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**ABSTRACT**

In the summer of 1958, the Middle East was engulfed in crisis, and the Eisenhower administration was rethinking its regional policy. Israel saw a chance to demonstrate its value as a reliable strategic partner by supporting the Western military operation to secure Jordan. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion authorized overflights and tabled proposals for a strategic partnership. Though Washington proved responsive, Ben-Gurion abruptly terminated the overflights, and a severe diplomatic crisis ensued. It was neither sought nor welcomed by the parties, and left all baffled and dismayed. Ben-Gurion's behaviour confounded contemporaries and historians: was he intimidated by Soviet threats? Did he yield to coalition pressures? Was he engaging in brinkmanship? New evidence shows that the root cause of the crisis was accidental, and ultimately it served only to cast doubt over Israel's fortitude.

**KEYWORDS** David Ben-Gurion; John Foster Dulles; Dwight D. Eisenhower; Gamal Abdel Nasser; Abba Eban; Israel–US relations; overflights crisis; Periphery Pact

Abba Eban, Israel's longest-serving ambassador to the United States, was nearing the end of his 10-year stint when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles summoned him to an extraordinary meeting at his residence on a Sunday afternoon, 3 August 1958. The ambassador buoyantly walked in, expecting a breakthrough conversation about the state of relations between Washington and Jerusalem. Relations between the two capitals had derailed in 1956, following Israel's collusion with the British and French in the Suez campaign. But two years on Eban believed they were slowly getting back on track. Regional developments gave him reason for optimism: the Middle East was engulfed in political crisis, building up to a coup d'état in Iraq on 14 July 1958. The Americans sought to secure the region's shaky pro-West regimes by dispatching marines to Lebanon, while the British prepared to airlift paratroopers to Jordan in a mission codenamed Operation Fortitude. But Saudi Arabia, Washington's key Arab ally, refused to approve Western overflights across its territory; its king balked at openly challenging Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Soviet-backed Egyptian president who had raised the banner of radical pan-Arab nationalism. Loath though they were to involve Israel, the Western powers saw no alternative. On 15 July 1958, for the first time in its history, Israel was called upon to partake in a Western military operation. Its role was minor and passive, but nonetheless crucial to the operation's success.

The Western powers asked Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion to authorize overflights of troops and supplies across Israeli territory. In so doing, he ran the risk of provoking Soviet and Arab reactions and upsetting his coalition government, but he also perceived a chance to redefine Israel's relations with the West. It was an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate what Ben-Gurion had long argued: that Israel could serve as a reliable bulwark against Soviet-Nasserist expansion in the Middle East, a strategic asset for the West. Ben-Gurion decided to authorize the overflights. To ensure Israel's support was not taken for granted, he conditioned the overflights on Washington's willingness to consider entering into a strategic partnership with Israel. Specifically he demanded that Washington review its arms sales policy, offer clearer security guarantees, and support a programme for the consolidation of a Periphery Pact

grouping of the non-Arab Middle Eastern states around Israel. On 1 August 1958 Dulles sent Ben-Gurion a letter promising him as much.

Therefore, when Eban walked into Dulles's home two days later, he was 'expecting great achievements'. Instead, he 'stepped into a boiling cauldron'.<sup>1</sup> He found the Secretary 'as agitated as I had ever seen him'.<sup>2</sup> By meeting's end Eban too was beside himself. It was 'the gravest and most fateful meeting I had ever participated in', the ambassador reported back.<sup>3</sup> It emerged that a cable from Tel Aviv informed Dulles earlier that morning that Ben-Gurion had made a 'dramatic and urgent demand' for the immediate cessation of all overflights following the receipt of a threatening Soviet note.<sup>4</sup> Dulles summoned Eban in order to strongly protest about the prime minister's decision. The President and Dulles 'were shocked to their core' by Israel's immediate and public capitulation to Soviet threats. Dulles was scathing: 'There was panic [in Israel], and there was no consultation [with Washington], and there was a show of fear for the Russians to behold, which is the phenomenon most detrimental to peace in the region and the world at large'.<sup>5</sup> Eban's consternation was palpable. 'After ceaseless efforts', he wrote to Ben-Gurion, Israel finally seemed to be 'standing at the threshold of a new era in our relations with the West, and suddenly as if the door locks shut'.<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, too, the crisis is seen as a milestone in bilateral relations. Historian Peter Hahn appraised this episode as marking 'the nadir in fifty years of US-Israeli relations', generating a bilateral crisis more severe than the one following Suez.<sup>7</sup>

Eban was as baffled as Dulles by Ben-Gurion's decision. On return from the meeting he cabled Jerusalem: 'Our position is highly perplexing to them'.<sup>8</sup> Three weeks later, his head of mission was still searching the foreign ministry for answers: 'To this day, those of us here cannot fathom why we went down that route',<sup>9</sup> he wrote. Half a century on, historians are none the wiser. Israel's role in the Western operation has been examined in a range of studies, and nearly all took note of Ben-Gurion's puzzling conduct.<sup>10</sup> Ilan Pappé characterized the prime minister's behaviour as 'bizarre',<sup>11</sup> Roger Louis referred to it as 'contradictory and eccentric'<sup>12</sup> and Avi Shlaim described it as 'rather muddled'.<sup>13</sup>

Scholars have speculated about what stood behind the 'strange game'<sup>14</sup> the prime minister was playing. The majority of studies dealing with Israel's conduct during the 1958 crisis conclude that the Soviet note seriously alarmed Ben-Gurion, so much so that he quickly succumbed to Soviet demands, even though he was generally satisfied with Dulles's letter.<sup>15</sup> A minority of scholars doubt that Ben-Gurion was genuinely intimidated by the Soviet threat. They reckoned he was dissatisfied with Dulles's letter, whose commitments he considered all too vague. Of these, two suggested that Ben-Gurion decided to halt the overflights in an act of brinkmanship,<sup>16</sup> hoping to extort further concessions from Washington; another two argued that with little in hand from Washington, Ben-Gurion could no longer quell dissent within his coalition government, and was forced to back down.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, Hahn suggested that the crisis was driven by a substantive 'divergence in U.S.–Israeli interests'.<sup>18</sup> Either way, the root cause of the severe diplomatic crisis that broke out between Israel and the United States in the summer of 1958 remains a matter of speculation. The studies mentioned above have offered little evidence in support of their hypotheses. The starting point for this article, then, is the need to substantiate in historical evidence claims about the cause and significance of the crisis.

The article constructs a narrative of the events that led up to and immediately followed on from the diplomatic crisis, so as to account for the decision that triggered it and in conclusion offer a reassessment of its consequences. Analysis draws on a pool of Israeli, American and British primary sources, including archival state documents and news reports, interviews, diaries and memoirs of policymakers. The article concludes that the minority opinion is closer to the mark: evidence indicates that Ben-Gurion was unfazed by the Soviet note. At the same time, however, evidence also suggests that he was broadly content with Dulles's letter and in control of his coalition. Furthermore, the study finds that the gap between the states' strategic

concerns had not widened in the immediate aftermath of the Baghdad coup, certainly not so far as to invite such a severe crisis. To the contrary: Dulles's and Ben-Gurion's thinking about the Middle East drew closer than ever before, Ben-Gurion welcomed Dulles's promising letter, and both were eager to embark on a collaborative new stage in bilateral relations. The crisis was neither sought nor welcomed by the parties; indeed it took both by surprise, and left all involved baffled and dismayed.

How then can we explain the outbreak of a severe diplomatic crisis in American–Israeli relations in early August 1958? New evidence, arrived at by the triangulation of three state perspectives, yields a fresh explanation for Ben-Gurion's puzzling behaviour. The article argues that the root cause of the crisis was accidental – an entirely avoidable triviality of a day's delay in the delivery of Dulles's letter to Ben-Gurion. It finds that Israel's prime minister acted primarily in rage – out of a growing sense of indignation at what he believed was Washington's disregard for his urgent appeals, and its taking for granted of Israel's support. His was an impulsive reaction, not a calculated manoeuvre.

