United States – Israel Relations (1953-1957) Revisited

Introduction

In the winter of 1993, *Diplomatic History* published an article titled “Eisenhower Revisionism: A Decade of Scholarship,” in which Stephen Rabe suggested that it was time to look back at Dwight Eisenhower’s conduct of US foreign policy and revise the common assumption about the president, whom the “old historiography” perceived as lax and benign in his demeanor, leaving it to his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, to do the work. That image is false, argued Rabe, suggesting that Eisenhower was the maker and shaper of US foreign policy, with Dulles serving as his loyal secretary of state, faithfully executing the president’s foreign policy.\(^1\) Indeed, no scholar of US foreign policy has contested this argument by Rabe, who based his claim on the work of other historians. There is, however, still one area in which Eisenhower revisionism is called for, namely, the study of American-Israeli relations during his presidency. The accepted approach to these relations is based to a great extent on expressions by the president himself. For example, on February 20, 1957, the president addressed the American nation via radio and television on the topic of the US response to Israel’s refusal to evacuate the two last posts it held after the 1956 Suez war – in Sharm al Sheik, at the southern tip of the Sinai desert, and the Gaza Strip. Israel insisted that it would evacuate these positions only after receiving satisfactory assurances that the Tiran Straits, across Sharm al Sheik, would remain open, and that the Gaza Strip would not once again become a springboard for attacks against Israel, as it had been before the war. Eisenhower insisted that Israel could not use its illegal occupation of the Sinai as a means

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to make demands, and that these issues should be resolved only after Israel’s withdrawal and through discussions with the United Nations. This statement by Eisenhower served as yet further evidence of a trait that seemed to characterize his administration from the beginning: his impatience toward Israel and his dismissal of the favoritism granted to it by the previous administration. In fact, the new administration made clear that it intended to change the nature of US relations with Israel and the Arab states, making them even-handed and impartial. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles introduced the policy the administration dubbed “impartial friendship” in his speech on June 1, 1953, following his visit to the Middle East, and it was subsequently approved by the National Security Council in NSC-155/1, which called for a policy of “objective partiality” between Israel and the Arab states.

Historians have endorsed that view of Israeli-American relations during the Eisenhower period. As Alice A. Butler-Smith concisely presents it, “Eisenhower saw Israel as the problem rather than the potential solution.” Other scholars have been more nuanced in their approach to the nature of relations between Israel and the United States during Eisenhower’s presidency.

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3 Radio Address by John F. Dulles, Secretary of State, on His Recent Visit to the Near East and South Asia, June 1, 1953, Department of State Bulletin, June 15, 1953, 834; Isaac Alters, Eisenhower and Israel (Gainesville, FL, 1993), 85.

4 Alice A. Butler-Smith, Imitations of Influence: Eisenhower, the Jews and the Middle East (PhD Diss., University of Kansas, 2004), X. See also Alters, Eisenhower and Israel, 37-38, 101-102; Etta Bick, “Transnational Actors in a Time of Crisis: The Involvement of American Jews in Israel-United States Relations, 1956-7,” Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 2003), 147; Peter Hahn, Caught in the Middle East (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), 164; Nadav Safran, Israel – the Embattled Ally (Cambridge, MA, 1981), 348; David Schoenbaum, The United States and the State of Israel (New York, 1993), 92-122; Asaf Siniver, Abba Eban, A Biography (New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2015), 130-131; Steven L. Spiegel, The Other Arab-Israel Conflict (Chicago, IL, 1985), 50-57; Salim Yaqub, Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 29.
Douglass Little, for example, argues that from the mid-1950s’ and more emphatically after 1958, “Eisenhower gradually came to regard the Israelis as potential allies in his struggle to contain Soviet-backed revolutionary Arab nationalism.”\(^5\) Likewise, when Little, Ben Zvi and others suggest that a change took place during 1957-1958, they agree that up to that point, Eisenhower had been aloof and distant in his attitude toward Israel.

While not wrong in their description of Eisenhower and Dulles as seeking a more balanced policy toward the protagonists in the Arab-Israeli conflict, these scholars seem to judge the president and his secretary of state’s attitude toward Israel too harshly and, in some sense, are “victims” of the administration’s rhetoric. A single and exceptional voice is that of Ian J. Bickerton, who suggested a different way to look at Eisenhower and his administration’s attitude toward Israel.\(^6\) This article will follow the line suggested by Bickerton, extending the discussion and will base it on primary sources not used before. It was indeed Eisenhower, Dulles and the senior leadership of the State Department and NSC that promoted the idea of an “impartial friendship,” and it was Eisenhower and Dulles who acted in what can be rightly described as an unfriendly manner toward Israel during the years 1953-1957. However, a careful reading of the documents and literature pertinent to the study of the Eisenhower administration’s policy and attitude toward Israel during those years reveals two traits that suggest a different reading of the meaning of the Eisenhower’s administration attitude toward Israel. First, while presenting their policy toward

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Israel as a change, in fact, the policy carried out by the Eisenhower administration toward Israel was one of continuity with the Truman administration more than it was a policy of change, as Eisenhower and Dulles would have us believe. Second, the administration was much more attentive and responsive to Israel’s needs than its rhetoric suggested. Conducing a nuanced and sophisticated type of policy, which intertwined interests with ideals, the administration aimed to preserve and increase US influence in the Middle East in light of the Cold War. This though was done in a way that would not put Israel at risk, and while acting to ameliorate Israel’s well-being, on the one hand, and being attentive and responsive to the voices emanating from the United States in relation to American policy toward Israel and the Middle East, on the other. All these factors, that did not get the appropriate attention in the literature. This article, it should be stressed, is not a comprehensive study of Israel-US relationships during the Eisenhower’ presidency. Its aim is to suggest, through the use of several examples, a different approach to our understanding of the Israeli-American relationships during the years 1953-1957, which were the years during which the ‘friendly impartial’ policy reigned.

