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Doing Oral History with the Israeli Elite and the Question of Methodology in International Relations Research

Eldad Ben Aharon

ABSTRACT

While there have been substantial methodological advances in the field of oral history since World War II, it remains an underutilized research method among historians of International Relations. Specifically, as this article will show, most historians of International Relations still choose principally to rely on archival research, while approaching oral history with great suspicion, finding it irrelevant to their work. Using Israel as a case study, I explore the ways in which the relationship between the country's intelligence and defense institutions and its foreign policy has created a barrier to the incorporation of oral history as a research method for gathering empirical evidence to support a historical understanding of policy decisions. I argue that there is a clear utility to accessing the memories of the Israeli diplomatic/intelligence elites because they shed new light on actors, events, themes, and processes that characterize Israel's foreign policy since 1948. Oral history, therefore, allows both for a more nuanced and broader interpretation of a history of International Relations and diplomacy. The insights gleaned from Israel's particular case study could be further applied to other International Relations research settings, and so I also discuss not only the ways in which the methodology can impact our understanding of International Relations, but also the complexities of undertaking interviews with those whose words, if not chosen correctly, could influence current global international affairs.

KEYWORDS

Elite oral history; clandestine diplomacy; methodology; Cold War; International Relations research; Israel's foreign policy; intelligence history

Introduction

Jerusalem, Israel, 10:55 a.m. on Tuesday 1 September 2015. With a mixture of excitement and apprehension, I climbed the stairs of an old building to its top floor to conduct an oral history interview with the former Israeli diplomat and politician Dan Meridor, who served in many high-ranking positions in consecutive Israeli governments throughout his career, such as Deputy Prime Minister (2009–2013) and Chairman of the Knesset's (Israeli Parliament) Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee (1999–2003). During the next hour and a half, this Israeli official—whose face I had only previously seen on television—shared with me his deep knowledge of and personal experiences with Israel's foreign policy and clandestine diplomacy. In one of his insightful quotes from our interview, Meridor provided information about foreign affairs not documented anywhere else in Israeli archival records. He recalled:

Given my close working relations with Prime Ministers Yitzhak Shamir [holding office from 1986 to 1992] and Ariel Sharon [holding office from 2001 to 2006], I have been sent to many secret diplomatic missions [. . .] the destination of these clandestine diplomacy assignments was mainly the United States, meeting with George Shultz and James Baker [who were former

Secretaries of State of the United States]. I have developed great working relations with both, but sometimes this has created a professional dilemma. Let me give you an example: during Shamir's administration, he sent me to the US for a secret meeting at the State Department. I arrived in Washington, DC with a cover story about a lecture I was supposed to deliver. During my meeting with Shultz he noted casually: "you know . . . tomorrow I'm meeting with the Israeli ambassador too." I immediately thought, "Oh dear, what am I going to do?" Obviously, the Israeli ambassador did not know I was there; alas, Shultz did not know about this either, as attested by his casual comment. Therefore, I have decided to break my promise to Shamir and went to the ambassador and informed him: "I am here, but no one could know about this, it's a secret!"¹

Meridor's gripping, anecdotal recounting of his involvement in Israel's clandestine diplomacy demonstrates the ways in which oral history can be a true asset when constructing a history of Israel's diplomacy. So why is it, then, that historians of International Relations (hereafter IR) do not use oral history as a core component of their research? What are the barriers to its use, if any? In what ways does oral history allow both a more nuanced and a broader history of IR and diplomacy? I argue that there is a clear utility to accessing the memories of the Israeli diplomatic/intelligence elites because they shed new light on actors, events, themes, and processes that characterize Israel's foreign policy since 1948. Looking more closely at the history of Israeli diplomacy sheds light not only on the role that oral history can and should play in such histories but also on the complexities and limitations of using such a methodology. The memories of Israeli diplomatic/intelligence elites inform a history that cannot be seen in censored primary sources that make up the bulk of IR history. In addition to discussing the reasons why historians of foreign policy have not used oral history as a primary source, I will also demonstrate oral history's utility for developing a clearer history of what actually happened according to the men and women who influenced the direction of foreign affairs, especially in Israel since 1948.

I structure what follows into two main parts. In the first part, I begin with a short history of Israeli foreign policy, clandestine diplomacy, and the limited role that oral history has played in informing that history; I also flesh out the uses of the term "clandestine diplomacy," as it is often an undocumented but core component to many diplomatic missions. I then survey the historiography of Israel's foreign policy, mapping the state of the field and discussing the minimalistic role oral history has played so far. I end this part analyzing why oral history remains an underutilized research method among scholars of IR, doing so within the context of the three situations in which researchers often find themselves when exploring Israeli diplomatic history. In the second part I discuss what oral history can do for Israeli IR history, using three selected examples from my interviews to discuss the ways in which they inform "behind the scenes" aspects of how multiple Israeli agencies competed for influence in the diplomatic arena; Israel's relations with the superpowers during the Cold War; and arms trading on a global scale (although Israel's arms deals have drawn much attention in public and academic debates, they have hitherto been difficult to study due to extreme governmental censorship).

Part I: Israeli IR History and Oral History

A Short History of Israeli Foreign Policy, Clandestine Diplomacy, and the Limited Role of Oral History

Israel was established in 1948, three years after the end of the Second World War and during the very early stages of the Cold War. While all issues of national security are

complex, many of Israel's current policies are fundamentally rooted in three major events of the 1950s and 1960s. First was the Cold War and how Israel positioned itself within the US and USSR's enmity and their regional arms race. At the beginning of the 1950s, Israel's foreign policy was neutral toward this East-West rivalry, but in the second half of that decade Israel chose to support the western bloc.² This decision to align itself with the US then drove the Soviets to train and arm Arab countries.

Second was the extermination of roughly six million Jews in the Holocaust, which heavily influenced and shaped Israel's perception of its place in the world and its relationships to other countries. Adopting the standpoint of "never again"—ensuring that no world power could ever annihilate those of the Jewish faith from the face of the Earth—played a major role in its domestic and foreign policies and it shaped Israel's Holocaust memory culture, especially in the 1960s with external threats to its sovereignty and the safety of the Jewish state.³ Located strategically in the Middle East, Israel had been (and subsequently continued to be) the focus of conflicts with both Arabs and Palestinians, leading to a succession of wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973.⁴ Israel's history, its narrative, became intertwined with that of the perception of a "country under blockade."⁵ Threats from Arab leaders to exterminate Israel, especially Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's president from 1956 to 1970, fueled Israeli anxieties and furthered their focus on and commitment to preventing a "second Holocaust."⁶ While a discussion of the wars themselves are beyond the scope of this article, in their wake Israel not only experienced a change to its borders but also embraced a recommitment to ensuring that Holocaust memories were a core narrative of Israeli politics and culture. This embrace of a Holocaust memory culture continued throughout the Cold War and well into the 2000s, as Israel experienced regular threats to its security, especially in the form of Palestinian and fundamentalist terrorism and the Iranian nuclear project.⁷ Thus, Israel viewed, and continues to view, its own political history through the lens of conflict and its attempts to preserve the Jewish people and their histories, which structured geopolitical aspects of its foreign policies.

And third in the development of Israel's foreign policy was the fact that much of the Israeli political leadership began their careers in the defense establishment before ascending the rungs of political and/or executive power.⁸ Given this, the dominance of rhetoric and actions around security and sovereignty in Israeli society, culture, politics, and, hence, its foreign policy is not at all surprising.⁹ For the most part, Israel's desire to protect itself has formed the core of its national security policies and has driven a reliance on clandestine diplomacy in much of its foreign affairs.

