Israel and the 'Alliance of the Periphery'

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ISRAEL AND THE 'ALLIANCE OF THE PERIPHERY'

Noa Schonmann

In the late 1950s, the State of Israel embarked on an ambitious initiative. Barely a decade old, small, endangered and politically isolated, Israel set out to consolidate an Afro-Asian bloc of states that would collaborate to foil Egypt's bid for hegemony in the Middle East. The plan was to bring together a group of states situated along the region's perimeter: Turkey to the north, Iran to the east, Ethiopia and Sudan to the south and Israel to the west. Together, the five demarcated a virtual outer ring that encircled the Arab states. The four states shared Israel's anxiety over the ascent of the Soviet-backed pan-Arab movement, headed by the charismatic Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Turkey and Iran as front-line states in the Cold War and Ethiopia and Sudan, both at conflict with Egypt over the Nile River waters, made ideal candidates for joining the counter-Nasserist bloc. Israeli policymakers hoped that beyond a common threat perception, some sense of shared identity might allow the periphery states to overcome their prevailing hesitancy to associate with the ostracized Jewish state: politically, all five regimes were pro-Western in orientation and their geographic marginality was compounded by ethno-cultural marginality in relation to the region's Arab core. In four of the periphery states (Israel, Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia) the overwhelming majority of the population was non-Arab, while in Sudan the non-Arab population constituted a sizable minority.

The 'Outer Circle' [*ha'ma'agal ha'hitzon*] plan, as Israeli decision-makers referred to it at the time, was adopted as state policy in July 1958. Over the following two decades, it yielded close if largely covert collaborative relations between Israel and Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia. Israel also developed collaboration with Sudan, but a coup d'état in November 1958 soon threw a spanner in the works. As state policy, the Outer Circle fostered extensive bilateral, and occasionally multilateral, cooperation in the political, economic and security fields. The policy provided for far-reaching security collaboration, including regular meetings of high-ranking military and security-services officers, the exchange of intelligence and defense know-how, military-industry trade, stationing listening posts along the borders with the Arab world and even the drafting of a joint strategic plan for the contingencies of a war with Syria and an Egyptian takeover of the Red Sea. Joint operations were few; those we know of include an Israeli-Iranian airlift of rifles to support the crumbling regime of

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Lebanese President Camile Chamoun in 1958 and large-scale military aid in support of the Kurdish rebellion against Iraq in the 1960s.

The periphery states benefited from Israeli expertise in military and security-service organization and advanced training programs, as well as in agricultural development and economic planning. Multilateral cooperation also emerged in the form of diplomatic consultations, public-diplomacy campaigns in Western capitals and coordinated votes in international organizations. The policy's crowning achievements were a bilateral political agreement, secret yet formal, signed between the prime ministers of Israel and Turkey in August 1958 and a multilateral security collaboration framework, codenamed Trident, that after October 1958 brought together the secret-services directors of Israel, Turkey, Iran and later also Ethiopia for semi-annual conferences.

Ultimately, the Outer Circle proved too weak to withstand the turn of political tides in the region. The policy was implemented in earnest from 1958 to the mid-1960s, when the partnerships that the policy had consolidated began to crumble. The final nail in the policy's coffin was driven by the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, but many believe that the policy – or rather the principles underlying it – left a deep imprint on Israel's practice of foreign relations to this day. Despite remarkable accomplishments, opinions are divided between those who consider the Outer Circle a success of Israeli statecraft and those deeming it a failure. Did the policy achieve its aims and objectives? Much of the argument boils down to the confusion over the policy's original purpose, as set out by the state officials who conceived and carried it out in the context of Israel's foreign relations at the time.

'Phantom Pact' or 'Alliance of the Periphery'?

Over the years, the Outer Circle captured the imagination of many in Israel and beyond. Numerous sources make passing reference to the initiative, but only a few offer more elaborate, chapter-length accounts (noteworthy among these are Podeh 2022; Bengio 2004; Shlaim 2001). Monographs dedicated to the initiative only began to appear in the past decade (Patten 2013; Alpher 2015; Samaan 2017; Schonmann, forthcoming). Scholars' hesitation to attempt an in-depth historical analysis of the policy up to this point was well justified, as most official documents pertaining to the Outer Circle remained long inaccessible to researchers.