**Eisenhower and Israel**

Unlike Truman, Eisenhower did not have a history with Jews and Zionists. Before his election, Eisenhower had never held an elected position, and hence he never came in contact with Jews or had to engage with issues pertinent to Jews and Zionism. His attitude toward Jews, Zionism and Israel was similar to the view of the average American, who acquired his knowledge about Jews and the State of Israel from his church and Sunday school. As he admitted to Sharett when the two met in London in February 1952, until the age of 25, all he knew about the Jews was what he had picked up from the stories of the Bible: “Actually, I wasn’t sure at all that there were Jews
in the world. I read in the Old Testament about angels, and I thought it was a fairy tale, and so I thought about the sons of Israel. I never knew they existed.”

When he did meet Jews, it was under the horrific circumstances of the Nazi concentration camps. As the Allied supreme commander, following the final defeat of the Nazis in May 1945, General Eisenhower visited a German death camp near Gotha. The things he saw there “beggar description,” and what he saw and heard from survivors made him sick. Eisenhower insisted on visiting every site in the camp, explaining to George C. Marshall, “I made the visit deliberately in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things, if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to ‘propaganda’.”

At the same time, Eisenhower treated and regarded what he saw as a humanitarian issue that had to be addressed and resolved as such. That is, for Eisenhower, the lesson and conclusion of what he saw did not necessitate the establishment of a Jewish state. In fact, he opposed the creation of a Jewish state that would alienate the Arabs against the United States. Nonetheless, in his message to the American Jews on the eve of Rosh Hashana in September 1952, during the election campaign, he referred to the establishment of the State of Israel as “part of the miraculous history of the Jewish people,” in which the United States also played a part. He mentioned the “growing [of] an ever-firmer friendship between America and Israel. It will be an enduring friendship based upon a common role .... Basic to this friendship are the aspirations we share in common with all freedom-loving people.” And he promised to continue supporting Israel if elected.

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7 Minutes of 59th Meeting of the Government, February 17, 1952, Israel State Archives, Jerusalem Israel (ISA), 59-60.


When it came to concrete measures toward Israel, Eisenhower was more reserved. During his campaign he refrained from speaking about Israel. He spoke about US interests in the region and the need to gain Arab friendship, while avoiding any mention of Israel.\textsuperscript{10} When he discussed economic aid to Israel, he did so in the context of the entire region, which should also include the Arab states and especially the Palestinian refugees.\textsuperscript{11} As president, he indicated his intention to change the previous administration’s attitude toward Israel. At an NSC meeting in July 1953, he stated that “under no circumstances would the United States favor the Israelis above the Arabs or vice versa.”\textsuperscript{12}

Eisenhower’s victory came as a shock to the Jewish community. The Jews had been linked with the Democratic party since the Roosevelt administration and during that of Truman. In 1952, a majority of Jews maintained this tradition, voting for Stevenson. With the election of a Republican president, their sense of security and confidence was shaken. They were also concerned about the absence of Jews in the new administration. In March 1953, Dulles received a phone call from publisher Roger Straus, who complained that there were no Jews serving in the new administration. Strauss wondered if Dulles had “a vacant assistant secretaryship for some young Jewish men.” Dulles discussed the difficulties of finding proper candidates, and the conversation ended without a definitive conclusion.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Alteras, \textit{Eisenhower and Israel}, 31.

\textsuperscript{11} Luncheon with General Eisenhower – Commodore Hotel, August 28, 1952, ISA, Foreign Office Files (FO)2382/22; A. Eban to M. Sharett, September 2, 1952, AA/368, ibid., FO2414/27; D. D. Eisenhower to Abba Hillel Silver, October 17, 1952, ibid., FO2389/1.


\textsuperscript{13} Telephone Conversation with Roger Strauss from New York City, March 24, 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS, USA (DDEL), Dulles, J.F. Papers, Telephone Conversation Series, b. 1.
When he became president, Eisenhower had no one around him who could play the role that people like David Niles, Abe Feinberg and Eddie Jacobson had played in the Truman administration. The only Jew in the president’s inner circle was Maxwell Rabb, advisor to the president for minority affairs. At the same time, the president was not really inaccessible. Vice President Richard Nixon, who participated in the inclusion of a pro-Israel article in the party platform at the 1952 Republican National Convention, told Israel’s ambassador to the United States, Abba Eban, that he “always supported [Jews] and … would continue doing so – you can ask the Jews in California.” Eisenhower’s secretary of agriculture, Ezra T. Benson, a Mormon, was a long-time friend of Zionism and Israel. Jacob Blaustein, former president of the American Jewish Committee, and Abba Hillel Silver had access to Eisenhower, and they met with him when necessary. The Israeli embassy also had access to Sherman Adams, Eisenhower’s chief of staff.

**John Foster Dulles and Israel**

Eisenhower’s secretary of state was more accessible to the Jews, with whom he had complex relations. Dulles was no stranger to Zionism and Israel. He had been a member of the American delegation to the United Nations’ sessions that voted on the Partition resolution, which he regarded as a “gamble” because it was unclear whether the Arabs would comply or go to war to prevent its implementation. It was also unclear whether they could carry out their “threat to drive the Jews into the sea.” Over time, when the extent of the Jewish victory and the Arab defeat

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14 P. Aliav to USA Division, April 3, 1953, W1961, ISA, FO358/3; A. Eban to E. Elath and Others, May 4, 1953, AE/1001, ibid., FO357/42.