But what is clandestine diplomacy, and how does it differ from regular or public diplomacy? And how is it incorporated into Israel's foreign policy? As noted by some scholars, the substance of diplomacy usually lies within the purview of governmental agencies, such as in Israel's case with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter MFA) and staff who are professionally qualified to manage IR.¹⁰ These women and men interact with those from similar agencies in other countries or with non-governmental international actors in order to navigate the complexities of international politics, cultural differences, and the like.¹¹ Much of this orthodox diplomacy is transparent to the public and covered by the media daily. By contrast, clandestine diplomacy, as Richard Aldrich notes, is an "operation to influence the world by unseen means – the hidden hand."¹² Others, such as Len Scott, see clandestine diplomacy as "a neglected yet intriguing dimension [of

international negotiations] that also provides insights into the study of intelligence.”¹³ Clandestine diplomacy, “the hidden hand,” is part of the role that intelligence officials and their agencies play in modern diplomatic settings. The power balance between public diplomacy and clandestine diplomacy varies among countries and changes based on a country’s institutional traditions (which also change over time) its geographical and geopolitical regions, and its perception of the nature of threats to its national security. More importantly, clandestine diplomacy is a neglected and hidden dimension of diplomatic history and thus has only rarely been transparent to the public, the media, and to historians. Given that historians of IR are fully aware of clandestine diplomacy and, therefore, that the traditional archival sources they use to construct their historical accounts are incomplete, the question arises: why not conduct oral histories to broaden an understanding of what was actually happening in foreign relations by hearing from the women and men who conducted this work?

In his timely piece in this journal, Alistair Thomson identified four major periods in the history of people’s perceptions of oral history as a reliable primary source. The first was in the wake of the Second World War in which many historians rejected memory as a source of knowledge about the past because of an assumed unreliability of memory itself. Then, starting in the late 1970s, oral historians pushed back on this belief, arguing instead that the subjective nature of memory itself was, in fact, a strength that allowed historians to uncover hidden histories not documented in traditional primary sources.¹⁴ Following this period, the 1980s became a time in which historians more generally recognized the analytical potential of oral history, though, simultaneously, problematizing the subjectivity of oral history relationships by casting doubt on how this affected the interpretation and analysis of the interviews. And finally, with the advent of new digital technologies and the Internet, since the late 1980s historians and other researchers have come to see oral history as an interdisciplinary instrument to understand stories about the past and now recognize its promise and its utility in many other disciplines.¹⁵ And while this is true for many historians, it has not been so for historians of IR – among them Israeli IR historians – who are stuck at the postwar phase, believing that memory is too fallible to be considered reliable.¹⁶

A Critical Historiography of Israel’s Foreign Policy and Oral History: The State of the Field

Looking more closely at Israel, its archival sources, and its clandestine diplomacy provides a useful lens to understand and analyze the reluctance to use oral history among historians of IR. Since Israel has been a country in a semi-permanent militaristic posture, it has relied heavily on its intelligence agencies to ensure its safety. These security agencies often conduct their operations in the shadows with the state’s sanction, being granted relatively unquestioned freedom to conduct their covert actions in order to protect the country’s security; this has been the state of the field since Israel was established in 1948.¹⁷ The difficulty of building a coherent picture of the diplomatic engagements between Israeli diplomatic/intelligence institutions and other countries is in no small part due to the tendency for the archival records of these intelligence institutions to remain unconditionally classified and thus unavailable for consultation by researchers.¹⁸

By the 1970s few researchers had conducted scholarly work on Israel's foreign policy, with Michael Brecher's seminal book as a notable exception that proved a key to understanding the early years of Israel's diplomacy.¹⁹ In the decades that followed, Benjamin Neuberger's edited volumes surveying Israel's foreign policy since the state's formation became the core work of note in Israeli IR history.²⁰ Most of the authors in these volumes focused their articles on the debate that revolved largely around the question of Israel's national security from the 1950s to the 1980s.²¹ Although these collected works addressed Israel's wars (1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973), the relations between Israel's diplomacy and its national security more broadly, and the reduced status of the Israeli MFA, the contributors rarely employed Israeli Security Agency (hereafter ISA) records and mainly relied on newspapers and the published memoirs of high ranking Israeli officials, such as David Ben Gurion (first Israeli Prime Minister) and others. In so far as these works addressed the problem of archival research and diplomacy conducted in the shadows, they tended to take it as a given limitation to scholarly research. For example, Aharon Kleiman's account claimed there was no possible way to evaluate accurately the impact of Israel's secret diplomacy on the Jewish world, Israel, or any other state, in fact, because of the "special grace" of silent (clandestine) diplomacy that relied on special conventions and on unwritten rules.²² Kleiman offers no practical suggestions for how historians should approach these problems.²³ Exacerbating the problem, several of the contributors used their own previously published works as core supportive material.²⁴ To a certain degree, early Israeli IR history was based on limited archival resources used over and over again, which led to repetitive arguments with only slight changes to fit individual publications' aims and scopes. Furthermore, the literature on Israeli foreign policy also largely avoided questions of methodology. Many of the ongoing debates over Israel's secret diplomatic engagements tended to ignore the problematic reliance on archival records to uncover a diplomatic history steeped in clandestine meetings and unofficial interactions between and among various intelligence institutions.

In the early 2000s, the publication of the two-volume work, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the First Fifty Years*, which summarized the first five decades of Israeli diplomacy, signaled a slightly new direction in the history of Israeli IR.²⁵ This ambitious project consisted of 129 book chapters, spanning more than one thousand pages, and addressed approximately sixteen different thematic areas, such as Israel's diplomacy in its early years, Israel's diplomacy in the third world, Israel's wars, and the peace process. Many of the contributors were veteran Israeli diplomats, each of whom wrote based on her or his individual knowledge and professional experience. These accounts, however, as with the classified archival records, were still subject to rigorous Israeli state censorship because of the high profile of these diplomats; the censorship, therefore, largely sterilized the knowledge provided.

However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, a handful of historians of Israeli IR have employed oral history as additional empirical evidence supplementing the traditional MFA records all historians use. Yitzhak Mualem, Ofra Bengio, Avi Shlaim, and Avi Raz have conducted oral histories with Israel diplomats and some Defense Ministry officials and have used these interviews in their works. Unfortunately, they do not address why they did so (especially given the general culture of Israeli IR history), nor what impact these interviews had on their studies (especially compared to what their studies would have concluded without those interviews).²⁶ Other Israeli historians, such as Uri Bialer,

have based some of their recent empirical work significantly on diplomats' memories but not principally from oral history work (mostly memoirs and correspondence), as there was no actual interview process and no interpersonal encounter between the scholars and the narrators. Bialer, who some regard as the founder of the study of Israeli diplomatic history, noted in 2012 that while he believed in providing an analysis of Israeli IR history based principally on Israeli archival records, he fully recognized that these records had their limitations and that the histories he could write were not always as fruitful as they could be.²⁷ In that same year he published an article that focused on Gideon Hadary, a State Department intelligence officer who was later assigned to work behind the scenes for the Jewish Agency and the State of Israel. Interestingly, in that article Bialer explored the potential of memoirs, autobiographies, and oral history to further an understanding of Israeli IR history.²⁸

Between Israel and US: Oral History and Intelligence Studies during the Cold War

What are the barriers historians encounter when conducting IR research? A considerable proportion of the records diplomatic and intelligence institutions keep are classified, and so there are many critical aspects of diplomacy that are hidden and undiscoverable in the traditional historical record. As such, some historians do sometimes employ oral history as an additional empirical source to supplement the formal, official records that often constitute the main primary source of their work; they do so in order to offer a different perspective on or more nuanced insights into foreign policy from the bottom up that imbues a sense of humanity to rather dry, historical material.²⁹ Some broad-scale histories of foreign policy are fragmented because successive state censors have only partly declassified records on a specific theme, leaving certain aspects of or consecutive periods about the same topic classified. Primary sources related to Israel's foreign policy with respect to the United States during the Cold War, for example, are neither completely open nor completely closed to researchers, and so a fuller history of the Israel-United States relationship, at least from the Israeli perspective, may not be known entirely for at least a few more decades. Oral history, then, has the potential to be a methodological solution to cover this gray zone into research about Israeli diplomacy. Given the clear utility of the oral history methodology, then, why is it that, to date, few historians working on IR have used oral history in their research? This is, I argue, because of the nature of conducting interviews with men and women whose words have the potential to impact global politics.

