

Israeli Polity and the European Powers during the 1950s: Democracy as a Tool in Fostering Bilateral Ties?

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Isolated in its immediate geopolitical environment, Israel started to approach the Western powers soon after its creation to request assistance of all kinds. One of the few arguments available to the Jewish state to persuade the West of its soundness as a partner was that of its adherence to parliamentary democracy. For much of the 1950s, Israeli leaders and diplomats did their best to present Israel abroad as a “real democracy” and an outpost of the free world in the Middle East. When addressing the Europeans, the Israelis were equally ready to display the socialist ethos behind their nation-building. Strategic reservations regarding any closer ties with the Jewish state were shared by all of the three Western diplomacies at the time. However, the British and the French were far more inclined to criticism concerning the nature of early Israeli polity. This ranged from the centralization of power in the hands of a closed political elite to the alleged intolerance of the general public as a whole.

[Middle East; Diplomatic History; Israel; Foreign Relations; United Kingdom; France]

Introduction

The early years of Israel’s existence were marked by constant border tensions, a destitute economy and a contested international standing. The new state’s quest for economic, political and military assistance was to continue for decades. As the relations with the Soviet block deteriorated, “non-identification”, which had characterized the first years of the state, started to be replaced by closer ties to the West.¹ The attitude of the Western powers towards Israel was quite complex. Domestic pressure in

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¹ For the early formation of Israel’s foreign policy, see the seminal work by U. BIALER, *Between East and West: Israel’s Foreign Policy Orientation 1948–1956*, Cambridge 1989.

the US played its part in Israel's favour, and there was wide support in the West for the idea of a Jewish state arising from the ashes of the Second World War. On the other hand, it was hard to deny that the creation of Israel had further destabilized the Middle East.² In order to avoid Soviet penetration into an area vital for post-war economic recovery, the US State Department launched repeated peace initiatives. During Dwight Eisenhower's presidency (1953–1961), his administration introduced additional balance into US Middle East policy. On particular occasions, such as the Qibya raid (1953), in response to the Sinai Campaign (1956), and to force the eventual retreat (1957), Washington showed itself willing to apply unprecedented pressure on the Jewish state.³ The British stance was marked by certain (bureaucratic) mistrust towards Israel dating to the last years (or rather a decade) of the Palestine Mandate (1920–1948). Jordan and Iraq constituted the core of British influence in the region during the 1950s.⁴ Moreover, the British followed their own economic interests rather than the Cold War logic.⁵ If compared with the Arab world, Israel had little to offer. The French case was peculiar. During the first half of the 1950s, France began to feel increasingly cornered by the Anglo-Saxon powers in the region. The independence war in Algeria (1954–1962) finally landed the French on a common front with Israel against (pan)Arab nationalism and propaganda coming from Nasserite Egypt. For the second half of the 1950s, the idea of supporting Israel, primarily for the sake of the regional balance of power, received a measured backing from the Quai d'Orsay. Overall, the 1950s can be seen as one of the most turbulent periods in relations between Israel and the West.

² In fact, the attempt to weaken British presence in the region had constituted the prime motive for Soviet support for Israel's independence at first. Y. ROI, *Soviet Decision Making in Practice: The USSR and Israel, 1947–1954*, New Brunswick 1980, pp. 24–25, 93–97, 160.

³ Among the many works on the subject, see particularly P. HAHN, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945–1961*, Chapel Hill 2006; D. LITTLE, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, Chapel Hill 2003; R. BARRETT, *The Greater Middle East and the Cold War: US Foreign Policy under Eisenhower and Kennedy*, London 2004.

⁴ For the specifics of the Middle East policy under the Attlee cabinet, see W. R. LOUIS, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945–1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States and Postwar Imperialism*, Oxford 1986. See also P. KINGSTON, *Britain and the Politics of Modernization in the Middle East, 1945–1958*, Cambridge 2002.

⁵ S. SMITH, *Ending Empire in the Middle East: Britain, the United States and post-war decolonization, 1945–1973*, London 2012, p. 162.

The existing historiography mirrors many of the specifics concerning the respective bilateral ties. US-Israeli relations are by far the best documented case, reflecting their significance for Israel's existence.⁶ The secondary sources on Anglo-Israeli relations are less impressive in scope, yet well-researched.⁷ Franco-Israeli relations have always provoked curiosity, even passions, if we were to borrow a term from the title of a book by Eli Barnavi.⁸ Still, relatively few accounts are comprehensive. The earlier works lacked, for apparent reasons, access to the original documents.⁹ Zach Levey failed to utilize sources in French in his attempt to examine Israel's relations with all of the three Western powers.¹⁰ Frédérique Schillo's monograph, published in 2012, was actually the first account to exploit the entire potential of the sources available in France.¹¹ The focus of the current paper dwells on the place of Israel's democracy in the bilateral ties between the Jewish state and the United Kingdom/France. Indeed, the stress on Israel constituting a free and pluralistic polity, unique in the Middle East, appeared frequently in the declarations of its leaders targeting the Western political circles and the public at large. "Shared values" and "common interests" with the West were to entitle Israel, in this perspective, to receive support and, ultimately, arms. Yet, to a surprising degree, this particular aspect of the relationship is usually taken for given and has not been subjected to a more systematic scrutiny on its own merit.

We may well say that presenting the Jewish state as a democracy akin to the Western standards worked in the US, practically since the start. As David Schoenbaum has put it, Israelis were successful "*at finding ways to make*

⁶ Among the many titles, see J. SNETSINGER, *Truman, The Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel*, Stanford 1974; D. SCHOENBAUM, *The United States and the State of Israel*, Malden 1996; I. ALTERAS, *Eisenhower and Israel: U.S.-Israeli Relations, 1953-1960*, Gainesville 1994; R. FREEDMAN, *Israel and the United States: Six Decades of US-Israeli Relations*, Boulder 2012.

⁷ N. ARIDAN, *Britain, Israel and Anglo-Jewry, 1949-1957*, London 2004; N. LOCHERY, *Loaded Dice: The Foreign Office and Israel*, London 2007.

⁸ E. BARNAVI - L. ROSENZWEIG, *La France et Israël: Une affaire passionnelle*, Paris 2002.

⁹ See the classic work by S. CROSBIE, *A Tacit Alliance: France and Israel from Suez to the Six Day War*, Princeton 1974 or (in Hebrew) M. BAR-ZOHAR, *Gesher al ha-yam ha-tikhon: yehasei Yisrael-Tsarfat, 1947-1963*, Tel Aviv 1965.

¹⁰ Z. LEVEY, *Israel and the Western Powers, 1952-1960*, Chapel Hill 1997.

¹¹ F. SCHILLO, *La politique française à l'égard d'Israël, 1946-1959*, Bruxelles 2012. For the later phase of the relations, see G. HEIMANN, *Franco-Israeli relations, 1958-1967*, Abingdon 2016.