became clear, it also became evident “where the balance of power lies.” Accordingly, he assumed that “we must take into account the comparative strength of Israel and its Arab neighbors.”\footnote{James G. McDonald, \textit{My Mission in Israel, 1948-1951} (London, 1951), 97.} In his conversations with Jewish leaders, he prided himself on being a supporter of the Zionist cause.\footnote{Minutes of Meeting of American Division of the Executive of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, August 5, 1947, David Ben Gurion Diary, David Ben Gurion Archives, Sde Boker, Israel (DBGD), Minutes Section (MS).}

In his attitude to the State of Israel, Dulles combined strong religious sentiment with pragmatism. At the religious level, Dulles often referred to Judeo-Christian civilization as the common ground between the United States and Israel. As Michelle Mart has shown, the idea of Judeo-Christian civilization had emerged in the United States in the 1950s in the context of a religious revival that swept the United States during that time. Judeo-Christian civilization stood against atheist communism, and those within its ranks shared the common goal of fighting the godless communists. It also ascribed a special place to Israel as the birthplace of the Bible, now populated by the Chosen People, the descendants of prophets, warriors and the common people who inhabited the stories of the bible. This vision romanticized Israel at the expense of the Arabs, and with Israel fighting the “foes outside the Judeo-Christian family, Israelis seemed just like Americans.”\footnote{Michelle Mart, “The ‘Christianization’ of Israel and Jews in 1950s America,” \textit{Religious and American Culture}, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2004), 109.}

In his presentation of Israel, the Arabs and the Soviet Union, Dulles fit squarely into the paradigm suggested by Mart. During his visit in Israel in May 1953, Dulles expressed a sense of American-Israeli closeness, referring to the common Judeo-Christian heritage that sustained the United States and Israel and voicing his belief that, unlike Egypt, Israel was committed to the
“death or life” struggle against those “gravely” threatening “our civilization.” Dulles also denounced “the insensitiveness of Egypt to the problems of the region and the world,” demonstrated in their refusal to stand by the West in the struggle against the Soviet Union. He asked “whether the Judeo-Christian civilization was going to survive, with all the moral and spiritual values for which it stood,” the challenge of the atheist Soviet Union. Israel shared this view, argued Dulles, “because the people of Israel had a sense of history.” In his encounters with Israelis, he sensed a “common language” based on “the values we cherished” in the struggle that could take place for “maybe the next thousand years” – invoking another religious reference, the Millennium – a struggle that the United States and Israel were determined to wage against atheist communism. Dulles admitted that despite his profound religious and ideological inclinations and politics, which made him feel close to Israel, there would be occasions when relations between the two countries would be strained. However, emphasized Dulles, the constant was stronger than the ephemeral: relations between the United States and Israel were based on a “sense of common destiny – a common faith in the destiny of man and his origin in the hands of God.”

In the context of recurring debates between Israeli diplomats and high-ranking administration officials over US policy toward Israel, Undersecretary of State General Walter Bedell Smith told Reuven Shiloah, Israeli minister plenipotentiary to Washington, that during a briefing for State Department officials, Dulles had stated,

US support for the establishment of the State of Israel had not been the result of only political considerations; the people of Israel and the American people share cultural,

religious and moral heritage. The establishment of the State of Israel was a tremendous historical event of people returning to the homeland. Israel in the Middle East is a center of power for the free world. Israel’s neighbors, for sentiments of revenge and fear of the influence of a modern democratic regime, want to see it destroyed. The United States is utterly unready to stand by and view indifferently the attempts to undermine Israel.\(^\text{21}\)

Alongside his favorable religiously based attitude toward Israel, Dulles was also critical of the previous administration’s pro-Israel policy. He vigorously pursued a more balanced policy in the Middle East, shifting it away from Israel toward the Arabs. The secretary suggested a non-judgmental and untitled narrative of the conflict. He called on the sides to overcome their differences and strive for peace, suggesting a narrative that treated the protagonists as equally blameworthy for not achieving peace. In this vein, Dulles mentioned the Arab fear “that the United States will back the new State of Israel’s aggressive expansion,” while the Israelis “fear that ultimately the Arabs may try to push them into the sea.”\(^\text{22}\) At the same time, Dulles himself and the people around him emphasized time and again that the wish to get closer to the Arab states should not be understood as if the United States abandoning Israel. One was not on the expense of the other, reiterated Dulles and the senior members of the state department.\(^\text{23}\)

\textbf{The Meaning of ‘Friendly Impartiality’}

\(^\text{21}\) R. Shiloah to M. Sharett, March 9, 1954, ISA, FO4374/5.

\(^\text{22}\) Radio Address by John F. Dulles, Secretary of State, on His Recent Visit to the Near East and South Asia, June 1, 1953, \textit{Department of State Bulletin}, June 15, 1953, 834.

Though associated with President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles, “friendly impartiality” actually emerged under President Harry Truman, who is considered as very much pro-Israeli.\(^{24}\) Truman’s Middle East policy was based on two prongs: first, having Britain as the hegemonic power in the region, while the United States stays out of the region as much as possible; second, preventing the entry of the Soviet Union into the Middle East. Renewed fighting between Arabs and Israelis would presumably create conditions that could lead to a Soviet entry into the region, and hence it was the president’s prime interest to prevent such hostilities. The Truman administration therefore sought to broker peace between the belligerents, maintaining good relations with both sides as a way to do so, while also seeking to prevent hostility toward the United States among Arabs on a scale that would drive them into Soviet hands.\(^{25}\) Demonstrating friendly impartiality toward Israel was one means toward this end, and it was expressed in two ways. First, the United States would maintain friendly relations with both the Arab states and Israel.\(^{26}\) Second, the United States would help Israel, but in the most inconspicuous manner possible. The American attitude toward Israel would be formal – assistance would be based on official and universal criteria and to the extent possible, where relevant, along the lines of policies recommended by the United Nations. And indeed, the more severe disputes between Israel and the United States erupted over Israel’s refusal to follow the recommendations and calls issued by the UN. For example, when the


\(^{25}\) Department of State: Policy Statement, Israel, February 6, 1951, United State National Archives, College Park, MD, USA, Record Group 59 (USNA, RG 59), 611.84a/2-651; A Report to the President by the NSC on USA Policy Toward the Arab States and Israel, March 14, 1951, Digital National Security Archives (DNSA).

