

# MERIA

## AN ANALYTICAL AND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF BRITISH POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL

By Jonathan Spyer\*

*The British relationship with Israel and attitude toward the Arab-Israel conflict are crucial but often misunderstood aspects of that country's Middle East policy. Constituting the most controversial, disputatious aspect of British policy toward the region, they are influenced by broader currents both in terms of British attitudes toward the Middle East region and differing British conceptions of international relations and the making of foreign policy.*

*This paper explores Britain's relations with Israel, emphasizing the underlying patterns and different schools of thought within the British foreign policymaking community.*

British policy is defined by two very different, often clashing approaches to the region. The first, which can be termed the "Diplomatic" approach, is based on maintaining the best possible relations with the existing regimes or those forces which seem likely to take power.

This approach, which remains prevalent in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, began by building British regional policy around the preservation of the monarchical regimes in Iraq, Jordan and Egypt in the immediate post-1945 period. It also, paradoxically, accounts for the British willingness in the late 1960s to cooperate with revolutionary Palestinian nationalism in Jordan, which was regarded at that time as an unstoppable force. Today, this viewpoint warns against too overt support for the United States in the region, echoing concerns emerging from Arab embassies and capitals. It is close to the dominant European perspective.(1)

The Diplomatic approach regards Israel mainly as an irritant, a factor complicating British relations with the Arab world. Demonstrating British distance from or criticism of Israel is seen as a way to win points in the Arab and Muslim world. Advocates of this viewpoint stress the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict as quickly as possible,

regarding this conflict as the key source of regional instability.

The second approach, termed here the "Strategic" view, puts more emphasis on dividing Middle Eastern regimes into moderate and hostile ones. It assumes that aggressive, anti-Western governments and belief systems--radical Pan-Arab nationalism; revolutionary Islamism--are the principle threats to regional stability and to British interests. Viewing the Diplomatic approach as often tending toward appeasement, it is more willing to use pressure or even confrontation when deemed necessary.

This stance has historically been more prevalent in the Prime Minister's Office, for reasons explored below. It tends to be more appreciative of Israel as a potentially valuable pro-Western regional power, as well as closer to the United States. Likewise, it has tended to see such regimes as those of Iran, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, and Syria--as well as militant and revolutionary Islamist movements--as the main source of regional problems as well as direct threats to British interests.(2)

These differences are not merely ideological but also institutional, related integrally to the specific functions performed by the two key centers of foreign policymaking power within the government. As is implied, other factors--

while having some influence--are far less determinant of the direction of British policy toward Israel in particular and the Middle East in general.

The British view of the Middle East, and Israel's place within it, is governed by a number of key considerations. . . . British economic interests--principally oil imports--give the country an obvious interest in the preservation of regional stability.

How to achieve this goal, however, has been the subject of much debate within the policymaking community. The issues are not simple, nor the solutions always straightforward. Britain, for example, has opposed radical and revolutionary movements in the region. But what should it be willing to do to ensure that these do not succeed? Ill thought out acts may end up helping the growth of the very anti-Western forces they are intended to oppose. Again, Britain's sale of arms to the region, especially to the Gulf States and most of all to Saudi Arabia, are an important source of revenue. Weapons' exports are now the country's most important single manufactured export.<sup>(3)</sup> Yet, arguably this trade can also have a destabilizing effect.

Does preserving stability require and justify good relations with those regimes that may be radical, repressive, and flaunt hostile ideologies? Some argue that engagement will envelop them in a web of rational, mutually beneficial relations and thus blunt their enmity. Others assert that only by containing and sometimes challenging radical states, movements, and ideologies can they be stopped from subverting British interests. These are among the positions, respectively, of the Diplomatic and Strategic schools and produce opposing policy recommendations.

The first view argues that a given regime's ideology or expressed anti-Western intentions are of less importance, as these need not be taken seriously or can be blunted by friendly

accommodation. The second orientation, by contrast, considers that since regional tyrannies tend to rely on instability, adventurism, and support for terrorism and insurgency as tools for legitimating themselves, they will inevitably undermine stability. The Diplomatic stance charges the Strategic approach with creating unnecessary conflicts; the Strategic stance accuses the Diplomatic approach of appeasement.

These two broad schools of thought view Israel very differently. Given the deep enmity toward Israel that forms a consensus in the Arab world, advocates of the former view are more likely to regard Israel as a factor--often as the main factor--preventing smooth relations between the West and Arab world. They place great stock in the priority that Arab states say they and their masses put on this issue. Israel is thus seen as the cause rather than one of the victims of radicalism, instability, and anti-Western feeling in the Arab world.

Israel's protestation that it shares Western democratic values and social institutions is dismissed as a point of little importance. And while those advocating the Diplomatic view within government tend to be conservative, they also adopt the basically far left-wing concept prevalent in many European states--as well as Arab regimes--that Israel is a latter-day colonial power.

In the Strategic conception, however, Israel's identity and value as an ally is considered to be enhanced by its existence as a militarily strong, democratic, and Western-oriented state. The conflict with the Arabs and the difficulty in resolving it are perceived as simply one more outcome of a generally unstable regional situation in which radical ideologies and regimes are generating strife. Additionally, this approach does not take Arab statements at face value, noting that there are many other factors that shape the behavior of those regimes.

Though both concepts have always been present among the circles making British Middle East policy, power has shifted between them. In institutional terms, the Strategic approach has an advantage since it is usually--though not always--centered in the more powerful Prime Minister's Office. But the Diplomatic concept has two assets: it has always ruled in the Foreign Office and those who believe it there almost always have the last word in implementing and interpreting policy.

### **WHO MAKES BRITISH MIDDLE EAST POLICY?**

#### *The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)*

The Foreign Office is responsible for the conduct of relations between Britain and all foreign countries. The Middle East and North Africa Department along with the relevant embassies and the Policy Planning and Research Departments are all involved in producing Middle East policy. The perception of Britain's interests in the Middle East adhered to by the Foreign Office is generally accepted to have been not sympathetic to the Zionist cause and the State of Israel. The reasons for the traditional tilt toward the Arab side in the Foreign Office are manifold.

Partly, internal institutional factors are responsible. There are twenty-two slots for ambassadors to Arab countries and only one for Israel, a ratio that repeats itself throughout the ranks. The Arabic track at the FCO, while no longer as prestigious as once it was, remains a well-trodden, respectable path for British career diplomats.(4) Interacting with Arab counterparts and informants, the diplomat working on the Middle East tends to see them as his clients and gradually begins to echo their beliefs and interpretations of events.

In contrast, career diplomats with any real knowledge of Israel and the Hebrew language and culture have been virtually non-existent in the Foreign Office throughout the years of Israel's existence.

Only in recent years has the Foreign Office begun to make some effort to allocate resources to equip relevant staff members with the language skills necessary for understanding Israeli society.(5) In such circumstances, promotion and career success often rest on expressing the "proper" views.

Of course, the stuff of maintaining normal relations and avoiding conflicts--the FCO's stock-in-trade--incorporates such built-in attitudes as avoiding offense, safeguarding good ties, and not antagonizing other countries, and therefore, also favors the Diplomatic orientation.

An example of this approach is the British attempt throughout the 1990s to pursue a "critical dialogue" with Iran's regime despite its energetic sponsorship of terrorism against Jewish and Israeli targets, opposition to the Oslo peace process, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, and internal repression.

A very large volume of evidence exists to suggest that in the FCO's organizational culture, the norm is one of a general lack of sympathy for Israel. The unnamed FCO official who described Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to the Guardian as "The cancer at the heart of the Middle East crisis" offers a perhaps unusually extreme expression of this orientation.(6)

A more representative statement of the FCO stance and the Diplomatic view was the April 2004 letter signed by 52 former senior British diplomats, fiercely criticizing Tony Blair's policies toward the Iraq War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.(7)

#### *10 Downing Street*

Independent-minded British prime ministers have tended to provide the main counterpoint to the FCO. The prime minister has his own range of concerns and instruments. He is charged with the overall welfare of Britain, requiring the consideration of many factors outside of British-Arab bilateral relations, or even

diplomatic issues and the Middle East in general.