Historians have disputed not only the root cause of the diplomatic crisis, but also its consequences. Many identified the summer of 1958 as a turning point in American–Israeli relations.<sup>19</sup> Avraham Ben-Zvi went as far as arguing that 'The dramatic events of July 1958 can be thought of as a conceptual watershed in American–Israeli relations' – a trigger event that profoundly affected American perceptions of Israel by providing 'definitive and ironclad proof of ... [Israel's] value as a strategic asset to the US'.<sup>20</sup> Scholars at the other end concluded that Ben-Gurion's efforts to forge a strategic relationship with the United States in the summer of 1958 came to naught. The narrative presented here reinforces with new evidence the latter position that Washington's perception of Israel's strategic value remained fundamentally unchanged.<sup>21</sup> It shows that Ben-Gurion's move yielded a diplomatic crisis so severe that it left the prime minister dumbfounded. In trying to extricate Israel from the crisis situation, Ben-Gurion then unwittingly dug himself even deeper, when he offered Dulles a laboured line of explanation that only cast further doubt over Israel's fortitude and hence its potential to serve as a long-term strategic partner. That lingering doubt reinforced the State Department's position that Israel remained a strategic liability to the United States, and ensured this position prevailed to the end of Eisenhower's administration.

### Prelude to crisis

The storm of Suez had just passed, when the Middle East horizon darkened again in early 1958. After months of unrest across the region, the radical current washed over Iraq, toppling its pro-Western Hashemite monarchy in a bloody coup d'état on 14 July 1958. Within hours of news breaking, the Eisenhower administration was ready to state that it had seen Nasser's Soviet-guided hand in the coup.<sup>22</sup> A week on, Dulles urged Eisenhower to 'regard Arab nationalism as a flood which is running strongly'.<sup>23</sup> The turbulent stream was threatening to burst its banks, and Washington had to decide whether to dam it up, or let it run its course.

The Eisenhower administration had long vacillated between accommodating and confronting Nasser. Its regional policy was driven by the need to acquire dependable regional allies who could back the United States' global campaign to contain the Soviet Union. Initially the administration had hoped that Nasser would come to fill the role. However, the populist Nasser soon set on a collision course with the Western powers, most notably by accepting Soviet arms in September 1955, and defiantly nationalizing the Suez Canal Company in July 1956. From then on, Washington tried to stem the Nasserist surge. Eisenhower and Dulles believed Nasser's 'positive neutrality' gave the Soviet Union a foothold in the Middle East and, in launching the Eisenhower Doctrine in early 1957, hoped to isolate and undermine him by buttressing his rivals: the conservative Arab regimes in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon and Libya. At the same time they tried not to antagonize the charismatic Egyptian leader too

bitterly, as some felt he may yet prove to be the only force capable of uniting the Arab world and curbing Soviet penetration.<sup>24</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the Baghdad coup the Administration embarked on a major review of its Middle East policy.<sup>25</sup> Newspapers reported growing sentiments among policymakers in favour of the latter course of action.<sup>26</sup>

The swing of the pendulum back towards rapprochement with Nasser perturbed Israeli policymakers. They feared that the West would opt to appease Nasser at Israel's expense.<sup>27</sup> Washington was wavering between accommodating Nasser's radical leadership, and propping up a conservative alternative. Both approaches came to terms with Arab nationalist aspirations, and both therefore precluded Israel as a strategic partner to the West. In this sense, the Baghdad coup opened a narrow window of opportunity for Israel. It brought down Iraq's Hashemite regime, Britain's key ally in the region, and unnerved the remaining conservative Arab regimes to the point that they had invited Western military intervention to secure their hold on power. At the same time, Washington's key ally, Saudi Arabia, refused to openly support the operation, and the Western powers had to turn to Israel. While policymakers in Washington were debating whether to revert to working with the radical Nasser or continue to prop up his conservative rivals, Ben-Gurion saw his chance to put to them a third option: the Periphery Pact.

Ben-Gurion argued that, in the long term, Washington could rely only on the non-Arab states in the Middle East. These, he noted, surpassed the Arab states in terms of combined population and territory, military power and economic development. Moreover, the non-Arab states were more stable politically and more decisively pro-Western. In effect, Ben-Gurion sought American support for an initiative that would bring together the four non-Arab states situated along the perimeter of the Middle East – Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia and Sudan – and consolidate them around Israel. The five demarcated a virtual ring that strategically encircled the Arab world, and Ben-Gurion hoped they would come to develop intense, if secret, collaborations across a range of military and civilian fields. Fundamentally, the proposal challenged the notion that Egypt was inevitably to become the region's hegemonic power, promoting instead a new role for Israel as a key Western ally in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> In advancing the Periphery Pact alternative, Ben-Gurion hoped to open the door to a strategic partnership between Washington and Jerusalem, such that in the long term would secure for Israel a steady stream of advanced arms at affordable rates. The entire idea, of course, was premised on Israel's dependability as a strategic partner, by contrast with Nasser's radical volatility and King Saud's unreliability.

### Quid pro quo

Ben-Gurion's chance to demonstrate Israel's strategic value and fortitude came in the form of a British request for overflight permission, the morning after the Baghdad coup. Ben-Gurion saw a clear Israeli interest in facilitating the British military operation: to forestall – if not prevent – Nasser's takeover of Jordan, and Israel's complete encirclement by a unified Arab force. Yet he had qualms about the presence of British troops in Jordan, fearing they might constrain Israel's freedom of action if border incidents broke out. He took the question to the inner circle of his government. Most ministers were inclined to acquiesce in the British request, yet – bearing Suez in mind – counselled Ben-Gurion to make sure Washington was supportive of the move. Ben-Gurion therefore summoned the American ambassador on the afternoon of 16 July. He told him that overflights would render Israel a partner to the Western operation; it risked riling domestic and international public opinion, and provoking a dangerous Soviet reaction. Ben-Gurion could advise his government to consent only if Washington was explicitly supportive of the British request, and took responsibility for its consequences.<sup>29</sup>

While awaiting Washington's response, Ben-Gurion convened the full government on the morning of 17 July. He proposed to authorize the British overflights on condition of

American backing. The proposal met with opposition: some ministers distrusted Britain so profoundly that they wanted no hand in its re-entry into the region; others highlighted the danger of stunting Israel's budding relations with Afro-Asian nations; the most serious challenge, though, came from those who argued that the risk of entanglement in the global Cold War was too great. Everyone agreed that the prospect of another world war was highly remote, but they feared that openly standing with the West against the East might fatally endanger Israel's existence in the long run. Ben-Gurion countered that Israel was unprepared at present to face in battle a unified Arab world and needed another decade to fortify itself. What if Israel refused to facilitate the Western operation and found itself encircled by pro-Nasserist forces sooner rather than later? It would surely require American help and could not afford to be deemed obstructive to this Western operation. Ben-Gurion's position prevailed: the decision to approve the British request to overfly 1500 troops was taken by a vote of eight to four.<sup>30</sup>

Scholars suggested that Ben-Gurion's decision two weeks later, to terminate the overflights, was prompted by mounting anxiety over an imminent Soviet reaction.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore significant to note that documents of Israeli deliberations offer no evidence to support this interpretation. The decision certainly weighed heavy on Ben-Gurion and his ministers, but they referred to entanglement in a superpower confrontation more as a general and long term peril than a real, looming threat. The prime minister recorded the cabinet meeting in his diary in some detail, but made no mention of concerns raised over the possibility of an imminent Soviet reaction. Nor do transcripts of the full government meeting or the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Security Committee (FASC) meeting, which Ben-Gurion attended on 16 July, mention such concerns. In fact, Ben-Gurion explicitly told the committee he believed that the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations was 'bluffing when he said that the [American] landing in Lebanon could plunge the world into a new world war'.<sup>32</sup>