Americans say 'we'".¹² As this paper demonstrates, the perspective of the European powers differed substantially. Neither the Foreign Office nor the Quai d'Orsay adhered to the notion of Israel belonging, in cultural terms, strictly to the Occident. While the policies of the two countries may have considerably diverged during the second half of the 1950s, the prevailing opinion regarding the Jewish state's structural problems did not fundamentally differ on either side of the Channel. The French had adopted a pro-Israel line without losing much of their critical insight. To that effect, this paper points out that the contrast between the Israeli self-perception and the Western views, as appearing in British and French records, goes well beyond the reservations on the part of the Eisenhower (US) administration(s). The Americans were worried primarily by the effects of Israel's actions; British and French concerns included the very power structure of the state. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Israelis were more likely to allude to the socialist ethos behind their nation-building when addressing the Europeans. Based on archival evidence gathered in the UK, France and Israel, the paper compares the British and French attitudes towards Israeli polity/society in order to discern common themes among the Western doubts regarding the nature of early Israeli democracy.

The Argument of Israel's "Real Democracy"

Early Israeli democracy was specific in a number of readily apparent ways. Basic political rights and civic liberties were available, but no constitution or "bill of rights" was adopted. Parliament, freely elected based on a system of proportional representation, dated its origins to the time of the Mandate or earlier (i.e. Zionist Congresses).¹³ In spite of this, a single party – Mapai (known as ha-Avoda since 1968) – remained in power for over forty years (1935–1977). As a Jewish state, Israel was to share a common bond with foreign nationals across several continents while some of its very inhabitants were excluded from such a community.¹⁴

¹² D. SCHOENBAUM, More Special Than Others, in: *Diplomatic History*, 22, 2, 1998, p. 281.

¹³ Cf. the seminal works D. HOROWITZ – M. LISSAK, *Origins of the Israeli Polity: Palestine under the Mandate*, Chicago 1978; P. MEDDING, *The Founding of Israeli Democracy, 1948–1967*, Oxford 1990.

¹⁴ For more on this aspect, see for example A. DIECKHOFF, Israël: la pluralisation de l'identité nationale, in: A. DIECKHOFF (ed.), *Nationalismes en mutation en Méditerranée orientale*, Paris 2002, pp. 153–171.

For the sake of security concerns, the Arab minority was actually placed under military administration until 1966. Though an important part of the Jewish population came from the Middle East and North Africa, Jews born in Slavic countries were in full control of politics. Collectivist and public institutions enjoyed near hegemony in social and economic life of the country.¹⁵ Yet, only the capitalist West was capable (and willing) to keep Israel afloat.

In order to achieve their objectives abroad, Israeli leaders had to present a far less complex and much more idyllic picture of their state. Two particular aspects acquired visibility – Israel’s pursuit of social justice (progress) and its staunch adherence to parliamentary democracy. The pioneering spirit, tested in the hard conditions of transforming a “desert” into a “home”, was to represent progressive ideals. Modern state-building, constituted on democratic principles, reflected its allegiance to the free world. As far as the 1950s were concerned, the two aspects often merged into a singular designation, that of a socialist democracy. In effect, the Jewish state could be pictured both as a progressive entity and (due to its democratic values) as an outpost immune to any Soviet indoctrination.

Given the close links of Israel’s ruling socialist-Zionist party, Mapai, to a number of labour and social democratic groups in Western Europe, it is not surprising that those groups were singled out as particularly fertile ground for the dissemination of the corresponding political gospel – in repetitive forms and throughout the period under scrutiny.¹⁶ With slight modifications, it continued to be disseminated (and enjoy success) until 1967. Israel portrayed itself as a “real democracy” due to, among other things, the respect and place it allocated to manual labour, institution-alization of a just social order and rectification of the land via modern methods of farming. This was the position Golda Meir, Israel’s foreign minister in the years 1956–1966, presented in clear terms at the Socialist

¹⁵ The “third-way socialism” of the activist Zionist left, as it had emerged during the 1920s and 1930s, combined ideological reformism with the adoption of centralized organisational models. Y. SHAPIRO, *The Formative Years of the Israeli Labour Party: The Organisation of Power, 1919–1930*, London 1974, pp. 29, 3; Y. GORNY, *Ahdut ha-avodah, 1919–1930: ha-yesodot ha-raayoniim ve ha-shitah ha-medinit*, Tel Aviv 1973, p. 62; Z. GALILI, The Soviet Experience of Zionism: Importing Soviet Political Culture to Palestine, in: *The Journal of Israeli History*, 24, 1, 2005, pp. 14–16, 23. On the role of the Histadrut, see M. SHALEV, *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel*, Oxford 1992, pp. 1–130.

¹⁶ See also M. SCHENHAV, *Le socialisme international et l’État juif*, Paris 2009.

International congress in July 1957. Pondering over the contemporary state of the Middle East, Meir concluded that the Arab states had cast off foreign yoke without achieving social and cultural emancipation for their own people. This was, in her view, in stark contrast to the story of the Jewish state: *“we made work, simple manual labour, our religion [...] Israel could, and has actually become, a pilot plant in the area. We are a real democracy. We have laid strong foundations of a new social order. We have a strong, free labour movement. We have reclaimed swamps and are cultivating the desert.”*¹⁷ Her predecessor, Moshe Sharett, who held the office in 1948–1956, provided a more theoretical framing of Mapai’s visions and the broader interplay of socialism and democracy when he addressed the French socialist party (S.F.I.O.) congress in 1959. Referring to the iconic French socialists of the past, such as Léon Blum and Jules Moch, Sharett observed that the connection between S.F.I.O. and Mapai had *“deep roots in the solidarity unifying the socialist parties of both countries, drawing its inspiration from the same source of social idealism and democratic conviction”*. He then continued: *“In a world polarized between capitalism which is incapable of solving serious national and international problems on the one hand, and communism which is oppressing human society and destroying all spiritual freedoms on the other, only a socialist democracy can and must give expression to the moral conscience of the free world.”*¹⁸

A corresponding image was cultivated within a network of Mapai’s international contacts. Many of the foreign guests who visited Israel in the early years of the state hailed from pro-Israel circles inside the British Labour Party and the social democratic parties of Scandinavia. Whether visiting communal settlements, development projects in the cities, or the Mapai party offices, these guests were presented with a uniform vision of life in Israel – a free egalitarian society walking hand-in-hand with the moral ideal of redeeming both the land and the people by labour.¹⁹ Within the Asian context, Israel did not cease promoting the principle of socialist democracy either, at least until the mid-1950s. As the case of

¹⁷ “Speech by Mrs. Meir in Opening the Middle East Debate at the Congress of the Socialist International, 3 July 1957”, p. 2, Israel Labour Party Archives, Kfar Saba [hereafter ILPA] 2-0111957-174.

¹⁸ “Allocution de Monsieur Moshé Sharett. Délégué du Mapai (Israël) – Ancien Ministre des Affaires Étrangères”, pp. 1–2, ILPA/2-914-1959-27.