In the late 1980s, the Israel State Archives started declassifying relevant files deposited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office under the standard 30-year procedure; many remained closed under an extended 40– or 50–year rule and were opened to the public only after the turn of the century. Several key files were released as late as 2016 and a handful remain classified to this day, 75 years on. For researchers interested in the military and intelligence aspects of the initiative, archive doors remain shut. Documents about such matters are classified in the Israel Defense Forces and Defense Establishment Archives, while the records of Israel's foreign-intelligence service, the Mossad, are altogether beyond the reach of researchers. The fact that access to the archival records of Israel's peripheral partners is prohibited, or extremely restricted, precludes insight into the perspectives of the government's counterpart to Israel's initiative. On the other hand, official Israeli sources can certainly be complemented by diplomatic papers filed in American, British and French archives, as well as a growing pool of information made public across the years in news reports, interviews and autobiographies.

For decades, insight into the Outer Circle's purpose and impact remained limited. Reliance on personal recollections and snippets of state documents sparingly released to official historians lent itself to partial and subjectively colored narratives, prone to anecdote, myth and misconception. Over the years, two stereotypical storylines emerged. On the one hand stands the idea that the Outer Circle was essentially a clandestine Mossad project, consisting of collaborations with domestic security and intelligence services in the periphery states. In this rendition, the Outer Circle came about as a makeshift framework, introduced primarily for organizational purposes, in order to loosely tie in what were otherwise discrete strands of bilateral relations pursued by the Mossad. Inter-service contacts were developed by operatives on the ground in an improvised manner and the framework clustering them together came to be premised, quite intuitively, on the common-sense rationale of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. Headed by Isser Harel, the Mossad successfully instilled itself at the apex of this tripod of bilateral ties, whose primary purpose was to fortify regional anti-Nasser regimes (by assisting in organizing their security services) and augment Israel's capacity to collect intelligence (by gaining listening posts and establishing regular inter-service consultations). Mossad agents conducting brazen operations and back-door shadow diplomacy were the stuff of this 'Ghost Organization' or 'Phantom Pact' as it was colorfully dubbed. The role of politicians, diplomats and even military officers is recounted as supportive at best: a secondary effort geared toward facilitating security-service collaborations. In this telling, the framework dissolved piecemeal, as regime changes in the periphery states led to the termination of bilateral inter-service collaborations, one by one, between 1958 and 1979 (see for example Alpher 2015; Samaan 2017; Harel 1989).

A second storyline depicts the Outer Circle as a pet project of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's widely revered founding father and long-serving prime minister and minister of defense. In this telling, the initiative consisted of diplomatic efforts to forge a multilateral strategic alliance that would commit the non-Arab states to aid one another against military and domestic security threats emanating from their common enemy, the Soviet-backed Nasser. The alliance was meant to start tacitly and develop into a formal agreement that would bolster Israel's deterrence posture vis-à-vis the Arab world when the alliance would one day come to light. Secret summits and formal letters exchanged between heads of state were the stuff of this 'Alliance of the Periphery' or 'Periphery Pact', as it came to be known. This rendition ascribes to politicians and diplomats the prominent role in conceiving and implementing the Outer Circle as foreign-policy, while Mossad operatives are relegated backstage. The policy followed Classical Realist logic, but rarely were its prospects considered realistic. Observers depict it as one of Ben-Gurion's 'fantastic ideas', with references to the project ranging from the visionary to the illusory. To make sense of the policy's undertaking, a range of rationales is quickly put forward: some see it as an ideological response to Nasser's brand of radical pan-Arabism, others as a project of national-identity construction, seeking to relieve Israel's stifling sense of isolation on the international arena; some suggest it was a way to bring about peace with the Arab world by integrating the Jewish state into the region, others say it sought to evade peace compromises by driving a wedge between the region's Arabs and non-Arabs; some present it as an effort to diminish foreign powers' intervention in the region, while others insist it was designed to integrate Israel into the Western defense system. In this telling, Ben-Gurion's peripheral alliance never quite ripened and was left to wither on the vine after the prime minister

left office in 1963 (see for example Shaham 1991; Segev 1981; Eshed 1997; Derogy and Carmel 1979).