When it came to working with the British, however, Israeli ministers proved justifiably wary: the road to collaboration was paved with pitfalls due to the overflights' hasty execution. Washington had delivered Israel's requested assurances by mid-day on 17 July, but the British did not wait for formal approval and their troop-carriers trespassed Israeli airspace while the government was still in session. In the event, Israeli fighters fired on the British planes, forcing some to turn back to their Cyprus base.<sup>33</sup> Ben-Gurion was enraged by this slight of Israeli sovereignty and dispatched a protest note to Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. He grew even more displeased when he had heard on the BBC the next morning that the number of paratroopers flown into Jordan exceeded two thousand.<sup>34</sup> He sent Macmillan another sharply worded letter on 20 July. Remarking that the British air-command appeared to believe that Israel was an occupied country, he demanded overflights be stopped forthwith.<sup>35</sup> Seeing as they could not persuade Ben-Gurion to authorize further overflights, the British asked the Americans to take over the supply operation.<sup>36</sup> On 23 July, Dulles informed the Israeli embassy that the United States would assume a more active role in Jordan, and asked for Israel's acquiescence in the American airlift.<sup>37</sup>

Eban had already put to Dulles Israel's interest in forging a strategic partnership in their meeting two days earlier, on 21 July.<sup>38</sup> He had said that Israel made it possible to secure Jordan's Hashemite regime, at great risk to its own security, by approving the British overflight request. The Western powers must recognize that in asking Israel to support the operation, they had effectively assumed 'a new and special responsibility' for its security. Israel wanted the United States to consider a fundamental shift in its approach to the question of military aid, and offer Israel a continual arms-supply programme. In addition, Eban pressed for a clearer security guarantee, by way of explicit reference to Israel's 'independence and integrity' in the context of Washington's definition of its vital interests in the Middle East. In the longer-term, Israel asked for Washington's help in encouraging Iran, Turkey, Sudan and Ethiopia to



cooperate with it. Israel also wanted Washington to establish a permanent framework for regular consultations, intelligence exchanges and the coordination of security policies with Israel.

When Dulles and Eban met again on 23 July, Eban pressed Israel's requests with greater force. If hitherto Israelis only mentioned what they hoped to gain in return for their country's part in the Western operation, Israel's acquiescence to further overflights was now given, for the first time, on an explicit quid pro quo basis. Eban handed Dulles a letter from Ben-Gurion to Eisenhower, which conveyed Israel's interest in obtaining American support for the consolidation of the Periphery Pact grouping that would stand as 'a strong dam against the Nasserist-Soviet torrent'.<sup>39</sup> According to Eban's report, Dulles read Ben-Gurion's letter carefully and said, 'This is a very important letter. It is most important to get it to President at once'. He added that Ben-Gurion's letter expressed many ideas corresponding to his own. In response to Eban's prodding, Dulles added 'I see no reason why I should not indicate to Turkey and Iran our feeling of satisfaction that there are developing ties between you and these two countries'.<sup>40</sup>

Dulles then raised the American overflight request. Eban replied that Israel could not permit airlifts indefinitely: demands were being made upon Israel as if it were an ally, and indeed Israel took risks befitting an ally, but all that time Israel had not been given the security guarantees of an ally. Eban was authorized to confirm that Israel 'would turn a blind eye [to overflights] for a few more days ... until it received a clear answer as to whether the United States saw merit in discussing Israel's proposals, and also until Israel received Britain's reply'.<sup>41</sup> When Dulles said he assumed the airlift operation would terminate within two weeks, Eban insisted he was only authorized to promise 'a few days', and even that was specifically in the context of Israel's expectation that within those few days it would be informed of Washington's consent to enter into serious discussions regarding the proposals that Ben-Gurion had put forward. In instructing Eban to take this highly unusual tone with Dulles, and explicitly condition Israel's consent to authorize the latest overflight request on Washington's agreement to discuss a strategic relationship with Israel, Ben-Gurion had made it clear that he was determined to exploit the crisis situation to the full.

On 25 July, Eisenhower wrote to Ben-Gurion thanking him for sharing his views and promising that Dulles would soon write a more substantive response.<sup>42</sup> Ben-Gurion was not greatly encouraged. His impression of the Eban-Dulles talks on 21 July was that the meeting was conducted 'in good atmosphere, but without any real results for the time being'.<sup>43</sup> Growing disquiet was evident in Ben-Gurion's dealings with Eban.<sup>44</sup> His anxiety heightened when news reports emerged on 28 July, suggesting that Washington would give 'friendly consideration' to a Soviet initiative for an arms embargo in the Middle East, under condition that it would exclude only Baghdad Pact members Turkey, Iran and Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> He cabled Eban wanting to know: 'How could this settle with the secretary's promise to review our arms request, and with the president's message confirming US interest in Israel's security?' Eban was instructed to undertake urgent action in this regard, as well as with regard to Eisenhower's promise that Dulles would soon reply in detail to Ben-Gurion's letter.<sup>46</sup> Ensuing enquiries by Israel's representatives in Washington confirmed that Dulles's reply was still being drafted, and should be expected shortly.<sup>47</sup>

### [Puzzling move](#)

Dulles finally dispatched his letter of response to Ben-Gurion's partnership proposals on the afternoon of Friday, 1 August 1958. He confirmed that much of what Ben-Gurion had written in his letter to the president was 'close to our own thinking', and expressed deep appreciation for Israel's acquiescence in Western overflights. As far as Ben-Gurion's request for US support for the Periphery Pact, Dulles confirmed that 'we are prepared to do what we can to be of

assistance'. He added: 'We believe that Israel should be in a position to deter an attempt at aggression by indigenous forces, and are prepared to examine the military implications of this problem with an open mind'.<sup>48</sup> Although Dulles's letter did not go as far as Ben-Gurion had hoped, it contained the most far-reaching promises hitherto given to Israel. Dulles, therefore, expected it would be received with appreciation. Yet, on the following afternoon, 2 August, Ben-Gurion informed the American and British ambassadors that all overflights must come to an immediate and complete stop. By way of explanation, Ben-Gurion referred to a threatening note, issued by the Soviet government on 1 August, which stated that in permitting overflights, Israel had rendered itself 'an immediate associate' in aggressive acts against Arab countries.<sup>49</sup> Ben-Gurion's abrupt decision, made without as much as consulting Washington, infuriated Dulles.

Was Ben-Gurion genuinely intimidated by the Soviet threat? It is significant to note that the Soviet protest came as no surprise to Ben-Gurion. Talking to the British ambassador on 22 July, Ben-Gurion had said that he was anxious precisely because so far the Soviet Union appeared to let pass Israel's part in the operation. He was expecting Moscow to protest, and was puzzled by its silence. In fact, the prime minister remarked, he would have felt more at ease had Israel been delivered a Soviet protest!<sup>50</sup> Second, the prime minister's diary and meeting records reveal a rather cool attitude towards the Soviet note in the 24 hours that had passed between its receipt and Ben-Gurion's abrupt decision to suspend the overflights. Upon receiving the note on the evening of 1 August, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary that it was 'paved with threats to the "national interests" of Israel',<sup>51</sup> but his subsequent move appears quite measured: Eban was instructed to inform Dulles the next morning that Moscow's strong protest had reinforced the prime minister's belief that in influencing Israel to permit the overflights, Washington had taken on a greater moral responsibility for Israel's security. At the same time, Eban indicated to Dulles that Israel would not be intimidated by the Soviet note. He told the secretary that Israel planned to reply by saying, inter alia, that it could not accept the charge of assisting in 'aggressive acts' since a Soviet-proposed UN Security Council resolution that had called the Western operation 'aggressive' was defeated by a vote of ten to one.<sup>52</sup> Nor was great urgency or alarm indicated by the prime minister's moves on Saturday, 2 August. According to his diary, Ben-Gurion's morning was taken up by lengthy meetings with the World Jewish Congress president and top coalition-parties' members. In discussing Israel's foreign-policy agenda with them, Ben-Gurion spoke of his Periphery Pact, but did not even mention the Soviet note, which by then had been made public by Soviet news-agency Tass. Following this meeting, Ben-Gurion dryly logged in his diary the news that Italy had also received a Soviet protest note.<sup>53</sup>

The prime minister's next appointment on Saturday afternoon was with the British ambassador, Sir Francis Rundall. The meeting was scheduled at Rundall's request and the prime minister did not know in advance what the ambassador wished to discuss. Rundall told Ben-Gurion that Britain had finally managed to open a land route through Aqaba, but again needed to dispatch more troops in order to secure supply transport-lines, and therefore required further overflight permissions. This new request visibly outraged Ben-Gurion, who flatly rejected it, telling Rundall he found it 'perplexing and saddening' that Macmillan could make such a request, especially after Israel had received the Soviet protest.<sup>54</sup> Thus, it was only after Rundall had put forward Britain's latest overflight request that Ben-Gurion began speaking of the Soviet note with a heightened sense of alarm. He said he was drafting without delay a reply to the Soviet note, which was to be dispatched as soon as it was approved at the weekly cabinet meeting the next morning.