\(^{26}\) Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 68-75.
United Nations determined that Israel had violated the UN-supervised Israeli-Syrian armistice agreement in May 1951, the United States, along with Britain, France and Turkey, sponsored a Security Council resolution demanding that Israel cease operations in the contested area along the Israeli-Syrian demilitarized zone (DMZ). Israel viewed the resolution as hostile and was especially offended by the US sponsorship and support behind it, but President Truman explained to President Weizmann that “the fundamental consideration in this resolution is the strengthening of the Israel-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission and of the authority of the United Nations Chief of Staff in dealing with the points at issue regarding the demilitarized Zone.”

Truman, a champion of the United Nations, was concerned about the status of the United Nations and its organs, and because the United States was acting against what it perceived as an unjustified Israeli offense against these organs, he approved the draft resolution.28

This was precisely the rationale behind the two clashes between Israel and the United States, which scholars have seen as evidence of the unfriendly attitude of the Eisenhower administration: the suspension of the financial assistance to Israel in October 1953 and the administration’s reaction to Israel’s attack on Egypt in October 1956. In both cases, the harsh American response stemmed from what the administration argued was a violation of the United Nations’ decisions and Charter. In October 1953, the Eisenhower administration forced Israel to stop irrigation works it was carrying out in the Israeli-Syrian DMZ, following the finding of Vagn Bennike, commander of United Nations Truce Supervision Organization, that Israel was violating the terms of the armistice agreement with Syria, and hence it should stop the works. What decided

27 USA Division to Israel Embassy, Washington D.C., May 18, 1951, ISA, FO338/10; President Weizmann to President Truman, May 18, 1951, State of Israel, Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, Vol. 6, 1951, Ed. Yemima Rosenthal (Jerusalem, 1991) (DFPI 1951, Vol. 6), Doc. 184; M.B. Davis to President Weizmann, June 1, 1951, ibid., Doc. 206.

28 M. Keren to M. Sharett, May 19, 1951, W44, ISA, FO2207/17.
the American position, which led to a temporary suspension of economic assistance to Israel, was the fact that Israel continued the works despite the clear stance of the United Nations on this matter. Dulles was clear in this regard: “It was not a matter directly affecting the United States. There was a United Nations authority involved, and this authority had given a ruling” to which Israel must abide.29

The same rationale – Israel’s violation of the United Nations Charter and the UN’s armistice agreements and line – drove Eisenhower’s reaction to the 1956 war. Admittedly, Eisenhower and Dulles shared Israel’s disdain for Nasser. The president compared him once to Hitler and another time to Mussolini and depicted Nasser as someone with a “long record of provocations” that went unnoticed.30 At the same time, Eisenhower objected categorically to the use of force against Egypt.31 The key to Eisenhower’s rage is to be found in his reaction to the possibility discussed prior to the Sinai war, that Israel might occupy the West Bank. The president argued that such an attack would constitute a violation of the United Nations Charter, and the United States would not support Israel when it was charged as responsible “for bringing about an unjust war.” Eisenhower emphasized that his position on this matter would not be affected by the coming elections and would be based only on American interests. In his diary, he wrote, “Ben


Gurion should not make any grave mistakes based upon his belief that winning a domestic election is as important to us as preserving and protecting the interests of the United Nations.” 32 Dulles warned Eban against the “disastrous” results that would accrue if Israel put itself “on the wrong side of the general armistice agreements.” 33 He insisted on the principle that Israel could not use the acts of terrorism and murder originating in Egypt as an excuse to attack Egypt. “We have simply got to refrain from resort to force in settling international disputes,” as otherwise “the whole United Nations would go down the drain.” 34

It is true that the punitive measures were directed toward Israel, which ostensibly was a proof of the administration’s hostile attitude toward Israel. However, viewing it that way would be a very narrow Israel-centric approach. It will be wrong to ignore the importance the United States attributed to the United Nations. As mentioned above, it was not only the Eisenhower administration that reacted sharply against what it perceived an attack against the United Nations – the Truman administration acted in the same manner, under similar circumstances. As with the Truman administration, so with Eisenhower’s – the punitive measures were the exceptions, not the rule, in the course of the American-Israeli relationships during the tenure of both presidents.

Furthermore, Eisenhower described the argument with Israel over the 1956 war not as a conflict between adversaries, but as a conflict between family members. Explaining

32 Memorandum of Conversation with the President, October 15, 1956, DDEL, J.F. Dulles Papers, WH Memo Series, b. 4; Memorandum for the Record by the President, October 15, 1956, FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XVI, Doc. 345.


34 Memorandum of Discussion at the 302nd Meeting of the NSC, November 1, 1956, FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XVI, Doc. 455.
why Israel and the Soviet Union were treated differently despite the Soviet act of aggression in Hungary, the president said:

There can, of course, be no equating of a nation like Israel with that of the Soviet Union. The people of Israel, like those of the United States, are imbued with a religious faith and a sense of moral values. We are entitled to expect, and do expect, from such people of the free world a contribution to world order which unhappily we cannot expect from a nation controlled by atheistic despots.35

Thus, while insisting that Israel should comply with the United Nations’ resolution, Eisenhower did so while claiming that Israel and the United States shared values and moral, and he was making demands from Israel on the basis of these shared values.36 And there was yet one more aspect to Eisenhower’s actions: Eisenhower regretted forcing the Israelis out of the Sinai, and he attributed his action to the lack of a Jewish adviser beside him when he made that decision. The former president told Max Fisher, the Jewish philanthropist, chairman of the UJA, in 1965, “Max, if I had a Jewish adviser working for me, I doubt I would have handled the situation the same way. I would not have forced the Israelis back.”37