Easily framed as alternative or competing renditions, the narratives sketched above are better seen as complementary. Each offers a partial account, based on select sources of evidence; together they shed light on different aspects of a complex and dynamic state-project, the Janus-faced Outer Circle. Primary-source information now available to researchers allows us to critically examine the conventional wisdom, dust off a layer of myth and misconception that has settled on the surface of these narratives over the years, and reveal a fuller and more nuanced picture of the Outer Circle policy.

The Making of the Outer Circle

Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion introduced the Outer Circle plan to his government on the morning of 20 July 1958. By day's end, the plan was adopted as state policy at a meeting of 'Our Comrades' [*havereinu*], the inner circle of the ruling labor-party Mapai. The impetus for Ben-Gurion's move was a coup d'état that brought down the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq on 14 July. Israeli military intelligence saw in the coup the hand of Nasser, Egypt's Soviet-backed president, who had raised the banner of Arab nationalism and enthralled the masses. Tension had been building up in the Middle East for over a year, and Ben-Gurion believed that Nasser's success in Iraq would embolden him to undermine other regimes in the region, encircle Israel and eventually proceed to take it on. Briefing his government, Ben-Gurion described the coup as the gravest international development since World War II. Over the next few days, the prime minister held a train of consultations with his close aides, foreign – and security – ministry officials, top army officers, his own party's leadership and prominent members of both coalition and opposition parties. In the weeks following the coup, he revealed his plan to a range of closed-door forums, in speeches to the Mapai Central Committee, the Israel Bonds conference, the Jewish Agency for Israel and in briefing Israeli newspaper editors. In these meetings, Ben-Gurion presented the Outer Circle policy as part of an action plan to deal with Nasser's advances in the region: first priority, he said, was acquiring arms wherever possible and as soon as possible; second, acquiring the help of the non-Arab states in the region. In his diary, Ben-Gurion recapped Israel's new foreign policy as consisting of efforts to tighten relations with the non-Arab states in the region that oppose Nasser – specifically Iran, Turkey, Ethiopia and Sudan – 'with the help of America, that is, by pressing America to press [these countries to draw closer to Israel] and to help [fortify the regimes of] these countries' in the face of Nasserist subversions (entries 17 and 20 July 1958).

Ben-Gurion's audiences that summer would be forgiven for thinking that the new policy was conceived off the cuff and in direct reaction to the fast unfolding regional crisis. In fact, by that point, the Outer Circle was already a well-formed policy concept. Its foundations were laid a year earlier, in light of the Syrian Crisis of August 1957 and had been set by the time the Baghdad coup had provided an opening for the plan's adoption as state policy. The notion of aligning Israel with the non-Arabs on the periphery of the Middle East was first introduced into Israeli foreign-policy thinking already in the late 1940s – well before Nasser's appearance on the regional scene, indeed prior even to the founding of the State of Israel – by Baruch Uziel, a lawyer who in the 1960s would come to serve as Knesset member for the Progressive Party. Formulated as a proposal for the political orientation of the future Jewish state, Uziel's idea was to cultivate a political alliance among

the non-Arab peoples in the Middle East to counterbalance the dangerous prospect of a Great Arab Confederation that might arise of 'the imperialist idea upon which the League of Arab States is premised'. Following up on a series of talks, Uziel outlined his proposal in a memo to the newly established Ministry of Foreign Affairs, further elaborating it in an article titled 'The Periphery Alliance' [*brit ha-periferiya*], published in the November 1948 issue of *Beterem*, the political periodical of Mapai's activist faction. Foreign-ministry files from the first decade revealed no traces of Uziel's proposal. Yet, the basic, commonsense notion underlying it – that Israel ought to cultivate relations with the non-Arab states on the region's periphery to counteract Arab unification drives – was not lost on policymakers of the time. Earnest efforts to forge relations with Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia and Sudan were made since 1950 but remained limited, both in scope and success. They were pursued bilaterally and in parallel, tied together by little more than the elementary foreign-policy principle of befriending as many states as possible. Now and then, policy-makers spoke of such efforts also as one, in terms of working to breach the regional wall of hostility toward Israel so as to demonstrate to the Arab world the need to come to terms with Israel's existence. Another aim mentioned occasionally in this context was enhancing Israel's strategic value in Western eyes, by demonstrating that the Jewish state was not an alien body without common regional interests.