Historically, prime ministers as varied as Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, and Margaret Thatcher of the Conservatives, and Harold Wilson and Tony Blair of Labour have adopted to some degree the Strategic point of view. In comparison, only Clement Attlee and Edward Heath can be said to have completely accepted the FCO standpoint. It is important to note that none of the Strategic-minded prime ministers have moved to permanently alter the FCO consensus. Their transient term in office as well as their need to devote attention and energy to other matters has also left the FCO with considerable staying power as regards the Middle East.

Today, 10 Downing Street is probably more powerful than ever in the making of British Middle Eastern policy. Blair has been criticized for "centralizing" foreign policymaking as well as for his stances on particular issues. The Observer described him as having, "Gone further than any prime minister since Churchill in overriding and by-passing the advice of the Foreign Office."(8)

Blair has also been subjected to criticism for his use of special advisers such as Lord Levy, favored diplomats such as Sir David Manning, and the No. 10 Downing Street staff, rather than making more use of Foreign Office personnel. He has been seen as introducing an almost "presidential" style into government. Much of this, however, has to do with strong advocacy of a particular policy he has favored, rather than bureaucratic arrangements.(9)

## **POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARLIAMENTARY LOBBIES**

### *The Labour Party*

The Labour Party has a long tradition of sympathy for Zionism, and close association with its sister party in Israel. The party has an officially-sanctioned Labour Friends of Israel group.(10) Leading figures such as Aneurin Bevan

were identified strongly with the Jewish national cause throughout their careers.(11) The legacy of the bitter last years of the Mandate left their mark on relations, of course. The figure of Ernest Bevin remains an arch-villain of Israeli history, though a figure of respect and affection for British social democracy. The high profile of Bevin as foreign minister was in large part due to the disinterest of Prime Minister Clement Attlee in foreign affairs. But both of the other major post-war British Labour prime ministers, Wilson and Blair, were noted for sympathy to Israel.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a generation influenced by the politics of the 1960s and the European New Left entered the Labour Party. Leading party figures of today such as Clare Short, Peter Hain, Jeremy Corbyn and Ken Livingstone may in different ways be seen as products of this experience. For this generation, the cause of Palestinian nationalism was an important rallying point. A number of pro-Palestinian bodies have been created within the party and the broader labor movement. Most prominent of these is the Labour Middle East Council.(12)

At Labour Party conferences, one will find well-attended fringe meetings of both the Labour Friends of Israel and the Labour Middle East Council. There is a direct correlation with stances in other areas, with left-wing socialist MPs (such as George Galloway and Jeremy Corbyn) supporting the Palestinians, and inheritors of the more centrist, specifically British Labourite traditions (such as Gordon Brown) having more sympathy for Israel.

Yet the influence of the party's left has been limited in recent years, on this as on other issues. Blair--influenced both by European social democracy and by the Christian Socialist tradition--is untouched by the more hardcore left-wing currents in Labour where support for the Palestinian cause tends to be stronger.

### *Conservative Party*

The traditional, aristocratic wing of the Conservative Party was strongly associated with the public service professions in Britain, including the Foreign Office. Correspondingly, it was characterized by strong ties and sympathy to the Arab world, and sometimes, it has been said, a hint of anti-Semitism.

But it should also be remembered that the old Conservative Party of the days of the empire contained within it a romantic nationalist/imperial element, exemplified by Benjamin Disraeli, and continued into the twentieth century in the figures of Sir Arthur Balfour and Sir Winston Churchill. This stream, while no longer visible or relevant in modern British politics, played an important role in early British support for the Jewish national home.

The real change in Conservative attitudes toward Israel came with the rise in the 1970s of Margaret Thatcher and those around her in the party. Thatcher was throughout her career surrounded by close Jewish associates, including Sir Keith Joseph, Alfred Sherman, Leon Brittan, Nigel Lawson, Malcolm Rifkind, and Michael Polanyi. Her lower, middle-class origins and the value she placed above all on the entrepreneurial spirit made her a natural ally of the new forces in the party to which these individuals were also connected. Her constituency, Finchley, also has a large Jewish population. (13)

In her foreign policy outlook, Thatcher's anti-communism and opposition to terrorism all naturally inclined her to tilt toward Israel, as well as toward a close relationship with America. Thatcher's influence in the Conservative Party in this regard has proven lasting. Her successor, John Major, was no more connected to the old, patrician, anti-Zionist wing of conservatism than was she.

The Conservatives are today led by a British Jew, Michael Howard, and their stance regarding Israel is broadly comparable to that of Labour. An active

pro-Israel lobby, the Conservative Friends of Israel, exists in the party. (14) The Conservatives have no organized "Friends of Palestine" group, but this reflects the old, established nature of the pro-Arab wing of the party, rather than a total absence of support for the Arab cause in its ranks.

### *The Media and Public Opinion*

There is much discussion regarding the attitudes of the British print and electronic media toward Israel. The media undoubtedly play an important role in shaping public perception of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. But observation of the actual policymaking process in Britain brings one rapidly to the conclusion that the role of the media and the input of public opinion in the process is minimal. The substantive debate is one between elites.

The British system possesses neither powerful ethnic lobbies, nor any truly mobilized section of public opinion able to exert influence on policymakers. As such, while discussion of media coverage of Israel and its influence on public opinion may be crucial in observing the broader context in which decisions are made, it need not overly detain us in our observation of the specifics of policy design.

### *Between Washington and Brussels*

The strategic culture of Britain is very different from that of Continental Europe, and there is none of the ingrained hostility to military involvement to be found in France and Germany. Heirs to the hardcore left-wing generation of 1968 have never achieved the political and cultural prominence in Britain that they have in some continental European countries. But Britain's many commercial involvements in the region, and its consequent desire not to stray too far from either the Arab or European consensus, have meant that the wholehearted embrace of Israel as a strong, stable lynchpin among pro-

Western regional powers has also not taken place.

Since Edward Heath left office in 1974, Britain has had an uninterrupted run of prime ministers sympathetic to Israel. Yet in substantive policy terms, Britain has not strayed far from the European consensus. The extension of the British balancing act to the Iraq issue put the paradoxes London faces in high perspective, especially alongside the polarization between U.S. and European positions which Britain seeks to bridge.(15)

## **OVERVIEW OF KEY EVENTS IN BRITAIN'S BILATERAL RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL**

### *1. The End of the Mandate*

Zionist partnership with Britain in the key years 1917-1930 was a crucial factor in the establishment of Israel. The Balfour Declaration of November 1917, the key statement of British support for Zionism, famously expresses the support of the British government for the establishment of a "Jewish National Home" in Palestine. The sympathy for Zionist aims expressed in the Balfour Declaration meant, above all else, that the Zionists were able to build up the Jewish population of Mandatory Palestine in the years 1917-29 from 55,000 to just over 162,000.(16) This gave the Jewish population, among other things, the critical mass necessary to begin to pursue independent national policies when the paths of Jewish nationalism and the British Empire began to diverge.

Beginning with the 1930's, relations between the British authorities and the Jews in Palestine steadily declined. The international situation made the British concerned at the possibility of Arab support for the Axis powers of Italy and Germany. As such, British support for Zionism came to be seen as an irritant, antagonizing the Arabs against Britain. This led to increased controls on Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine in the period leading up to the war, and

ultimately to the White Paper of 1939. The latter effectively reversed the Balfour Declaration, setting out a plan for the emergence of a unitary, majority Arab state in Palestine.

The circumstances of Britain's decision to withdraw from Palestine, taken in 1947, did not augur well for good relations between Britain and the new Jewish state. Economically exhausted, distrusted by both sides and harried by Jewish illegal immigration and the militias of the Zionist right, Clement Attlee's Labour government handed the problem over to the United Nations, leading to the UN's resolution on partition in November 1947--on which Britain abstained--and British departure, against a background of inter-communal war, in May 1948. The intervening, strife-torn months left a certain legacy of mistrust between Britain and the new State of Israel.