While basically following the path paved by the Truman administration in its execution of the “friendly impartiality” policy, the Eisenhower administration differed in that the former did not carry this policy as a banner, the way the latter did. Hence, the Truman administration did not have to engage in polemics, the way the Eisenhower administration did. Dulles and his associates

36 And see Mart analysis, Eyes on Israel, 149.
emphasized time and again that their wish to form closer ties with Arab states should not be understood as abandonment of Israel by the United States. One was not at the expense of the other, reiterated Dulles and the senior members of the State Department.\textsuperscript{38} Dulles did everything he could to convince his (mainly) Jewish critics that being friendlier toward the Arabs did not mean abandoning the friendship with Israel. While pursuing a more even-handed policy toward Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict, Dulles would repeatedly announce his commitment to the friendship with Israel. Shortly after the inauguration, he promised Abba Hillel Silver that there was no change in the United States’ friendliness toward Israel.\textsuperscript{39}

He reiterated this position following a major crisis that took place in October 1953, when the United States suspended the transfer of a grant-in-aid to Israel after the latter had engaged in a heated dispute with the United Nations over the abovementioned works in the Israeli-Syrian DMZ. In response, Eban told Dulles that the feeling in Israel was that “a cloud had fallen over [the Israel-US] relationship, and that the traditional atmosphere no longer prevailed.”\textsuperscript{40} Dulles was offended by Eban’s comment. He told the ambassador that “the government and people of the United States ascribed to their friendship with Israel a special importance” that was unlike anything the United States had with any other state. This relationship was unique for two reasons: First, a large number of Americans “are bound by ties of blood and religion to the people of the state of Israel.” Second, “the American people have a profound appreciation of what the Jewish people have contributed to the fundamental concepts of American culture and morality,” referring to the “Judaeo-Christian heritage,” a term he said he was using “frequently in addressing his fellow countrymen.”

\textsuperscript{38} R. Shiloah to M. Sharett, March 9, 1954, ISA, FO4374/5.
\textsuperscript{39} A. Eban to USA Division, March 17, 1953, W40, ISA, FO2310/1.
\textsuperscript{40} Minutes of Meeting of The Secretary of State J. F. Dulles with A. Eban, September 25, 1953, ISA, FO2414/27.
addition to these spiritual reasons, added Dulles, “the American government and people admired
the military, political and economic development which the state of Israel had recorded after two
thousand years during which the Jewish people had had no state and no homeland.” Dulles urged
Eban “not to allow” himself to doubt “for a single moment … the desire of the American
government and people to maintain and to strengthen this friendship.”

During a meeting with Sharett in November 1955, he further stated that if America had to choose between standing by
Israel or pursuing its other interests in the “vast Arab world,” it would stand by Israel, “come hell
or high water.”

Arm to Israel

This final assertion brings us to the second issue – arms – as it directly begs the question of
how to reconcile that statement with the administration’s refusal to supply arms to Israel,
particularly after the September 1955 Czech-Egyptian arms deal, which even Dulles and
Eisenhower admitted tilted the arms balance against Israel. It is difficult to overstate the impact
that Nasser’s announcement of the deal had on Israel, as it transformed Egypt from a potentially

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41 Minutes of Meeting of The Secretary of State J. F. Dulles with A. Eban, October 8, 1953, ISA, FO2414/27; Memorandum of Conversation, October 8, 1953, FRUS 1952-1954, Vol. IX, Doc. 683.


43 A. Eban to M. Sharett, October 1, 1955, WI353, ISA, FO2311/4.
hostile state into an actual, cardinal danger.\textsuperscript{44} Israel’s concerns further intensified after Syria and Saudi Arabia entered a military alliance with Egypt in October. Thus, Nasser decisively consolidated his authority and prestige, becoming the undisputed leader of the Arab world.\textsuperscript{45} Israel was bound to feel increasingly besieged, and it briefly considered the option of launching a preventative war. Instead, however, it acted swiftly to make its highest priority the acquisition of arms – in kind and quantity – in order to restore the military balance between itself and the Arabs.\textsuperscript{46}

Dulles regarded the Czech-Egyptian arms deal in a regional context. He argued that it was imperative to prevent other Arab countries from turning to the Soviet Union for arms. Hence, it was important not to take measures that could upset the other Arab countries.\textsuperscript{47} Arming Israel would be such a step. Dulles made another odd observation when he rejected Israel’s request for arms. He argued that, considering Israel’s demography and geography, it “could not absorb more than a certain amount of armaments, much less than the Arab states with their large territories and populations.”\textsuperscript{48} Dulles would use the same argument a few days later during his abovementioned meeting with Sharett, and he repeated this argument in his statement to the Senate Foreign

\textsuperscript{44} Minutes of the 8\textsuperscript{th} Meeting of the Knesset, October 18, 1955, \textit{Divrei Haknesset}, 86-88; Mordechai Bar-On, \textit{Challenge and Quarrel} (Sde-Boker, 1991), 11-23; Shimon Peres, \textit{The Next Phase} (Tel Aviv, 1956), 23.

\textsuperscript{45} Uriel Dann, \textit{King Hussein and the Challenge of the Arab Radicalism} (New York, 1989), 24.


\textsuperscript{48} Memorandum of Discussion at the 262\textsuperscript{nd} Meeting of the NSC, October 20, 1955, \textit{FRUS} 1955-1957, Vol. XIV, Doc. 327.
Relations Committee in February 1956. Eisenhower, too, thought that the accumulation of ever more arms would not solve Israel’s problems. There was no point in the Israelis attempting to respond to the Egyptian-Czech arms deal by pursuing a similar arms deal: “1,700,000 Israelis … could not hope to match 30,000,000 … in the amount of arms they could absorb.”