Such references, however, appear few and far between up to the Syrian crisis of August 1957, when Soviet encroachment into Syria raised alarm in Washington. Eisenhower's administration had encouraged the region's pro-Western Arab regimes to take forceful counteraction, but all efforts were made to dissuade Israel from interfering in Syria. To mollify Ben-Gurion, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles assured him that Washington shortly wished to exchange views concerning the crisis. Dulles's promise to consult Israel on regional affairs stirred a flurry of proposals for a new Israeli foreign policy. Many foreign-ministry officials observed that hitherto Israel tended to articulate its positions in critical, rather than constructive, terms; now was the time to redefine its role on the international scene, so as to persuade Washington that the Jewish state was not a liability but an asset in the Cold War context, and thereby pave the way to Israel's integration into Western defense systems.

Three such proposals sought to achieve this by highlighting to Western interlocutors Israel's commonalities with the pro-Western non-Arab states in the Middle East and by seeking rapprochement with them. Notable among these was a proposal submitted by the foreign ministry's assistant director-general Emile Najar, which called for concerted diplomatic efforts to promote among Western leaders the understanding that 'in the Middle East, Arab-Islam now constitutes a sick body', having been infected by communism following Soviet success in penetrating Syria and Egypt. Therefore, only those states 'that do not belong to Arab-Islam', namely Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia, Israel and possibly also Sudan and Lebanon, could be relied upon as potential Western allies in the region: 'These states must be fortified and the connection amongst them encouraged'. Creating new security frameworks was impractical at present, he assessed, so Israel ought to strive to strengthen relations with Western powers on the one hand and on the other, get Washington to encourage Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia to quietly tighten relations with Israel in the political and economic fields and even maintain military contact.[1] Najar's proposal features some of the themes that underlined Uziel's proposal a decade earlier, but there are important differences as well: Uziel conceived of an open political alliance among peoples (both states and minorities), Najar's proposal was more modest in comparison, advocating the quiet tightening

of bilateral relations among states; and, whereas Uziel saw the 'Alliance of the Periphery' primarily as a means of re-balancing power from within the region and only secondarily as a means of influencing foreign powers' regional policies, Najar's proposal relied on Western support for its realization and was conceived primarily as a means of integrating Israel into Western defense systems.

In coming months Israeli policymakers repeatedly asked American counterparts to encourage Turkey and Iran to tighten relations with Israel, but their argument evoked little interest in Washington. By this point, though, relations with the periphery states were taking off even without Washington's assistance. Indeed, Najar did not grasp the notion of a peripheral connection out of thin air but had formulated his proposal in light of encouraging signals from the periphery. African states Ethiopia and Sudan were the first to put out feelers. In the aftermath of the Suez War of October 1956, Nasser began pressing Sudan and Ethiopia to enter into a military alliance that would see both united under Egyptian domination. From Sudan and Ethiopia's perspective, Israel's collusion with Britain and France in Egypt's invasion constituted a show of force befitting a regional power, and they quickly turned to Israel, seeking support for their efforts to ward off Nasser's subversions. Sudan's Umma party had initiated contacts with Israel already in 1954, persistently seeking financial assistance while in opposition and, even more so once it became the leading coalition member in July 1956. By October 1957 visits were exchanged and secret meetings were held at the ministerial level between Sudan and Israel. Discussions revolved around the dispatch of agricultural experts and military advisers to Sudan, as well as arms purchases. Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, who hitherto had taken a highly cautious approach in his dealings with Israel, initiated contact in February 1957 through the head of Israel's ministry of defense delegation to Paris. The Ethiopians sought to establish a channel of communication with Israel's military and intelligence services, through which they soon discussed the possibility of joint political action against Nasser's subversive activities, as well as developing economic relations and upgrading diplomatic relations.

