Introduction

Histories of the modern Middle East, and of the Arab–Israeli conflict in particular, generally focus on regional participants. Some work has been done about the relations between the region and the two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union), but little has put the Arab–Israeli conflict into the context of the Cold War. Both East and West sought influence and favor, juggling ideology and geopolitics. Between the end of World War II and the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the superpowers, fighting proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam and contending over Berlin and Cuba, calculated their national interests in the Middle East according to bilateral global factors. For Israel, those factors determined the nature of its relations with each of the superpowers.

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and defense minister, was not like many of his colleagues led astray by ideology or stereotypes. He understood that as a democracy Israel was a part of the West and that only the United States could provide Israel with the economic aid it needed to ingather Jewish exiles from all over the world. However, Ben-Gurion was faced with a paradox. Following the exodus of the Jews from the Arab-Muslim countries after the creation of the State of Israel, the Soviet Union's Jewish population was the largest reservoir of potential immigrants: the well-off Jews of the United States, he realized, would never move en masse to Israel. Thus, preserving correct relations with the Soviet Union and persuading it to allow its Jews to emigrate was critical for Israel and kept Ben-Gurion, at least initially, from explicitly aligning the country with the West.

That failed because the Soviet Union quickly concluded that its strategic interests lay with the Arab world. While Israel did have two political parties strongly identifying with the Soviet Union, the Soviets realized that the road to Soviet-style socialism in the Middle East would not be paved through Israel. The Arab world offered not only oil but strategic depth, and Soviet penetration of the Middle East began with the Czech–Egyptian arms agreement.

By all accounts, Israel's decision to join the Suez Campaign in 1956, either in collaboration with Britain and France or based on calculating national security interests, determined the country's short- and long-term strategies. The Sinai Campaign immediately worsened relations with the Kremlin and the Arab states, eventually leading to the Six Day War in 1967. Furthermore, cooperation with France contributed to Israel's deterrence when France helped set up Israel's nuclear reactor and provided a steady supply of aircraft and surface-to-surface missiles.

However, had Washington acceded to Israel's demands for security guarantees and heavy weapons, a mortal blow would have been dealt to the fundamental assumptions of US Cold War strategy. The United States would have lost its strategic interests in the Middle East, the oil, military bases and transportation routes, as well as the loyalty of the moderate Arab governments to the West, and the defection of the radical Arab states to the Soviets would have become a fait accompli. According to US policy at the time, giving Israel security guarantees (that is, an alliance) would have worsened the East–West conflict in the Middle East.

US administrations up to and including that of John F. Kennedy considered the Arab refugee problem the tinder most likely to set off a Middle East war, a volatile issue the Soviets could exploit. Throughout the period, the Washington mindset was global and regional issues were variables in the larger equations presented by the conflict with the Soviets. Israel could only try to influence the United States and other Western countries to pursue policies favorable to it, or at least keep harm to a minimum.

Israeli–Soviet relations cannot be fully explained without taking the Cold War into account and, given the lack of sources to explain decision-making in the Kremlin, nothing can be determined with the same certainty as in the relations between Israel and the United States. However, recently published Soviet diplomatic material offers a glimpse of the Soviet leadership's global and regional calculations. Like the United States, the Soviet Union took a regional approach and ignored Israel's vital interests.

The Kremlin may have been satisfied with making Israel a scapegoat, and Soviet support of the so-called 'progressive Arab states' held the promise of tipping the global balance of power in Moscow's favor. In all probability, the determined and unconditional Soviet support of the Arabs, and its contempt for Israel's capabilities, shaped the Kremlin's refusal to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate freely. While common wisdom is that the Kremlin kept its internal and external considerations completely separate, the members of the Central Committee and the Politburo who made the decisions about the Middle East were most likely anti-Semitic

or influenced by anti-Semitism. However, we lack the tools to gauge this influence. The Kremlin may well have been satisfied to make Israel not only a scapegoat, but a victim of the Cold War.

