

# France or the US? The Struggle to Change Israel's Foreign Policy Orientation, 1956–64 (Part I)

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An examination of the last forty-five years in the diplomatic history of the State of Israel reveals that the relationship forged between Israel and the US during this period proved to be a cornerstone of Israel's diplomacy. Levi Eshkol, the father of the strategic alliance between the two countries, has been assigned a place of honor in Israel's early history, first and foremost because of the dramatic change engendered by the Washington–Jerusalem alliance that he fostered.<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, that development seems obvious—US President Harry S. Truman was the first world leader to recognize the Jewish state after independence was declared. However, from 1956–64, it was actually France that became Israel's strategic ally. During that period, arguments developed in the government, the IDF, and other government bodies regarding the nature of that policy, and in the end it was altered. Some of those arguments were topical and rooted in fundamental issues. Others were reflective of the conflicts between the prominent political figures of the time. On the one side (advocates for the French orientation) were Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and the “youngsters,” headed by Defense Ministry Director-General Shimon Peres, who were supported by active generals, including Moshe Dayan, Zvi Zur and Ezer Weizman. On the other were the “middle-agers,” headed by Finance Minister Levi Eshkol and Foreign Minister Golda Meir, alongside the head of the Mossad and General Security Services (GSS), Isser Harel, and senior military personnel such as Haim Laskov and Yitzhak Rabin.

How did the dynamic develop between those demanding a French orientation and those opposed to it? Why was that orientation eventually changed? This discussion is of great importance, especially in light of the fact that over the years, Jerusalem's American foreign policy orientation became a strategic pillar for Israel, the contribution of which has proven invaluable. It is also important because the argument regarding the French orientation constituted a true reflection of the

dramatic political conflict between central figures in the Israeli government at that time. Its consequences resonated in Israeli politics for an entire generation and perhaps even longer.

## I

In September 1955, a new stage in the confrontation between Israel and its Egyptian-led Arab neighbors began. A large weapons deal between Egypt and Czechoslovakia, in which Cairo was slated to receive very advanced Soviet weaponry,<sup>2</sup> threatened to rupture the delicate strategic balance that had existed since the War of Independence.<sup>3</sup> That transaction, along with other weapons deals with the Soviet bloc, and with other countries such as Britain, ensured Israel's neighbor to the south a supply of more than 200 advanced fighter jets, hundreds of tanks, and various types of artillery. It was clear to Prime Minister Moshe Sharett, Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion, and IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan that they had to prepare for the new situation that would be created in the region after the deal was signed. In the fall of 1955, the IDF had a mere thirty fighter jets at its disposal. With the infusion of new weapons to Israel's Arab adversaries, the disparity between Arab and Israeli air power would be dramatic — as high as 10:1, and the situation of the IDF's armored corps, in relation to that of Egypt, would not be much better.<sup>4</sup> Israeli policy makers had to face the question of how to respond to that development. All were in agreement that the military buildup could lead to Israel's destruction. "The furnishing of substantial quantities of heavy weaponry to Egypt means the unleashing of a war of annihilation against Israel,"<sup>5</sup> declared Sharett to the Knesset.

However, as in the past, differences of opinion arose among the "hawks."<sup>6</sup> Sharett wished to counteract the Egyptian arms deal by purchasing heavy weapons from Washington and by seeking an American–Israeli security pact.<sup>7</sup> Ben-Gurion and Dayan did not, of course, reject the prime minister's attempt to try to achieve a military and strategic balance. They were in favor of a defense agreement with the US, but they did not believe that either the US or France and Britain were willing to help Israel, and they wanted to thwart the Egyptian course of action with a military campaign. They claimed that the large weapons deal that Egypt had signed with Czechoslovakia would strengthen Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir's regime and would prompt the Egyptian president to behave more aggressively toward Israel, including even initiating all-out war. In their estimation, an Israeli military action could strengthen Israel's deterrence, which had eroded since the War of Independence, and would lessen the significance of the designated supply of arms to the Egyptian military. It would also solve the problem of infiltrators.<sup>8</sup>