Ben Gurion had an answer to this claim. He noted Israel’s advantage in technology, standard of education, health and skilled training, all at much higher levels than of those its Arab neighbors. He reminded Eisenhower that in 1948, 600,000 Jews, “having the essential minimum of arms, withstood the combined forces of five Arab states successfully.” Ben Gurion also rejected the idea that Israel base its security on foreign forces, whether UN or forces. Before such forces come to Israel’s assistance, the Egyptian air force could already “wreak havoc on our cities.” Arms were the only way to ensure Israel’s security.

That argument did not bring about change. On October 20 the NSC decided not to provide Israel with arms, although the United States would not object to Israel’s buying weapons “with its own resources.” This was the gist of the answer that Dulles gave Sharett during their meeting in Geneva on 26 October 1955.

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50 Memorandum for the Secretary, March 1, 1956, DDEL, Subject Series, b. 10.
Here, too, Eisenhower was not deviating from Truman’s policy. Truman had refused to supply arms to Israel at its hardest time, during the 1948 war. He maintained that policy after the war ended, proposing, instead, the May 1950 Tripartite Declaration, in which Britain, France and the United States pledged to prevent an attack against any country in the Middle East. It also included a pledge to prevent an arms race in the Middle East.54 Now Eisenhower was following the same path. Nonetheless – and here is where the true proclivity of Eisenhower and his administration are revealed – Eisenhower and Dulles were aware of and concerned about the danger to Israel posed by the Egyptian-Czech arms deal. Dulles believed that Israel was still stronger than its neighbors, but it was actually “very difficult” to make a case for not providing matching arms supplies to Israel when the Soviet Union was supplying arms to Arab countries. On the other hand, supplying arms to Israel would “antagonize the Arab world and allow the Soviet Union to become dominant in that area.” This, in turn, would endanger the oil supply to Western Europe. “I feel this is a situation which only the president can deal with,” he lamented.55

Eisenhower dealt with it. He thought that perhaps he and Dulles were being “too tough with the Israelis with respect of arms.” Eisenhower believed that the United States had a moral obligation to support Israel, “a tiny state, surrounded by enemies.” He mentioned that the United States had recognized the State of Israel shortly after its establishment, and that act of recognition carried with it a sense of commitment. Additionally, “and on top of this,” Israel had “a very strong position in the heart and emotions of the Western world because of the tragic suffering of the Jews


throughout twenty-five hundred years of history." The solution was posited in the aforementioned NSC resolution: helping Israel acquire arms from other sources. Israel did so, with American blessing and support. In late October 1955, Sharett met with Dulles as well as the French prime minister, Edgar Faure, who immediately agreed to provide Israel with major arms systems that would restore the balance between Israel and its neighbors. Not only did the administration promise not to stand in the way of the French-Israeli arms deal, it even encouraged it. It also encouraged the Canadian and Nicaraguan governments to provide arms to Israel. In February 1956, the administration approved Nicaragua’s sale to Israel of Swedish Mustangs that it had previously purchased. Israel had become interested in the planes just shortly before the Egyptian-Czech arms deal was sealed, and now the administration gave its consent to the deal. The Israeli-French arms deal was concluded in November 1955, and the shipment, which included tanks and jet planes, arrived in 1956.

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56 Memorandum for the Secretary, March 1, 1956, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library (SGMML), Princeton, USA, Subject Files, b. 10; Entry for March 8, 1956, DDEL, AWF, DDE Diary Series; Diary, March 13, 1956, ibid.


58 Department of State to American Embassy to Paris, January 18, 1956, USNA, RG 84, 784A.56/1-1856; From Tel Aviv to the Secretary of State, January 30, 1955, ibid., 784A.56/1-3056; Secretary of State to the American Embassy in Tel Aviv, February 16, 1956, ibid., 784A.56/2-1656.


60 K. Salmon to Office, Jerusalem, September 7, 1955, W252, ISA, FO2311/3; From Stockholm to US Secretary of State, February 9, 1956, USNA, RG 59, 784A.56/2-956

61 Bar-On, Challenge and Quarrel, 124-127.
**Economic Aid to Israel**

Another area in which the administration demonstrated its actual attitude toward Israel was in the financial aid it provided. But to avoid claims that granting money to Israel was yet another demonstration of the administration’s preferential treatment of Israel, the administration took measures to provide this economic assistance through regional aid programs. Receiving the funds entailed negotiations and pressure, with involvement by Israeli diplomats, American Jews and congressmen, and the process had to be repeated every year.° The outcome was always the same: Israel received a handsome sum of money each year, far more than its Arab neighbors. Thus, during the years 1953-1956, Israel acquired grants and loans through the following forms of distribution: direct grant, which there was no need to return – $142.5 million; technical assistance – $6.3 million; surpluses – $51.7 million (surpluses were provided in the form of commodities, for which Israel had to pay, but it paid these back in Israeli currency rather than dollars, which offered a considerable relief); miscellaneous sources – $8.2. Hence the total was $208.7 million.° To these figures, it is necessary to add tax deductions at an annual amount of $40 million.° Here, once again, the Eisenhower administration was following the path paved by the Truman administration.

° The occasions on which Israeli and American Jewish pressure was applied during the years under discussion are too numerous to cite. The following are a few representative examples: Notes on Congressional Activities, 1953, EC/3/67, ISA, FO361/7; I.L. Keren to L. Lipsky, November 10, 1952, ISA, FO2389/1; E. Herlits: Report on Our Connections with the American Jewry, August 28, 1953, EH/1339, ISA, FO382/18; Memorandum of Conversation, August 19, 1954, USNA, RG59, 611.84A/8-1954; Conversation, October 18, 1955, FRUS 1955-1957, Vol. XIV, Doc. 343; J. Proskauer to J. F. Dulles, November 17, 1955, AJA, MS780, b. 9; Note, January 14, 1956, DDEL, Central Files, General File 122, Israel, b. 817. This last file contains an abundance of letters to the president, Dulles and Rabb, demanding that the president arm Israel and sign a security pact with it. Similar letters are also on deposit in the Israel State Archives, e.g., R. Levine to J.F. Dulles, February 6, 1956, ISA, FO417/3.