Rundall questioned the need for a precipitous reply and asked whether Israel could delay it 'for a day or so, to give us time to complete this operation'.<sup>55</sup> Ben-Gurion rejected the idea outright. He also made a point of telling Rundall that he had intended on calling him the

previous evening, 'following the Soviet note', to demand that Britain discontinue its overflights.<sup>56</sup> Ben-Gurion did not explain to Rundall why he had not in fact called him on 1 August, but later he told US Ambassador Edward Lawson this was because he 'had run out of time'.<sup>57</sup> We may presume that had the prime minister been truly anxious about an imminent Soviet response he would have made it his top priority to inform the British of his decision to terminate the overflights. Moreover, had Ben-Gurion been troubled by the Soviet note itself, he could have been expected to urgently call upon his aides to assess the gravity of the situation and formulate Israel's response. Ben-Gurion indeed consulted them, but only on the morning of 3 August, when he learnt that top foreign ministry officials did not find the Soviet protest alarmingly sharp in tone, and believed Israel need not hurry to reply.<sup>58</sup>

Right after his meeting with Rundall, on Saturday afternoon, 2 August, Ben-Gurion sent word to inform Lawson that the American overflights must also come to an immediate and complete stop. Lawson asked whether they may continue until 6 August, when the programme was scheduled to terminate. He was told the prime minister was 'very insistent on [the] need for speedy action and was extremely serious re[garding the] urgency of [the] matter': Ben-Gurion was already drafting his reply to the Soviet note, and resolved to bring it to his government on Sunday morning. Lawson questioned the basis for this 'dramatic and urgent demand'. He was told that upon receiving the Soviet note, Ben-Gurion had been on the verge of calling in the ambassadors because he felt he had overstretched the authority granted to him by his government.<sup>59</sup>

From the outset Ben-Gurion was hesitant about authorizing the Western overflights and wanted to see them over as quickly as possible. On 24 July he was persuaded by his ambassadors in Washington and London to allow overflight continuation for 'a few days' longer as a means of winning British and American goodwill in considering his arms requests and strategic partnership proposals. When a week had passed and neither power informed him that the overflights had been brought to an end, nor that his proposals had been accepted, Ben-Gurion seriously began contemplating their termination. The delivery of the Soviet note may have reinforced his determination to do so, but he ultimately did not go ahead with it until Rundall had submitted the new British overflight request. On the spot, the dismayed Ben-Gurion not only rejected Rundall's new request, but also demanded that all other overflights must come to end at once. In explaining his decision to Rundall and Lawson, Ben-Gurion tied his refusal to the threatening Soviet note, but the lack of urgency in his actions during the 24 hours that had passed since the note's delivery indicates there was more frustration and indignation behind his decision than anxiety. Ben-Gurion, whose patience had worn thin over two weeks due to the inconclusive discussions with the Western powers, appears to have snapped on 2 August, when Rundall came to see him on what the prime minister described in his diary as 'an unexpected and unsightly mission'.<sup>60</sup> When Rundall left the room Ben-Gurion, clearly exasperated, told his aides that the British request was 'insolent'.<sup>61</sup>

The narrative above indicates that fear of an imminent Soviet response was not the primary factor behind Ben-Gurion's decision to terminate the overflights, as the majority of scholars argued. A minority suggested that Ben-Gurion tried to extract further concessions from Dulles against a background of a looming coalition crisis. The prime minister certainly faced domestic pressures, but there is no evidence to suggest that he deemed them insurmountable at any point. Unrest within his coalition did not prevent Ben-Gurion from pushing through government the decision to renew the overflights on 10 August. Indeed, he contentedly noted in his diary that he was able to gain 'a free hand in formulating the [reply] note, as well as on the question of the American overflights'.<sup>62</sup> Some scholars explained the move as an act of brinkmanship following from Ben-Gurion's dissatisfaction with Dulles's response to his proposals. I found no evidence in support of this explanation. Ben-Gurion's first impression upon reading Dulles's letter, as recorded in a foreign ministry memorandum



of conversation, seems far from bitter disappointment. Ben-Gurion said that 'it seems Dulles's reply is quite positive, and hopefully we will devote ourselves to it'. He made note of the fact that Dulles did not provide the guarantees Israel had asked for, but nonetheless told Lawson he believed that if the letter's contents were carried out 'we could turn the Middle East around, and the Soviet invasion would be halted'. The prime minister concluded the conversation on a hopeful note, saying 'may we together devote ourselves to organising the pro-western forces in the region in order to put an end to the expansion of Nasser and the USSR'.<sup>63</sup> Dulles's letter was also viewed as constructive by top foreign ministry officials.<sup>64</sup>

### The difference a day makes

Dulles's letter surely did not go as far as Ben-Gurion had hoped. Yet the prime minister and his aides believed it provided an unprecedented opening for further discussions, and they expressed interest in following up on it. Why, then, would Ben-Gurion risk antagonizing Washington by halting the overflights on 2 August? The answer to this puzzle lies in a small detail, hitherto overlooked. Although Dulles's letter was dated Friday, 1 August, the day before Ben-Gurion had decided to suspend the overflights, the letter was held up over a long weekend at the American embassy in Tel Aviv and actually delivered to Ben-Gurion only three days later, on the afternoon of Monday, 4 August. Ben-Gurion's decision to suspend the overflights was thus taken not despite Dulles's letter, but rather due to its supposed absence.

Ten days had passed since Eban had told Dulles that Israel would overlook the airlift for only 'a few days' longer while Washington considered Ben-Gurion's proposals. On 2 August Rundall turned up to request yet another overflight authorization without as much as a nod to Ben-Gurion's proposals. The prime minister took it to signify the Western powers' disregard for his appeals, and taking Israel's support for granted. Enraged, he withdrew authorization for all overflights.

Eban had informed Ben-Gurion on Thursday, 31 July, that Dulles was still working on a draft response,<sup>65</sup> but it was only on Sunday, 3 August, that the ambassador was finally able to confirm by short telegram that he had obtained a copy of the letter. As far as he knew, the telegram was sent to the American embassy in Tel Aviv two days earlier, on the evening of Friday, 1 August. Ben-Gurion noted in his diary entry of 3 August that he found this 'curious', seeing as he 'had not yet received notification to that effect from Lawson'. He therefore requested that Eban immediately forward him a copy of Dulles's letter.<sup>66</sup> On Monday morning, 4 August, Ben-Gurion received two cables from his embassy in Washington: one containing the text of Dulles's letter, the other carrying an alarming message from Eban, reporting that on Sunday afternoon, 3 August, he was urgently summoned to Dulles's home and found him 'more agitated than I had ever seen him'. Dulles, who did not know that Ben-Gurion had not read his letter yet, spoke strongly. The overflights themselves were no longer the main issue; a far graver issue, Dulles asserted, was the fact that Israel appeared to exhibit alarming weakness and panic in the face of empty Soviet threats. He questioned whether Israel was mentally capable and willing to withstand them. If it was not, Dulles said, then

the picture of relations between Israel and the United States drastically changed and the impression of partnership that prevailed since the onset of the situation... would be shattered. The deep impression that Ben-Gurion's letter had made... was now being undermined ... subservience to Soviet threats will leave you in a position where you will have no friends.