While the absence of archival records about intelligence and other foreign affairs operations has affected the international history of the Cold War and its aftermath for a long time now, somewhat surprisingly – given an awareness of this problem – only a few scholars have written about the lack of oral history use in histories of IR and/or have started to include some oral history in their publications. Two decades ago, Jonathan Soffer raised the question, “Why are [oral histories] so little used in leading works of [American] diplomatic history?”³⁰ He identified two main reasons why historians in the field underutilized oral history in the history of the United States' IR: first, historians were suspect of the accuracy of narrators' accounts based only on their memories, which is not an unexpected insight considering Thompson's discussion of positivist historians in the late 1970s and their critiques of oral history. Secondly, Soffer believed that many historians

were skeptical of the interviewing skills of average historians, thus making the oral histories that had been conducted also unreliable as a primary source.³¹

Soffer found that oral histories were used more often in biographies and memoirs of American diplomats, especially those who engaged in clandestine diplomacy. As he points out, for example, the biography of former US Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger that Walter Isaacson wrote was based largely on 150 interviews Isaacson conducted with Kissinger himself.³² Soffer mused on why oral histories were easier to employ in projects similar to Isaacson's but were seldom used in more "mainstream" diplomatic histories. He argued that the reason might be that foreign policy historians are usually more focused on broad-based diplomatic history – the collective acts of policy negotiations among national security institutions – whereas biographers tend to focus more on the role an individual played in diplomatic history. And the best way to know what one person did is to ask that person about it.³³

Even more recently, though, three American and two Israeli IR historians started to explore the potentiality for oral history in their work. James Blight and Janet Lang, two American IR historians, have provided a valuable case study of how oral history could be a useful method to examine a disputed moment in the diplomatic history of the late Cold War – specifically the collapse of the American-Soviet *détente* in the Carter-Brezhnev years – using what they call "critical oral history" or the "credible additions or corrections to the historical record."³⁴ In other words, using critical oral history with US diplomats provided Blight and Lang insights into what was involved in diplomatic decision-making that complemented what was already documented in the archival records. As a bottom-up approach, oral history, from their perspective, imbues a sense of humanity to rather dry historical material. For them, oral history can provide rich texture and insights on top of what can be learned from archival materials. Andrew Hammond, a Scottish IR historian, has also made an important contribution to evaluating the role that oral history can play in IR history. He used it as a methodology to explore the US Central Intelligence Agency's (hereafter CIA) role in US foreign policy, *vis-à-vis* negotiating the methodological and epistemological perils and biases of both intelligence history and oral history. Based on his research, Hammond argued that although the CIA and US Senate have launched oral history projects to enhance their understanding of such IR engagements, the projects themselves are too narrow as they explore only "top down" questions, that is, that they are limited to decision-making processes to legitimate the role each institution played. Hammond, however, further proposes that the contribution of oral history to IR history, theory, and methodology lie in allowing us to explore a broader range of research questions based on identity, culture, meaning, and narrative.³⁵ Although still an unfinished debate in the United States IR community, Soffer, Blight and Lang, and Hammond together offer a grounded argument for the inclusion of oral histories in US foreign policy history.

Clila Magen and Eytan Gilboa's work on the impact and merit of the oral histories of Israeli intelligence service officers can be found in their 2014 article, "Communicating from Within the Shadows: The Israel Security Agency and the Media." They use oral history to investigate the interrelationships between the ISA and the local media. As they note, "The interviews yielded highly valuable information found in no other source. A discourse that usually remains behind the scenes within the intelligence community was brought to fore."³⁶ Their article demonstrates the merit of oral histories used as

a standalone method in the absence of other viable sources, especially for those who want a deeper understanding of the origins of policies and their changes over time.³⁷

To build upon what Soffer, Blight and Lang, Hammond, and Magen and Gilboa have offered so far with their critique of the usefulness of oral history within IR history, what follows are three additional examples from my own work that demonstrate the ways in which oral history is a critical method for understanding IR and foreign affairs, as well as the complexity of using the methodology within a culture that needs and embraces secrecy to further local, national, and international negotiations and relationships.

Part II: Case Studies

Doing Oral History with the Israeli Elite: Fieldwork in Highly Politicized Research Settings in Israel

While those who read this journal are already quite familiar with the utility of oral history as a methodology, using it as a tool to uncover the purposefully undocumented (or censored) past is critical to a better understanding of the history of IR. During the course of my research into the history of Israel's public and clandestine diplomacy, I interviewed numerous diplomats, Mossad officers, and others involved in public and clandestine IR work to learn more about that undocumented or censored history. This oral history work, though not without ethical and moral considerations, allowed me to help interviewees overcome the excessive caution and self-censorship some narrators felt and applied in their memoirs, autobiographies, and other published writings. Through a process of negotiation with the narrators, we worked together to explore the nature of the somewhat self-imposed restrictions on what they could and could not say. Even though my narrators all knew what the state allowed and disallowed them to say, oral history permitted us to take a few steps closer to revealing the unwritten history of Israeli diplomacy. Quite frankly, if my narrators had been asked to write answers to the same questions I asked during the course of the interview, most would have applied quite rigorous self-censorship, inhibiting our ability to uncover useful but heretofore unknown material.

Oral histories were, for me, central to providing a historical account that encompasses the otherwise hidden history of Israel's covert diplomacy and intelligence agencies that, I believe, other historians of IR should undertake. The oral histories in the case studies that follow show how Israeli diplomatic and intelligence agencies have had to compete over the years in order to secure and maintain their own domestic political legitimacy but also the roles that diplomats and such agencies played in garnering international influence critical for the nation's safety. Exploring my work in this way has also provided insights into a wide range of other themes related to power and decision-making in Israel, though these topics will not be discussed in this article. For example, safeguarding the well-being of Jewish communities in Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East by the Mossad, the complex relations between Israel and American Jews, the 1979 peace accord with Egypt, manifestations of Holocaust trauma within Israeli diplomacy, the 1979 Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Iran, and Israeli-Turkish relations, just to mention a few. My case studies show explicitly a wide range of uses of oral history methodology in a highly politicized research setting, like the history of IR, and how, even when archival records

cannot be consulted, historical issues can still be studied effectively by relying only on critical oral histories.

While oral history has become increasingly prominent in many academic disciplines in recent decades, it too has its limits.³⁸ In recent contributions to the field, Erin Jessee, Kijl Anderson, and others have outlined various concerns about relying on oral histories as a main source in historical research. Jessee and Anderson, for example, in their research on genocide perpetrators, highlight how oral histories must be read and analyzed carefully in light of other empirical sources to avoid the bias and the subjectivity of the narrator.³⁹ In my work I read and analyze my narrators' accounts within the framework of existing, albeit at times limited, historiographical debates on Israel's clandestine diplomacy, as well as through the lens of prosopography – collective biography – by tracking overlap with other narrators' points of view. Doing so allows me to take a reflexive look at what my narrators said without reifying it.

Before moving into specific case studies, there are just a few other important items to note about my narrators and my methodology. Though the nature of the rigorous censorship is now a matter of academic and political debate within Israel itself, I must emphasize that my narrators were not always able to speak freely about specific topics or reflect on certain questions, even though they had been retired from office for a number of years; leaving the Israeli diplomatic community did not grant them special permission to discuss matters of national security that had long since passed.⁴⁰ Knowing this, while narrators agreed to speak with me for my research project, several of them were, at times, somewhat suspicious about the goals of the interview we were conducting together – such as a greater understanding of highly politicized topics like Israel's foreign policy regarding the contested memories of the Armenian genocide. And diplomats who were still in active service at the time of the interview had even greater limitations.⁴¹

I usually conducted my interviews in narrators' home office spaces, where they generally felt most comfortable speaking; most of my interviews lasted between one and two hours total. All of my narrators were aware of my status as a doctoral student at a university abroad pursuing research for my thesis, and, for some unexplained reason related to the Israeli culture (I was born and raised in Israel), most of the Israelis I interviewed tended to respect the limited time doctoral students who studied abroad had to undertake their study. Returning to Israel for my field research served as an advantage in terms of accommodating when, where, and for how long we could conduct an interview. However, I do not want to give the impression that all potential narrators responded positively to my requests for an interview, nor that narrators who agreed to be interviewed allowed me to follow a traditional, structured interview processes. In some instances, I received curt answers from diplomats who were not keen to participate: "I do not meet with doctoral students" or "I am not familiar with the period you are working on" were the most frequent responses. Some of the diplomats were ambivalent about their interviews and required a bit of nudging on my part to get them to sit down with me, which is also an unexplainable part of Israeli culture, namely an unwillingness to commit to a schedule: "This is my phone number, call me when you will arrive, and we can find the time. I cannot say right now," was a very frequent response from many of the diplomats. Although an outsider might interpret this as a way of saying, "thanks, but no thanks," in an Israeli cultural context this was indicating that they were interested in

principle in the meeting but might need more time to digest my request or before making any specific commitments.

