ben-Gurion opposed equal cooperation between Israel and Jewish organizations in matters of foreign policy. Those organizations, as well as diaspora Jewry, were called upon to support Israel in every way, but were left out of the foreign policy-making processes. According to Ben-Gurion, Israel represented the whole Jewish people, but Jews not living in Israel had no rights in the making of Israel's foreign policy. This asymmetric perception was based on a conception that in Jewish terms Israel was the center and the diaspora the periphery. In other terms, according to Ben-Gurion's approach, the desired relationships between Israel and the diaspora were those of patron and client. Foreign policy was the fullest expression of the independence and sovereignty of Israel. Thus, any attempt to build a partnership between Israel and diaspora Jewry with regard to Israel's foreign policy would be totally rejected by Ben-Gurion.

Over the years Ben-Gurion formulated the principles on which Israel's foreign policy relied. In 1958 he mentioned the following principles: to build friendly relations with any peaceful country no matter its domestic policies; to achieve a permanent peace and cooperation with Israel's neighbors; to strengthen the peace in the world; to develop commercial relations with all countries; to maintain Israel's sovereignty, freedom and peace; and, lastly, "to take care of the right of the Jews in all countries to immigrate to Israel and to take part in its building."[10]

In 1961 he changed the order of these principles: the first was the security needs of Israel; second, the ingathering of the exiles (*kibbutz galuyot*); third, support for world Jewry including the right of Jews to emigrate; and lastly, helping new nations and strengthening peaceseekers in the world.[11]

In 1962 Ben-Gurion gave priority to the desire for peace in the world and especially in the Middle East. He defined the second principle as the security needs, immigration, development and independence of Israel. The next principle was the well-being and needs of world Jewry, while the last was support for international cooperation and the principles of the United Nations Charter.[12]

Ben-Gurion's three statements of principle did not ignore the Jewish cause, yet none gave primacy to this cause. There were some inconsistencies in the relative weight of the Jewish component in Israel's foreign policy. In 1958 the immigration issue was the only Jewish point; it was enlarged in 1961 and again in 1962. This issue, more than anything, represented more the interests of Israel rather than that of diaspora Jewry. As time went by Ben-Gurion relied more and more on Jewish considerations, but his policy decisions were far from reflecting such considerations. Nevertheless, his changing declarative emphasis on the Jewish cause over time was expressed at the same time in the adoption of policies which were closer to Jewish interests than policies adopted in the first years after the establishment of the state.

Non-Alignment

The first major case involving the Jewish dimension in Ben-Gurion's foreign policy relates to the non-aligned posture of Israel, a policy which ended in 1950. Barzilai concluded that "the policy of nonalignment was a Jewish policy that was concerned with the ingathering of the exiled, as [well as] with the security of the Jews in the countries where they live."[13] Yet some of his own findings do not support this conclusion. Although Soviet Jews were not allowed to emigrate to Israel and were persecuted by the Soviet authorities, Israel's foreign policy was characterized by sympathy towards the Soviet Union.[14]

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Until 1950, when the relations between the Soviet Union and Israel were severely strained, Ben-Gurion did not clearly demand free emigration from the Soviet Union.[15] This is far from "Jewish policy" when the interests of Soviet Jewry are concerned. As long as Israel was supported by the Soviets, its Jews were partially neglected by the Israeli political establishment, which Ben-Gurion headed. Barzilai did not concentrate on the wide gap between Jewish rhetoric manipulated by Ben-Gurion and his indifference towards Soviet Jewry. Ben-Gurion justified his non-alignment policy in Jewish terms, as supportive of world peace. The biblical Prophets were morally committed to world peace. Therefore, as a Jewish state Israel must follow the moral legacy of the Prophets. But beyond these statements were clear Israeli interests such as arms supplies and political support from the Soviet bloc. When it became clear in 1950 that these interests would not be promoted through a non-aligned foreign policy, that policy was abandoned and Israel turned to the West. The Jewish implications of this policy shift were not seriously taken into account by Ben-Gurion. When Mapam, a socialist-oriented party, renewed its demand for a posture of non-alignment in 1957, Ben-Gurion rebuffed them by emphasizing the difference between the United States, whose Jews were allowed to support Israel, and the Soviet Union, which prohibited such Jewish involvement.[16]

The Jewish Doctors' Plot

In 1953 the Soviet leadership led by Joseph Stalin accused senior Jewish doctors of cooperating with the CIA in an attempt to poison top Soviet leaders — an anti-Semitic affair that became known as the Jewish Doctors' Plot. Ben-Gurion used this issue to attack the pro-Soviet Israeli Communist party (Maki). He told the members of his Mapai party Political Committee that Soviet Jewry faced a potential holocaust at the hands of the Soviets and sought to punish the Israeli Communists by outlawing their party. Yet a majority of the Committee voted down Ben-Gurion's proposal.[17] Ben-Gurion's attitude on this issue was not one of retaliation since Maki did not take part in the Soviet plot. In this affair his motivation was not related to foreign policy at all but to calculations of domestic party politics. In any case, if Ben-Gurion's proposal had been implemented, it could not have served the concrete interests of Soviet Jewry.