Eban objected to Dulles's interpretation. He insisted that Ben-Gurion's decision, derived from 'cool and balanced judgment', was based on the belief that the new British request involved sending additional troops into Jordan 'which were an added convenience, but not crucial for the support of the British operation'. He admitted that Ben-Gurion took the Soviet note very seriously because Israel lacked a formal security guarantee from the United States and was

deeply concerned over the malevolent power of the Soviet Union 'which could destroy Israel in five minutes'. Dulles exclaimed that 'the Eisenhower Doctrine had made it clear that the US would come to the support of Israel should it be attacked by a Communist power', and he could not understand why Ben-Gurion found this basic fact so difficult to grasp. The United States, he said,

had committed to Israel no less than it had to any other state in the world, including NATO states, that if it were attacked by the USSR, the United States would fight for it .... If the Prime Minister did not believe this solemn commitment ... it was his right to do so, but then there was no possibility of achieving partnership with the United States.

Dulles concluded by telling Eban 'I want to know where you stand'. Eban replied: 'There is no doubt where we stand'. The secretary wryly retorted: 'We shall see'.<sup>67</sup>

It was only on the afternoon of Monday, 4 August, amid all the commotion over the secretary's outrage, that Ambassador Lawson came to see Ben-Gurion, carrying with him a formal copy of Dulles's much-awaited letter. The letter was dispatched from Washington on Friday evening, 1 August, and was indeed received by the embassy in Tel Aviv on Saturday, 2 August. But it was not until the afternoon of Monday, 4 August, that Lawson handed it over to Ben-Gurion. Upon delivery, Lawson explained that the delay was due to the fact that he 'did not wish to bother the prime minister on the Sabbath'. Ben-Gurion replied: 'That is a pity ....'<sup>68</sup> If it was the case that the ambassador decided to hold off the letter's delivery until Monday, then he appears to have committed a gross error of judgement. Did he fail to realize the importance of the letter and how anxious Ben-Gurion had been to receive it? It is difficult to believe that Lawson had the letter in hand yet chose not to mention it when notified of Ben-Gurion's decision to suspend the airlift – a decision Lawson himself described as 'dramatic and urgent' in his report to Washington. Furthermore, Lawson did not actually deliver the letter until Monday afternoon. This would suggest that he was sparing not only the prime minister's Saturday, but also his own Sunday rest (Sunday being a normal workday in Israel, in all but foreign embassies). Lawson kept his job, so perhaps a lower-level blunder had occurred at the embassy. At any rate, it remains that Ben-Gurion was unaware of Dulles's largely positive response to his proposals when he decided to put a stop to the overflights; nor was the furious Dulles aware of the fact that Ben-Gurion had taken this critical decision without reading his letter first.

In his meeting with Lawson on 4 August, Ben-Gurion said that Dulles's charges of Israeli subservience to Soviet demands had stunned him to such extent that he had barely had the opportunity to digest his letter's contents. In an about-face, Ben-Gurion now said he had no intention of urgently replying to the Soviet note. When the government discussed the matter in its weekly meeting on 3 August, Ben-Gurion informed it he would not be dispatching the reply before the next weekly meeting. In fact, he told Lawson, he had not yet even begun to draft his reply.<sup>69</sup> Ben-Gurion then received Rundall, who pressed for authorization for several more days of British overflights. He found Ben-Gurion adamant not to bring the matter again to his government as long as he remained unconvinced of the request's necessity. Rundall replied that 'this was quite unsatisfactory' because the problem was pressing.<sup>70</sup> Ben-Gurion grew infuriated: Rundall had 'badgered me for an hour and a half' with his 'insolent pleas', Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary, 'at times I wanted to get up and throw him out of the room'.<sup>71</sup>

### Backtracking

Soon after reading Dulles's letter, Ben-Gurion reversed his decision to halt the overflights. The American airlift to Jordan resumed on 6 August, and lasted four days.<sup>72</sup> In a long-winded letter to Dulles, Ben-Gurion expressed his distress at the 'misunderstanding' that had arisen. Eban reported that Dulles had interpreted the overflight halt as panicked surrender that cast doubt over Israel's value as a loyal partner.<sup>73</sup> Needing to assure Washington of Israel's steadfastness

and reliability, Ben-Gurion now strongly denied there was any direct relation between the overflights' termination and the Soviet note. Even if the American embassy was at fault for holding up Dulles's letter, Ben-Gurion could hardly use this fact to justify his exasperated move. He thus portrayed his decision as coolheaded, based on the belief that further airlifts were not crucial to the Western operation, and no longer justified 'the serious embarrassments and dangers' involved in the overflights of Israeli territory. Such reasoning certainly factored in Ben-Gurion's decision, but cannot in itself explain why he took the decision so abruptly, without as much as consulting Washington or his own aides.

A 10 August letter from Dulles to Ben-Gurion insisted on setting the record straight, but nonetheless concluded that the overflights' resumption would 'go far to eliminate adverse repercussions of their having been interrupted', and expressed hope that 'we can consider the situation which arose out of the interruption of our flights a closed matter'.<sup>74</sup> What was the long-lasting significance of this chain of events? The Israelis' greatest fear was that Dulles would retract the positions expressed in his 1 August letter, and that 'all the efforts we have invested for weeks, would go down the drain'.<sup>75</sup> They were concerned that the crisis would not so easily be forgotten, and 'might get thrown in our face sometime in the future'.<sup>76</sup> Most, however, came to the conclusion that Ben-Gurion's reversal had satisfied Dulles.<sup>77</sup>

The proposals contained in Ben-Gurion's letter to Eisenhower of 24 July seem to have fallen on receptive ears. Yet, it was a very narrow window of opportunity that Israel managed to crack open. It rested largely on Dulles's personal receptiveness to the idea that Israel's Periphery Pact may work to contain the flood-tide of Nasserism. Whereas Dulles expressed enthusiasm for the proposals from the start, State Department officials were far more apprehensive. Thus, while Dulles remarked to Eban that Eisenhower's letter of 25 July 'had not gone as far as the President would have liked',<sup>78</sup> State Department records suggest that it was rather Dulles who wished it had gone farther.<sup>79</sup> A gap between the secretary and his State Department officials was also apparent when time came to formulate Dulles's reply to Ben-Gurion. Dulles had sent back the letter drafted by his aides, commenting that it was 'inadequate, and asked that it be thoroughly re-drafted', so as to address 'itself more to the heart of the important issues raised in Ben-Gurion's carefully thought-out letter'.<sup>80</sup>

Shortly after the airlift resumed, State Department officials studied the episode and concluded that in light of it, new weight should be given to their initial reservations about Ben-Gurion's proposals. In a memorandum to Dulles on 11 August, Policy Planning Staff Director Gerard Smith wrote that although Ben-Gurion's letter to the president 'was closely reasoned, his arguments have not convinced me of the usefulness of an informal entente among Israel, Ethiopia, Iran, Sudan and Turkey'. Having noted the Periphery Pact's key weakness, specifically the unlikelihood of keeping it a secret for long, Smith pointed to a further problem. 'The cornerstone of the suggested entente', he wrote, 'is not firm'.<sup>81</sup> In making this argument, Smith referred to the letter that Ben-Gurion had sent Dulles on 5 August, consenting to the overflights' resumption. In it, Ben-Gurion highlighted the grave risks Israel had incurred 'for ourselves and our brethren', emphatically stating that:

For forty years, millions of our brethren in the Soviet Union itself have stood up to fearful pressures ... I was therefore shocked to hear that you found it possible to say to our Ambassador that Israel had 'caved in' immediately to a Soviet threat ....<sup>82</sup>

Ben-Gurion's decision to evoke Israel's deep commitment to the Jewish Diaspora as testament to his country's resilience had the opposite effect – reminding the administration of one of Israel's key strategic vulnerabilities. In his memo to Dulles, Smith explained that

Ben-Gurion may or may not have panicked from fear of Soviet measures against Israel when he recently sought to terminate our overflights en route to Jordan. One consideration that clearly did sway him is indicated by the reference... to the 'millions of our brethren in the Soviet Union.' These brethren, their well-being and the possibility of

their release for emigration to Israel will strongly influence the policy toward the USSR of any likely Israeli government.