¹⁹ *Mapai Bulletin*, 15 Apr. 1953, p. 7, ILPA/2-914-1953-290; “Yediot ha-mazkirut” [News by the secretariat], Oct. 1952, p. 7, ILPA/2-002-195283a; “Yediot ha-mazkirut”, Feb. 1953, p. 11, ILPA/2002-1952-83a; “Yediot ha-mazkirut”, Feb. 1954, p. 7, ILPA/2-002-1952-83a.

the Rangoon Conference of 1953 showed, Mapai was prepared to use the venue attended by left-leaning nationalists for verbally repudiating both Western imperialism and “ideological neutralism”. There was no socialism without an energetic defence of a true national ideal. In Mapai’s view, (authentic) socialism had to wage war on two fronts – “*against capitalism and feudalism on the one side and against Communism on the other*”.²⁰

Israel’s economy had been precarious ever since the foundation of the state, and the country offered few attractions when compared with the Arab markets. Tensions with the international community were intense and ongoing, centred on the evergreen topics of Arab-Israeli disaccord, such as the plight of Palestinian refugees, the future of Jerusalem, and the demarcation of boundaries. It was the existence of parliamentary democracy that distinguished the young state from its surrounding neighbours, enabling it to appear a more suitable partner than its rivals. In the words Sharett used when speaking to a group of foreign journalists in March 1956: “*One of the Arab States after another has gone through a succession of internal disturbances, coups d’états, revolutions and political assassinations. In this wide area, which is shaken by constant internal struggles and revolutionary upheaval, Israel represents the only free democratic and stable community.*”²¹ Some leaders, most notably the long-term Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, were not only adamant in promoting such images, but rigorously opposed any cultural association between Israel and the rest of the Middle East. As the Israeli prime minister presented his case to British envoys in June 1949: “*We should not be treated as if we were one of the Arab States, but as if we were, say, Belgium, as we were in all vital respects a modern, progressive, ‘European’ people.*”²²

The difference between democratic Israel and undemocratic Arab regimes was particularly exploited at the times of repeated regional tensions. Ever since the first Arab-Israeli war, Israel blamed the absence of any permanent settlement squarely on the other side. To put it simply, all the conflict zones (including the refugee issue) had been created by the invasion of the Arab armies (May 1948) and by the incessant beligerent designs. With the 1948/49 defeat the Arabs got only what they had deserved and it was now time to accept the new reality and leave

²⁰ M. Sharett, “Rangoon Conference”, *Mapai Bulletin*, 15 Apr. 1953, p. 3, ILPA/2-9141953-290.

²¹ “Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Moshe Sharett before visiting editors and commentators”, 21 Mar. 1956, p. 3, ILPA/2-011-1955-170c.

²² “Report on the visit of Sir William Strang, permanent undersecretary for foreign affairs, 1-3 June 1949”, p. 2, Israel State Archives, Jerusalem [hereafter ISA] MFA/2412/26.

Israel at peace.²³ Once the Soviet Union started to actively penetrate the region, as typified by the Czechoslovak-Egyptian arms deal of 1955, the scope of relevant declarations had been correspondingly expanded. The Egyptian ruler, Gamal Abdul Nasser, was frequently referred to – by name or otherwise – as a dictator and a demagogue, and was even compared to Hitler; references to the peril of a “new Munich” were floated.²⁴ In addition, a higher frequency of references to the dictatorial nature of the surrounding regimes accompanied tensions over free passage in the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran throughout the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s.²⁵ The continuing blockage was labelled as “*the naval piracy carried on by the Egyptian dictator against Israel’s international shipping*”.²⁶

It is small wonder that allusions to “shared values” between Israel and the free world had become an inevitable part of the phrasebook Israelis turned to when addressing their partners in Western Europe. In a corresponding fashion, the support for Israeli democracy was presented as an innermost interest of the West; references to common threats were employed. Soon after the Sinai Campaign, Ben Gurion assessed a recent meeting between Shimon Peres, his confidant and number two at the ministry of defence, and the French prime minister, Guy Mollet, by referring to “*a friendship which is inspired not only by common political interests, but by the shared cultural values of our two peoples*”. He then interpreted the Campaign as an undertaking which had put an end to “*a danger threatening the free world and its common values*”.²⁷ In an audience with her French counterpart, Maurice Couve de Murville, in August 1958, Meir had been quite explicit in demanding concrete support for Western “outposts” in the Middle East, namely Israel and Turkey. Correspondingly, Nasser’s leanings towards the USSR were interpreted in ideological terms. “*The Near East is just a first stage on communism’s march towards world domination,*” warned

²³ W. Eytan, “Declaration by Israel Delegation to Palestine Conciliation Commission Conference in Paris”, 19 Sep. 1951, p. 2, ISA/MFA/175/13.

²⁴ “Neum sarat ha-huts be-atseret u”m” [Speech of the minister of foreign affairs at the UN Assembly], 5 Dec. 1956, p. 7, ILPA/2-011-1955170a; “Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Moshe Sharett”, 21 Mar. 1956, p. 4, ILPA/2-0111955-170c.

²⁵ “Rosh ha-memshalah al hofesh ha-shait ve-gorel retsuat Azah” [The Prime Minister on the freedom of sailing and the fate of the Gaza Strip], 24 Feb. 1957, pp. 1, 4, 6, ILPA 2-011-1957-174.

²⁶ “Mapai Convention”, *Mapai Bulletin*, Mar. 1960, p. 2, ILPA/2-914-1959-303.

²⁷ “Message personnel au Président Guy Mollet de la part du Président David Ben-Gourion”, 12 Dec. 1956, p. 1, Archives diplomatiques du ministère des Affaires étrangères, La Courneuve [hereafter AMAE] Cabinet du Ministre/11QO/34.

Meir her Gaullist host.²⁸ In other statements, we may find that closer ties between Israel and France were but a natural outcome of the existing cultural proximity between the Jews and Europe.²⁹ The British were also confronted with similar pronouncements, albeit Anglo-Israeli relations were noticeably cold in the early 1950s. According to FO sources, Eliyahu Elath, Israel's first minister (later ambassador) to the UK, had appealed to "*the necessity for all democratic countries to work closely together*" already at the beginning of his tenure in London, in September 1950. This would, in his view, be best materialized by the British provision of arms to Israel, helping the country to grow stronger. "*This was in our interest, since Israel was the only democratic country in the Middle East and during the war she had shown her ability to fight and would do so again and can therefore play her part not perhaps in halting Russian expansionism but in delaying it,*" is how the FO recorded his ideas.³⁰ Elath's request for arms, namely tanks and jets, was accompanied by assurances to the effect that it was "vital" for Israel to "*move towards a closer rapprochement with the Western countries*" which also "*corresponded with the instinct of her people*".³¹

These sorts of utterances may naturally be taken for a diplomatic jargon. Nevertheless, Israel's representatives' persistence in and capacity for entrenching references to democracy and common values into their arguments for political support and military assistance went well beyond mere formalities. As a matter of fact, Israeli self-esteem probably ran higher. For most of the 1950s, Israeli diplomacy viewed Western assistance as disappointing, failing to match the needs associated with the heroic task of building a new state. In the words of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)'s aide-mémoire dated June 1958: "*from 1948 to 1956, the State of Israel was alone in its struggle for the sake of the West in the Middle East. It was supported in its struggle strictly for non-political reasons (economic assistance from the United States) or with reluctance and no system (occasional French arms sales,*

²⁸ "Compte rendu d'entretien entre Mme Golda Meir et M. Couve de Murville, 5 août 1958", pp. 2-3, AMAE/ Afrique-Levant [AL]/218QO/50.