Britain's recognition of Jordanian sovereignty over the West Bank following the War of 1948 was indicative of the direction of British policy in this period. The British sought alliances and patron-client relationships with the traditional, monarchical regimes that they were largely responsible for installing, i.e., the Hashemite monarchies in Jordan and Iraq, and King Faruk in Egypt. The desire for an alliance with the Arab status quo was the cornerstone of British policy, symbolized by London's central role in the establishment of the Arab League. Jordan's status as a client state of Britain obviously complicated relations with Israel, which had just concluded a victorious war against the Jordanians.(17)

Britain afforded Israel *de facto* recognition on January 30, 1949, in the last stages of the War of Independence, and *de jure* recognition on April 27, 1950. Normal diplomatic relations were established shortly afterwards.(18)

The parliamentary debates immediately preceding recognition of Israel give a good sense of the formation of the two opposing schools of thought in

British policymaking regarding Israel. In the House of Commons on January 29, 1949, Foreign Secretary Bevin, who had opposed partition and supported the creation of a unitary, majority Arab state in Palestine, squared off against a staunch and long-term supporter of partition and Zionism, the Leader of the Opposition, Sir Winston Churchill.

In a long passage, Bevin details the grievances of the Palestinian Arabs and the refugee problem that had emerged from the war of 1948. He expresses the basic Arab case against Zionism, asking the House if the British would accept the slicing up of Britain to "make way for another race." In looking at the Palestinian refugee problem Bevin declares that the "Driving of poor innocent people from their homes, whether it is in Germany by Hitler, or by anybody else, is a crime." (19)

Hugh Dalton, a keen contemporary observer, considers that Bevin may well have imbibed this view from the versions of events given to him by his advisers at the Foreign Office. (20) Men such as Sir John Troutbeck, Britain's ambassador in Egypt, shared Bevin's suspicion of Zionist motives and believed that Israel was likely to become an expansionist force in the region. Troutbeck was also particularly concerned that Britain's vital strategic interests in the Suez Canal Zone could be harmed if the UK were to appear too accommodating toward Israel. For Bevin and officials like Troutbeck, Sir Ronald Campbell and others, an undoubtedly sincere sympathy for the Arab cause meshed with a perception of the need for Britain to come to some form of accommodation with the growing forces of Arab nationalism, for which the eventual destruction of Israel was a central tenet of faith. (21)

An entirely contrasting outlook to the view of this school was expressed by Churchill and Oliver Stanley for the Conservative Opposition in the Commons debate. Churchill framed his arguments in terms of interests, though there was a clear emotional underlying

identification with the Jewish cause: "Whether we like it or not," he said, "the coming into being of a Jewish State in Palestine is an event in world history to be viewed in the perspective, not of a generation or a century, but in the perspective of a thousand, two thousand or even three thousand years." He continued, "No one has done more to build up a Jewish National Home in Palestine than the Conservative Party, and many of us have always had in mind that this might some day develop into a Jewish State... Now that it has come into being, it is England that refuses to recognize it, and, by our actions, we find ourselves regarded as its most bitter enemies."

Churchill deplores what he regards as the slowness of British policy to react to the reality of Israel, as he expresses it: "His Majesty's Government... has always been one, or even two and sometimes three steps behind the march of events. When the State of Israel was proclaimed, it was recognized at once by the Americans. His Majesty's Government could at least have accepted the principle of partition laid down in the United Nations Resolution."

Reflecting the heated nature of the debate, Churchill went on to accuse Bevin of a "Very strong and direct streak of bias and prejudice" against the Jews, claiming that this is one of the factors influencing his stance. (22) Winding up for the Opposition, Oliver Stanley noted that Britain had, through its actions, "Forfeited the friendship of Israel without gaining the gratitude of the Arabs." Stanley concluded that the only party to benefit from any of this was "the set of people who profit from chaos and confusion wherever it happens in the world. If communism ever does come in Palestine, the Right Hon. Gentleman [i.e. Bevin] and his policy will have done most to encourage it." (23)

Churchill and Stanley saw Israel as a natural ally of the West, and Churchill certainly regarded Jewish national revival in Israel as a great historic cause

deserving of British support. Such sentiments, it should be noted, were by no means limited to the Conservative side of the House. Aneurin Bevan, one of the most prominent leaders of the Labour left, was as passionate and outspoken in his support of Zionism as was Churchill.

Bevin, Troutbeck and their standpoint had no sympathy for the Jewish national cause. They were alert to the problems faced by the Palestinian Arab population, and Bevin may also justly be accused of a studied insensitivity where the Jewish historical experience was concerned.(24) But above all, they were aware of the growing force of Arab nationalism. Bevin and Troutbeck were determined that British interests should not suffer as a result of appearing to be identified with the creation and sustaining of Israel.

As a Foreign Office Memorandum circulated by Bevin in August 1949 put it, "His Majesty's Government accepts Israel as an established fact and intends to grant her de jure recognition at the earliest suitable moment. At the same time they are bound to have regard to their existing friendships and alliances with the Arab states, particularly as the latter are at present more willing than Israel to commit themselves to the anti-Communist camp. It would be too high a price to pay for the friendship of Israel to jeopardize, by estranging the Arabs, either the base in Egypt or Middle Eastern oil."

This frank statement sums up a particular school of thought in British foreign policy in an admirably concise way. It continues:

His Majesty's Government would not regard it as in their interest that Israel should acquire more Arab territory without a *quid pro quo* or that she should carry her economic exchanges with the Arab states to the point of dominating them economically and so politically. They would not lend their assistance to the

furtherance of any such ambitions and would indeed support the Arab states in resisting them.(25)

Such statements obviously reflect a more or less across the board acceptance of the Arab view of the conflict and the assumptions behind it. Thus were the lines demarcated: a consensus deeply wary of Israel in the Foreign Office and reflected in the views of important policy-makers but with significant individuals in both major parties far more sympathetic, and inclined to view the new state as a potential asset and ally. This breakdown of opinion reflected pre-existing trends for and against Zionism within the British policy-making establishment and has remained fairly constant.

## 2. *The Suez Crisis, 1956*

The Suez Crisis of 1956 was a pivotal moment in post-war British political history, the point at which Britain's great power status ended and the country's search for a new role began. After Suez, Britain accepted de-colonization in the Middle East as inevitable. It also accepted that it was no longer able to engage in major regional initiatives without American consent and involvement.

The crisis also marks a fundamental change in Britain's relations with Israel. The British recognized in Nasser's Arab nationalism a dangerous, destabilizing force in the Middle East. Nasser, for his part, regarded Britain as the main force of imperialism, and was determined to expel it from the region once and for all.(26) Nasser was not only the leader of Egypt. As champion of the cause of Arab unity, he was also a symbol of pride across the Arab world and a potential model for radical movements in other Arab countries.(27)

Britain was thus worried that the Free Officers regime in Egypt might inspire other movements which would emerge to subvert traditional, pro-Western states



such as Jordan. Israel, too, had cause to view Nasser with concern. Inflammatory rhetoric and threats to destroy the Jewish state were a staple of Egyptian propaganda, which found practical expression in permitting Palestinian *fedayeen* to launch their attacks against Israel from the Gaza Strip, then controlled by Egypt.

Prime Minister Anthony Eden, who as a Foreign Office official in the 1930s had resigned in protest against the appeasement of Nazi Germany, saw the Egyptian leader as a dangerous, expansionist dictator. Nasser's support for the insurgents against France in Algeria, opposition to the U.S.-sponsored, British-backed Baghdad Pact, and purchases of arms from the Soviet Union after 1955 all served to heighten British, French, and American suspicion.