Smith acknowledged that Dulles, in his 1 August letter to Ben-Gurion, had given 'a qualified blessing to his entente concept'. Yet, he argued, 'that letter was drafted before the overflight incident, and you may now wish to re-examine the utility of Ben-Gurion's concept'.<sup>83</sup> Dulles did indeed reconsider his position, and on 18 August approved his staff's recommendation that from now on, 'we exercise extreme caution in giving Ben-Gurion further encouragement or support in the development of his projected five-nation entente, in view of the grave political hazards involved in it'.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

The Israelis persisted in their efforts to set up the Periphery Pact, which yielded close if covert relations with Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia. However, despite Israel's concerted attempts, the argument that Israel's Periphery Pact could become a viable alternative to Nasser in the region found little resonance with the administration. As long as Dulles remained secretary of state, he served to restrain those voices within the administration that called to improve relations with Nasser. However, in late 1958, Dulles's health began to deteriorate, and he eventually resigned his post in mid-April 1959, and passed away a little over a month later. During his period of illness, the idea of seeking an accommodation with Nasser regained ground within the administration. By mid-1959, much to Israel's chagrin, Washington gradually reverted to a more pragmatic position of pursuing cautious rapprochement with Nasser.<sup>85</sup> Although this shift coincided with Dulles's illness, it should not be attributed merely to his physical decline. During the July crisis, Dulles himself had consistently taken the view that the United States 'must regard Arab nationalism as a flood which is running strongly. We cannot successfully oppose it, but we can put up sandbags around positions we must protect'.<sup>86</sup> Dulles remained strongly opposed to 'trying to work with Nasser', whom he believed could not be stopped, like Hitler.<sup>87</sup> His way of dealing with the Nasserist threat was by trying to keep him within bounds, containing rather than frontally opposing him, 'until the flood had eventually subsided'.<sup>88</sup> Support for Israel's Periphery Pact may well have been regarded by Dulles as one such sandbag, a temporary and exceptional measure. Once the July crisis abated, so did his enthusiasm for the concept, and for taking the risks entailed in developing a quiet strategic partnership with Israel.

In retrospect, the diplomatic crisis triggered by Ben-Gurion's decision may seem minor. It was in so far as the crisis was contained in duration and scope. Moreover, severe as this bilateral diplomatic crisis was, it was dwarfed in comparison to the drama of shaken regimes and restive societies that gripped the region at the time. Yet, the significance of the diplomatic crisis comes into view when it is framed in the broader context of the fragile state of American-Israeli relations post-1956, and located at the juncture of the major regional policy review upon which Washington had embarked in the second half of 1958. In July 1958, after a year of turmoil that appeared to advance Soviet interests in the Middle East, the Eisenhower administration was preparing to review its regional policy. As the West's line-up of Arab allies were crumbling one by one, Israel was given a chance to demonstrate its value and fortitude as a strategic partner of the Western powers. The crisis that broke out between Jerusalem and Washington in early August 1958 jeopardized the trust and goodwill laboriously built up between the two capitals since the Suez debacle. More importantly, it critically undermined Ben-Gurion's ability to persuade Dulles to foster a quiet strategic partnership with Israel.

The findings of this research render a hitherto puzzling historical event intelligible and consequential, by showing that Ben-Gurion's manoeuvres not only critically jeopardized the recovery of bilateral relations between Israel and the United States post-Suez, but also nullified Ben-Gurion's achievement of an incipient Western recognition for Israel's strategic value, no

sooner than it was accorded. As a result, Israeli policymakers lost their tenuous grip on the possibility of influencing Washington's review of its Middle East policy, part of their ongoing efforts to sway Dulles away from falling back to a line accommodative of Nasser. The long wait for Dulles's response stretched Ben-Gurion's nerves to breaking point. His efforts to accelerate the process of aligning Israel with the West ultimately proved a hindrance. The diplomatic rift between Washington and Jerusalem was soon patched up, but Ben-Gurion's primary drive at the time was to reap long-term strategic dividends from Israel's supportive role in the Western operation. His aim was to capitalize on Israel's contribution to the Western operation by tying its overflight acquiescence to a broader framework of strategic cooperation, such that would ensure that Israel's strategic value in the eyes of the Western powers did not diminish as soon the immediate crisis blew over. In this he was unsuccessful.

## Notes

1. Herzog to Eytan, 21 August 1958, Israel State Archives (hereafter ISA)/Record Group (hereafter RG) 130.23/3085/13.
2. Eban to Ben-Gurion, 3 August 1958, ISA/RG130.09/2313/5, in DFPI 1958–1959, vol. 13, Document 42.
3. *Ibid.*, Document 43.
4. Lawson to Department of State (hereafter DoS), 2 August 1958, in FRUS 1955–1957, vol. 13, Document 34.
5. DFPI, Document 42.
6. *Ibid.*, Document 43. The minister at the Israeli embassy in Washington echoed Eban's anxiety; see Herzog to Eytan, 21 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3085/13.
7. Hahn, "Special Relationships", 267–268.
8. DFPI, Document 43.
9. Herzog to Eytan, 21 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3085/13.
10. To date, six articles have been dedicated to this subject: Almog, "An End of an Era"; Ben-Zvi, "The July 1958 Jordanian Crisis"; Oren, "The Test of Suez"; Pappé, "The Junior Partner"; Shlaim, "Israel, the Great Powers"; Tal, "Seizing Opportunities". The thesis presented in Ben-Zvi's article was extended into a book: Ben-Zvi, *The Origins of the American–Israeli Alliance*. Substantive references to the 1958 crisis are found in books and articles whose scope is broader. Many of these are cited throughout this article.
11. Pappé, "The Junior Partner", 264.
12. Louis and Owen, eds., *A Revolutionary Year*, 12.
13. Shlaim, "Israel, the Great Powers", 185. See also Tal, "Seizing Opportunities", 146; Oren, "The Test of Suez", 74.
14. Bar-On, *Of all Kingdoms*, 253.
15. Levey, *Israel and the Western Powers*, 95–96, 110–111, 134, 137; Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 311; Tal, "Seizing Opportunities", 147–148; Almog, "An End of an Era", 57; Bass, *Support Any Friend*, 46–47; Ben-Zvi, *The Origins of the American–Israeli Alliance*, 47–49; Druks, *The Uncertain Friendship*, 202; Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 245.
16. Oren, "The Test of Suez", 67, 70, 74, 83; Pappé, "The Junior Partner", 248–249, 260–261, 264, 266–267.
17. Shlaim, "Israel, the Great Powers", 187, 189–190; Bar-On, *Of all Kingdoms*, 259, 261.
18. Hahn, "Special Relationships", 267–268. The majority and minority lines of explanation are not entirely mutually exclusive. Scholars broadly concur that Ben-Gurion hoped to reap strategic dividends from Israel's supportive role in the Western operation, and was not above bargaining. The dividing line is drawn between those who attribute Ben-Gurion's decision primarily to anxiety over the Soviet note, and those who attribute it primarily to dissatisfaction with Dulles's letter.