° P. Aliav to P. Sapir, July 22, 1959, 704, ISA, FO3091/2.

° Memorandum of Conversation with the President, February 17, 1957, DDEL, J.F. Dulles, WH Memorandum Series, Meetings with the President, b. 8.
Israel received a total of nearly $427 million from the United States between 1953 and 1959. Each year the Truman administration was increasingly generous, as during two successive years (1951/52 and 1952/53) Israel received $63.5 and $70.2 respectively – that is, money that it did not have to return. During that period, it also received the largest loan ever granted by the Export-Import Bank (EIB) – $100 million. However, the annual sum Israel received from the Eisenhower administration was quite close to the amount it had received from the Truman administration. In contrast, no Arab states received such sums. During 1953-1959 Egypt received $138.8, Iraq – $16.5, Jordan – $152, Lebanon – $21.4, and Saudi Arabia – $27.2.65

The Eisenhower Administration and the American Jews

The final indication of the administration’s attitude toward Israel was its response to Israeli and Jewish pressure throughout the years. The main issues over which Israel and American Jews pressured the secretary of state and the president were those discussed above, namely, “friendly impartiality,” arms (denying them to Arabs and supplying them to Israel), financial aid and the American measures taken in response to the September 1953 Israel-Syria DMZ crisis and the 1956 war. Dulles and Eisenhower’s reaction to the pressure is interesting and indicative mostly because a majority of Jews had not voted for Eisenhower, and the president and Dulles were, of course, well aware of this. Eisenhower and his associates reached the conclusion that even if the administration had given Israel everything it requested, American Jews would not change their voting pattern.66 Dulles accused American Jews of trying to pressure the administration, as they

65 S. Yaari to US Division, August 13, 1959, SY/360, ISA, FO3091/2.
66 P. Aliav to US Division, August 26, 1953, PA339, ISA, FO358/2.
had under Truman and Roosevelt, but asserted that things had now changed. Eisenhower’s predecessors had felt a sense of commitment to Jews because of the Jewish vote. Accordingly, those presidents had succumbed to the pressure of Jewish groups, taking measures to promote Zionist and Israeli interests while ignoring those of the Arabs. Eisenhower owed the Jews no such debt, as he had been elected “by the overwhelming majority of the people of the U.S.” This freed him from American Jewish pressure and allowed him to be more sympathetic to Arab arguments, although at the same time he still believed that “US policy had to continue to be one of support of Israel,” according to Dulles.67 The secretary was critical of the power of the American Jews and their ability to pressure administrations to endorse pro-Israel policy. In what can be viewed as verging on anti-Semitism, he believed that Jews and Zionists had influence “around the world.”68

Responding to Jewish – and non-Jewish – pressure on the administration not to impose sanctions on Israel after the 1956 war in response to its refusal to evacuate Sharm al Sheikh and the Gaza Strip, Dulles stated that he was “well aware how almost impossible it is in this country to carry out foreign policy not approved by the Jews. Marshall and Forrestal learned that. . . . That does not mean I’m anti-Jewish, but I believe in what George Washington said in his farewell address, that an emotional attachment to another country should not interfere” in the making of foreign policy.69

As Congressional calls against the sanctions increased in volume, Dulles expressed his frustration over what he regarded as significant Jewish influence. It “is completely dominating the scene and

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69 Telephone Call from Mr. Luce, February 11, 1957, DDEL, J.F. Dulles Papers, Telephone Conversations Series, b. 6.
almost impossible to get Congress to do anything they don’t approve of,” he stated, and he blamed the Israeli embassy for “practically dictating to the Congress, through influential Jewish people in the country.” It reached the point of Dulles charging that Ben Gurion “can control our government policies through the Jewish pressure here.”

Notwithstanding these words, Dulles also tried to appease American Jews. The secretary led Senator Jacob Javits (R-NY) to understand that the administration did not underestimate the Jewish opposition, and even though he and senior administration officials realized that Jews would not lend their vote to the Republicans, the administration still did not “want to fly in the face of the Jewish people in the US.” During the American Jewish campaign against a shipment of arms to Arab countries, which the administration was contemplating, Dulles, concerned about pressure from Jewish leaders, wanted to discuss – or in his words, negotiate – the issues Israel had raised directly with Eban. When Eban agreed to “negotiate” terms that would satisfy Israel, Dulles expressed the hope that American Jews would end their campaign against the administration policy during these “negotiations.” Eban was unwilling to make such a commitment. In fact, following this meeting, Eban summoned Jewish leaders such as Philip Klutznick, Zionist Organization of America president Israel Goldstein, Henry Montor, Rose Halperin and Sy Kenen to discuss the next moves. The attendees agreed that Dulles’s sensitivity called for an organized and united Jewish position. The meeting concluded with a decision to convene a gathering in Washington, D.C., for the heads of Jewish organizations from across the country – about 100 people.

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70 Telephone Call to Roswell Barnes, February 19, 1957, DDEL, J.F. Dulles Papers, Telephone Conversations Series, b. 6.