Matters were brought to a head by Egypt's nationalizing of the Suez Canal Company on July 26, 1956. Nasser wanted to use the revenue of the canal for his Aswan High Dam project on the Nile. But for Britain the nationalization was a direct blow to its prestige and interests which could not be allowed to pass. The British government owned a controlling interest in the company's shares. Additionally, almost one-quarter of British imports went through the canal, and indeed, one-third of the total shipping passing through the Suez Canal was British.

An elaborate and bold plan was conceived by the British and French to regain control of the Canal area. It involved, for the first time, strategic cooperation between Israel and Britain, against a common enemy. The plan, in brief, was for an Israeli attack on Sinai, in response to Nasser's increasing support for the Palestinian guerillas. British and French forces would then intervene to 'separate the combatants,' seizing control of the Canal Zone in the course of doing so, and (it was hoped) bringing about the toppling of Nasser. On October 24, 1956, Britain, France, and Israel signed a tripartite document detailing this plan,

known henceforth as the "secret protocol of Sevres."(28)

The Israeli part of the plan was a resounding success from the military point of view. Between October 29 and November 5, 1956, Israeli forces captured Sinai in its entirety, and shattered three Egyptian divisions.(29)

But the Anglo-French element of the plan went awry. An unexpectedly severe Soviet response to Anglo-French intervention at Port Said was coupled with severe U.S. pressure on Britain and France to abandon the plan to seize the Canal and the operation ended in debacle.

#### *A Change in the British View of Israel*

The 1956 Sinai Campaign led to a significant change in the way Israel was viewed in the region and by the great powers. Until that time, the Jewish State had been seen as a weak entity whose long-term survival was by no means certain.(30) After Israel's performance, it became apparent that far from being a state hovering on the brink of extinction, Israel possessed the premier fighting force in the region. This meant that for a status quo power like Britain, concerned with preventing the further toppling of traditional regimes and halting the spread of anti-Western Pan-Arab nationalism, the maintenance of a strong Israel became an interest. Israel's military strength and its ability to hit back and punish aggressors would act as a powerful deterrent to radical Arab regimes seeking to inflame the regional climate.

From 1960, as a result of this changed perception, British arms began to be sold to Israel. Arms sales to Israel did not mean that the entrenched views in the Foreign Office had vanished. Nor had Britain taken an ideological decision to draw closer to Israel because it was democratic or Western-oriented. The British decision was based on the desire for stability and the prevention of regional war. As Britain's then ambassador to Israel explained in a communication to the Foreign Office:

We do not give the Israelis arms because they are pro-western or because we admire their achievement. We give them arms because our interests in the Middle East are to keep the place quiet, and to prevent war. Anything which makes war in the Middle East more likely is against the interests of the Western powers.(31)

Thanks to Israel's ability to ensure its own survival, its ability to deter its neighbors from attacking it became an interest of any power supporting regional stability. As a clearly pro-Western state, a strong Israel was also potentially a useful bulwark against pan-Arab nationalist regimes in Egypt and Syria who were increasingly turning toward the Communist bloc in search of arms and aid. The fall of the Hashemites in Iraq in 1958 sealed the failure of the British attempt to ensure stability by supporting the then-existing status quo in the region.

The events of 1956 ushered in a new period which would be dominated by the challenge of Egypt, and the pan-Arab model it promoted. The regime in Cairo and its ideology constituted the main threat to the regional stability that stood at the center of British interests. Chief among the ambitions of the Nasser regime was the destruction of Israel.(32) As such, a natural commonality of interests existed between the two countries, based on the threat to Israel's existence and the growth of anti-Western ideologies among the increasing number of radical Arab regimes.

### *3. The Six Day War and its Aftermath*

The mid-1960s saw the return of tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The emergence of the extremist Salah Jadid regime in Damascus in 1966 led to a de facto situation of low-intensity war between Israel and that country. This, coupled with the announcement by Britain on

February 22, 1966, that in two years' time it would be evacuating all its military bases from the Gulf area, were ominous developments from the Israeli point of view. Israel believed that Britain's evacuation would lead to growing instability in the Gulf area, which would be exploited by Nasser.(33) Jadid's support for the activities of Al-Fatah led to an escalation in regional tensions, into which Nasser was drawn. The closing of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping on May 23, 1967, seemed to make war inevitable.

Britain regarded the Straits as an international waterway through which vessels of all nations had a right of passage. Public opinion in Britain was firmly behind Israel. Foreign Minister Abba Eban arrived in London on May 24, 1967, on the last leg of an attempt to ensure guarantees from the West for the formation of an international maritime force that would open the Straits. He was told by Prime Minister Harold Wilson that the Cabinet had met that morning, and that a consensus had been reached that Britain would join with others in an effort to open the Straits. Wilson, a member of the Labour Friends of Israel and close to a number of Israeli Labour Party figures, was considered to be among the most pro-Israeli of British politicians.

But Wilson's declaration of support proved to have less to it than met the eye. While Wilson himself, and his Foreign Secretary George Brown, had been in favor of Britain's taking the lead in organizing an international naval force to keep open the Straits of Tiran, this idea failed to achieve majority support in the British cabinet on May 23.(34) Ministers, frightened at the prospect of Britain's leading an international initiative of this kind, rendered the policy toothless, filling it with caveats. The end result was that Britain expressed its willingness to constitute part of such a force, but not to lead it, and even participation was conditioned on the plan receiving broad

international support and involvement. The Foreign Office preference for a "low profile" won out against the principled support for Israel sought by Wilson.

On May 31, an all-day debate in the House of Commons on the situation in the Middle East took place. Brown stressed the role of the UN and the need to return UN forces. He made clear in his speech that:

We are not setting out to 'topple' Nasser. . . .But neither are we prepared to accept that he has the right to topple another Middle Eastern nation at the risk of plunging us all into war. . . .We would consider as acts of belligerence any unilateral act to close the Gulf of Aqaba or any acts of aggression committed by either side of the Israel-Arab border.(35)

The statement by the Leader of the Opposition, Edward Heath, was similar in its combination of stress on the unacceptability of Nasser's behavior, but clear concern at the possibility of action being taken against him on the basis of an unacceptably narrow coalition. The last thing Britain wanted was to become involved in a conflict situation in the Middle East, particularly without UN support. Eban's demand that Britain declare its support for Israel's independence and integrity, as a counter-balance to Soviet support for the radical Arab states, was also too much for the Wilson government. The harm that such an open identification with Israel might do to British political and economic interests in the region was clear.

Eban likewise failed to obtain a clear guarantee of support from the United States. The failure of diplomacy made war inevitable.

The War of 1967 resulted in a major victory for Israel and the eclipse of the threat of Nasserite pan-Arabism. Israel made territorial gains on all fronts.

British policy in the crisis preceding the war follows a familiar pattern. Sympathy for Israel on a moral and ideological level from senior elements in the political echelon combined with a sense of a shared Western orientation and opposition to subversive, Soviet-associated elements such as Jadid's Syria and Nasserite Egypt. But this was offset by the view also present in the political echelon and dominant in the Foreign Office, according to which, in the words of one under-secretary of state:

The protection of our interests entails preserving the best possible relationship with the Arab countries, in which the bulk of Middle East oil lies, with which we do a much great[er] volume of trade than we do with Israel, valuable though that is, which control many transit routes through the area, and whose relations with the [Soviet] bloc might develop in a way gravely detrimental to the West. . . .If we are to preserve the friendship of the Arab governments, which we need to protect our interests, including those in the Gulf and elsewhere in Arabia we must avoid giving that degree of overt support to Israel.(36)

#### *4. Crisis in Jordan, 1970*

With the ascension to power of the Conservative government of Edward Heath in 1969, British Middle East policy turned to a full application of the Diplomatic approach, placing a primacy on good relations with the forces in the Arab world deemed dominant. What makes this stance so unusual during the Jordan crisis, however, was a willingness to accept the overthrow of a pro-British Arab regime to achieve that goal.