19. Alteras, Eisenhower and Israel, xiv–xvi, 312; Eshed, Reuven Shiloah, 311; Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, 1358; Tal, “Seizing Opportunities”, 147–153; Levey, Israel and the Western Powers, 96–98, 134.
20. Ben-Zvi, The Origins of the American–Israeli Alliance, 16, 31.
21. Hahn, “Special Relationships”, 267–268; Shlaim, “Israel, the Great Powers”, 187, 189–191; Pappé, “The Junior Partner”, 249, 268, 273–274; Oren, “The Test of Suez”, 80–83; Bass, Support Any Friend, 46–41.
22. Congressional Leaders’ Memorandum of a Conference with the President, 14 July 1958, in FRUS 1958–1960, vol. 11, Document 127.
23. Memorandum of Conference with the President, 23 July 1958, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (hereafter DDEL)\Ann Whitman File (Hereafter AWF)\DDE Diary Series\Box 35\Staff Memos July 1958(1).
24. Ashton, Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser, 194–202; Mufti, “The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism”, 174–75; Kunz, “The Emergence of the United States as a Middle Eastern Power”; Yaqub, Containing Arab Nationalism, 2.
25. The policy review lasted nearly three months, and yielded National Security Council (NSC) Paper 5820/1 of 4 November 1958, which replaced NSC 5801/1 of 24 January 1958. NSC 5820/1 formed the basis of the United States’ policy toward the Near East for the next three years. FRUS 1958–1960, vol. 12, Documents 5 and 51.
26. Osgood Caruthers, “Nasser: Can We Live With Him? West Faces Difficult Choice in Mideast”, New York Times, 27 July 1958, E4; Max Freedman, “U.S. Dilemma Over The Middle East: To thwart Nasser – or make a deal with him?”, The Manchester Guardian, 25 July 1958, 7.
27. Knesset FASC Meeting Minutes, 16 July 1958, ISA/RG60.4/7566/3.
28. Lawson to DoS, 1 August 1958, United States National Archives (hereafter USNA) USNA/RG84/Israel, Tel Aviv, Unclassified General Records 1956–1958/Box 14/Middle East July–December 1958; Ben-Gurion Diary (hereafter BGD), 31 July 1958, Ben-Gurion Archive (hereafter BGA); Government Meeting Minutes, 20 July 1958, Stenographic Records of the Eighth Government’s Meetings 1958, ISA.
29. BGD, 15 and 16 July 1958, BGA; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter MFA) to Elath, 16 July 1958, in DFPI, Document 4; Salt to Foreign Office (hereafter FO), 17 July 1958, The National Archives of the UK at Kew (hereafter TNA)/British Public Record Office (hereafter PRO)/F0371/134345/VR1222/6.
30. Government Meeting Minutes, 17 July 1958, Stenographic Records of the Eighth Government’s Meetings 1958, ISA.
31. Levey, Israel and the Western Powers, 95–96, 110–111, 134, 137; Alteras, Eisenhower and Israel, 311; Tal, “Seizing Opportunities”, 147–148; Almog, “An End of an Era”, 57; Bass, Support Any Friend, 46–47; Ben-Zvi, The Origins of the American–Israeli Alliance, 47–49; Druks, The Uncertain Friendship, 202; Hahn, Caught in the Middle East, 245.
32. Government Meeting Minutes, 17 July 1958, Stenographic Records of the Eighth Government’s Meetings 1958, ISA; Knesset FASC Meeting Minutes, 16 July 1958, ISA/RG60.4/7566/3.
33. FRUS 1958–1960, vol. 11, Document 185.
34. BGD, 17 July 1958, BGA; Comay to Israeli embassies, 17 July 1958, and Comay to Elath, 20 July 1958, in DFPI, Documents 7 and 15.
35. Comay to Elath, 20 July 1958, in *ibid.*, Document 14.
36. Elath to Ben-Gurion, 21 July 1958, in *ibid.*, Document 17; Memorandum of Conversation (hereafter memcon): Lloyd and Elath, 21 July 1958, TNA/PRO/FO371/134284/VR1051/13. Ben-Gurion had already approved two American requests with far greater ease: the first request, on 17 July, sought clearance for American

aircraft flying en route to a show-of-force over Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq; the second sought to replenish Jordan's dwindling petroleum supplies the following day. Dulles to US embassy in Amman, 16 July 1958, in FRUS 1958–1960, vol. 11, Document 183; BGD, 17 and 18 July 1958, BGA.

37. Israeli embassy in Washington to Eytan, 23 July 1958, ISA/130.02/2450/8.
38. The following account is based on Memcon: Dulles and Eban, Situation in the Middle East, 21 July 1958, USNA/RG59/DoS Executive Secretariat, 1954–1964/The Secretary's and the Undersecretary's Memcons, 1953–1964, Lot64D199/Box 9/20–31 July 1958; Eban to MFA, 22 July 1958, ISA/130.02/2450/8; Eban's Views Prior to Departure for US, 18 July 1958, USNA/RG84/Israel, Tel Aviv, Unclassified General Records 1956–1958/Box 13/Israel 1958; Israeli embassy in Washington to MFA, 22 July 1958, in DFPI, Document 22.
39. Ben-Gurion to Eisenhower, 24 July 1958, DDEL\AWF\International Series\Box 32\Israel(1).
40. Eban to Ben-Gurion, 24 July 1958, in DFPI, Document 27; Memorandum of Conference with the President, 23 July 1958, DDEL\AWF\DDE Diary Series\Box 35\Staff Memos July 1958(1). Following paragraphs draw on: MFA to Eban and Elath, 24 July 1958, ISA/RG130.02/2450/8; Eban to Ben-Gurion, 24 July 1958, in DFPI, Document 29.
41. On 18 July Ben-Gurion refused passage to more British transport aircraft but took the opportunity to raise 'a more fundamental issue' with British Ambassador Sir Francis Rundall. In light of regional developments, Ben-Gurion revived his 1951 proposal of forging a British–Israeli partnership in the Middle East, 'similar to Britain's relationship with New Zealand, but without us joining the commonwealth'. Ben-Gurion took Rundall's response – that such a partnership already existed – as a rebuff. Israel was interested in 'erecting a dam against Nasser's expansionism', he said, and if Britain felt it had common interest with Israel in this field, bilateral relations ought to be established on a new foundation of a close working partnership, and of course the dispensation of arms. Rundall promised to pass Ben-Gurion's message on to the British government. BGD, 18 July 1958, BGA; Comay to Elath, 18 July 1958, ISA/130.09/2322/1, in DFPI, Document 9; Comay to Israeli embassies in London and Washington, 19 July 1958, ISA/130.02/2450/8; Rundall to FO, 19 July 1958, TNA/PRO/FO371/134284/VR1051/12. For more on Ben-Gurion's 1951 proposal see Tal, "The American–Israeli Security Treaty", 831.
42. Eisenhower to Ben-Gurion, 25 July 1958, ISA/RG130.2/4316/7.
43. BGD, 23 July 1958, BGA.
44. The ambassador had received the draft of Ben-Gurion's letter to Eisenhower on the evening of 22 July, while attending the UN General Assembly in New York, and decided to spend a day editing the letter before submitting it to Dulles on 24 July. This agitated Ben-Gurion, who noted in his diary: 'For some reason, Eban did not return last night to Washington, and we have lost a very precious day in this time of turmoil ... instead of rushing to Washington, Eban stayed another day in New York ....' BGD, 24 July 1958, BGA; Eban to Ben-Gurion, 23 July 1958, ISA/130.02/2450/8.
45. Drew Middleton, "US to Consider Limited Embargo on Mideast Arms", New York Times, 28 July 1958, 1.
46. Ben-Gurion to Eban, 29 July 1958, ISA/130.02/2450/8.
47. On 2 August Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs William Rountree told Eban there was no basis for reports that Washington was endorsing the embargo proposal. See Eban to MFA, 2 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 40.
48. Dulles to Ben-Gurion, 1 August 1958, ISA/130.02/4316/7.