²⁹ "Pegishat rosh ha-memshalah im ha-mishlahah ha-parlamentit mi-Tsarfat be-roshuto shel mar Soustelle" [A meeting between the Prime Minister and the French parliamentary delegation chaired by Mr. Soustelle], 13 Aug. 1957, p. 1, ISA/G/5569/2.

³⁰ "Conversation between Israeli Minister and Parliamentary Under-Secretary, on Anglo-Israeli relations, on 15th September (1950)", p. 3, The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA] FO 371/82529.

³¹ "Conversation, Sir W. Strang – Mr. Elath", 14 Nov. 1950, pp. 1-2, TNA/FO 371/82529.

limited in number and irregular).³² Evoking the legacy of Charles Martel (the “saviour of Christendom against the Muslims”) and common Judeo-Christian values, the same document castigated the West for doing little for the Christians in Lebanon.³³ On closer inspection, we may find that there was more than well-calculated rhetoric behind these claims.

If nothing else, the language (and content) of internal documents did not differ fundamentally from that of those presented to the Western counterparts. Whatever misgivings a critical scholar (or contemporary opposition) may have about certain aspects of early Israeli democracy, a number of leading personalities did profess their profound belief in it. Indeed, although Sharett may have been more prone to accentuate a need for pluralism of opinions than others (namely Ben Gurion), it was taken for a fact within the establishment. The apparent ethnic exclusiveness of the Israeli model was not seen as a matter for concern. While being aware of a unique historical background, many in Mapai did not resign on the idea of their party serving as a role model to be followed. Zalman Aran, who occupied several ministerial positions from 1954 until 1969, offered an elaborate interpretation of the subject in his meeting with the party faithful in July 1956. There was more than one way of building a socialist society. As the Israeli case had documented, a socialist economy could go hand-in-hand with coalition politics and political pluralism, Aran asserted. He hailed the Israeli model both for its traditions and for accomplishing a blend of social progress and national emancipation, the one unthinkable without the other. The erection of a fully-fledged workers’ economy as represented by the Histadrut trade union federation, covering all fields from production to services, healthcare and education, had been achieved without resort to anything like the class struggle. “*We stand upon the territory of democratic socialism,*” stressed Aran in that regard. Reflecting upon the latest changes, i.e. de-Stalinization in the USSR, Aran concluded that these had hardly changed Mapai’s standpoint. Scientific socialism had failed to be adopted in the USSR and the USA alike, as each country had obstructed the progress of socialism for their own internal reasons.³⁴

³² “Aide-mémoire. Quelques réflexions sur la politique de l’Occident en Moyen-Orient”, 30 June 1958, p. 1, AMAE/AL/218QO/45.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

³⁴ Z. Aran, “Medinat Yisrael sotsialistit” [Socialist state of Israel], 21 July 1956, pp. 35–36, 38–39, ILPA/4-007-192910a.

Moshe Dayan, who served as the chief-of-staff between 1953 and 1958, expressed belief in the genuine character of Israel's democracy, noting undervaluation of this asset abroad. When addressing a forum similar to Aran's in November 1958, he stated, among other things, the following: "*Our principal importance is that we are at the core a European, Western country with a democratic regime, [situated] amidst the Middle East. However, this is not reflected in our low value on the world map.*"³⁵ References to democracy were also frequent in documents the Israeli diplomacy prepared for domestic purposes. This can be illustrated by a foreign policy overview drafted by the MFA in 1952. In its main line of argument, Israel adheres to the principle of non-interference so far as regimes in other countries are concerned, but considers democracy to be the best option, as only a free and democratic regime could enable the Jews to cultivate their national culture and build ties with Israel.³⁶ Last, but not the least, the interpretation of the Sinai Campaign destined for domestic use followed similar logic as that presented to the French. In January 1958, Israeli ambassador to France, Yaacov Tsur, offered a strikingly similar account when summarizing Israel's contemporary foreign policy prospects for his party comrades. As Tsur put it, Israeli victories during the War of Independence and the Sinai Campaign were "*a clear signal to Europe that the days of her [i.e. Europe's] culture are not over and her destiny is not sealed*".³⁷

The Perspective of Western Observers: an Affinity Sought by Israel?

Israel's courtship was not without success. Israeli sources themselves noted with satisfaction the Jewish state's good standing in Western public opinion in the late 1950s, particularly within "progressive circles" (i.e. communists apart).³⁸ The political partners may have been harder to convince, but common ground was sure to be found when it came to tensions with some of the Arab regimes, such as Nasser's Egypt. Occasionally, the Western counterparts resorted in private to language not far from Israeli mindset. On one such occasion in May 1958, the British foreign secretary,

³⁵ "Pratei-kol kenés bnei ha-moshavim" [Protocol of the convention of the members of the cooperatives], 6 Nov. 1958, p. 9, ILPA/2-015-195863.

³⁶ "Mediniut ha-huts shel Yisrael be-shenat 1951-1952" [Foreign policy of Israel in the year 1951-52], pp. 1-2, ILPA/2-011-1952-34a.

³⁷ "Petihat moadon Yahdav" [Opening of the Mapai Yahdav club], 14 Jan. 1958, p. 7, ILPA/2-0151958-63.

³⁸ According to the surveys of the time, Israel was rated favourably by ca. 40% of the French public. SCHILLO, p. 842.

Selwyn Lloyd, characterized Nasser as a “schizophrenic”.³⁹ The French, for their part, described Nasser plainly as a “dictator” at that time.⁴⁰

Western diplomatic corpses posed by far the biggest challenge. Though strategic reservations were being expressed by all, (at least) one characteristic difference between the Europeans and the American diplomacy is easily noticeable. While the US State Department described Israel in August 1953 as “*a parliamentary republican democracy of the Western type*”,⁴¹ the British and French commentaries remained far more restrained in their appreciation of the Israeli political/societal model throughout much of the 1950s. Overall, Israeli democracy was seen as oligarchic and the local political culture was often associated with cronyism. While a cynical flavour dominated the British sources, the French expressed concern for the longer-term consequences regarding the functioning of society. Their criticisms ranged from a lack of democracy within Mapai to the autocratic manners of Ben Gurion and the wider society’s assertions of intolerance.