One last note about the case studies that follow. To make my prose as concise as possible, I paraphrased some of what my narrators said in order to allow more space for discussion and analysis. In some instances this can give the impression that my narrators were completely detached from the decision-making processes and that IR was simply a top-down process; this, though, was certainly not the case. My narrators complemented the extant Israeli IR literature, injecting a sense of humanity into historical scholarship, exposing, in part, the diplomat's emotions, beliefs, and feelings about specific aspects of diplomatic history.⁴² And they also demonstrated that decision-making was a multi-sided process that required negotiations among a number of interested parties. My narrators and their interviews highlight that diplomacy and IR depend on personal relationships and eye-to-eye contact, and, therefore, archival records are not sufficient to draw out and explain IR history on their own.

The Hidden Hand? Competition for Diplomatic Influence Between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Other Israeli Agencies

While one might assume that Israel's MFA was the principle state entity responsible for engaging in diplomacy with foreign nations, much like the State Department in the United States, in actuality Israel had a number of agencies competing with each other, often acting independently instead of collaborating to achieve the state's aims. The history of these contests among the agencies, however, is buried within censored material, thereby hindering a true historical understanding of Israeli diplomacy: the interconnections, professional tensions, and division of responsibilities between Israel's MFA and other Israeli agencies.

Aharon Kleiman has argued that since Israel's establishment in 1948 there has been a basic asymmetry of authority between the Israeli MFA and the Israeli Ministry of Defense (hereafter IMD) one of the other agencies engaging in diplomatic relations. Kleiman proposed that this asymmetry of authority was easy to justify at the time due to Israel's national security threats: Israel's wars with the Arab World, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and more recently the threat of regional non-state actors such as Hezbollah. This resulted in almost unquestioned support from the Israeli public (at least in Israel's first three decades) who were mobilized into a citizen army with an unparalleled budget, resources allocated for meeting defense objectives, and with former military elite – such as Moshe Dayan, Ariel Sharon, and Yitzhak Rabin – serving in top government (civilian, not military) positions.⁴³ In further research Kleiman identified a clear militarization and politicization of the MFA: very few foreign ministers came with significant diplomatic experience, most having mainly military experience (with Moshe Arens, Abba Eban, and Moshe Sharett being notable exceptions), and many of the ministers were either confidantes of the Prime Minister or achieved their positions as trade-offs with coalition partners.⁴⁴ That said, in 1993 a “new Middle East” seemed to be emerging: the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, under which the Oslo accord was signed, and a new post-Cold War global order gave a positive momentum to liberalism. Writing his account in 1994, Kleiman might have hoped these processes could, in fact, turn Israel's diplomacy into one less dependent upon national security concerns, which would open a new path to study the archives of Israeli diplomacy.⁴⁵ This did not happen.

More recently, an independent policy institute, Mitvim — The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, has been trying to provoke a public and academic discussion regarding the historical and topical problem of the MFA's role in the diplomatic landscape. It has launched a series of conferences and academic publications to discuss, among other things, the “normalization” of the Israeli MFA⁴⁶ and to promote greater transparency in Israeli statecraft.⁴⁷ Specifically, Mitvim is interested in understanding the negative outcomes of having untrained diplomats representing Israel's national security interests, but mainly to foster, in cooperation with the Abba Eban Institute of International Diplomacy at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, a long-term plan that will make the necessary reforms in the MFA in order to take it into the twenty-first century.⁴⁸

Given this, most historians of Israeli IR, like Kleiman, have limited their research to traditional, censored sources (and continue to do so) and so have drawn relatively narrow conclusions about Israeli IR that, for the most part, do not precisely match what happened according to those who were responsible for diplomacy and their understanding of the covert competition within the MFA and between the MFA and other state agencies. And this is where oral history can transform our understanding of the actual history of Israeli IR, casting new light on the role of Israeli diplomats and their normal and clandestine diplomacy. Instead of simply describing the problems of Israeli IR history from the outside and hoping for a change like Kleiman did in 1994, deploying oral history helps fill the gap in our understanding of Israeli foreign affairs.

Take for example what Itamar Rabinovich, who served as Israel's ambassador to the United States (1993–1996), shared with me in his oral interview:

The Israeli case is not unique and that in many other modern nations there is a tension between the chief executive and the foreign office. In the US for example, it is the White House, the National Security Council, and the State Department which are in constant tension. In the United States also, however, Condoleezza Rice and Henry Kissinger were once Secretary of State and later National Security Advisor, and the power shifts from one office to another office with that person. In Israel, we have an awkward situation wherein the Foreign Minister is in many instances a coalition partner, but he is not a member of the ruling party; therefore, he can be an actual political rival of the Prime Minister. Netanyahu and Lieberman are one of the best examples of this tension. Also, Golda Meir and Abba Eban could definitely fit here. We can examine each Israeli administration one by one and see this pattern. Two subjects will always be in the hands of the Israeli Prime Minister and will almost automatically be removed from the MFA agenda: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli-American relations.⁴⁹

Reoven Merhav, who served for thirty years in the Mossad, Shabak, and the MFA (roughly ten years in each in that order) further elaborates on what Rabinovich said about professional tensions among the various official and unofficial diplomatic organizations. He notes that:

There are many individuals, like me, who have moved between the Mossad, Shabak and the MFA and vice versa. It is leading me to think that there is no difference between the work of a professional diplomat in MFA or elsewhere [other intelligence institutions]. The diplomatic engagements are based on establishing trust, and thus individuals who have moved from the Mossad to the MFA can use their useful personal connections in their diplomatic work. I will share a short example: when I served in Kenya as a diplomat, I had an open door to meet the president, just because of my previous professional experience in the Mossad. While other ambassadors have to wait a year to meet him, I could do it within a few days.⁵⁰

Yitzhak Lior, meanwhile, the general director of the MFA Middle East Department (1983–1987) and Israel’s ambassador in Japan (2000–2004) argues that “the dominance of the intelligence and defense agencies, such as the Mossad, the Shabak etc. is mainly driven by the high level of influence they have on domestic decision making, while the MFA has no input whatsoever on those discussions.”⁵¹

Pini Avivi, Director of the Middle Eastern department in the MFA (1989–1991) and Israel’s ambassador to Turkey (2003–2007), having served only as a diplomat during his career, gives a different perspective:

Although Israel’s intelligence services have done a lot to promote Israel’s clandestine diplomacy, it is the diplomacy conducted by the MFA diplomats that is most significant. The IDF representatives in the embassy could only meet with officers up to a parallel rank in the local army, whereas Israeli diplomats can go much higher than that. Israel cannot expect to maintain serious diplomatic engagements by chatting with the other party every few months [Avivi is referring to the intelligence services here]. When a diplomat walks into the room from the front door he can achieve much more than the others who are entering from the window.⁵²

Carmi Gillon, who served in various positions in the Israeli diplomatic landscape, such as the Director of Shabak (1995–1996) and later as Israel’s ambassador to Denmark (2001–2003) gives us another view as to why the diplomacy conducted beyond the boundaries of MFA was essential to many Israeli achievements:

When I was the key negotiator with Jordan at the time of the peace process [1993–1994], I used to fly with the director of the Mossad in a helicopter to meet King Hussein in Oman, and no one in the MFA knew about this. This meant that the MFA felt neglected. All the intelligence services in the world, such as MI6 or the CIA, have an office whose sole objective is to conduct silent diplomacy. The Mossad’s offices abroad are always in the Embassy buildings, they are the MFA’s guest. That said, they do not need to give any updates to the ambassador about what they are doing while the MFA takes care of all their needs.⁵³

Alon Liel, who served in numerous positions within the Israeli MFA, such as Israel’s Chargé d’affaires in Turkey (1981–1983), Israeli ambassador in South Africa (1992–1994), and MFA director-general (2000), recalls:

Although the Mossad and MFA were accommodated in the same venue, there were absolutely no professional connections. They have always been on a separate floor in our building. We were friends with some of them, eating and drinking together, but we never could speak about our work. “You could not get a ‘folder’ from the Mossad.” It is what it is at all the Israeli embassies. Having said that, when the Mossad have a problem they come to you and vice versa. For example, when I served in South Africa, Nelson Mandela asked if we could help him with a non-military armoured vehicle. Do I know how to do that? Of course not. You go to the Mossad.⁵⁴

The context of Liel’s account is very important if we are to understand his example fully. While serving as Israel’s Chargé d’affaires in Turkey, he had to work in almost total darkness as part of a covert operation by the Mossad to help Iranian Jews who had fled into Turkey after the Iranian fundamentalist revolution (1979).⁵⁵ Although this operation was covert, Liel had to conduct his general daily diplomatic missions without discussing information about the operation in the course of his daily meetings with Turkish diplomats. Liel provides a more concrete example of the total compartmentalization between the Mossad and the MFA with respect to the working conditions overseas.