Rapprochement with West Germany

A meaningful step in Israel's foreign policy was the rapprochement with West Germany and Ben-Gurion was its main architect. In spite of

strong criticism from the right and the left, Ben-Gurion did not refrain from fulfilling the agreement with West Germany. He justified his decision to exchange granting legitimacy to West Germany for financial assistance by arguing that Israel would be unable to absorb and resettle the masses of Jewish immigrants unless it received economic support from West Germany. In January 1952 he spoke to the Knesset about the "moral right" of Israel to receive this support and about its "sacred duty" to restore Jewish property lost in the Holocaust.[18] Ben-Gurion was motivated in this matter by a sincere desire to strengthen the Israeli economy which was in deep crisis at the time.

As time passed the cooperation between Israel and West Germany significantly broadened. West German arms sales to Israel evoked domestic criticism. After news leaked out about a secret visit to Germany by Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, Ben-Gurion decided to resign. Defending his policy, Ben-Gurion emphasized the subordination of foreign policy to security needs:

> I want to say in clear words, that as long as I am responsible for security matters...I will not hesitate for a minute to accept equipment from any country....If I am given in one hand all the ideals in the world, magnificent, wonderful, charming ideals but lacking Israel's security, and in the second hand only Israel's security, I will not hesitate for a minute and I will choose the hand of Israel's security.[19]

Ben-Gurion endowed a Jewish content to security needs by labelling them "the care for the existence of the Jewish people."[20]

Attitudes Towards South Africa

A very interesting case for understanding the weight of the Jewish factor in Ben-Gurion's foreign policy was Israel's 1961 vote at the UN in favor of sanctions against South Africa in response to apartheid. Two opposition parties — Herut and Agudat Yisrael — criticized the Israeli vote, arguing that it might be harmful to South African Jewry. Ben-Gurion told the Knesset that three considerations had guided him in his decision: the Jewish moral heritage, the needs of South African Jewry, and the international position of Israel.

Concentrating on the Jewish moral heritage, Ben-Gurion explained why Jews were unable to agree to racial discrimination. To support his arguments he quoted selected phrases from the Torah. He even mentioned the marriage of Moses to a black woman. Speaking on behalf of the Jewish people, he claimed that "we tasted racial discrimination during thousands of years, and we will not be able to regard indifferently a regime which believes in such discrimination in the utmost form."[21]

Speaking of the needs of South African Jewry, Ben-Gurion told the Knesset that Israel did not join those countries which voted for expelling South Africa from the UN since Israel "does not ignore, and is not allowed to ignore the fate of the sons of our people in other countries."[22] Ben-Gurion pointed out that one of the reasons for the decision to support the proposal imposing sanctions on South Africa was the Israeli interest in strengthening its ties with the new Afro-Asian countries. In fact, this was the crucial factor in the process of decision-making, while the interests of South African Jewry were largely ignored and the moral considerations were used as a cover for a *realpolitik*-oriented policy.

Anti-Semitism in the Diaspora and the Eichmann Trial

In two instances Ben-Gurion did adopt a foreign policy which was partly directed by strictly Jewish considerations and which had no negative impact on Israeli interests. In 1959 there were swastika-daubing incidents in a dozen countries. The Israeli government sent letters to the governments of the countries concerned, expressing shock and amazement. Ben-Gurion justified this policy as follows: "Theoretically it is so: we always say we are responsible only for the Jews of Israel. But practically Israel belongs to the Jewish people. We know, in a way, that we represent the Jewish people...we are responsible for the fate of the Jewish people."[23] The Israeli government had nothing to lose by taking such diplomatic steps. Rather, it strengthened its position in its struggle with Jewish organizations outside Israel over the right to represent the interests of world Jewry.

In 1960 Israeli agents in Argentina kidnapped Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal, who was subsequently sentenced to death by an Israeli court in Jerusalem. His abduction caused a diplomatic clash with Argentina, and the affair was even discussed by the UN Security Council. Ben-Gurion responded: "Do the Argentinians understand the sufferings we have endured? Have they had six million of their people murdered?...At that time they were neutral in a conflict that threatened the very future of humanity."[24] The diplomatic crisis between Israel and Argentina was resolved after a short period. Ben-Gurion's policy in the Eichmann Affair was the most extreme case of loyalty to Jewish interests. Argentina, a marginal state in terms of international politics, was judged to pose no serious threat to Israeli interests.

In conclusion, if the total equation of Jewish interests and Israel is unacceptable, the Jewish dimensions in Ben-Gurion's foreign policy should be considered as marginal. When Israeli interests contradicted the interests of Jewish communities in the diaspora, Ben-Gurion tended to favor Israel's interests. Yet, in cases where Israeli interests were not

at stake, Ben-Gurion was ready to support the Jewish cause. This was exemplified in the case of the Eichmann trial and following the swastika-daubing incidents. Jewish deliberations were marginal in Ben-Gurion's foreign policy, but central and important in the justifications and explanations offered for his decisions.