A salient description of the existing impressions concerning the Israeli political system was provided by the first British minister (later ambassador) to Israel, Alexander Knox Helm, in January 1950. His survey, revealingly entitled “Repository of real power in Israel”, stated, among other things: “*Israel claims to be a Socialist democracy and at the first sight the claim has justification. Trade unionism is highly developed [...] the 120 members of the Knesset or Parliament were freely chosen last February for a four-year period by a by no means ignorant or unlettered electorate [...] there is real freedom of debate and nobody suggests that the Government could survive without popular support. Yet these realities are to some extent deceptive, for they veil what approximates to something not unlike a dictatorship. In Israel real power is highly concentrated, on the one hand in the Histadrut and on the other in a small group inside the Government, with the shock-headed stocky figure of the Prime Minister linking the two. It seems to me that in the last resort Mr. Ben Gurion is the only person who really counts. [...] Mapai element in the Government enjoys virtually a free hand as regards economic, social, and foreign policy [...] Mapai is, for all practical purposes, Mr. Ben Gurion and those immediately around him.*”⁴² His successor, John (Jack) Nicholls, portrayed Mapai and Histadrut as monolithic

³⁹ “Conversation between the Secretary of State and the Israel Ambassador on May 2, 1958”, p. 1, TNA/FO 371/34284.

⁴⁰ “Note”, 25 July 1958, pp. 1–2, AMAE/AL/218QQ/50.

⁴¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952–1954*, Vol. IX, Part 1, Washington 1952–1954, 18 Aug. 1953, No. 649, p. 1279.

⁴² A. K. Helm, “Repository of real power in Israel”, 13 Jan. 1950, p. 1, TNA/FO 371/82508.

organizations run on a strict top-down principle by a closed circle of party cadres. The nexus between the two constituted a de facto “*state within the state*”.⁴³ The French tended to concur with this perspective. In their view, the Mapai party rested on two fundamental pillars – the prestige of Ben Gurion and the power of its organizational structure. “*Mapai and Histadrut constitute together a true state within the state [...] [a worker] can spend his entire life within the frame of the same giant organization,*” observed the French sources.⁴⁴ Sometimes, French criticism went even further. According to Édouard-Félix Guyon, the first minister (later ambassador) to Israel, the problem did not stop with the concentration of power. Mapai as such was to be permeated by clientelism and nepotism.⁴⁵

When assessing the seventh Mapai party conference (August 1950), FO sources pointed out “little or no criticism” and an apparent lack of any internal debate or any change in the leading personnel. The country was, as a whole, “*led, indoctrinated and managed by a ‘pioneer aristocracy’ of early immigrants mostly of Russian or Polish origin [...] There is a danger that the present trend towards concentration of real policy-making in the hands of a hierarchically elected oligarchy will lead to the breakdown of all democratic control,*” mused the British.⁴⁶ This observation stood in stark contrast with Ben Gurion’s self-assertion that Mapai had professed allegiance to democratic socialism as practiced in Britain and Scandinavia.⁴⁷ The French assessment of the eighth party conference which took place six years later (August 1956) did not substantially deviate from the picture established by the FO. According to the French counsellor in Tel Aviv, Jean Fernand-Laurent, the speeches had brought nothing new; the rule of the old cadres continued uncontested as before. Ben Gurion’s personal dominance overshadowed any existing personal rivalries. Accumulation of functions in the party had become a common practice. The meeting resembled “an assembly of veterans”. As a whole, the Mapai conference left two overarching impressions: first, that the party constituted a “formidable force” to be reckoned with by any opponent, and second, that it drew a firm net around its members. For insiders, it was a “*famiglia*” (sic).⁴⁸

⁴³ J. Nicholls to H. Macmillan, 2 Aug. 1955, p. 2, TNA/FO 371/115813.

⁴⁴ J. Fernand-Laurent to MAE, 14 Aug. 1955, pp. 8–9, AMAE/AL/218QO/47.

⁴⁵ E. F. Guyon to R. Schuman, 5 Sep. 1950, p. 5, AMAE/AL/218QO/30.

⁴⁶ J. E. Chadwick to E. Bevin, 23 Aug. 1950, pp. 1–2, TNA/FO 371/82509.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ J. Fernand-Laurent to MAE, 11 Sep. 1956, pp. 2–4, AMAE/AL/218QO/47.

In the view of the Quai, a high level of politization affected the operations of the diplomatic corps and the armed forces alike. When Dayan replaced Mordechai Makleff as the chief-of-staff in 1953, French sources attributed this development, among other things, to Makleff's refusal to enter the Mapai ranks and his open flirting with the General Zionists. Unlike him, Dayan possessed "great political sense" and the right party affiliation. "By nominating a member of its executive committee to the position of chief-of-staff, Mapai calculates to extend its control over the army," mused the French.⁴⁹ Histadrut, controlled by the Mapai party, was a dominant player in the national economy. According to the estimates provided by the ambassador Pierre-Eugène Gilbert, Histadrut controlled 70% of the agricultural production, 70% of the transport services and 66% of the companies involved in construction and public works.⁵⁰ As such, Israel of the 1950s was portrayed by the British and the French alike as a political monolith, displaying traits not dissimilar to those characteristic of people's democracies (with a certain Levantine touch).

Even more question marks surrounded Ben Gurion's autocratic manners. Some of these came directly from Israeli insiders. President Chaim Weizmann was taken by the British as a particularly valuable and reliable source of knowledge. In one meeting with Helm, Weizmann complained that Ben Gurion was "a brute and a bully" who held "all the power" in the country.⁵¹ In another meeting, Weizmann described him as "impulsive and dangerous".⁵² Helm correspondingly referred to Ben Gurion's lack of tolerance and strong headedness, and provided the following assessment: "I have in spite of his Western orientation regarded him as a growing menace, not immediately in relation to possible foreign excursions, but internally in Israel." In 1950, Helm accused Ben Gurion of running the state, together with the then chief-of-staff Yigael Yadin, on "more or less dictatorial lines".⁵³ By 1957, once some of the post-war acrimony had settled down, Ben Gurion was characterized by the FO as "emotional and with a streak of Messianic fervour

⁴⁹ J. Bourdeillette to M. Couve de Murville, 12 Feb. 1963, pp. 1-2, AMAE/AL/218QO/85; J. du Boucher, "Changement de chef d'état major général", 4 Dec. 1953, pp. 2-3, AMAE/AL/218QO/38.

⁵⁰ P. E. Gilbert to G. Bidault, 27 June 1953, p. 3, Centre des archives diplomatiques de Nantes [hereafter CADN] 378PO/6/890.

⁵¹ A. K. Helm to M. Wright, 11 Jan. 1950, p. 1, TNA/FO 371/82508.

⁵² A. K. Helm to G. W. Furlonge, 28 June 1950, p. 3, TNA/FO 371/82509.