Although the defense minister and chief of staff were in favor of a large-scale military operation, in the end, Sharett was able to prevent this course of action. In the time left in his tenure as prime minister, Sharett succeeded in convincing the ministers in his government and other important individuals in the Israeli establishment<sup>9</sup> to join his opposition to a military “adventure” because it was not at all clear that such a mission could foil the Egyptian–Soviet agreement. This was especially after he claimed that in the end, it would be possible to convince the Americans or the British, and maybe the French as well, to supply Israel’s military needs. This pro-American stance was a pillar of the foreign policy that Sharett wanted Israel to adopt.<sup>10</sup> Ben-Gurion, on the other hand, was very doubtful as to whether this was the correct course of action.<sup>11</sup> He, Peres and Defense Ministry officials strongly believed that the Americans would not reverse their embargo policy.<sup>12</sup> Consequently (along with other European countries, including Britain and Germany), France was viewed as the only possible source of arms to Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, France agreed to sell Israel twenty-four *Mystère IV*<sup>14</sup> fighter jets and to supply other weapons as well. From Britain, Israel bought approximately a hundred aging Sherman tanks and two refurbished destroyers (the *Jaffa* and the *Elath*).<sup>15</sup> Israel also signed arms agreements with Canada and West Germany.<sup>16</sup> But the quantities of weapons that Sharett procured were meager relative to the IDF’s burgeoning needs. Clearly frustrated, the minister of defense commented on the fact that the sales involved “millions of dollars” but not “tens of millions.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the only potential large-scale source for weapons continued to be Paris and Washington. But French statesmen only partially agreed to Sharett’s request,<sup>18</sup> while the Americans—to the bitter disappointment of Israeli government members—did not respond favorably to Israel’s pleas for weapons.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, there was not yet any satisfactory military or political response to Egypt’s contract with Czechoslovakia.<sup>20</sup> That fact convinced Ben-Gurion that it was necessary to launch an immediate, comprehensive preemptive military action against Egypt.<sup>21</sup> In the meantime, Ben-Gurion succeeded Sharett as prime minister on November 3, 1955. From then on, it became clear that a large-scale military action would probably be carried out in the near future.

At the same time, however, just as his predecessor had done, the new prime minister continued to seek new sources for weapons. For this, he enlisted the help of Shimon Peres, the energetic young director-general of the Ministry of Defense. Whereas in the past, France had displayed clear signs of sympathy and friendship toward Israel, in February 1956, relations became closer still.<sup>22</sup> There were many reasons for this change.<sup>23</sup> Some related to the socialist leanings of the new French prime minister, Guy Mollet, and to the personal amity felt toward Israel by leaders in that new administration, including Foreign Minister Christian Pineau.<sup>24</sup> Another important reason was France’s strategic interests in the Suez Canal, which were

endangered by Nasir's threat to nationalize it. Yet another reason was the tense situation in Algeria and the fact that Nasir was considered an ally of the Algerian rebels seeking independence from France. An additional important factor was the existence of an Israeli lobby in France, headed by Ambassador Ya'akov Tzur, and the intense activity of Peres among high-ranking individuals in Paris.<sup>25</sup>

Ben-Gurion sent Peres to France in order to convince its leadership to quickly supply weapons to Israel. Peres' great resourcefulness bore fruit. He was able to establish contacts with both government officials and heads of the French aircraft industry, who were interested in selling sophisticated weaponry to Israel in exchange for cash.<sup>26</sup> Once the French had acquiesced to the Israeli pleas, a series of secret talks ensued between an Israeli delegation (headed by Dayan, Peres and Yehoshafat Harkavi, head of IDF intelligence) and representatives of the French Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs. In June 1956, they reached an agreement for full Israeli-French cooperation. The French agreed to supply Israel with 200 AMX tanks, 72 additional Mystère IV jets, and a large amount of light weapons and ammunition. On behalf of the State of Israel, the three negotiators signed the agreement, which provided for the immediate supply of all the arms and ammunition for \$80 million, to be paid two years from the date the agreement was signed. Peres signed the acquisition agreement on behalf of the government before he had even received authorization from Ben-Gurion or Eshkol.<sup>27</sup> Neither the defense nor finance minister envisaged such a swift and complete French response. When the delegation members returned to Israel and updated Ben-Gurion, he realized the magnitude of their success, and was not deterred by the high price that Israel would have to pay for the deal—an amount equaling almost one-fifth of the country's budget.<sup>28</sup> He told the group that it was "a somewhat dangerous adventure. but what is to be done? Our whole existence is such."<sup>29</sup>

On July 24, 1956, about a month after the agreement was signed, the first shipment of French arms reached the Kishon port in Haifa. Other shipments soon followed, including Vautour fighter jets. Consequently, Israel was prepared for war, at least from the point of view of the strategic military balance. The IDF's dramatic victory in the 1956 Sinai Campaign constituted unequivocal proof of this.