49. Avidar to MFA, 1 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 38; Dulles to US embassies, 2 August 1958, USNA/RG84/Israel, Tel Aviv, Unclassified General Records 1956–1958/Box 13/Israel 1958.
50. Comay to Elath, 22 July 1958, in DFPI, Document 20.
51. BGD, 1 August 1958, BGA.
52. Eban to MFA, 2 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 40; Dulles to US embassies, 2 August 1958, USNA/RG84/Israel, Tel Aviv, Unclassified General Records 1956–1958/Box 13/Israel 1958.
53. BGD, 2 August 1958, BGA; “Russian Protests to Italy and Israel”, *The Times*, 2 August 1958, 5A.
54. BGD, 2 August 1958, BGA; Comay to Israeli embassies, 3 August 1958, and MFA to Israeli embassy in Washington, 4 August 1958, in DFPI, Documents 41 and 45.
55. Rundall to FO, 2 August 1958, TNA/PRO/F0371/134347/VR1222/55.
56. Comay to Israeli embassies, 3 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 41.
57. MFA to Israeli embassy in Washington, 4 August 1958, in *ibid.*, Document 45.
58. BGD, 3 August 1958, BGA; Eban to Ben-Gurion, 3 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 43.
59. Lawson to DoS, 2 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 34.
60. BGD, 2 August 1958, BGA.
61. Comay to Israeli embassies, 3 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 41.
62. BGD, 10 August 1958, BGA.
63. MFA to Israeli embassy in Washington, 4 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 45.
64. The Foreign Minister’s Political Secretary Mordechai Gazit regarded the letter as outlining ‘an important shift in US attitude to the issues troubling us’. Gazit to Meir, 5 August 1958, ISA/RG 130.2/4308/23. Eban opined that Dulles’s letter was of ‘far-reaching significance’, opening a ‘new era’ in relations between the two countries. Not only did it fully correspond with Israel’s analysis of the situation, it also contained ‘a promise to assist us in strengthening our relations’ with the periphery states, and an unprecedented ‘admission that Israel must sustain a military force capable of deterring any regional aggression’. Moreover, it was the first time an official American document referred to Israel ‘not as a liability to be borne out of pity and without choice, but rather as a spiritual, technical and practical asset to the free world’. Eban to Ben-Gurion, 3 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 43; Herzog to Eytan, 21 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3085/13. Herzog assessed Dulles’s letter as an ‘invaluable document, perhaps the most important we have ever received from the current Administration’. Herzog to Eytan, 21 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3085/13.
65. Eban to MFA, 31 July 1958, in DFPI, 60, n.l.
66. BGD, 3 August 1958, BGA; MFA to Israeli embassy in Washington, 4 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 45.
67. Memcon: Israeli Decision to Request US to Cease Overflights of Israel, 3 August 1958, in FRUS 1955–1957, vol. 13, Document 35; Eban to Ben-Gurion, 3 August 1958, in DFPI, Documents 42 and 43.
68. The stamp on the original outgoing State Department telegram, found in USNA files, indicates that Dulles’s letter was cabled to the embassy in Tel Aviv, ‘for delivery personally to the Prime Minister as soon as possible’, on Friday evening, 1 August, at 11.27 pm (EDT). See Dulles to Lawson, 1 August 1958, USNA/RG59/Lot67D548/Box 160/Records of the Policy Planning Staff 1957–1961. By Lawson’s own admission, the telegram was indeed received by the embassy ‘on Saturday’, 2 August. See MFA to Israeli embassy in Washington, 4 August 1958, in DFPI, Documents 45.
69. MFA to Israeli embassy in Washington, 4 August 1958, in DFPI, Documents 45.
70. Rundall to FO, 4 August 1958, TNA/PRO/F0371/134347/VR1222/60.

71. BGD, 4 August 1958, BGA; Comay to Israeli embassies 4 August 1958, in DFPI, Documents 47.
72. Israel's reply to the Soviet note was ultimately delivered on 12 August. Comay to Israeli embassies 6 August 1958, in DFPI, 84 n. 1; Gazit to Meir, 11 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3085/13.
73. Eban to Ben-Gurion, 3 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 43.
74. Dulles to Ben-Gurion, 10 August 1958, in DFPI, Document 53.
75. Herzog to Avner, 21 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3088/6; Herzog to Eytan, 21 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3085/13.
76. Avner to Herzog, 12 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3088/6.
77. Gazit to Meir, 5 August 1958, ISA/RG130.2/4308/23; Herzog to Avner, 21 August 1958, ISA/RG130.23/3088/6.
78. Memcon, 27 July 1958, USNA/RG59/DoS Executive Secretariat, 1954–1964/The Secretary's and the Undersecretary's Memcons, 1953–1964, Lot64D199/Box 9/20–31 July 1958.
79. Dulles's first draft of the president's reply led State Department officials to comment that they 'felt strongly that the draft you dictated of a letter to Ben-Gurion went much further than is desirable by way of commitment'. The letter's final version, authorized by Eisenhower, went along with their cautious revisions. See Greene to Rountree and Greene to Dulles, 25 July 1958, DDEL\Dulles Papers\White House Memoranda Series\Box 7\Meetings with the President 1 July–31 December 1958 (10) Dulles to Eisenhower, 25 July 1958, DDEL\White House Office, Office of the Staff Secretary Records 1952–1961\International series\Box 8\Israel (1) July 1958–February 1960; Eisenhower to Ben-Gurion, 25 July 1958, ISA/RG130.2/4316/7.
80. Boster to DoS Executive Secretariat, 29 July 1958, DDEL\Dulles Papers\Special Assistants Chronological Series\Box 13\Greene-Boster chronological July 1958 (1).
81. Smith to Dulles, 'Ben-Gurion's Concept of an Informal Entente Among Israel, Ethiopia, Iran, Sudan and Turkey', 11 August 1958, USNA/RG59/Lot67D548/Box 160/Records of the Policy Planning Staff 1957–1961.
82. Ben-Gurion to Dulles, 5 August 1958, USNA/RG59/DoS Executive Secretariat, 1954–1964/The Secretary's and the Undersecretary's Memcons, 1953–1964, Lot64D199/Box 9/1–14 August 1958.
83. Smith to Dulles, 'Ben-Gurion's Concept of an Informal Entente Among Israel, Ethiopia, Iran, Sudan and Turkey', 11 August 1958, USNA/RG59/Lot67D548/Box 160/Records of the Policy Planning Staff 1957–1961; Rountree to Smith, 'Policy Planning Staffs Memo Concerning Project for Closer Relations between Israel, Ethiopia, Iran, Sudan and Turkey', 11 August 1958, USNA/RG59/Lot67D548/Box 160/Records of the Policy Planning Staff 1957–1961.
84. Rountree to Dulles, 16 August 1958, USNA/RG59/Lot67D548/Box 154/Records of the Policy Planning Staff 1957–1961/Near and Middle East 1958; Toussaint to Savage, 'Israeli Concept for Middle East Entente,' 19 August 1958, USNA/RG59/Lot67D548/Box 154/Records of the Policy Planning Staff 1957–1961/Near and Middle East 1958.
85. Ashton, Eisenhower, Macmillan and the Problem of Nasser, Ch. 13; Mufti, "The United States and Nasserist Pan-Arabism". To follow the gradual shift in Washington's attitude toward Nasser and the pan-Arab movement see FRUS 1958–1960, vol. 12, 111–288.
86. Memorandum of Conference with the President, 23 July 1958, DDEL\AWF\DDE Diary Series\Box 35\Staff Memos July 1958(1); Memcon: Dulles and Fanfani, The Middle East Situation, 29 July 1958, USNA/RG59/DoS Executive Secretariat, 1954–1964/The Secretary's and the Undersecretary's Memcons, 1953–1964, Lot 64D199/Box 9/20–31 July 1958; Eban to Ben-Gurion, 24 July 1958, in DFPI, Document 27.

87. Secretary's Staff Meeting Notes, 17 July 1958, USNA/RG59/Executive Secretariat, Minutes and Notes of the Secretary's Staff Meetings (lot 63D75)/Box 4/1 July–3 December 1958; Minutes of Cabinet Meeting, 18 July 1958, DDEL\AWF\DDE Diary Series\Box 35\Staff Memos July 1958(1).
88. Memcon: Dulles and Adenauer, 26 July 1958, USNA/RG59/DoS Executive Secretariat, 1954–1964/The Secretary's and the Undersecretary's Memcons, 1953–1964, Lot 64D199/Box 9/20–31 July 1958.

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