It would not be fair to judge Ben-Gurion's foreign policy as totally non-Jewish. According to his belief, Israel's foreign policy was fully Jewish. In addition, where Israel's interests were not at stake, Ben-Gurion adopted a typical Jewish foreign policy. During his period as prime minister his major goal was to ensure the survival of the newly-born Jewish state. Achieving this basic goal necessitated his adoption of *realpolitik* and a pragmatic foreign policy. However, the manipulations made by Ben-Gurion concerning the Jewish cause were not unavoidable.

The Jewish foreign policy foundations designed by Ben-Gurion were basically adopted by almost all subsequent prime ministers. Only Menachem Begin can be regarded, to a limited extent, as being the only Israeli prime minister who considered the Jewish aspect in foreign policy beyond the simplistic argument concerning the total equation of Jewish interests and the State of Israel. Yet overall, especially in the formative era under Ben-Gurion's leadership, an Israeli foreign policy was developed but no Jewish foreign policy was adopted.

It is important to emphasize that a Jewish foreign policy does not mean a specific policy lacking flexibility or variation. Hence, a nationalist-hawkish foreign policy such as adopted by Begin may be considered a Jewish foreign policy, as well as may a universalistic-dovish foreign policy, such as recommended by Nahum Goldmann, President of the World Zionist Organization. Goldmann demanded that Israel cooperate with Zionist organizations in the designing of Israel's foreign policy, a demand rejected by Ben-Gurion. Goldmann supported the neutrality of Israel by arguing:

> This people is unique in its history and its structure....Such a state, whose mere existence requires the moral and spiritual solidarity of all the Jews of the world, must by definition be neutral....Such a state would set the perfect crown on Jewish history, in keeping with the unique destiny of the Jewish people. In terms of practical politics it would mean that the United Nations would have to guarantee the state's existence and integrity by methods that would be effective.[25]

Ben-Gurion's statist approach avoided any meaningful possibility of adopting or creating a Jewish foreign policy which did not exclusively reflect the interests of the Jewish state. His perception that the Jewish people had not yet fully consolidated as a normal nation necessitated a foreign policy based on *realpolitik* considerations. Since, to

Ben-Gurion, non-Israeli Jewish foreign policy meant the adoption of old diaspora patterns, there was no chance that he would ever implement such a policy.

Instead of Israeli governments adopting some elements of a Jewish foreign policy, the permanent pattern of Israeli-diaspora relations is totally different. As Sheffer argues:

> 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 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.[26]

Notes

1. Shmuel Sandler, "Is There a Jewish Foreign Policy?" *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 20:2 (December 1987): 115-121.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

3. Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 89-90.

4. Avraham Avi-Hai, "Israelocentrism: A Guiding Doctrine of David Ben-Gurion," *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1975), p. 355.

5. Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel — Setting, Images, Process* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 232.

6. David Ben-Gurion, *From Class to Nation* (Tel Aviv: Ayanoth, 1955), p. 500 (Hebrew).

7. *Divrei HaKnesset* (Knesset Protocol), Vol. 1 (March 10, 1949), p. 135 (Hebrew).

8. David Ben-Gurion, *Vision and Way*, Vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Hotzaat Mapai, 1951), p. 9 (Hebrew).

9. Avi-Hai, "Israelocentrism," p. 365.

10. *Divrei HaKnesset*, Vol. 24 (April 22, 1958), p. 1817 (Hebrew).

11. David Ben-Gurion, *The Eternity of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Ayanoth, 1964), pp. 448-449 (Hebrew).

12. *Divrei HaKnesset*, Vol. 34 (August 6, 1962), p. 3063 (Hebrew).

13. Gad Barzilai, *Israeli Foreign Policy 1947-1950*, M.A. Thesis, Department of Political Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan (1982), p. 15 in the English synopsis.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

16. *Divrei HaKnesset*, Vol. 23 (November 18, 1957), p. 181 (Hebrew).

17. Giora Goldberg, "The Jewish Factor in the Israeli Reaction towards the Doctors' Plot in Moscow," in Eliezer Don-Yehiya, ed., *The State of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora: Ideological and Political Perspectives* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, forthcoming).

18. *Divrei HaKnesset*, Vol. 10 (January 7, 1952), p. 896 (Hebrew).

19. *Ibid.*, Vol. 23 (December 23, 1957), pp. 483-484 (Hebrew).

20. *Ibid.*, Vol. 32 (November 2, 1961), p. 249 (Hebrew).

21. *Ibid.*, Vol. 32 (November 27, 1961), p. 449 (Hebrew).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 450.

23. Brecher, *Foreign Policy System*, p. 237.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 239-240.

25. Nahum Goldmann, *The Autobiography of Nahum Goldmann* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 301.

26. Gabriel Sheffer, "The Elusive Question: Jews and Jewry in Israeli Foreign Policy," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 46 (Spring 1988): 108.