The interrelationships and contestations among the various Israeli government entities responsible for official and unofficial diplomacy, which are currently partly invisible in the written record, are quite clear from the sources I interviewed for my doctoral work. But these few accounts have only scratched the surface of all that has been going on behind the scenes in Israeli IR. It is a history shrouded in secrecy in Israeli archives, but one that does not need to be hidden. As noted, there are substantial efforts from some historians and institutes (like the Mitvim) to bring this history to the forefront in order to understand better and improve Israeli diplomacy. Knowing the imbalance among the Israeli MFA and other intelligence agencies can answer questions about whether this competition for diplomatic influence has been (and would continue to be) unhealthy for the Israeli professional diplomatic services or if it has been helpful to certain diplomatic missions in various parts of the world. However, the only way to know this history, at least at this point in time, is to ask those who lived it to talk about it.

Israel's Relations with the Superpowers during the Cold War

Although Israeli literature on Israel's global foreign policy toward the East and West during the Cold War is growing rapidly – compared to scholarship in and about the US, for example, where more archival records are available to scholars to study a wide range of Cold War-related topics – Israel is lagging behind because censorship still prevails in Israeli archives.⁵⁶ The works of Uri Bialer, Gadi Heimann, Yacov Bar Siman Tov, Avner Cohen, Gabriel Sheffer, Abraham Ben Zvi, Yaacov Ro'I, Aharon Kleiman, and Zach Levey have identified some of the core issues in relation to Israel's national security threats within the bipolar world order, but their analyses are based on limited sources.⁵⁷ This is an important topic that cannot be understood fully using American primary sources in isolation from Israeli primary sources. Both American *and* Israeli perspectives are needed to comprehend Israel's national security concerns about and resolutions to the country's wars with the Arab World, the peace process with Egypt, the taboo and pretense surrounding Israel's nuclear project, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (to mention only a few). Though Uri Bialer's important, pioneering work identifies the core structural and domestic political issues that shaped Israel's Cold War perspective in the 1950s, his 1990 book argues simply that Israel, for the most part, was trying to craft a “non-identification” policy – not clearly siding with any nation – toward the superpowers.⁵⁸ However, Bialer's argument regarding non-identification invites us to think further about how the domestic political structure of Israel, the ideological rivalry between communist parties, the dominance of the labor party, and the role of the Israeli right drove that policy. Bialer conducted most of his field research for the book in the late 1980s, at a time when at least some of the Israeli elite – including members of parliament and intelligence officials who were responsible for shaping Israeli Cold War policies – were still alive and could have been interviewed. Had he interviewed some of these important men and women, these veterans could have shed a new light on this history, covering the gray zones that his limited, traditional archival sources failed to cover.

In my interview, for example, with Dan Meridor, Deputy Prime Minister (2009–2013), Meridor notes that:

In 1948, after the Second World War, parts of the Israel political landscape sought to view the world's future in socialism, i.e. that the Soviet Union won the war. Some Israeli politicians from that generation, from the *Mapam* party [in Hebrew *Mifleget Ha-Poalim Ha-Meuheadet*], for example, argued that there is one homeland, Israel, and there is the mother homeland, the Soviet Union. This was not just an ideological dispute of communism versus capitalism but a case of identifying and joining a winning force, i.e. to be on the “winning side of history.” We need to remember that the Jewish world identified from close up the outcomes of the War (the liberation of the death camps by the Soviet army) and that was Stalin's nation. Most importantly, although the Soviets suffered the largest casualties in the war – 22 million soldiers – Stalin was the key figure in the defeat of Hitler.⁵⁹

Likewise, Efrim Halevy, who was the ninth Director of Mossad (1998–2002) and Israel's ambassador to the EU (1996–1998), recalled:

On May 1951, during Israel's third Independence Day, the Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion was not attending the celebrations. He was visiting the US. It was the only time when the Prime Minister was not attending Israel's Independence Day ceremonies, and I remind you it is only the third Independence Day. Where was he? He was in Washington, DC. We need to remember that Ben Gurion was also Israel Defense Minister. Hence, he travelled to meet Eisenhower and the director of the CIA. Why? He sought to make an explicit note: we [Israel] are part of the free world. Later, after the 1967 War, Soviet relations with Israel completely deteriorated, to the point of a complete breakdown. It was the Soviets' biggest mistake because great powers should never break their relations with a nation-state. This includes us [Israel]; it was the Soviets' strategic oversight. After acknowledging their mistake, therefore, they [the Soviets] had to turn to informal channels. In 1972, five years after they had broken off their relations with Israel, they tried to get in touch with us mainly because we had become a significant power in the Middle East. They did that with two new directions: firstly, Yevgeny Primakov [a Soviet Jew, who was a Middle Eastern expert, Director of the KGB and Russian foreign minister and Prime Minister between 1996-1998]. Primakov was sent as a secret agent to Israel, and he and I met on a regular basis. Secondly, the Soviets established and funded the “Pugwash” nuclear International Council. The Soviets contacted Shalheveth Freier and asked him to attend Pugwash conferences and to be appointed to be one of the council directors.⁶⁰

Had Bialer or any other historian interviewed Halevy, his account would have cast new light upon Israel's clandestine diplomatic engagements with the Soviets after the 1967 War, which, clearly, resulted in a complete diplomatic breakdown. While this history may be in one of Israel's diplomatic archives, its censorship makes knowing this history almost impossible without interviewing these historical actors. As Halevy notes in his gripping account, the Pugwash organization, and Halevy's frequent meetings with Primakov during the 1970s, reveal how powerful sub-state actors and transnational agencies had been – even during the pre-globalization period of the Cold War – and emphasize the importance of Israel's intelligence service as diplomatic actors.

In my oral history with Reoven Merhav, he added depth to our understanding of how the superpowers perceived Israel's role in the Cold War and in the Middle East:

Our relations with the superpowers during the Cold War were not only subject to our wishes. The Soviets' straightforward decision was to support the Arabs and to assume that they were the future of the Middle East. The Soviets also sought to turn the Middle East into the “laboratory” of the Cold War. Specifically, from a technological perspective, the Western bloc

was the favourite, especially, because of Israel's quality manpower; the special blend of Israel's skillful manpower with Western arms and technology made the difference. In many ways, the Arab nations and Israel become the "gardening tools" of the Cold War superpowers.⁶¹

Hence, as Merhav hints, Israel's relations with the superpowers during the Cold War were dictated by the "two dogs chewing on a bone" image of Cold War Sovietism versus Americanism. The United States chose Israel and the Soviets chose the Arabs, and so the Middle East was, essentially, a Cold War laboratory.⁶²

These three accounts also speak to possible future directions for study of Israel's relations with the superpowers, specifically during the Cold War era. Somewhat surprising (at least to me), most of my narrators spent time during our interviews focused on expanding their accounts of Israel's relationship with the Soviet bloc, rather than with the United States, Israel's historical ally. Clearly, there is an as yet unexplored ground with respect to Israel's relations with the communist bloc, specifically with the Soviets from the late 1960s through the 1970s and 1980s. This is certainly an important period and one made more interesting in Israel's case by the battle to protect and save the Soviet Jews and the "prisoners of Zion."⁶³ Further interviews in this direction could explore the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War, how Israel's clandestine diplomacy with the Soviets in the postwar period influenced the immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel, and the ways in which Americans responded to these secret relations with the Soviets.