The Suez War won Israel maritime freedom through the Straits of Tiran, opening the possibility of importing oil from Iran. At Iran's initiative, an oil trade connection was established in late 1956, quietly and informally. A year later, close on the heels of the Syrian Crisis, Israel's ambassador in Paris was approached by an Iranian counterpart, asking to arrange a discreet meeting. The guest who turned up at the door was General Teymur Bakhtiar, director of Iran's newly formed National Intelligence and Security Organization, the *Savak*. Gravely concerned by Soviet penetration into the region, the Shah had instructed Bakhtiar to find out whether the Mossad would agree to train Iranian agents in surveillance and listening techniques. By November 1957 high-level visits took place and liaison officers were exchanged. So far, contacts with Israel were initiated by the periphery states – first Sudan and Ethiopia, then Iran – each approaching Israel independently, all seeking its assistance in the field of internal security. Their feelers, quietly put out through foreign-ministry channels, were quickly handed over to the Mossad, whose operatives proved highly entrepreneurial in developing them into substantive bilateral collaborations. Israel certainly welcomed these approaches, though its follow-up was cautious.

The Turkish connection followed a different path. Of the four periphery states, Turkey was considered the most economically developed, militarily powerful and politically stable. Even more important was Turkey's membership in both the Baghdad Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), making it the West's key ally in the Middle East. As such, Turkey was the only periphery state that Israel actively courted from the outset.

Whereas Ethiopia, Sudan and Iran took the initiative in forging covert ties with Israel, vigorous efforts had to be invested from the outset in strengthening relations with Turkey. Moreover, Turkey is the only periphery state to have maintained formal diplomatic relations with Israel throughout the 1950s. Therefore, the role designated for Israel's diplomats in developing this track of bilateral relations remained as central as the role played by the Mossad.

In the Turkish context, the Suez War marked a setback for relations with Israel. In its aftermath, Turkey decided to downgrade diplomatic representation in light of mounting anti-Israeli sentiments in the Arab world, fearing for the stability of the Baghdad Pact. The Syrian crisis presented an opportunity to thaw relations, and Israel's foreign ministry launched a concerted effort to establish contact directly with Prime Minister Adnan Menderes. Recognizing a dramatic shift in the region's political landscape, Ankara proved forthcoming to Israel's advances. A meeting was scheduled in Paris on 15 December 1957, in which Israel's ambassador to Italy Eliyahu Sasson put forward to Menderes the idea of establishing contact between Israel's Mossad and Turkey's security service, the MAH. His interlocutors requested time to think the matter over; then the line went quiet. It took another regional shock, the unification of Egypt and Syria into the United Arab Republic in February 1958, to finally spur Menderes to schedule a follow-up meeting in early April. Frustrated by his Western allies' 'delusion' that Nasser's appeasement could serve to curb Soviet penetration into the region, the Turkish foreign minister proposed that Turkey, Israel and Iraq stage a coup in Syria without letting the Western powers in on the plan. While Ben-Gurion was clear that Israel would not involve its military or arms in any internal Arab coup, his diplomats tactfully managed to channel the Turks' newfound willingness to collaborate with Israel to more acceptable avenues. It was agreed that a secret conference of Israeli and Turkish security experts would convene to analyze the regional situation, through which Israel managed to institutionalize permanent contact with the Turkish military in the intelligence field.

Initially, the four bilateral channels of intelligence and security collaboration were run discretely from one another, and their development by the Mossad was guided, quite intuitively, by the basic strategic principle of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. As early as December 1957 Harel decided to set up a new department within the Mossad, named *Tevel* (Universe), whose mission was to liaise with the intelligence services of friendly states. With this move, he brought collaborations with the region's non-Arab states under one organizational roof. Around the same time, the idea of adding a multilateral layer of cooperation to the budding relations with each periphery state was raised at the foreign ministry. On a visit to Tehran in late February, Harel indeed put forward to Bakhtiar the idea of tightening relations between Iran and Israel and, with time, bringing in Turkey as well. It was up to the three to formulate a shared stance, he added, rather than letting the Western powers dictate it to them and coordinate operations to thwart Nasser's Soviet-backed attempts to take over the region. To this end, Harel asked Bakhtiar to help the Mossad establish contact with its Turkish counterpart, the MAH. Bakhtiar agreed (Caroz 2002 pp. 117–118). From Harel's perspective, subversion through propaganda and fifth columns was Nasser's regional modus operandi. The purpose of the periphery 'operation' was therefore to construct a dam against the Nasserist-Soviet torrent by assisting the non-Arab states in organizing effective intelligence services and a police or military striking force that could withstand any coup attempt. Shortly after Israel began assisting the periphery states, Harel developed the notion that through such collaborations Israel might also establish itself as

'the long arm' of the United States in Asia and Africa. To his mind, intelligence was the only sphere through which a small state such as Israel could become a strategic asset for a great power. However, Harel's 'ceaseless attempts' to interest the CIA in this operation and enlist its backing were politely rebuffed (Harel 1989 pp. 408–410).