71 E. Evron to Sh. Bendor, September 9, 1953, EE/68/4621, ISA, FO2414/27.

72 Conversation with the Secretary of State, September 15, 1954, ISA, FO2414/28.

73 A. Eban to M. Sharett, September 18, 1954, W875, ISA, FO2310/11.
As described above, the administration rejected Israel’s requests for American arms in late 1955 and during 1956, but it did help Israel obtain arms from other countries. This did not, however, put an end to the campaign for arms to Israel, which upset Dulles. The secretary had expected gratitude from the Israeli public for the American help in obtaining arms for Israel. He complained to Eban about the Israeli and American Jewish campaign for weapons, accusing the Israelis of preferring to work with the administration by putting pressure on it, “carrying on a very highly organized and high-powered campaign” intended to “force our hand irrespectively of our judgment.” He tried to convince Eban to end the campaign and warned the ambassador not to assume that the administration was vulnerable to Israeli and American Jewish pressure during an election year. Neither he nor the president was “made of the stuff that would surrender to elections’ political pressure.”

At the same time, he took credit for the excellent combat jets that Israel had received from France. He also took pride in the fact that during the Republicans’ four years in power, Israel was stronger than it had been four years earlier. Dulles was keen to hear that Israel appreciated the administration’s friendship, and he was contemplating additional measures that would encourage the Israelis to say so.

A few months later, during a discussion with Eban and Shiloah about American measures to help Israel acquire arms from Canada, Arthur Dean, Dulles’s former business partner, asked Eban whether Israel would release a public statement making it clear that the question of arms was no longer an issue. A month later, shortly before the presidential elections, Dean told Eban that

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74 Israel Embassy, Washington DC., to US Division, March 2, 1956, W/960, ISA, FO2311/7; J.F. Dulles to A. H. Dean, March 27, 1956, DDEL, J.F. Dulles Papers, Subject Series, Israel, b. 1; See also A. Eban to M. Sharett, February 10, 1956, WI/855, ibid.

75 A. Eban to Y. Herzog, July 27, 1956, W499, ISA, FO2311/11.

76 Memorandum by Arthur Dean, September 14, 1956, DDEL, J.F. Dulles Papers, Subject Series, Israel, b. 1.
Dulles was urging the EIB to approve in full a loan of $75 million that Israel had requested. On a supposedly unrelated note, Dean then asked Eban if the Israeli government could issue a statement praising the Israeli-American relationship. Unknown to Israel, the EIB and US treasury were inclined to reject the Israeli request on the grounds that it was over-stretched in terms of loans, or as Secretary of Treasury George Humphrey put it, “Israel had virtually no dollar earning power but depended almost completely on donations” from the US government and American Jews. Dulles insisted that the EIB should look more closely into the project for which Israel seeking funds – water development – and if the project was feasible, he recommended that the loan be approved.

Ben Gurion recorded Eban and Shiloah’s telegram in his diary, lamenting that “it seemed as if Eisenhower’s victory is not assured.” He agreed to issue a statement commending the administration for the loan. However, he was unwilling to praise the administration on the issues of arms. Ben Gurion argued that the administration had in fact placed obstacles along the way to Israel’s arms procurement, and that it had not needed to ask others to provide Israel with arms when it could do so itself.

**Conclusion**

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77 A. Eban to Y. Herzog, October 5, 1956, W651, ISA, FO6451/3. No record of such a statement is to be found in the Annals of the Knesset.

78 Memorandum of Conversation with the President and Secretary Humphrey, October 3, 1956, DDEL, J.F. Dulles Papers, WH Memorandum Series, b. 4.

79 Entry for October 6, 1956, DBGD.

80 D. Ben Gurion to A. Eban, October 9, 1956, WI/539, ISA, FO2312/9.
In line with his attitude toward the Eisenhower administration from the outset, Ben Gurion remained suspicious of it. Yet like future historians, he too overlooked the true nature of Eisenhower and Dulles’ attitude toward Israel during the years 1953-1957. In conducting relations with Israel, Eisenhower and Dulles were vacillating between head and heart, interests and ideals. They wanted to look at Israel through the lens of American interests in the Middle East, which meant abandoning what they perceived as the favoritism that typified the Truman administration’s treatment of Israel. They presented themselves as standing beyond and above domestic politics in their conduct of US foreign policy in the Middle East in general and toward Israel specifically. They succeeded in creating the impression of impartiality – although, incidentally, not among Arabs, who continued to accuse the administration of favoritism toward Israel. Yet a more in-depth look into their rhetoric and conduct reveals that the president and his secretary of state were, after all, Americans. This meant that they had profound sympathy for Israel, on both idealistic and religious grounds, and they were prepared to distance themselves from Israel only up to the point that it threatened Israel’s security and well-being. The president and his secretary of state made sure that Israel could acquire arms when they became convinced that, indeed, Israel needed those weapons, and they continued the previous administration’s policy of generously supporting Israel’s economy. In doing so, they were responding to pressure from American Jews and Israelis – but this was not capitulation. In their relations with Israel, Eisenhower and Dulles did not take a stance against American Jews. They tried to implement what they believed was the right policy for the United States, but they also accepted the premises that drove the Jewish pressure against their deeds.

Most importantly, the periods of conflict and tension overshadowed the more durable periods of cooperation and assistance. It was Dulles who nicely described the way things worked. There
was a dialogue, and it was frank, open and sincere. The kind of relations that existed between Israel and the United States enabled the secretary “to discuss the situation with full friendliness and frankness,” even when Eban and the Israeli government were not pleased with the things he uttered. “Even if an agreement could not be reached,” described Dulles, regarding his view of relations with Israel, “there should be understanding of our respective points of view due to our common objective.”

Officials and diplomats from both states met their counterparts as often as necessary, delivering messages, raising ideas and discussing issues pertinent to the relations between the two countries – all in an open and frank manner. Neither side told the other everything, but this was natural. More significant was the extent, level, frequency, availability and depth of the dialogues between officials and diplomats from both sides. This structure of relations and the actual deeds of the administration as they relate Israel justify taking another look at the nature of the Israeli-American relationship during the years 1953-1957.

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