The History of Arms Trading in Israel's Clandestine Diplomacy

Arms trading – the purchase and sale of military weapons – is yet another disputed topic in Israel's foreign policy, a theme of study for which most source work remains in the shadows of sealed archives. Scholars have published various book chapters and articles on this topic over the years, including Yitzhak Muallem, Aharon Kleiman, and Naomi Chazan and Daphna Sharfman. Kleiman, for example, surveyed the history of Israel's arms trading under the label of secret diplomacy.⁶⁴ Others, such as Chazan and Sharfman, studied Israel's arms trading policy by critiquing its impact on human rights and morality.⁶⁵ These works, however, are based mainly on secondary sources and newspaper articles, a result of stringent censorship regulations in relevant IR archives mentioned throughout this article. Not surprisingly, the two-volume work *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the First Fifty Years* (2002), written by Israeli diplomats, almost completely omits any references to or critical engagement with this sensitive topic and focuses selectively on Israel's inclusions in international treaties such as the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (hereafter NNPT).⁶⁶

More recently, the topic has become the center of attention within the Israeli public, the media, and parliament (the Knesset) mainly due to an Israeli Supreme Court decision to forbid access to archival records of the MFA and IMD from the late 1980s and the 1990s. These records would potentially shed light upon Israel's arms trades, including alleged arms deals with genocidal regimes in the former Yugoslavia (the Srebrenica genocide) and the genocide in Rwanda in 1994.⁶⁷

I decided to ask four diplomats/intelligence officials to reflect on this sensitive issue in order to provide some insight into Israel's policy on the purchase and sale of military weapons from and to foreign nations. In his oral history interview, Pini Avivi, Director of

the Middle Eastern department in the MFA (1989–1991) and Israel’s ambassador to Turkey (2003–2007), responded:

One would be surprised but there are some moral engagements embedded in our arms trading. Israel’s MFA puts a lot of effort into not selling offensive arms, or, to put this differently, not to sell a “tie breaking” weapon. Our MFA has been making sure not to sell certain arms in a specific area in Asia so that these regimes will not use them against ethnic minorities. I should emphasize that this understanding is also applied to the Armenian-Azerbaijan dispute.⁶⁸

While Avivi’s statement addresses the MFA’s contemporary approach to arms trades, we know that much of Israel’s history on this disputed topic has not been monitored, and it is far from clear whether this modern approach not to sell “tie breaking” weapons has always been applied. Nachik Navoth, former deputy director of the Mossad between 1982–1984, recalls:

We always had an instant need to produce arms, because in its early years, no one wanted to sell any to our country. Later, arms trading helped Israel very much to gain access to countries who we did not conduct any diplomatic relations with us. Clearly, we did not check their “tsitsiyot;” however, we did check the national security interests and our diplomatic interests in that region.⁶⁹

Yossi Alpher, former Mossad official (1971–1988), notes:

No doubt that if one goes back in time to a few years ago, the Israeli authorities needed to make some adjustments to our regulations and licenses to practice in this field. The main reason is that in the previous 20-30 years many individuals who retired from service in the Israeli intelligence and defense community, started to work in this field using their knowledge and experience. Some of these individuals often established private companies and sold their knowledge and expertise. We have made some adjustments to this field, though it is still not perfect. We [Israel] do our best not to sell any arms to conflict zones, specifically in Africa; we also do our best efforts not to sell offensive arms, only defensive.⁷⁰

Yehoyada Haim, Israel’s ambassador to China (1995–2000) and to India (2002–2007), and during the 1980s the head of the MFA’s Middle East department, argues in an oral interview:

This issue has been very problematic but at the same time, arms trading gives tens of thousands of Israelis jobs here. Furthermore, if we don’t trade then the Swedes trade, and the same goes with the Americans. Involving morality here may be necessary, but it is a condition that the whole world will embrace morality not only us, otherwise, we will also become the only righteous.⁷¹

As becomes clear from my interviews, this historiographical debate shows that diplomats and other intelligence officials believed that arms deals could be used as a means to protect Jewish communities in distress. Although the lack of archival records limits historians’ ability to study this important issue generally, the work of Yitzhak Mualem, which relies partly on oral histories, attests to how Israel sought to use arms deals to influence the problematic regimes in Ethiopia, Iran, and Argentina in order to protect the local Jewish communities in those countries.⁷² Mualem’s work showcases the great potential of oral history, giving voice to a number of prominent members of the Israeli security establishment, such as former Foreign Minister Moshe Arens, Defense Minister David Ivry (who was former Israeli ambassador in Washington, DC) and others. Mualem’s interviews help him to verify the premise that although Israel wished to protect Jewish communities in

distress, conducting arms trades with those countries was not the primary goal of Israel's intelligence forces. Nevertheless, as Mualem's oral interviews demonstrate, the deeper the problems a Jewish community outside of Israel experienced, the greater the degree of Israel's arms-related economic aid to those countries.

To add to this discussion of arms trades and Ethiopia from my own work, Reoven Merhav, who played a part in that operation, recalls in his own words:

I had good access to Yitzhak Shamir [the Prime Minister at the time] and Moshe Arens [the Defence Minister]. I argued that the arms would be used to kill women and children, and we would upset the Americans; Mengistu's regime was close to its end anyway, and on top of that, we would not get any money for this trade, because Mengistu did not have any. The IMD saw this as an opportunity to increase Israel's financial growth. Therefore, arms were sold to both unfriendly and sympathetic regimes. Later, this thing became global, and the Arms Trade Treaty was signed and the Israeli executives also took more responsibility. All in all, the problem essentially begins when a state such as Israel manufactures arms for its own use, because nobody wants to conduct business with us.⁷³

Clearly, as I have argued throughout, oral history is the only current method that Israeli IR historians can use to uncover hidden truths sealed in Israeli archives. My interviews and others show that in the period after Israel's establishment, the country mainly bought arms and technology to defend itself and was heavily dependent on the willingness of Western nations – the Americans and the French – to sell their arms to Israel. As the years passed, Israel began to produce arms for its own use; while this production supplied work for the Israeli workforce, new economic, moral, and ethical challenges emerged. Continued oral history work with these and other diplomats could shed light on different periods of Israel's arms purchases and sales, especially in different geographical areas and with specific regimes.

Conclusion

Although interest in and the use of oral history has increased since the Second World War in many sub-disciplines of history, historians of IR, especially those in Israel, have been much slower to adopt the methodology. My fieldwork demonstrates that accessing and recording the memories of the Israeli diplomatic/intelligence elites casts new light on actors, events, themes, and processes that characterize Israel's foreign policy since 1948 – knowledge that is otherwise (probably) locked away in censored and/or sealed archives that no one will see for decades, if at all. Though most historians of IR still choose to rely on archival research, approaching oral history with great suspicion and finding it irrelevant to their work, there are a few in IR history who are starting to embrace the methodology.

Building on the work of Soffer, Blight, and Hammond which focuses on US foreign policy/intelligence history, this article adds another layer to debates and discussions about Israel's relationship to and with superpowers and other countries in the wake of Israel's formation. It also showcases the ways in which such work on Israeli IR history can be incorporated into a larger debate on elite oral history and IR research. Most of my narrators (including others not mentioned in this article) were part of the decision-making processes for key events in Israel's history, and their stories would not be known had a historian not asked them to answer some questions during an oral history

interview. If historians of IR choose to embrace oral history as a research method, it will help not just to bridge the gaps that the fragmented archival records of Israel's broad-scale histories and neglected themes in historiographical debates have created but also help to stimulate public awareness to contested topics such as arms trading. Using case studies drawn from my work with Israeli diplomats and intelligence officials, I have shown how oral histories allow both a more nuanced interpretation and a broader history of International Relations and diplomacy in Israel since 1948. And this, I hope, will show other IR historians in Israel and abroad that oral histories contribute greatly to, and may serve as the only source for, truly understanding the ways in which governments construct their foreign policies and engage with other nations.