Ben-Gurion's thinking about the Outer Circle was far broader and more ambitious than Harel's. By July 1958, Israel had opened direct channels of communication with the Shah of Iran, the Emperor of Ethiopia and the prime ministers of Turkey and Sudan, and substantive collaborations were developing among the countries' security services. Ben-Gurion believed that if this connection tightens, it may serve not only to check Nasser's expansion but also 'bring about a new constellation of the forces in the Middle East'. It is not a foregone conclusion that the entire region should oppose Israel, he posited, for the Near East is not entirely Arab. In fact, he repeatedly pointed out that the combined power and population of the region's non-Arab states matched the Arab states', and such a constellation 'could prove decisive in this region'. That should be our policy, Ben-Gurion concluded: to form an 'alternative arrangement of forces in the Middle East', to bring about 'an entirely different balance of power and international relations … that could change the face of things in the Middle East'. To his mind, constructing the Outer Circle would ultimately prove 'to the Arabs that Israel could not be destroyed … that it has friends in the world and friends in the [Middle] East'. It is the only chance for Jewish–Arab peace, he posited.

Ben-Gurion's ambitious proposal was received with considerable skepticism by coalition and Knesset members, who questioned the plan's logic and feasibility. Was Ben-Gurion seriously suggesting that Israel count on the non-Arab states to come to its aid in times of crisis? And would Israel be wise to rely on states whose regimes 'hang by a thread'? In response, Ben-Gurion explained that even in the long run he was not envisioning an alliance, but an informal association, a 'community of interests' within which Israel would assume not a central 'but a considerable position'. He insisted that such a partnership need not be public or even formalized. Furthermore, he acknowledged that consolidating such a partnership among the non-Arab states required patient cultivation, and the prospect was tenuous indeed: he repeatedly invoked the biblical expression, we are only 'girding our armor' and must not celebrate prematurely. Finally, Ben-Gurion clarified that he sought to consolidate the Outer Circle not as a military, but as a 'political force that would stand against Nasser'. He conceded outright that the non-Arab states were irrelevant in terms of offering Israel 'concrete assistance in arms'. Rather, he reiterated, it was their 'political friendship' he was after.

Ben-Gurion did not employ this term off-handedly or naively. For him, political friendship signified an inter-state relationship based on common interest and marked by interdependence and reciprocity. A solid and long-lasting political friendship requires more than a common enemy or ideological affinity; it must be founded on mutual benefit. Though it need not be public, nor formalized, political friendship must be institutionalized – entailing regular high-level consultations on issues of common interest, such that can sustain a close working partnership consisting of joint planning and action in political, military, economic and intelligence fields, faithfully advocating one another's positions on the international stage. Ben-Gurion explained that in its first decade of independence, Israel had amicable relations with many states, consisting of cordial diplomatic exchanges, the extension of political help by way of international recognition and material aid in the form of loans or reparations and back-door arms sales. But such relations were shallow, haphazard and often one-sided, with Israel in a vulnerable supplicant position.

Entering its second decade, Ben-Gurion believed it was time to reestablish Israel's foreign relations on more solid foundations: it needed to develop reciprocal relations, consisting of regular high-level consultations and substantive broad-range collaborations, wherein states with common interests would come to take up a stake in Israel's strengthening as a regional power, be willing to fight with and 'for us politically' and provide reliable 'backing'. Ben-Gurion attached great importance to forging political friendships across the world but explicitly prioritized acquiring friends among Western states, because only on the basis of political friendship (and from that part of the world) could Israel acquire arms necessary for its defense: its top priority. In this context, Ben-Gurion was clear that Washington held the key to Israel's future, and the American attitude toward Israel, he explained, depended to a large extent on how America's friends related to Israel. Turkey and Iran were Washington's key allies in the region and forging a political partnership with them, he was convinced, would improve Israel's standing in the United States and the world at large. For many years, he said, Israel was an 'object of international politics', a 'subject for international discussions'; only by forging political friendships and partnerships could Israel transform itself into a weighty factor in regional and world politics, emerging as an international actor in itself.[2]