⁵³ A. K. Helm to G. W. Furlonge, 18 Oct. 1950, p. 5, *ibid.*

[...] *with a direct and fundamentally honest approach*".⁵⁴ The tone of the French observations was subtler. Referring to his tensions with Weizmann, the French sources described Ben Gurion as "energetic and domineering". He "exercised an indisputable personal upper hand over the members of parliament and of the coalition government which he himself presided," being in fact "a true master of the country."⁵⁵ In 1953, Gilbert described Ben Gurion as a "true founder of the state, a tireless tribune [...] a hard-to-defeat fighter, who knows the right moment to take command". Still, even Gilbert cautioned that Ben Gurion was a "prisoner of his own personality," noting further that he treated his fellow ministers in a "cavalier fashion".⁵⁶

A further look into some characteristics of leading Israeli personalities suggests that the British and the French were genuinely convinced that Ben Gurion had enjoyed influence unparalleled by any politician in the West. His imprint on the foreign policy formulation can represent a case in point. Walter Eytan, the long-term director general of the MFA during the 1950s, was thought to be a purely nominal figure head. "It is difficult to judge the extent of his influence in the formulation of Israel's foreign policy, but there are indications that it is not much," mused the British ambassador, Francis Rundall, on that account.⁵⁷ Even Sharett, who had shaped much of Israel's foreign policy orientation in the early days of the state (serving also as Prime Minister between 1953 and 1955) was not considered an equal political weight. The French (1953) recognized Sharett for representing "certain flexibility towards the Great Powers" inside the government. He was reputed to have considerable support within Mapai against the "intransigence and combative spirit of Mr. Ben Gurion".⁵⁸ Still, on the whole they considered him to be no more than a "perfect technician" whose skills Ben Gurion desperately needed.⁵⁹ Once Sharett's days in office came to an end in June 1956 (due to his insurmountable divisions with Ben Gurion),⁶⁰

⁵⁴ F. B. A. Rundall, "Leading personalities in Israel", 18 Oct. 1957, p. 6, TNA/FO 371/128086.

⁵⁵ E. F. Guyon to R. Schuman, 2 Dec. 1949, pp. 2–3, CADN/378PO/6/573.

⁵⁶ P. E. Gilbert to G. Bidault, 19 Oct. 1953, pp. 2, 6, AMAE/AL/218QO46; P. E. Gilbert to MAE, 10 Jan. 1956, p. 2, AMAE/AL/218QO/47.

⁵⁷ F. B. A. Rundall, "Leading personalities in Israel", 18 Oct. 1957, p. 10, TNA/FO 371/128086.

⁵⁸ P. E. Gilbert to G. Bidault, 19 Oct. 1953, p. 3, AMAE/AL/218QO/46.

⁵⁹ J. Fernand-Laurent to MAE, 29 Aug. 1955, AMAE/AL/218QO/47.

⁶⁰ For more, see G. SHEFFER, *Moshe Sharett: Biography of a Political Moderate*, Oxford 1996, pp. 653–887.

his successor, Meir, scored even worse. “*Her scope for initiative is narrow, her role being essentially that of an instrument of Mr. Ben Gurion’s policies,*” mused the British.⁶¹ Small wonder, then, that the French solved any doubts in that regard by gambling on Ben Gurion’s closest associates – Peres and Dayan. Few would probably have described Israel as a standard (Western) democracy so far as the distribution of power was concerned.

Indeed, one may always question the extent of in-depth knowledge and credibility of Western sources regarding the subject. Neither the Foreign Office nor the Quai d’Orsay enjoyed reputation of friendly institutions among Israelis. In its own right, this is justified. The tone of the FO’s diplomatic correspondence concerning the Jewish state discloses a certain sense of cultural superiority as a whole. The ambassadors to Israel did not necessarily belong among those best disposed towards the country. According to Neill Lochery, the ambassador Nicholls seemed to regard Israeli leadership with a degree of contempt.⁶² The Quai tended to produce elaborate policy papers presenting a more sophisticated (if less readable) story than that issued in London. Yet, as Schillo has noticed, the French foreign ministry of the Fourth Republic constituted something of “a fiefdom of old Catholic families” with “saloon anti-Semitism” being fairly present among its officials.⁶³ In either case, the respective positions contrasted with pro-Israel enthusiasm as personalized by the first US ambassador to Israel, James G. McDonald, for example.⁶⁴ Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that at least some of the criticism concerning the shortcomings of early Israeli democracy was shared by “pro-Arab” as well as “pro-Israeli” European observers. Gilbert, who served as the French ambassador to Israel in 1953–1959, happened to be the first diplomat in such a position to master the Hebrew language.⁶⁵ He was seen by the Israelis (and suspected by the British) to be a “true friend” of the Jewish state. However, this did not preclude him from penning down a number of observations which deviated from the image Israel wished to cultivate.

⁶¹ F. B. A. Rundall, “Leading personalities in Israel”, 18 Oct. 1957, p. 17, TNA/FO 371/128086.

⁶² LOCHERY, p. 59.

⁶³ SCHILLO, pp. 105, 128.

⁶⁴ Israel came to be seen as a kindred spirit by a large part of the US society during that time. M. MART, *Tough Guys and American Cold War: Images of Israel, 1948–1960*, in: *Diplomatic History*, 20, 3, 1996, pp. 357–380.

⁶⁵ B. PINKUS, *Me-ambivalentiut le-vrit bilti ketuba: Yisrael, Tsarfat ve-yehudei Tsarfat, 1947–1957*, Beersheva 2005, p. 359.

So far as the Israeli internal politics were concerned, Gilbert was actually far from uncritical, referring to the limits of pluralism imposed by the “omnipotent” Mapai and the “domineering” personality of Ben Gurion.

We may well say that the core of Western critique touched some of the most problematic aspects of statism, namely the concentration of power and the centrality of Ben Gurion. At the same time, one should not forget that Western criticism was not entirely free of certain hypocrisy, interpreting democratic standards according to the current geostrategic needs. In any case, the aim of the current paper is not to determine whether Israel of the 1950s was a formal or a substantive democracy, but how was it perceived by the British and the French diplomats of the time.⁶⁶ The picture we come across in the relevant sources is, on the whole, quite far from being idyllic. A good number of dispatches reaching Paris and London described in vivid colours the prevailing culture of bitter rivalry and acute personal skirmishes. While the overall dominance of a single party remained intact, Israeli coalition politics, reflecting the new state’s diverse societal make-up, was mostly considered shaky. At the same time, Mapai’s control of the state apparatus and the preponderance of Zionist ideology could equally represent a “healthy phenomenon” from the Western point of view as they had made any communist penetration very difficult.⁶⁷ As such, European observers did not have only the harsh words to say about Israeli democracy. To enlist a few examples, the French sources noted with respect the wide distribution of liberties, including the press freedom.⁶⁸ The notoriously sceptical British commentators had appreciation for the fact that Ben Gurion had held “*few illusions about Russian Communism*”.⁶⁹ Still, it is quite obvious that certain elements of Israeli phraseology were decoded with ease. The French diplomats were clear-eyed in regard to the desiderata of Israel’s foreign policy, designating arms

⁶⁶ For the corresponding debate (and a spirited defence of the latter claim), see A. BARELI, *Hierarchy, Representation, and Inclusion in a Reflective Democratic Culture: Conflicting Perspectives in Israel’s Nascent Years*, in: *Israel Studies*, 22, 1, 2017, pp. 139–164.