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Notes

- 1 Author's interview with Dan Meridor, 1 September 2015, Jerusalem, Israel. I conducted all interviews in Hebrew and have translated them into English for this article. All recordings are in my possession and stored in my private archive.
- 2 Uri Bialer, *Between East and West: Israel's Foreign Policy Orientation 1948–1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 206–34; and more recently Howard A. Patten, *Israel and the Cold War: Diplomacy, Strategy and the Policy of the Periphery at the United Nations* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).
- 3 For example, Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Domino Press, 1991); and Idith Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 4 This has been an extensive historiographical debate. See, for example, among many others Mordechai Bar-On, "Small Wars, Big Wars: Security Debates during Israel's First Decade," *Israel Studies* 5, no. 2 (2000): 107–27; Efraim Inbar, "Israeli National Security, 1973–96," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 555, no.1 (1998): 62–81; and Amichai Cohen and Stuart Cohen, "The Dynamics of Israel's National Security Constitution since 1948," *Israel Studies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 180–88.
- 5 For further debate about the perception of a "country under blockade" among many others see for example: Uri Ben-Eliezer, "A Nation-in-Arms: State, Nation, and Militarism in Israel's First Years," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 2 (1995): 264–85; and Baruch Kimmerling, "Patterns of Militarism in Israel," *European Journal of Sociology* 34, no.2 (1993): 196–223.
- 6 Shlomo Aronson, "Israel's Security and the Holocaust: Lessons Learned, but Existential Fears Continue," *Israel Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009): 65–93; Zertal, *Israel's Holocaust*, 91–127; Segev, *The Seventh Million*.
- 7 For more on this see Charles David Freilich, "Israel's Counter-Terrorism Policy: How Effective?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 2 (2017): 359–76; Nadav Morag, "Measuring Success in Coping with Terrorism: The Israeli Case," *Studies in Conflict &*

- Terrorism* 28, no. 4 (2005): 307–20; and Gil Merom, “Israeli Perceptions of the Iranian Nuclear Threat,” *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 1 (2017): 87–118.
- 8 See for example: Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, “Israel’s ‘Security Network’ and Its Impact: An Exploration of a New Approach,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006): 235–61; and Uri Ben-Eliezer, “Do the Generals Rule Israel?” in *A Society in the Mirror*, ed. Hanna Herzog (Ramat: Tel-Aviv University, 2000 [Hebrew]), 235–368.
 - 9 For a good analysis of these components together see Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, “The Study of Civil–Military Relations in Israel: A New Perspective,” *Israel Studies* 12, no. 1 (2007): 1–27.
 - 10 Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thaku, “Introduction: The Challenges of 21st-Century Diplomacy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, eds. Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thaku (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.
 - 11 *Ibid.*
 - 12 Richard Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence* (London: John Murray, 2001), 5; and see also Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
 - 13 Len Scott, “Secret Intelligence, Covert Action and Clandestine Diplomacy,” *Intelligence & National Security* 19, no. 2 (2004): 322.
 - 14 Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2007), 49–70, especially 51–56.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 57–70.
 - 16 Though there are a few notable exceptions. See for example: Nancy Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa Race and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Elie Podeh, “Saudi Arabia and Israel: From Secret to Public Engagement, 1948–2018,” *The Middle East Journal* 72, no. 4 (2018): 563–586; Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Lorena De Vita, “Overlapping Rivalries: The Two Germanys, Israel and the Cold War,” *Cold War History* 17, no. 4 (2017): 351–66; Avner Cohen, “Nuclear Dimensions of the 1967 Middle East War: An Israeli Perspective,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 5–6 (2018): 359–75; Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); and Eldad Ben Aharon, “Superpower by Invitation: Late Cold War Diplomacy and Leveraging Armenian Terrorism as a Means to Rapprochement in Israeli-Turkish Relations (1980–1987),” *Cold War History* 19, no. 2 (2019): 275–93.
 - 17 Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations [*Ha-Mossad* in Hebrew] is responsible for collecting intelligence abroad, for more see: www.mossad.gov.il/eng/Pages/default.aspx (accessed October 7, 2019); Israeli General Security Service [*Ha-Shabak* or *Sherut Bitachon Klali* in Hebrew] is responsible for domestic intelligence; however, one of its important tasks is to secure Israeli embassies worldwide, along with Israeli ambassadors, see: www.shabak.gov.il/english/ (accessed October 7, 2019); Aman is a sub unit of the Israeli Defense Forces (hereafter IDF), which is responsible for collecting military intelligence, see: www.idf.il (accessed October 7, 2019); the National Security Council (NSC) was established in 1999 and its main duty is to coordinate the data collected by the different agencies. The NSC does not operate an official website. All these institutions operate directly under the Israeli Prime Minister.
 - 18 Historians have reflected on his problem to greater or lesser degrees internationally, especially in relation to the diplomatic and intelligence history of the Cold War and its aftermath. See for example Jonathan Soffer, “Oral History and the History of American Foreign Relations,” *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 607–16; Kenneth G. Robertson, “The Study of Intelligence in the United States,” in *Comparing Foreign Intelligence: The U.S., the USSR, the U.K. & the Third World*, ed. Godson Washington Roy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7–42; and John Ferris, “Coming in From the Cold War: The Historiography of

- American Intelligence, 1945–1990,” *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 1 (1995): 87–115 to mention only a few.
- 19 Michael Brecher undertook one of the earliest works in this field, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel: Setting, Images, Process* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).
 - 20 See for example, Benyamin Neuberger, ed. *Statecraft in the Dark: Israel's Practice of Quiet Diplomacy* (Jerusalem: Westview Press, 1988); and Benyamin Neuberger, ed. *War and Peacemaking: Selected Issues in Israel's Foreign Policy* (Ramat-Aviv: Open University, 1992).
 - 21 A more recent attempt to evaluate the substance of Israel's secret diplomacy was made in an edited volume, entitled *Israel's Clandestine Diplomacies*. Although this touches on Israel's “secret diplomacy” conducted in the shadows, for the most part, oral history is absent from the analysis of the contributors. Only one contributor to this volume (Jacob Eriksson) did use some oral histories with Israeli diplomats in his account. See the chapter by Jacob Eriksson, “Israeli Track II Diplomacy: The Beilin-Abu Mazen Understandings,” in *Israel's Clandestine Diplomacies*, eds. Clive Jones and Tore T. Petersen (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 210–27. It should be noted that at the time this article was written the new book by Uri Bialer, titled: *Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone* (forthcoming, Indiana University Press, 2020), was not published yet. Therefore, an analysis of parts of his book that involve episodes on Israel's clandestine diplomacies is not included in this section.
 - 22 See Aharon Klieman, “In Silent Pursuit of National Interest,” in *Statecraft in the Dark: Israel's Practice of Outie Diplomacy*, ed. Aharon Klieman (Jerusalem: Westview Press, 1988), 55–74.
 - 23 Only a handful of studies during this period used oral interviews, but they tended to be very short and lacked any methodological discussion about how they conducted the interviews and how they contributed to the authors' analyses. See for example the chapter by Efraim Inbar, which included two interviews, “Israel Strategic Thinking After 1973,” in *War and Peacemaking*; or the chapter by Yehuda Ben-Meir, “Decision making process on national security issues,” in *War and Peacemaking*.
 - 24 See, for example, among many others, the chapter by Klieman, “In Silent Pursuit of National Interest,” reprinted from the original contribution Aharon Klieman, “In Silent Pursuit of National Interest,” in *Statecraft in the Dark: Israel's Practice of Outie Diplomacy*, ed. Aharon Klieman (Jerusalem: Westview Press, 1988), 55–74.
 - 25 Moshe Yeger, Yosef Govrin, and Arye Oded, eds., *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the First Fifty Years* (Jerusalem: Keter Press, 2002 [Hebrew]).
 - 26 See for instance Yitzhak Mualem, “Israel's Foreign Policy: Military–Economic Aid and Assisting Jewish Communities in Distress – Can the Two Coexist?,” *Israel Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2012): 201–18; Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship*; and Avi Shlaim, “Interview with Abba Eban, 11 March 1976,” *Israel Studies* 8, no. 1 (2003): 153–77.
 - 27 Uri Bialer, “Archival Documents in the Basement in Historical Perspective – a Personal Note,” in *New Perspectives on the History of International Relations*, Gadi Heimann, ed. (Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute, 2012 [Hebrew]), 92–103.
 - 28 Uri Bialer, “Between Rehovot and Tehran – Gideon Hadary's Secret Diplomacy,” *Israel Studies* 17, no. 1 (2012): 1–23; Benyamin Neuberger, ed. *Diplomacy and Confrontation: Selected Issues in Israel's Foreign Relations, 1948–1978* (Ramat-Aviv, Tel Aviv: The Open University Publication, 1984 [Hebrew]); and Daphna Sharfman, ed. *A Light unto the Nations Israel's Foreign Policy and Human Rights* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1999 [Hebrew]) to mention a few.
 - 29 For this approach, see, for example, Anziska, *Preventing Palestine*; Bengio, *The Turkish-Israeli Relationship*; De Vita, “Overlapping Rivalries”; and Eldad Ben Aharon, “Between Ankara and Jerusalem: The Armenian Genocide as a Zero-Sum Game in Israel's Foreign Policy (1980's–2010's),” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 5 (2018): 459–76.
 - 30 Soffer, “Oral History,” 607.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, 607–09.
 - 32 Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
 - 33 Soffer, “Oral history,” 608–09.