Because of the arms agreement signed between Israel and France in the spring of 1956, not only was military parity achieved between Israel and Arab states, but France was now considered Israel's strategic ally.<sup>30</sup> The alliance between the two countries became stronger still, reaching its peak in the three agreements that enabled Israel to join the nuclear club.<sup>31</sup> On December 12, 1956, one month after the end of the Sinai Campaign, the first agreement was signed between the two states in which France committed itself to extending industrial and technical aid to Israel through the establishment of a nuclear reactor for research purposes that

would operate on natural uranium provided by France. On August 21, 1957, a second agreement was signed in which the two countries agreed to cooperate on the manufacture of nuclear weapons. In the third agreement, signed the following October, all the military aspects of the issue were summarized, including the establishment of a facility for separating plutonium. Many years passed before the idea came to fruition and a nuclear bomb was developed, but these agreements constituted proof of the close alliance between Israel and France.

## II

Charles de Gaulle's rise to power in the second half of 1958 was a turning point in the special relations that had developed between Israel and France. The French president wished to normalize relations with Arab states, and that was bound to occur at Israel's expense. After an agreement was signed between France and Egypt on August 22, 1958, the president and particularly his foreign minister, Maurice Couve de Murville, strove to change the nature of the relationship between France and Israel. This was felt in various realms but was most prominently manifested in the nuclear issue. De Gaulle wanted to halt French assistance to Israel's nuclear program and its aid in the construction of a nuclear reactor in Dimona.<sup>32</sup>

From that point on, various circles in the Israeli administration began to criticize Israel's French orientation. Political heavyweights, such as Foreign Minister Golda Meir, Finance Minister Levi Eshkol, IDF Chief of Staff Haim Laskov and the head of the military operations branch at GHQ, as well as Yitzhak Rabin, considered that policy a mistake and maintained that it needed to be balanced or altered. They were convinced that de Gaulle's foreign policy would sabotage Israeli-French relations. In their eyes, depending on only one country was a grave error. They insisted that Israel establish parallel relations with the US and attempt to convince the Americans to become Israel's principal weapons supplier. Israel, they believed, needed to come under Washington's patronage. Their struggle did not succeed, chiefly because the Americans refused to change their policy and supply the strategic weapons that the IDF required, and were certainly not willing to contribute to the development of Israel's nuclear capabilities. Another reason for their failure was Ben-Gurion's steadfastness in preserving Israel's French orientation; the unremitting support of senior IDF officers, led by the commander of the Air Force, Ezer Weizman, as well as of the head of IDF intelligence, Chaim Hezog, and Peres, who had been promoted to the position of deputy defense minister in 1959. Those Francophiles ensured that France's demand for exclusivity with regard to supplying weapons to Israel was met.<sup>33</sup>

Peres, for example, exerted pressure on Meir and Ben-Gurion to immediately cease “putting out feelers,” as they were constantly doing, regarding the possible acquisition of arms from the Americans,<sup>34</sup> as this could insult the French and cause them to change their mind about supplying Israel with the arms it required.

However, Meir was not worried about the warnings—and her strong distaste for Peres, which dated back to the outset of her tenure as foreign minister, actually spurred her to act in the opposite direction. She did negotiate with the French and did not stop complimenting its leaders on their friendship with Israel. When she met de Gaulle in early August 1958, she praised and exalted France and its people and promised Israel’s eternal friendship.<sup>35</sup> But, at the same time, she did not trust him. Meir did not attribute much significance to the statement of the president at that meeting: “Convey to your government that the deepest and warmest friendship exists between Israel and France and will not change.”<sup>36</sup> She considered those words non-binding and hinted as much to the journalists covering her trip.<sup>37</sup> In her view, relations with France, as with Britain, were based on mutual give-and-take. Israel needed arms as well as British and French political support,<sup>38</sup> and those two countries in decline stood to gain politically from that relationship. But, more importantly, the arms industries in their countries stood to make significant financial gains. The arms brought over from Britain, especially from France, by the IDF were paid for in full, much of it in cash. Beyond the economic aspects, there were also political interests.<sup>39</sup>

This was not the way in which Meir saw the relationship between Israel and the US. In her opinion, Israel was politically and economically dependent on that country, and there was no substitute for that dependence. That was, therefore, the reason she did not hesitate to continue to exert pressure on the Americans to supply the IDF, even if the French, British and West Germans supplied those arms in an almost regular fashion. Nor did she hesitate to demand that Israel be accepted as a member of NATO<sup>40</sup> even after de Gaulle rose to power,<sup>41</sup> though it was clear to her that the French president had his own deep-seated reservations about NATO. She knew that “putting out feelers” to the Americans could actually heighten tensions between France and Israel.