⁶⁷ A. K. Helm to E. Bevin, 16 Feb. 1950, p. 2, TNA/FO 371/82510.

⁶⁸ P. E. Gilbert to G. Bidault, 11 Jan. 1954, pp. 1–3, AMAE/AL/218QO/37. For a more critical assessment of the Israeli press in the 1950s, see B. MORRIS, *The Israeli Press and the Qibya Operation, 1953*, in: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 25, 4, 1996, pp. 40–52.

⁶⁹ A. K. Helm to M. Wright, 11 Jan. 1950, p. 2, TNA/FO 371/82508; A. K. Helm, “*Repository of real power in Israel*,” 13 Jan. 1950, p. 2, TNA/FO 371/82508; Minute by Sheringham, 12 May 1950, p. 1, TNA/FO 371/82509.

purchases as its driving force.⁷⁰ The British perspective was similar, with the FO commenting to the effect that the ambassador Elath “*seldom misses an opportunity to revert to the question of arms supplies*”.⁷¹

It is noteworthy that the arguments for the improvement of bilateral ties with Israel came alongside remarks which negated any unreserved association of the country with the Western democracies and their value-systems. Nicholls, who served as the British ambassador at Tel Aviv in 1954–1957, expressed this in a telling fashion in March 1955. Though he suggested a number of ways to strengthen relations with Israel, in order to avoid it becoming isolated, which could lead to a further escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, his words on the subject illustrate the gap between Israel and the Western mindset: “*I believe that we must treat the Israelis as a sick people [...] I fear that if we cannot find some way of treating Israel’s psychological condition she is more likely to embark on an apparently suicidal policy in a state of national exaltation, based on a compound of mystical conviction that somehow Jehovah would intervene to save his people and shrewd calculation that United States Jewry might turn out to be his chosen instrument.*”⁷² The Quai tended to employ softer language. Still, French astonishment over some unilateral steps reflected British impressions. As the French general consulate in Jerusalem commented upon the decision to transfer the seat of the MFA from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 1953: “*Although the Israeli political system, which is quite democratic by certain ratings, should not be compared to fascism, the young state has, like Mussolini’s Italy, the habit and taste for fait accompli despite the advice of the Great Powers.*”⁷³ Overall, many of the British and French sources of the time seem to be characterised by a sense of estrangement rather than the affinity, claimed by Israel.

Though further research would be required to elaborate on the topic in full, we should mention that European observers had equal doubts regarding the Israeli societal model more generally. The attitudes of the common people were often described as anything but tolerant of different viewpoints. Even in the late 1950s, when British criticism of the Jewish state was substantially diminishing, diplomatic correspondence characterized Israelis as “*a most intolerant people*” and referred to the “*rabid*

⁷⁰ J. Bourdeillete, “Rapport de fin de Mission”, 17 Aug. 1965, p. 22, AMAE/AL/218QO/86.

⁷¹ “Proposed meeting of Sir F. Hoyer-Millar and the Israel Ambassador”, 11 Feb. 1957, p. 1, TNA/FO 371/128133.

⁷² J. Nicholls to C. A. E. Shuckburgh, 8 Mar. 1955, p. 2, TNA/FO 371/115825.

⁷³ Gen. Consulate in Jerusalem to MAE, 16 July 1953, p. 2, AMAE/AL/218QO/32.

self-righteousness of the average Israeli".⁷⁴ The process of nation-building and profound internal divisions within the Jewish polity constituted yet another source of curiosity. Critical remarks of the early 1950s targeted the political elite; it was in the second half of the decade that those targeting social issues reached their zenith. The British noticed the uneasy coexistence between the religious and the secular while the French focused on the (Jewish) inter-ethnic divide. On the whole, diplomats were quite puzzled by the state's difficulties regarding the "ingathering of the exiles".

According to the French, the eventual outcome of this process remained in doubt because the migrants coming from dozens of culturally alien countries had "*little in common apart from religion, performed according to different rites*".⁷⁵ As the British put it, problems were "*arising and likely to arise from the mixing of European, African and Oriental bloods in a state whose origins are Eastern European*".⁷⁶ In characteristically derogatory style, the FO referred to "genuine claustrophobia" as the defining characteristic of the Israeli melting pot. Israel was defined by external threats rather than internal cohesion; a peace solution would deprive this "military state" of a "crusading spirit", leading inevitably to its submersion in the Arab Levant. Israeli culture, in the widest sense of the term, was not even considered to exist, and Hebrew was described as a language "*of which all the citizens up to a few years ago had been blissfully ignorant*".⁷⁷ Somewhat more insightful were observations concerning the incapacity to conceptualize a new (civic) approach towards the Jewish religion. Given the absence of reform/liberal Judaism, the population could only choose between two extremes – the "bleak fanaticism" of the orthodox and the "messianic materialism" of the left. "*To the non-Jewish observer, the lack of any spiritual content in the daily life of Israel is woefully apparent*," mused the British.⁷⁸ The merit of such reports cannot be taken at face value as they often reveal more about their respective authors than they do about contemporary Israel. Nevertheless, for our purposes it is noteworthy how far the perspectives of diplomats residing in Israel differed from the way the Jewish state wanted to be seen by its partners in the West.

⁷⁴ F. B. A. Rundall to S. Lloyd, 2 June 1958, pp. 4–5, TNA/FO 371/134371.

⁷⁵ J. Binaud to the chargé d'affaires in TA, 12 July 1959, p. 1, AMAE/AL/218QO/47.

⁷⁶ A. K. Helm to G. W. Furlonge, 6 July 1950, p. 5, TNA/FO 371/82509.

⁷⁷ R. H. Turton to Levant dept., 11 Oct. 1955, pp. 1–6, TNA/FO 371/115813.

⁷⁸ F. B. A. Rundall to S. Lloyd, 2 June 1958, p. 4, TNA/FO 371/134371.