Jordan was Britain's closest ally in the Middle East. The Hashemite ruling family enjoyed close commercial and military relations with the United Kingdom. In the late 1960s, however, the

common perception in the Middle East was that traditional monarchical regimes of the Hashemite type were doomed, and would shortly be swept away by radical and revolutionary forces.

In the aftermath of the 1967 defeat, the Palestinian guerilla emerged as the new hero of the Arab intelligentsia. Organizations like Yasir Arafat's Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) led by George Habash were invested with an aura of glamour.<sup>(37)</sup> With their attempts to establish networks in the West Bank defeated by the Israeli security forces by the end of 1968, these movements based themselves in Jordan, from where they came to constitute an increasing threat to the regime of King Hussein.

The British opened up channels of communication to the Fatah leadership in Jordan in 1969. The British embassy in Amman began regular meetings with Ahmad Azhari, deputy director of Fatah for information, who was authorized by Arafat for this purpose. Britain hoped to induce Fatah to use its influence on the PFLP to desist from violence against British targets and individuals. As one embassy official put it: "We should try to encourage both the press [and British security forces] to distinguish between Fatah, which is going out of its way to emphasize its disapproval of wanton terrorism, and the PFLP, a small group which does present a threat."<sup>(38)</sup>

The British viewed Fatah as a rising force, which might well be on the way to power in Jordan, and which was not openly pro-Soviet. The Foreign Office's conception of pragmatism considered that such a view must take precedence over Fatah's use of terrorism, or its practice of subversion, which had set the movement on a collision course with the Hashemites, Britain's closest allies in the region. The British attitude was also dictated, to a considerable extent, by the hope that it could appease Fatah into not attacking British targets and even stopping allied groups from doing so.

When crisis erupted between Jordan and the Palestinians in September 1970, Britain took a central role in the drama. The confrontation between King Hussein and the Palestinian organizations began with the hijacking of four airliners by the PFLP, who demanded the release of their members held in jails in Germany, Switzerland, Israel and Britain. One of the hijackings--of an El Al plane--failed, with one hijacker killed, and the other, Leila Khalid, taken into custody in Britain. The three other airliners were taken to Dawson's Field in Jordan where they were blown up in a calculated act of provocation towards King Hussein's authority.

A few days later, the PFLP hijacked a BOAC VC10 en route from Bombay to Beirut, and took 300 hostages, 65 of them British. They demanded the release of Khalid, threatening to murder the hostages. The British were given 72 hours to reach a decision. On September 13, the British government announced that Khalid was to be released. The remaining hostages were exchanged for Khalid and six other Palestinians held in German and Swiss jails two weeks later. There was outrage at the time in Washington and Jerusalem at the British decision. It placed the British in defiance of the Tokyo Convention of 1963, to which the country was a signatory.<sup>(39)</sup> It also seriously impaired Western credibility in the event of future negotiations with hijackers, as the British themselves admitted.

In an interview 30 years after the events, Peter Tripp, then head of the Middle East Desk at the Foreign Office, was candid as to British considerations during the negotiations with the PFLP:

When we heard that Leila was on the plane in the UK, it was decided that she had to be detained. We knew that various powers would be very interested in getting their hands on her. We had to make sure that she was

kept by us as safely as possible until her fate had been decided. We couldn't commit her to prison because the Palestinians, the PFLP or Fatah would consider that we were now going to keep her forever. We had to find some way of squaring the circle.(40)

The incident proved the spark that ignited open conflict between King Hussein's forces and the Palestinian organizations, which broke out openly on September 17. In the first days of combat, before the situation and Hussein's advantage became apparent, the king made frantic requests for British military aid. His requests went unanswered. Tripp admits the British considered that the Hashemites were probably about to fall. He expresses himself in the following terms: "King Hussein's relationships with other Arab countries were changing and you could not just nail your colours to that particular mast and say, well, we'll go down with the ship. There's a certain amount of self-interest in all this."(41)

Cabinet papers reveal that with the Syrians mobilizing on his border, apparently about to intervene to support the Palestinians, Hussein passed a message to London and Washington, asking the British to pass it on to Israel. The message was a request for Israeli aerial intervention against the Syrian force. Britain declined to pass it on, leaving the matter in the hands of the Americans, who did so. Asked about British contacts with Arafat at the time, Tripp replies, "At the time, it certainly seemed that Arafat was a force to be reckoned with . . . He represented a very strong theme in Arab nationalism and it seemed to us at least prudent not to cut off all contact. . . we had to consider that this might some day be a man we'd have to deal with."(42)

The British performance during this period once again fits squarely into the set of assumptions adhered to by the Foreign Office throughout.

### *5. The 1973 War*

When war between Israel and the Arab states broke out again on October 6, 1973, the Conservative government of Edward Heath took the controversial decision to declare neutrality, embargoing arms supplies to "all sides." The British government also refused to allow its military facilities to be used for the transit of military supplies to the battlefield.

This decision clearly adversely affected Israel and not its enemies. The two Arab countries involved in the war, Egypt and Syria, were both Soviet client states who were receiving large shipments of Soviet weapons, with some 4,000 tons of military equipment supplied in 280 flights by the Soviet Union. The embargo extended not only to new equipment, but also to spares and ammunition for items already purchased. Since Israel had a large number of modified British Centurion tanks, this restriction was significant.

The Labour party opposed this policy--as did some Conservative members of Parliament--and Wilson received daily briefings from Israeli Ambassador Michael Comay throughout the war. Abba Eban, reflecting on the British decision on the embargo, called it one of "pulling back in panic before the Arab threat to withhold oil supplies" and describes it from Israel's standpoint "as a specially harsh blow" which encouraged other European countries to also sacrifice Israel's interests.

In the House of Commons debate, Wilson called for an end to the embargo and pointed out that while the government had remained silent regarding past Arab aggression against Israel, it had sponsored resolutions condemning Israeli military actions on three occasions. Sir Alec Douglas Home, for the government, strongly rejected accusations that fear of Arab use of the 'oil weapon' was dictating government policy.

In his speech, Wilson called for support for Israel on the basis of its being

the "only democracy in that region." He then returned to the oil issue, addressing it in the following terms, a classical statement of the Strategic view:

No one underestimates the gravity of what is happening on this front, the cost, simply, of the increase in prices and its effect on inflation in this country. . . but we must not be blackmailed. We must decide what is right as a nation, as a Government, as a Parliament, and abide by it. . . the characteristic of Danegeld is insatiability. They come again. Their appetite feeds on appeasement."

Parliament, however, endorsed government policy, by a margin of 251 votes to 175.(43)

The policy of the Heath government was representative of Europe in the 1973 War. The Nixon Administration found itself without allies in its airlift to Israel. Heath refused a personal request from the President for landing rights in Cyprus en route to Israel.(44)

Douglas-Home's denials in Parliament notwithstanding, the use by Arab oil-producing countries of the European reliance on Middle Eastern oil (85 percent of European petroleum was imported from the region at that time) was undoubtedly an element in making Britain reluctant to appear to be backing Israel. The oil weapon was used in a direct and coordinated way by the Arab Persian Gulf states in 1973, with various conditions applied to European countries directly depending on their stance regarding the Arab-Israel conflict.

The Heath government's response, once again, can be understood if placed in the broader framework of British attitudes toward Israel. Heath was a strong supporter of détente, with no record of support for Israel. There was thus no sense of a preference to be awarded to a pro-Western state or fellow democracy. On the contrary, as the

attitude taken toward the Hashemites shows, the policy was one of trying to maintain good relations with the force expected to be in power regardless of the content of its policies, secure in the conviction that accommodation would not increase the threat to British interests by strengthening or emboldening radical forces.

#### *6. The 1970s and 1980s*

The War of 1973 marked the last occasion in which Israel and the combined armies of the Arab states met on the field of battle. The 1970s and 1980s were witness to the first halting moves toward the establishment of normal relations between Israel and its neighbors, beginning with the U.S.-brokered Disengagement Agreement between Israel and Egypt signed on January 18, 1974. The Camp David Accords of 1979 were of course the pivotal event in this regard, removing with one stroke the most powerful Arab state from the fight with Israel.