This state of affairs resulted in a continuous rise in tension between Foreign Minister Meir and Peres,<sup>42</sup> both as director-general and, from 1959, as deputy minister of defense—an appointment that greatly increased his political standing.<sup>43</sup> The tension between the two had already existed, but now it was seemingly based on real contrasts between their different political approaches. The foreign minister’s political strategic viewpoint was based on the recognition of the US as the most important and friendly power to Israel,<sup>44</sup> despite the fact that the American administration under Eisenhower and later Kennedy did not always see eye-to-

eye with Israel regarding its political and military strategic objectives. The US tended, for example, to see Egypt as a state with which it should try to establish correct relations and in which to increase American influence in order to compete with the Soviets.<sup>45</sup> Meir also favored an American orientation despite the fact that Ben-Gurion was more inclined to view France as the patron-friend to trust in, chiefly because of the American administration's cool relations with Israel and the president's refusal to meet with him.<sup>46</sup> On more than one occasion, he complained that "it makes political sense for them [the Americans] to support us, but one can never know how the president will act."<sup>47</sup>

To Meir it was clear that France was Israel's main weapons supplier, and therefore France's extremely important role in ensuring Israel's security made it necessary for Jerusalem to cultivate ties with Paris. The same was true of Britain, which also supplied essential weapons to Israel.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, she engaged in fostering relations with the heads of those two countries.<sup>49</sup> However, she had no doubt that at the end of the day, in light of the strategic importance of the US, the Americans would have to replace the. Therefore, not only did she not accept the preference for France as Israel's chief ally as etched in stone, but from the time she entered office,<sup>50</sup> she did not cease to press for a change in the current policy that would lead Israel to an American orientation. But the heads of the US administration made it difficult for her. In the president's global vision, as was manifested in the Eisenhower Doctrine, which was declared on January 5, 1957 and ratified by the two American houses of Congress, Israel constituted a part of the Western world; therefore, as US Special Envoy to the Middle East James Richards<sup>51</sup> explained to Foreign Minister Meir (the text of which was made into an official document by the two countries),<sup>52</sup> if the USSR were to attack Israel directly, the US would consider this a "clear case of a Communist attack and the president would take action."<sup>53</sup> She suspected that the Americans did not really mean that. "Behind closed doors," she complained to de Gaulle at her meeting with him, "the Americans want to create the impression that they will not abandon Israel, but they did not say that explicitly," and on the day of reckoning, in her estimation, they might shirk their responsibility,<sup>54</sup> despite the fact that the secretary of state's staff made sure to convey to her that "the integrity and independence of Israel are crucial to America... the president of the United States will stand by Israel's side if it is attacked, even to the point of sending in the military."<sup>55</sup> Meir was not convinced, and a clear justification for that skepticism, in her opinion, was the administration's staunch refusal to supply weapons to the IDF.<sup>56</sup> Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was, however, prepared to have his country aid Israel in funding<sup>57</sup> the acquisition of arms, but this did not make Meir any less doubtful of the sincerity of the Americans' desire to nurture relations with Israel.

Eventually, the pressure she exerted in her frequent conversations with Dulles, his successor, Christian Herter,<sup>58</sup> other government leaders<sup>59</sup> and heads of the Senate and the Congress, coupled with Egypt's closer leaning to the Soviets, succeeded in thawing the ice somewhat. In 1957, the Americans began to provide economic aid to Israel once again, including large shipments of surplus food, which they had stopped sending at the end of the previous year in protest over Israel's steps toward war.<sup>60</sup> During the latter half of 1958, it was clear that the American president was going to change US policy regarding military aid as well, although in a less drastic way. The first indication of this change occurred when Eisenhower agreed to assist Israel in purchasing heavy weapons from Britain.<sup>61</sup> Later, Washington supplied Israel directly with 100 106 mm recoilless artillery pieces<sup>62</sup> and on September 29, 1959, Meir met with Herter. They agreed that Israel would specify to the US administration which weapons the IDF sought.<sup>63</sup> Later, President Kennedy agreed to supply Hawk missiles to Israel, but it was a long time before the US became the IDF's chief weapons supplier.