In Ben-Gurion's view, the primary aim of the fresh drive in Israel's foreign policy was to acquire Washington's friendship; the regional partnership that the Outer Circle policy sought to develop – while significant in itself – was inherently tied to this higher aim. Nasser's rise, Ben-Gurion argued, put not only Israel but other nations in the Middle East, in grave danger. Furthermore, Nasser was undermining Western powers' regional policies and intensifying tensions between East and West. This presented Israel with a precious opportunity to construct a regional partnership through which it could finally demonstrate to Washington its value as a regional power.

Israel invested efforts in assisting the periphery states in organizing their internal and external security-services. Establishing covert security collaborations with the periphery states was certainly considered an important objective in itself, but it was a means toward a more ambitious aim. In adopting the Outer Circle policy, Ben-Gurion's aim was to redefine relations with the Western powers and, more specifically, to forge a strategic relationship with the United States that would secure Israel's long-term military, political and economic future. The prime minister clearly understood that consolidating the Outer Circle was not easily within reach and would require time and concerted efforts. He also saw that the partnership was bound to remain secret in the foreseeable future and therefore could hardly be expected to deter Nasser from pursuing his ambitions. While he certainly hoped that the regional partnership may eventually emerge from the shadows and materialize into a full-blown formal regional alliance, Ben-Gurion was well aware of the fact that it would be a long time, if ever, before this vision could become a reality. Israeli policymakers nonetheless invested considerable effort in forging ties with the periphery states because what they sought in the short-term was to create a phantom of a pact: a vision of regional alignment, just real enough to persuade Washington that Israel was a rising regional power, capable of spearheading Western interests in the Middle East and, as such, worth supporting and strengthening.

Israeli policymakers had been trying to convince Washington of Israel's strategic value since the early 1950s. Their predicament lay in the fact that in the context of the Cold War, the United States considered Israel a strategic liability, inasmuch as aligning with the Jewish state inevitably meant antagonizing the region's numerous Arab states. In its pursuit

of regional allies, Washington vacillated between accommodating the radical leadership of Egyptian President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser and propping up the Saudi's conservative leadership: King Saud bin 'Abd al-'Aziz. Underlying both strategies was American willingness to accept the Arab concept of the Middle East, a concept that rested on the notion that the region was essentially an Arab domain, at the heart of which lay Israel – a foreign element whose existence was the key obstacle to Arab rapprochement with the West. If Israel was to forge a strategic relationship with the United States, Israeli policymakers realized, a viable alternative to US reliance on Arab forces had to be put forward.

It is in this context that the Outer Circle policy was adopted, and Israel's diplomats launched a public diplomacy campaign advocating a new concept of the Middle East and a vision for Israel's place and role within that regional system, as a key Western ally. In so doing, they effectively sought to challenge the prevalent notion that the Middle East was a monolithic Arab region and that Egypt was inevitably to become its hegemonic power. The alternative concept advanced was that of a heterogeneous Middle East in which Israel would no longer stand isolated but rather serve as the linchpin of a powerful regional partnership. The United States, it was said, must understand that in the Middle East, it can rely only on the non-Arab states, which are not only decisively pro-Western and more stable politically, but also outweigh the Arab states in terms of their combined population and territory, military and economic power. If hitherto Western powers perceived the region in terms of a zero-sum game where siding with Israel meant losing the support of numerous Arab states, they were now presented with an alternative construction of the region, where backing Israel meant fortifying a non-Arab bloc of states that could provide a more durable basis for Western influence in the Middle East.

The Outer Circle marked a seminal moment in Israeli statecraft: upon entering its second decade of independence, Israel was ready to shift gears in its foreign policy. Hitherto its diplomats plowed the international political field: delivering statements in international forums, submitting formal requests and explaining Israel's position through official and public diplomacy channels (*hasbarah*). Now, for the first time, Israel would embark on a concerted and ambitious foreign policy, an extensive campaign to build relations of political friendship in the region and beyond, harnessing to this end not only its foreign ministry but also its military and security services, with the prime minister steering the concerted efforts.