These years were also witness to the growth in Western Europe of a consensus increasingly critical of Israel. The fear of a return to the use of the oil weapon by the Arab states undoubtedly played a part in this. Less tangibly, one must also take into account the strategic culture of the member states of the then-European Economic Community. The status of many European countries as former colonial powers, the desire to develop a European stance separate from that of the United States, and a general lack of concern regarding the anti-Western and authoritarian nature of many local political and ideological forces all contributed. There was also the beginning of what would become the principal Western European foreign policy concept, in which the amenability of problems to negotiated solution was taken as a given.

As early as November 1973, and again in June 1977, the European Council expressed its support for the principle of

Palestinian self-determination. European Middle East policy was clarified and crystallized in the Venice Declaration of June 13, 1980. This declaration, adopted in the wake of the Camp David Accords, marks a clear desire for greater involvement in the peace process. It is also very clearly an attempt to set down an alternative diplomatic route on the Arab-Israel question to that forged by the United States at Camp David.

The Declaration went beyond previous European statements in that it called openly for the first time for a role for the PLO in the diplomatic process:

A just solution must finally be found to the Palestinian problem, which is not simply one of refugees. The Palestinian people. . . must be placed in a position, by an appropriate process defined within the framework of the comprehensive peace settlement, to exercise fully its right to self-determination. . . . These principles apply to all the parties concerned, and thus: the Palestinian people, and to the PLO, which will have to be associated with the negotiations.(45)

Given that the PLO at this time was still unambiguously committed to Israel's destruction, this was a significant departure and the Venice Declaration was roundly criticized by Israel and the United States. Britain, for its part, voted for the Declaration and British policy in the period was characterized by a desire not to stray too far from the European consensus.

Margaret Thatcher was the first serving British Prime Minister to visit Israel,(46) and she and her successor John Major, whose personal views were solidly Atlanticist and pro-Israel, took Britain on occasion far from the European consensus on the Middle East. Britain's support for the U.S. bombing of Libya in 1986, of which most EU

member states were deeply skeptical, is a prominent example of this.(47) But the essential contours of British policy outlined above did not alter during the long period of Conservative government from 1979-1997.

The most anti-Israel elements in the British debate--the old patrician anti-Zionist Tories, with their counterparts in the Foreign Office, and the Labour far left-wing--were further from decision-making circles than ever. But as late as 1985, for example, it was still possible for a British company to obtain a certificate from the Foreign Office attesting to compliance with the secondary Arab trade boycott against Israel.(48) More substantively, Britain's thriving trade relationship with the Arab states again meant that the country found it prudent not to be tarred with the "pro-Israel" brush from which many British diplomats consider America suffers in the region.

During the Thatcher years, arms trading with Middle Eastern states also developed and flourished. The al-Yamama deals with Saudi Arabia, which have generated an estimated \$40 billion of business, made the Saudi kingdom Britain's most important arms customer.(49) Restrictions, meanwhile, continued to operate on arms sales to Israel until 1994.

### *7. The Post-Cold War Period*

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent birth of the Oslo process opened up the possibility of a significant improvement in British-Israel relations. The central reason for this is because the zero-sum argument, whereby Britain's relations with the Arab world would inevitably suffer if relations with Israel improved, was no longer applicable.

Given the pro-Israel inclinations established as a norm by Margaret Thatcher, and continued by her successor, it is not surprising that a rapid improvement of relations took place in the 1990s. In 1995, Prime Minister Major led a large business delegation to

Israel(50), and announced during the visit that Britain would no longer feel constrained by the Arab boycott. In 1994, the arms embargo on Israel was rescinded, and in subsequent years, Britain's defense relationship with Israel has grown considerably (while remaining subject to certain restrictions). On a symbolic level, the improved relations were marked by the first British royal visit to Israel in 1998.

In tandem with these growing ties, Britain also became a major partner in the building up of the Palestinian Authority (PA). In 1995, John Major became the first Western leader to meet with Yasir Arafat inside the PA area, and in November 1998, Britain unveiled a \$100 million package of aid and assistance to the PA and UNRWA. (51)

The election of Tony Blair and the Labour Party in 1997 brought no change in this pattern. Far left-wing elements in Labour in the 1980s had developed a consistent anti-Israel stance, and senior individuals close to Blair--Robin Cook, Clare Short, and Peter Hain--were all known as trenchant critics of Israel. But Blair himself and his Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown have strong personal sympathies for the Jewish state. Blair enjoys firm support in the Jewish community and has on occasion used one of his backers from within Anglo-Jewry, Lord Michael Levy, as a diplomatic envoy to Middle Eastern leaders.(52)

Yet this changed situation has not meant resolving the British position between the two competing approaches. Britain voted in favor of the Venice Declaration in 1980, which had called for talks between Israel and the PLO. In the context of the 1990s and the many disputes which arose around the implementation of the Oslo Accords, Britain once more broadly followed the European line. British criticism of settlement policy and of the "military" occupation of eastern Jerusalem placed the country still much closer, in declarative terms at least, to the EU than

to the United States.(53) During the British presidency of the EU in 1998, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook raised controversy and criticism in Israel when he refused to visit the Holocaust museum at Yad Vashem but went to observe construction at Har Homa, and at a later stage in his visit demonstratively hugged Arafat.

Declarative gestures notwithstanding, the volume of trade between Britain and Israel continued to grow. Bilateral trade reached an annual rate of £2.5 billion in 2000, a 22 percent increase from 1999, making Israel the UK's biggest trading partner in the Middle East in the first years of the new millennium.(54) Israel and Britain established the Britech Fund in 2000, which invests some £15 million annually to encourage collaboration in research and development projects. Israel Aircraft Industries closed a \$25 million deal with the Royal Air Force in September 2000 for British purchase of a combat training system. This represented the first substantial Israeli penetration of the formerly closed British arms market.(55)

In its voting pattern in EU bodies, the UK is much less critical of Israel than are France and Italy, but is also less likely to try to block anti-Israel moves than is Germany. Unlike France, Britain has not initiated moves to pressure Israel economically to obtain greater concessions on the peace process. Unlike Germany, it has not openly expressed opposition to such moves. Britain has, however, expressed consistent opposition to the more ambitious schemes of the French for an increased political/diplomatic role for the EU in the peace process.

When the post of the special EU envoy to the Middle East was created, and its mandate was being defined, British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind paid careful attention to U.S. concerns at a possible European attempt to play a role in competition with the U.S. in Middle East diplomacy. British



and German pressure ensured that the functions of the envoy were ultimately much narrower than originally intended. While Britain on a declaratory level tends not to sound greatly different from other EU countries, in practice Britain supports an American-led peace process, and, unlike France, does not see the development of an independent European role as a self-evident goal in itself. Rather, Britain seeks to use the good offices of the EU in assistance to U.S. efforts.

For example, in April-May 1998, during the period that the UK held the presidency of the EU, Tony Blair was active in promoting the issues of the industrial park, airport, and seaport in Gaza, which the EU was involved in financing. Blair made it clear that Britain and the EU were fully behind U.S. efforts to break the deadlock between the parties, and reiterated that Europe had no intention of trying to supplant the United States in its role as broker. Rather, Blair was keen to promote British involvement in the peace process in cooperation with the Americans.(56)

This approach was adhered to consistently throughout the years of Oslo. Britain, unlike Spain and Italy, remained opposed to a unilateral declaration of independence by the Palestinians.(57) Rather, Britain hoped that the accords would lead to a consensual agreement between Israelis and Palestinians, which would form the lynchpin of a prosperous and stable post-Cold War Middle Eastern order.