### III

It was actually military personnel, headed by Chief of Staff Laskov and the head of Military Operations Yitzhak Rabin, who came to Meir's aid in her argument with Peres.<sup>64</sup> They preferred American arms (with the exception of Mirage fighter jets) because they did not believe that France had the appropriate quantity or quality of weapons with which to confront Egypt's Soviet-made weapons. The most sophisticated tank manufactured by France was the AMX-13. It was inferior to the American-made Patton tank and was not suitable, in their opinion, for Israel's needs, particularly after the Egyptians and Syrians had received shipments of the state-of-the-art Soviet T-54 and T-55 tanks. The IDF even preferred the obsolescent British Centurion tank over its French counterpart.<sup>65</sup>

However, after Dayan retired from the army and entered politics (on January 1, 1958), Peres became the most influential individual in the defense establishment, and even the support of Laskov and other high-ranking military officers for the foreign minister's position was of no avail. The ambitious Peres wielded great influence over Ben-Gurion, through which he was able to neutralize the opposition of the army generals and, thus, also that of Meir. He even had his "own" officers in the general staff who supported his approach, including Chaim Herzog, Ezer Weizman,<sup>66</sup> and later also Chief of Staff Zvi ("Tchera") Zur, Laskov's successor.<sup>67</sup> Like Peres, Weizman viewed the acquisition of American arms as a "wish that is far from being fulfilled."<sup>68</sup>

According to Peres, the alliance forged between Israel and France in mid-1956 not only caused a situation in which the IDF was supplied with ample weapons and

ammunition, but, no less important, also one in which Israel was able to start building the atomic reactor in Dimona, which was supposed to enable Israel to eventually develop nuclear weapons within a few years. He was convinced that despite de Gaulle's opposition to the development of Israel's atomic program, France would continue to support Israel militarily and politically, would supply the coveted Mirage jets, and would even support, in its own way, Israel's nuclear program. On the other hand, he had no doubt that Washington would oppose Jerusalem's nuclear program even more vehemently than Paris; therefore, in his opinion, Israel must not change over to an American orientation. Moreover, he opined that Israel should make every effort to preserve the Israeli–French alliance, though if France, for example, could not supply certain weapons to Israel, it should buy them from Britain or Germany. Ordering weapons and equipment from the US could sabotage these efforts, he thought, since an acquisition of this type could be viewed very negatively in France, which considered the American defense contractors a threat to its own lucrative trade.

In order to bypass the opposition of those two individuals to his policy with regard to the French orientation, Peres was aided by Weizman, who was in effect the person who determined the IDF's long-term purchasing policy. Since his appointment as commander of the airforce in 1958, Weizman implemented an independent policy that sometimes led to clashes with Laskov, and later with Rabin. As a close associate of Peres, and particularly due to the fact that the two did not hold the chief of staff in especially high esteem, they knew, each in his own way, how to neutralize opinions differing from their own, such as those of Laskov and Rabin, and to make their opinions acceptable to the defense minister.<sup>69</sup> Weizman's only wish at that stage was to buy a hundred French Mirage jets, instead of the sixteen or twenty-four with which Laskov and Rabin had made due.<sup>70</sup>

These two approaches—the Francophile and the pro-American—first came into head-to-head confrontation in the winter of 1960. In advance of an upcoming meeting between Ben-Gurion and President Eisenhower, the Israeli prime minister met with Laskov and Rabin, who told him that “every effort should be made to break the ‘American ring’ that closes off to us the source of weapons from the US.”<sup>71</sup> Laskov even prepared a detailed list of military equipment to be requested from the Americans, with two Hawk anti-aircraft missile batteries topping the list. Rabin, who had just returned from a wide-ranging and conclusive visit to the French military, apparently told Ben-Gurion at that meeting how he had described to the top French brass the threats facing Israel. He explained to them why the IDF needed sophisticated French arms,<sup>72</sup> and from their response he got the clear impression that his hosts, although they did not refuse his requests and understood Israel's situation (particularly the IAF's need for Mirage fighter jets), were mired

in their own war against the underground in Algeria. His impression was that France would make every effort to find partners in the Arab world (particularly in Egypt) to aid in its suppression of the underground; therefore, he came to the conclusion that the close bond between Israel and France was in danger.<sup>73</sup>

It was against the backdrop of this serious evaluation that Rabin went to Ben-Gurion—and apparently that was how he succeeded in convincing him to attempt to purchase American arms. No wonder, then, that when Peres heard about the conversation between the defense minister, chief of staff, and head of military operations, he vehemently opposed their request. This was mainly due to his fear that their chances of acquiring Mirage jets would be harmed, as would Israel's nuclear program, which was faced with de Gaulle's opposition. With Weizman's support, and that of Herzog, who defined the relationship between Israel and the US as "gripped by hysteria,"<sup>74</sup> he tried to persuade Ben-Gurion not to agree to the entreaties of Laskov and Rabin, claiming that France and its leaders would take a very negative view of Israel's acquisition of American arms at the expense of purchases in France.