I have not devoted Israel's domestic policy (*Innenpolitik*) the attention it deserves. For all intents and purposes, Mapai, Ben-Gurion's party, controlled foreign policy. Even when the leftist parties (Mapam and Ahdut HaAvodah) and those on the right (the General Zionists) participated in the government, their influence on foreign policy was negligible compared with Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett, and, afterward, Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir and Abba Eban. Both the United States and the Soviet Union understood the ideological and practical significance of Mapai's control. The United States viewed its rule as better than one led by the extreme right-wing Herut movement, which advocated a nationalist policy of economic and territorial expansion. The extreme left sought to establish closer ties with the Soviets, so that both left and right were liable to endanger US strategic interests. The Soviet Union was hostile to Mapai because of its pro-Western orientation, bourgeois character and opposition to Communist ideology.

The goal of this book is to examine decision-making processes in Israel, the United States, and, to the extent possible, in the Soviet Union during the first twenty years of the Cold War. Since the minutes of the Israeli cabinet meetings during these years are partly classified, important information on Israeli government decisions is lacking, particularly regarding the nuclear facility in Dimona. Nevertheless, there are a great many sources offering a reasonable picture of the decision-making process.

In effect, for better or for worse, Israel's fate was determined by the United States and the Soviet Union. France, Britain and West Germany also played roles in ensuring Israel's survival, albeit generally in coordination with, or at least with the knowledge of, Washington. The exception was France, which did not always notify the United States about its arms deals with Israel.

A word on methodology: I do not accept the view that Israel's history is a series of missed opportunities. That is merely hindsight and misses the spirit of the times (zeitgeist). I take a simple historical approach that does not preoccupy itself with theoretical assumptions and assumes rather that worldviews (weltanschauungen) guide and shape policy. A single pioneering study written by Uri Bialer tried to examine Israel's foreign policy within the methodological framework of the Cold War. The current study continues and updates Bialer's work.

Four more books deal with the Middle East in general, paying marginal attention to the impact of the Cold War on Israel. They are Yezid Sayegh and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The Cold War and the Middle East* (Oxford

1997); Michael B. Oren, *The Six Days of War and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oxford 2002); Yaacov Ro'i and Boris Morozov, eds., *The Soviet Union and the June 1967 Six Day War* (Stanford 2008); Wm. Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim, eds., *The 1967 War Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences* (Oxford 2012). In addition, the abovementioned books focus mainly on the 1967 war itself and except for Oren, who begins as late as 1965, none of them uses the highly important material in the Israel State Archives (ISA).

During the Cold War, most of the countries of the world had to adjust themselves, one way or another, to its realpolitik and Israel was no exception. In large measure, its geopolitical position at a strategic crossroads in the very heart of the Arab world determined its fate. One basic assumption of this study is that Israel's proximity to the Middle East's large oil reserves, strategic transport routes, and the large military base in the area of the Suez Canal did not allow it the luxury of neutrality in the Cold War. Once the Czech–Egyptian arms agreement was concluded in 1955, the Cold War was a powerful regional presence.[1]

That raises the question of whether the Soviet threat was inherent or conditioned by Israeli behavior. The basic goal of the Soviet Union was to demolish the capitalist world and it made its own rules.[2] The United States had limited control over Israel, but it was completely different from the Soviet control of the Arabs. The Middle East was particularly important during the Cold War because of the strategic routes controlling access to it. Lacking a border with the Soviet Union, Israel did not play a direct or vital role in the West's strategy, but, because of its identification with the West, it could not avoid becoming a pawn in the East–West struggle.

Ideology was also a decisive factor in the Cold War. Beyond the ideological struggle, Israel exerted constant pressure on the Kremlin for Jewish immigration, something its rulers regarded as a direct threat. Thus, the Soviets regarded Israel as a double enemy, both Western and Zionist. Ultimately, the Soviet Union's efforts to gain a firm foothold in the Middle East, in particular in Syria and Egypt, led it to support its radical nationalist leaders. The Kremlin never adopted their program of seeking to destroy Israel, but it did not try to curb them. The United States found itself caught between its commitment to Israel and its strategic interests in the Arab world. While it was not dependent on

1 Arne Westad (2005) thinks that the Arab–Israeli wars had a special rationale stronger than that of the Cold War.

2 Heikal, 1978: 22–3.

Arab oil, its Western European allies were, and it feared that supporting Israel too strongly might directly cause economic chaos and enable the Soviet destabilization of Europe. Furthermore, the war in Vietnam limited US ability to firmly oppose Soviet encroachment in the Middle East. Ultimately, the Six Day War was a product not only of the Arab desire to wipe Israel off the map or of Israel's imperative to survive, but also of the complex global web of superpower conflict which led inexorably toward a Middle East war.