- 34 James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, "FORUM: When Empathy Failed: Using Critical Oral History to Reassess the Collapse of U.S.-Soviet Détente in the Carter-Brezhnev Years," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 2 (2010): 34; for more regarding Blight's critical oral history project on the Cold War see Danny Postel, "Revisiting the Brink: The Architect of 'Critical Oral History' Sheds New Light on the Cold War," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 8 (2002): 1–16.
- 35 Andrew Hammond, "Through a Glass, Darkly: The CIA and Oral History," *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 100, no. 340 (2015): 313–14.
- 36 See Clila Magen and Eytan Gilboa, "Communicating from Within the Shadows: The Israel Security Agency and the Media," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence* 27, no. 3 (2014): 495.
- 37 See also the forthcoming book project of Elie Podeh on Israel's clandestine diplomacy in the Middle East since 1948, which is using an oral history methodology.
- 38 For an excellent analysis of the developments in the consideration of the limitations of oral history, such as the subjectivity of the narrators, their memory, and other related limitations, see Thomson, "Four Paradigms."
- 39 See Erin Jessee, "The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings," *Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 287–307; Kjell Anderson, "The Dehumanization Dynamic: A Criminology of Genocide" (Ph.D. diss., National University of Ireland, 2011), 36; and Kjell Anderson, *Perpetrating Genocide: A Criminological Account* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- 40 This absurdity has been critically addressed in several public and academic forums. From August 2017, classified historical records that had previously been stored in the ISA must now be sent back to the government ministries and Israel state institutions so that these offices will consider if the material should be declassified or not. Undoubtedly, this process has made the already heavily criticized process even worse. See for example the censor's official decision: www.archives.gov.il/wp-content/uploads/pdf [Hebrew], (accessed October 7, 2019).
- 41 All the narrators quoted in this research agreed to be interviewed and recorded for research purposes. The narrators signed a consent form confirming that the copyright of their accounts resides with me. The author conducted all the interviews in Hebrew and translated them into English.
- 42 For more reading on the history of emotions and oral history literature see, for example, in this journal the recent article by Katie Holmes, "Does It Matter If She Cried?: Recording Emotion and the Australian Generations Oral History Project," *Oral History Review* 44, no. 1 (2017): 56–76; and Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein and Peter Stearns," *History and Theory* 49, no. 2 (2010): 237–65.
- 43 Aharon Klieman, "New Directions in Israel's Foreign Policy," *Israel Affairs* 1, no.1 (1994): 100.
- 44 Klieman, "The Foreign Ministry."
- 45 Klieman, "New Directions," 100–1.
- 46 See the institution's detailed description, public and diplomatic engagements, and its publications at www.mitvim.org.il (accessed October 7, 2019).
- 47 For more on this see, for example, two of Nimrod Goren's, the Mitvim's director, articles: www.ynet.co.il/articles [מדיניות הרוץ ישראלית](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles) and Nimrod Goren, "Promoting Transparency in Israeli Foreign Policy" (January 2017), (accessed January 9, 2019). In the latter article, Goren problematizes the inefficacy, lack of transparency, and the decentralization of the powers of the Israeli MFA within the totality of Israeli statecraft.
- 48 See www.idc.ac.il/he/research/aei/pages/main.aspx (accessed October 23, 2019).
- 49 Author's Interview with Itamar Rabinovich, 3 February 2016, Tel Aviv, Israel.
- 50 Author's Interview with Reuven Merhav, 23 July 2017, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 51 Author's Interview with Yitzhak Lior, 26 June 2016, Ramat Gan, Israel.
- 52 Author's Interview with Pini Avivi, 25 July 2017, Mevaseret Zion, Israel.
- 53 Author's Interview with Carmi Gillon, 8 January 2016, Mevaseret Zion, Israel.
- 54 Author's Interview with Alon Liel, 3 September 2015, Mevaseret Zion, Israel.

- 55 See Eldad Ben Aharon, “The Geopolitics of Genocide in the Middle East and the Second Cold War: Israeli-Turkish-American Relations and the Contested Memories of the Armenian Genocide (1978–1988),” (PhD thesis, Holocaust Research Institute, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2019).
- 56 For more on the Wilson Center Cold War International History Project, which “supports the full and prompt release of historical materials by governments on all sides of the Cold War, and seeks to accelerate the process of integrating new sources, materials and perspectives from the former ‘Communist bloc’ with the historiography of the Cold War,” see www.wilsoncenter.org/program/cold-war-international-history-project (accessed October 7, 2019).
- 57 To mention only a few, see Bialer, *Between East and West*; Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, “The United States and Israel Since 1948: A ‘Special Relationship?’,” *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 2 (1998): 231–62; Yaacov Ro’I, “Israeli – Soviet Relations, 1941– 1953: Introductory Note,” and “The Deterioration of Relations: From Support to Severance,” *Journal of Israeli History* 22, no. 1 (2003): 21–36; Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel’s Bargain with the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); and Zach Levey, “Anatomy of an Airlift: United States Military Assistance to Israel During the 1973 War,” *Cold War History* 8, no. 4 (2008): 481–501.
- 58 Bialer, *Between East and West*, 57–173. For more on this point see also Avi Shlaim, “Israel, the Great Powers, and the Middle East Crisis of 1958,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 27, no. 2 (1999): 177–92.
- 59 Interview, Meridor, 1 September 2015.
- 60 Author’s Interview with Efrim Halevy, 8 June 2016, Tel Aviv, Israel and 7 January 2017, Ramat Aviv, Israel. We conducted two separated interviews to cover some of other themes in my research project that are beyond the scope of this article. Shalheveth Freier (1920–1995) was the director-general of the Israel’s Atomic Energy Committee (AEC) in 1971 and 1976, and the director of the Soreq Nuclear Research Center at Nachal Shorek and Weitzman Institute. In Pugwash, Freier was a Chairman of the Israeli Pugwash Group and a member of its International Council. Halevy referred to the “Pugwash Organization,” which, as he noted in the interview, “seeks a world free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction [...]” During the darkest days of the Cold War, the founders of Pugwash understood the dangers of nuclear weapons. In their efforts to change dangerous policies they became pioneers of a new kind of transnational, “track II” dialogue. This section is designed to be a portal for scholars and others interested in the Pugwash history, to help those interested to find additional information about this groundbreaking history. See www.pugwash.org (accessed January 9, 2019).
- 61 Interview, Merhav, 23 July 2017.
- 62 For more on this see, among others, Douglas Little, “The Cold War in the Middle East: Suez crisis to Camp David Accords,” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler, Odd Arne Westad, vol. II, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 305–26.
- 63 “Prisoners of Zion” are the Soviet Jews who, during the Cold War, were forbidden religious freedom due to their affiliation with the Soviet nation.
- 64 Klieman, “The Foreign Ministry.”
- 65 Daphna Sharfman, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Israel and Human Rights,” in *A Light unto the Nations Israel’s Foreign Policy and Human Rights*, ed. Daphna Sharfman (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1999), 15–41; and Naomi Chazan, “The Fallacies of Pragmatism: Israeli Foreign Policy Towards South Africa,” *African Affairs* 82, no. 327 (1983): 169–99.
- 66 See, for example, the contributions to “Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the First Fifty Years” volume by Leora Herzl, David Danieli, and Gill Reich.
- 67 See the Supreme Court decision from 31 October 2016 in www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2912166 [in Hebrew].
- 68 Interview, Avivi, 25 July 2017.
- 69 Author’s interview with Nachik Navoth, 9 September 2015. “Tsitsiyot” is Jewish religious tradition entailing men wearing knotted ritual fringes on the upper body that is a symbol of

great Jewish faith. The interviewee made this reference to emphasize the need to remember at all times to keep from sin and to put faith in God.

- 70 Author's Interview with Yossi Alpher, 2 February 2016, Ramat Hashron, Israel.
- 71 Author's Interview with Yehoyada Haim, 28 January 2018, Jerusalem, Israel.
- 72 Mualem, "Israel's Foreign Policy."
- 73 Interview, Merhav, 23 July 2017.

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