Most significantly, many reports associated Israeli society with all sorts of ethnic discrimination which went far beyond the mistreatment of the Arab minority.⁷⁹ In fact, many of the communitarian tensions were said to originate with the man in the street rather than the government. French diplomacy had been keenly sensitive to this issue ever since the early 1950s, when it had first noted tensions revolving around “labour discrimination” against the Oriental Jews.⁸⁰ In the view of Gilbert, expressed in 1953, the Oriental Jews were being ostracised. Though one could not refer to “segregation” in the full sense of the term, the bulk of the European Jews approached them with “mistrust” and “a real lack of any sympathy”. The inevitable result was, in his view, “a sense of rejection”, not dissimilar to that engendered by the anti-Semitism which had been experienced by European Jews in the past. “*Most of the Maghrebians, and many Oriental Jews that have been disappointed, nourish [a sense of] nostalgia for their countries of origin where, though the existence of the number of them was a sordid one, they dream to return to,*” asserted the ambassador.⁸¹ At the height of Franco-Israeli cooperation in the late 1950s, certain reports overtly accused Israeli society of “*the most frightful [form of] racial discrimination, that of skin colour*”, with North African migrants being commonly called “blacks” in the country.⁸² Some encounters with Israeli bureaucracy may have confirmed these impressions. Maurice Fischer, Israel’s first minister (later ambassador) to France, who remained active in promoting bilateral ties after the end of his term in Paris, presented a very stereotypical image of North African migrants in association with the subject of Franco-Israeli cultural agreement. According to Israeli sources, Belgian-born Fischer openly questioned the Oriental Jews’ potential to spread Francophone culture, observing that they constituted “*miserable masses who speak Arabic*”. They were supposedly marked by “*a deep sense of inferiority [...] with a very low general level of culture*”.⁸³ According to French sources of the time, the discrimination against the Oriental/North African migrants was plain to see: “*By a strange paradox, the nation that has*

⁷⁹ For more on the subject, see B. K. ROBY, *The Mizrahi era of rebellion: Israel’s forgotten civil rights struggle, 1948–1966*, Syracuse 2015 or (in Hebrew) S. SHITRIT, *Ha-maavak ha-mizrahi be-Yisrael: bein dikui le-shihruv, bein hizdahut le-alternativah, 1948–2003*, Tel Aviv 2004.

⁸⁰ Gen. consulate in Jerusalem to MAE, 7 May 1953, p. 2, AMAE/AL/218QO/47.

⁸¹ P. E. Gilbert to G. Bidault, 22 July 1953, pp. 1–3, CADN/378PO/6/890.

⁸² R. Vizzavona to the chargé d’affaires in TA, 16 July 1959, p. 1, AMAE/AL/218QO/47.

⁸³ “Protocole de la séance du 23.6.1960 à Jérusalem,” pp. 2, 8, ISA/MFA/939/18.

the most suffered from racial persecution extends to some of its own members the notion of colour-bar." Their participation in the organs of power was said to be "minimal", there were few mixed marriages, and the number of students (at the institutions of higher learning) did not exceed 5% of the total.⁸⁴ To illustrate the subject of inter-racial relations better, French diplomats cited an incident in which an Israeli taxi driver offended the Liberian chargé d'affaires by calling him a "dirty negro" (*sale nègre*).⁸⁵ Needless to say, none of this corresponded with the purpose-built image of a nation that was not afflicted by any colonial past of its own, which was often touted in the context of Afro-Israeli relations abroad (particularly by Ben Gurion and Meir).

The above examples represent only part of a broader picture of Israel that can be found in the diplomatic records of the time. The entire perspective was complex rather than negative and the sense of "otherness" was not absolute. When assessing the causes of growing Gallic support for Israel in the mid-1950s, British sources did not fail to mention the attitude of the French public and its "*sympathy for a more or less European, intellectual and democratic people*".⁸⁶ As far as the merits of Western criticism are concerned, one might well wonder whether the French were best placed to teach the rest of the world about humanism, given their contemporaneous actions in Algeria. Yet what matters for our purposes is that both the Israeli model of parliamentary democracy and the claims in regard to social egalitarianism seem to have been treated with caution in London and Paris alike. The evidence gathered by diplomats working on the spot raised a number of fundamental concerns not only about the comportment of the top echelons of the state, but also about the "real" (or inclusive) character of Israeli democracy as a whole.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1950s, relations between Israel and the West were marked by a mixture of collusion and tensions. The issue of Israel's democracy was seen through various lenses. For Israel's leaders and representatives abroad, the country's democracy was real, obvious and beyond dispute. It represented a cultural bond with the Western world, an extra leverage which could be used to offset the advantages of the regional foes.

⁸⁴ J. Bourdeillette to M. Couve de Murville, 23 May 1960, pp. 2-3, CADN/688PO/1/2.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸⁶ J. G. Beith to E. M. Rose, 13 May 1955, p. 1, TNA/FO 371/115887/1076/513G.

The democratic nature of the Jewish state was presented as one of the key reasons why Israel should be assisted in becoming a strong outpost of the free world in the Middle East. Emissaries, such as Elath in London, referred to Israel's association with the West well before this became a recognized fact in their own country. Throughout Israel's diplomatic communications at this time, a request for arms supplies was ever present. On the whole, however, the respective assertions seem to mirror the mindset of the time in Israel, rather than constitute purely propagandistic constructions.

British and French diplomats saw Israel's democracy in a rather different light. While Israel's ideological resilience towards Soviet penetration was undoubtedly appreciated, numerous aspects of the young state were seen as questionable and undemocratic. There was no shortage of extremely critical comments. It is quite certain that the descriptions of Israel as a mentally ill patient (Nicholls) or the ruling party Mapai as a Sicilian-style clan (Fernand-Laurent) would not have gone down well with the Israelis. So far as the FO was concerned, Israel was perceived as a trouble spot rather than any sort of "strategic outpost". France, on the other hand, took the Hebrew state under its wing in the mid-1950s. Despite adopting divergent strategies, the two Western powers' respective views of the Israeli state and society often differed more in tone than in substance. They displayed interesting similarities in their analysis of the centralized political system. Both considered that Mapai and the Histadrut were running a parallel state of their own, barely veiling this reality behind genuine elections. Ben Gurion was seen (and respected) as an autocrat. The relationships inside the microcosm of Jewish identities were interpreted as anything but idyllic.

The very effect of Israeli declarations remains somewhat debateable. Though the exact role is difficult to establish, it is clear that critical diplomatic reports were reflected in the initial prudency on the part of the British and French concerning any closer bilateral ties. Economic interests in the Arab world aside, both European powers had serious doubts about Israel being the standard (Western) democracy that its leaders claimed it was. At the same time, democracy was not mentioned as a main criterion for supporting (or not) the Jewish state on a particular occasion. In effect, Israel was judged on the account of its utility to Western designs in the Middle East, not on the basis of its democracy (or even conformity with the international law). Israel's participation in the Franco-British plot to topple Nasser's regime in 1956 raised apprehension of its military capacities (even in the US). Once Israel had allowed (on certain conditions)

British units to overfly the country on their way to save king Hussein of Jordan in 1958, the tone of British diplomacy became considerably softer. The Jewish state was, for the first time, recognized as “*a stabilising factor in the political spectrum of the Middle East*”.⁸⁷ Whether the (alleged or real) ills of Israeli democracy had been removed in the meantime did not seem to constitute a key concern.

⁸⁷ F. B. A. Rundall to S. Llyod, 21 Nov. 1958, p. 1, TNA/FO 371/134315; R. Stevens, “Anglo/U.S./Israel relations” (October 1958), p. 6, TNA/FO 371/134298; F. B. A. Rundall to R. Stevens, 26 Nov. 1958, pp. 1–2, TNA/FO 371/134298.