#### 8. *2000-2004, Collapse of Oslo and Renewed Conflict*

The year 2000 witnessed the collapse of the Oslo process and with it the eclipse of the assumptions that had dominated British and European thinking toward Israel and the Palestinians throughout the 1990s. It had been widely believed that the conflict was winding down, and that a final settlement was imminent. It had been assumed that the Palestinian leadership, above all Arafat, were

committed to historic compromise on the basis of a two-state solution. These assumptions were based on a broader perception of the Middle East following the former Communist world into a future based on rational self-interest, trade, and development. Instead, in the summer and autumn of 2000, following the collapse of negotiations at Camp David, armed conflict broke out.

The ongoing conflict has now become only one facet of a much broader turbulence. The September 11, 2001, terror attacks in the United States and what has followed have pitted the democratic West and several radical Islamist organizations against one another in war. The toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the now worldwide threat of Islamist terror has created a new policymaking environment very different from that envisaged during the optimistic first years after the Cold War. Israel's travails in the EU since the collapse of the peace process in 2000 have been many. The crucial year of 2002 was particularly intense in this regard. There was controversy over tax abatements for Israeli goods made in settlements, calls for freezing or rescinding of the trade agreement that gives Israel benefits for sales to Europe (its largest trading partner), and even calls for economic sanctions against Israel. Britain and Germany have proved the key moderating factors in this regard, blocking the wilder excesses and preventing all moves toward the imposition of sanctions. As Blair himself has expressed it, "Friendship between nations is tested in times of crisis and trouble, and Britain will not walk away."(58)

The British Trade and Industry Ministry has opposed moves to change Israel's status as a preferred target market and Blair has been among the European statesmen most critical of the PA's failure to act against terror. At the time of Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, Blair spoke in the House of Commons of the PA's "inability, or refusal, to control

terrorism properly." He also criticized what he called the "revolving door" policy of the Palestinian Authority toward terrorist suspects (i.e., the tendency to jail terrorists and then release them shortly after.) It should be borne in mind, however, that such statements were made in the context of speeches which were elsewhere very critical of Israel. There is a sense here once again of the balancing-act aspect of British policy, with the prime minister hoping to stick close to the European perspective, while simultaneously expressing understanding for the Israeli position.

Blair has also endeavored to restrain the pro-Arab tendencies of the Foreign Office. Ben Bradshaw, under-secretary for Middle East Affairs, who was known for his anti-Israel views and statements, was removed from his job. The strategic dialogue between the two countries remains intact. The unique stance of the Blair government showed itself once more after President George Bush' speech of June 24, 2002, in which he said that Middle East peace would not be achieved unless Arafat was replaced. The speech was widely condemned by EU leaders, who continued to endorse the legitimacy of Arafat as the Palestinians' chosen leader. Blair, by contrast, expressed an equivocal position, substantively agreeing with his European colleagues, while expressing understanding for Bush's remarks, given Arafat's failures to take measures necessary to secure a settlement. Similarly, Blair stood out among European leaders in expressing approval of Ariel Sharon's plan for unilateral disengagement. He did so, however, by framing his support in a perspective designed to appeal to the European consensus, stressing that unilateral disengagement was the first step in a process of Israeli territorial concessions.

The renewed violence between Israelis and Palestinians has placed strains on British-Israel relations. The remarks by Cherie Blair, and later by Foreign

Secretary Jack Straw and Liberal Democrat MP Jenny Tonge seemingly expressing understanding (or in Straw's case 'compassion') for the motivations of suicide bombers were regarded with particular distaste by Israelis.(59) More substantively, the willingness of the Blair government to host Syrian president Bashar al-Asad on an official visit in December 2002, given his regime's continued sponsorship of terror organizations and openly expressed anti-Semitic views, led to heated disagreement with Israel. This dispute worsened when Blair declined to meet with then-Israeli Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a visit by the latter to the UK two weeks after the Asad visit. Blair's willingness to meet a month later with then-Israeli opposition leader Amram Mitzna did not improve matters.(60)

There have been other areas of tension. These relate to genuine policy differences as well as merely presentational issues. For example, Britain's willingness to engage with the Islamist regime in Iran remains a point of contention between the two countries. These differences came out sharply during a visit by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to Teheran in September 2001. Prior to leaving for Iran, Straw infuriated Israelis by arguing in a newspaper article that one of the factors that helps breed terrorism is the "anger that many people in this region feel at events over the years in Palestine."(61) Straw's words led to the canceling of a planned meeting between himself and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

On the British side, there has been concern at the use of defense technology originating in the UK in Israeli military actions in the West Bank and Gaza. British concerns were mostly with British-manufactured elements in American equipment sold to Israel, such as the missile trigger systems used in Apache helicopters, manufactured by the Smiths group. But the issue of converted Centurion tanks being used as armored personnel carriers has also been raised.

Such concerns have slowed the development of the relationship between the British and Israeli defense industries, which blossomed during the Oslo years of the 1990s. There have been reports of the British Department of Trade and Industry stalling on the granting of export licenses for the selling of military components to Israel.

It should be borne in mind that all these differences have placed only a small dent in what is a very flourishing commercial relationship between Britain and Israel. Israel remains the UK's biggest export market and largest trading partner in the region, and the UK's 22nd largest trading partner worldwide. (62)

While supporting U.S. policy in Iraq and taking strong measures against radical Islamists based on British soil, the Blair government is still far from endorsing the view of Israel and U.S. political figures generally of a clear link and commonality between Israel's struggle with terror groups and the challenge facing the West. The latter see Israel's predicament--readiness to make concessions for peace, but faced with an intransigent and extreme leadership on the other side--as one facet of a broader clash between the West and radical movements and ideologies emanating from the Middle East.

The view of France and several other European states instead blames Israeli "intransigence" for the deadlock and violence. They urge criticism and pressure to bring unilateral concessions from Israel. In the familiar pattern, the British position lies somewhere in between. Blair's own sympathy for Israel is undoubtedly sincere. But his policy has not been to radically overhaul or rethink the contours of British relations with Israel, but rather to continue to operate within traditional parameters. Indeed, reports suggest that Blair has been keen to try and use the influence he gained in Washington as a result of his backing of Bush on the Iraq question in order to restart the negotiations between Israel and the PA. Comments by Foreign Secretary

Jack Straw, on alleged 'double standards' at the UN regarding Security Council resolutions dealing with Iraq and those dealing with Israel indicate the extent to which the British government's position sometimes sounds substantively similar to that of the European mainstream. (63)

## CONCLUSIONS

British policy toward Israel has been defined by three dualities. First, there has been the battle between two opposing conceptions of the Middle East. The Diplomatic view emphasizes the need to engage regimes, even oppressive and aggressive ones, conducting relations and trade with no reference to these factors. It views Israel as a disruptive influence in the region because its existence or policies inflame anti-Western passions which would otherwise be insignificant.

The Strategic approach sees the Middle East's dilemma as stemming primarily from the presence and behavior of dictatorial regimes which either evince or manipulate radicalism and anti-Western feelings for their own interests and preservation. This has led to corruption, a lack of freedom, inefficient economies, and ultimately to regional violence and crises. It misdirects grievances which might otherwise be resolved down the blind alleys of extremism and excessive demands.

The historical record shows that Israel's own actions have a very limited role in effecting British policy. The two conceptions have their own views of Israel which interpret actions through their respective lenses.

Second, there are two key institutions that battle over shaping and implementing British policy toward Israel: 10 Downing Street, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Prime Minister is responsible for the general direction of policy, the Foreign Office for its day-to-day implementation. The Foreign Office, with its staff of long service, career diplomats, is the main promoter of the Diplomatic approach. Independent-minded prime ministers

such as Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Harold Wilson, Margaret Thatcher, and Tony Blair have tended to a greater or lesser extent to take the Strategic approach.

Finally, there is the duality of Britain's roles as member of the European Union and a close ally of the United States. Of course, Britain has its own views of its interests and options, but it constantly must deal with the two contending polls of Western policymaking in the region. As we have seen, this leads at times to a gap between the substance of British policy and the declarations of policymakers.