Efforts to realize the Outer Circle policy proceeded along two channels: diplomatic-political activity was directed by the foreign ministry, both in the periphery states and in Western capitals, while efforts to develop security-intelligence collaborations with the periphery states were spearheaded by the Mossad. Both channels of operation were closely overseen by the prime minister's office. A key factor determining the respective roles of the Mossad and the foreign ministry in building the periphery ties was the regime structure in each of the counterpart states. Thus, whereas in Turkey the prime minister worked in close collaboration with his foreign minister on developing relations with Israel, in Iran the Shah preferred to entrust the matter to his Savak director. Mirroring the contact structures in the partner-states, the Mossad came to fill a greater role in developing relations with Iran, while relations with Turkey fell largely under the purview of the foreign ministry.

The foreign ministry also led the effort to develop political and economic channels of cooperation with the periphery states and closely collaborated with the Mossad in forging bilateral and multilateral security ties. The coordination of this complex operation was

entrusted to the Foreign Minister's political advisor, Reuven Shiloah, until his untimely death in May 1959. In developing covert relations with the secret services, Tevel operatives often gained precious access to their heads-of-state and operated at times as a 'shadow' foreign ministry. Caroz recalls friction between Tevel and foreign ministry representatives abroad but makes the point that at the highest level there was full coordination, as Foreign Minister Meir was understanding toward such encroachments into her territory (Caroz 2002 pp. 130). During the Outer Circle's early years, while Ben-Gurion was still at the helm, it appears that activities in both channels proceeded in a largely collaborative and complementary manner, although there certainly were inevitable instances of discord and inter-departmental clashes. It was only later on, in the late 1960s and 1970s that the foreign ministry's involvement faded into the background, while the Mossad maintained and expanded its momentum of activity.

The Outer Circle's Staying Power: From Policy to Doctrine?

The story of the Outer Circle's making, told above, demonstrates that there are as many conceptions of the policy's purpose as there are stakeholders in its implementation. The fundamental notion that Israel ought to cultivate relations with the non-Arab states on the region's periphery was widely shared, but different people attached different purposes to this commonsensical endeavor at different times. Indeed, the policy continuously evolved through interaction among institutional stakeholders and with the change in international circumstances. Sixty-five years since the launch of the Outer Circle, opinions remain divided as to whether it should be considered a triumph, or a failure of Israeli statecraft. Such divergence of opinions can be attributed, at least partially, to the fact that observers hold different notions of the policy's purpose and therefore use very different yardsticks by which to measure its accomplishments.

At the same time, few doubt the project's deep-rooted appeal and long-lasting imprint on Israeli statecraft. Many scholars and practitioners opt to interpret all relations that have since developed with the non-Arab states of the Middle East primarily through the lens of the 'Periphery Pact'. Some go as far as considering it a 'national grand strategy' or 'doctrine', whose premises became the basis of Israel's regional geostrategy, accepted without challenge by Israeli leaders from Ben-Gurion to Shamir, Peres to Netanyahu and persisting despite all transformations on the regional scene (for example Beit-Hallahmi 1988; Voller 2015; Bengio 2004; Eshed 1997; Samaan 2017; Alpher 2015; Yaniv 1990). To the extent that Israel's purpose in cultivating ties with the periphery states is taken for granted as fixed and self-evident, such observers may well be seeing the phantom of a pact where none exists.

Notes

1 The above paragraph draws on remarks by Emilie Najar from the Israel State Archives, 13 September 1957 ISA/RG130.23/3089/8.

2 The above paragraphs draw on Knesset FASC Meeting Minutes, 16 July and 19 August 1958, ISA/RG60.4/7566/3; Government Meeting Minutes, 20 and 28 July 1958, Stenographic Records of the Eighth Government's Meetings 1958, ISA; Ben-Gurion's speech at Mapai Central Committee, 11 September 1958, BGA; BGD 11 September 1958, BGA; 'Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's Political Review at Plenary Meeting of JAFI Executive', 4 August 1958, BGA).

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