*\*Dr. Jonathan Spyer has served as a special advisor on international affairs to Israeli Cabinet ministers. He is currently a research fellow at the Global Research in International Affairs Center, Herzliya, Israel.*

#### NOTES

1. For an articulate and concise exposition of this view of the Middle East, see "The West is like the Great Satan," The Spectator, May 22, 2004. <<http://www.thespectator.co.uk>>.
2. For a basic statement of the thinking behind the Strategic approach, see Michael Gove, "Colonialism is Alive and Well in the Middle East," The Times, Dec 5, 2001. <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk>>.
3. Jonathan Rynhold, "British Policy toward the Middle East in the '90s: Between the US and the EU," paper given at the BESA Conference on Euro-Atlantic Security & the Middle East, January, 1999.
4. Sharon Sadeh, "Withdrawing from the Arabs to the Embrace of the Europeans," Ha'aretz, January 26, 2004. <<http://www.haaretz.co.il>>.
5. The FCO has recently initiated the training of a young diplomat in Hebrew language skills. The initiative was taken to remedy a situation in which the British

Embassy diplomatic staff in Tel Aviv did not include a single Hebrew-speaker.

6. Quoted in Ewan MacAskill, "Israel's Tactical Indignation," The Guardian, September 25, 2001.

<<http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk>>.

7. Robin Renwick, "My Fellow Ambassadors are Not a Pretty Sight," Daily Telegraph, May 2, 2004.

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk>>. Also

Chris Hastings, "Diplomats Failed to Disclose their own Arab Links," Daily Telegraph, May 2, 2004.

8. Anthony Sampson, "Hijacked by that Mob at no.10", The Observer, June 8, 2003.

<<http://www.observer.guardian.co.uk>>.

9. Peter Stothard, 30 Days: A Month at the Heart of Blair's War (London: Harper Collins, 2003).

10. <<http://www.lfi1.dircon.co.uk>>.

11. See Harold Wilson, The Chariot of Israel (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1981), pp. 184-188 for an examination of Bevan's views on the Israel-Arab conflict.

12. <<http://www.lmec.org.uk>>.

13. In her memoirs, Thatcher writes of her Jewish constituents, "I have enormous admiration for the Jewish people inside or outside Israel . . . My old constituency of Finchley has a large Jewish population. In the thirty three years I represented it I had never had a Jew come in poverty and desperation to any one of my constituency surgeries. They had always been looked after by their own community." Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years (London: Harper Collins, 1993).

14. <<http://www.cfoi.co.uk>>.

15. Britain, of course, is not alone in this respect - as shown by the policies of Italy, the new EU members from the former Soviet bloc, and other countries.

16. Howard Sacher, A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to our Time (New York: Knopf, 1979), pp. 138-162.

17. For an in-depth discussion of the motivations underlying British Mid-East policy in this period, see Louis, William

- Roger, The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-51 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
18. Wilson, The Chariot of Israel, p. 228.
19. Ibid, p. 235.
20. See Hugh Dalton, High Tide and After (London: London, 1962), pp. 147.
21. Louis, William Roger, The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-51, pp. 114-5.
22. Wilson, The Chariot of Israel, p. 239.
23. Ibid.
24. Bevin's parliamentary Under Secretary, Christopher Mayhew, wrote in his diary (May, 1948) that "there is no doubt in my mind that Ernest detests Jews. He makes the odd wisecrack about the 'Chosen People'; declares the Old Testament the most immoral book ever written and says the Jews taught Hitler the technique of terror. 'What could you expect when people are brought up from the cradle on the Old Testament' he said to me." See, Avi Davis, "The Hateful Legacy of the British Foreign Office," Boston Globe, January 12, 2003.
25. Louis, William Roger, The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-51, p. 581.
26. Moshe Gat, Britain and the Conflict in the Middle East, 1964-67: the Coming of the Six Day War, (New York: Prager, 2003), p.3.
27. For a discussion of Nasirite Egypt's dual identity as both state and revolutionary force, see Adeed Dawisha, Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 152-3.
28. Wilson, The Chariot of Israel, p. 269.
29. Howard Sacher, A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to our Time, pp. 493-501 for a detailed account of the Israeli military campaign.
30. Ibid, p.515.
31. Moshe Gat, Britain and the Conflict in the Middle East, 1964-67: the Coming of the Six Day War, p. 26.
32. Adeed Dawisha, Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair, pp. 106-111 for a discussion of the centrality of the 'liberation of Palestine' for Arab nationalism.
33. Moshe Gat, Britain and the Conflict in the Middle East, 1964-67: the Coming of the Six Day War, p.148.
34. Moshe Gat, Britain and the Conflict in the Middle East, 1964-67: the Coming of the Six Day War, p.209.
35. Wilson, The Chariot of Israel, p. 343.
36. Moshe Gat, Britain and the Conflict in the Middle East, 1964-67: the Coming of the Six Day War, p. 98.
37. For an insightful account of this moment in the political history of the Arab world, see Fuad Ajami, The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation's Odyssey (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).
38. See Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin, Yasir Arafat: a Political Biography (London: Continuum, 2003).
39. The Convention deals with offences and certain other acts committed on board aircraft. It stipulates, among other things, the required actions to be taken by signatory states in the event of unlawful seizure of aircraft.
40. Interview with Peter Tripp, UK Confidential, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk>>.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Wilson, The Chariot of Israel, p. 372.
44. Howard Sacher, A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to our Time, p. 790.
45. From the Venice Declaration, European Institute for Research on Mediterranean and Euro-Arab Cooperation, <<http://www.medea.be>>.
46. <<http://www.israel-embassy.org.uk>>.
47. Jonathan Rynhold, "British Policy toward the Middle East in the '90s: Between the US and the EU."
48. Ibid.
49. International Institute of Strategic Studies 1998: pp. 265, 277.
50. British Embassy to Israel website: <<http://www.britemb.org.il>>.
51. 'Robin Cook, Press Conference', FCO Website, November 26, 1998, <<http://www.fco.co.uk>>.

52. Douglas Davis, "The Man Behind Blair," Jerusalem Post, September 24, 1999, and Sharon Sadeh, "The Road to Damascus Passes Through London," Ha'aretz, December 15, 1999. Also Simon Henderson, Bush and Blair: "Tensions in the Relationship," Policywatch paper no. 738, April, 2003.
53. Christopher Walker, "Britain Spearheads EU Drive to Halt New Israeli Homes on West Bank," The Times, January 14, 1998. Christopher Walker, "Britain Warns Netanyahu Not to Crush Palestinian Hopes," The Times, June 6, 1996. Christopher Walker, "Arabs incensed by US Land Veto," The Times, May 19, 1995.
54. British Embassy to Israel website: <<http://www.britemb.org.il>>.
55. Arie O'Sullivan, "IAI Inks \$25 m deal with RAF," Jerusalem Post, September 19, 2000.
56. Michael Binyon, "Middle East Peace Should Top Agenda in US," The Times, November 8, 1996. Danna Harman, "Germans to Fight Wye EU linkage," Jerusalem Post, December 31, 1998.
57. Lamia Lahoud, "New Talks on Jerusalem Under Way," Jerusalem Post, August 23, 2000. Ibrahim Hazboun, "EU to recognise Palestine," The Guardian, June 21, 2000. Danna Harman, "Bloody Palestine," The Guardian August 28, 1998.
58. Jonathan Rynhold, "British Policy toward the Middle East in the '90s: Between the US and the EU."
59. See Ha'aretz, "UK's Straw Voices Compassion for Suicide Bombers," May 27, 2002. Also Nicholas Watt, "Lib Dem MP: Why I Would Consider Becoming a Suicide Bomber," The Guardian, January 23, 2004.
60. Richard Allen Greene, "Israel, Britain at Odds over Forum," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, January 10, 2003.
61. Philip Reeves, "Israel accuses Straw of Anti-Semitism over References to Palestinian Anger," The Independent, September 25, 2001.
62. <<http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk>>.
63. Simon Henderson, "Bush and Blair: Tensions in the Relationship," Policywatch No. 738, April 2, 2003.