Ben-Gurion actually accepted the approach of the chief of staff and the head of military intelligence and conveyed their request to the American president. But, at that meeting with Eisenhower, he also noted that Israel did not intend to consider the US the IDF's principal weapons supplier. The president did, indeed, promise Ben-Gurion that he would supply defensive equipment<sup>75</sup> to the IDF, including two Hawk missile systems, which the IDF greatly needed. Not only was Laskov's and Rabin's success a partial one—in that Ben-Gurion himself remarked to the president that Israel viewed France as its main weapons supplier—but a short time later it became apparent to them that that success was irrelevant. Peres did ultimately convince Ben-Gurion not to change his policy toward France because he presented reasoning based on the assumption that de Gaulle, who sought to halt French support of the construction of the reactor in Dimona (but had only made verbal expressions of his desire to do so at that point), would soon turn his words into actions. This was especially so after French Foreign Minister Couve de Murville told the Israeli ambassador to France on May 14, 1960 that his government had decided not to supply uranium to Israel in the future. Moreover, he hinted that the purchase of Mirage jets was also in jeopardy.<sup>76</sup> This was enough to exert double pressure on Israel and to convey a clear message regarding the nuclear issue via France's refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Israel's development of atomic weapons. France also conveyed its protest over Israel's military contacts with the US and its fear that the French arms industry would suddenly lose one of its largest customers.

Israel, via Peres, and with the wholehearted agreement of the prime minister, made it clear to the French that it would not change its acquisition policy as it stood since 1956. This led the French government to immediately consent to supplying twenty-four Mirage jets to Israel, which were delivered at a festive ceremony on May 11, 1960. One month later, Ben-Gurion, accompanied by Peres, traveled to France for a policy meeting with French leaders to clarify the issue. During his meetings, he realized that just three months after his talks with the US president, an entirely different dynamic was being created. During his two meetings with de Gaulle, Ben-Gurion was promised by the French president, after having been expressly asked to do so by the Israeli prime minister, that France would continue its pro-Israel stance, including supplying all arms and fighter jets needed by Israel in the future.<sup>77</sup> Because of de Gaulle's continued opposition to the construction of the nuclear reactor in Dimona, the two agreed that Israel would not begin building an atomic bomb but that construction on the reactor would continue,<sup>78</sup> and, no less important, that in the future, "new arrangements would be made for scientific cooperation,"<sup>79</sup> as Herzog, the head of military intelligence, put it. The practical significance of those "arrangements" was the continued cooperation between France and Israel on the nuclear issue.

On December 29, 1960, Peres was able to claim another achievement after reaching an agreement with the French, whereby Israel would continue to develop its nuclear capabilities and France would not prevent the companies that had thus far assisted Israel in that endeavor from continuing their work. The agreement, which was updated again in February 1961, stated that France would not renege on the three agreements it had signed with Israel. This signified that the attempt to divert Israel's foreign policy to an American orientation was finally over. To those ministers in the Israeli government, most notably Golda Meir, and heads of the security establishment, led by Rabin, who had demanded such a change, there was no choice left but to accept the prime minister's decision at Peres' urging regarding the continued French orientation of Israel's foreign and weapons acquisition policies. The Francophiles had won, at least for now.

Translated from the Hebrew by Yvette Shumacher

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Yossi Goldstein, *Eshkol, Biographia* (Tel Aviv, 2003), p. 602.
- <sup>2</sup> See TASS statement, October 2, 1955, *Soviet News*, October 3, 1955, reprinted in *Documents on International Affairs* (1955), pp. 375–376.
- <sup>3</sup> See Zack Levi, "Ha'orientatzia shel Yisrael Bemidiniut Hachutz," unpublished doctoral dissertation submitted to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1993), pp. 57–61.
- <sup>4</sup> Yitzhak Greenberg, *Cheshbon Ve'otzma: Takziv Habitachon Memilchama Lemilchama, 1957–*

1967 (Tel Aviv, 1997).

- <sup>5</sup> Moshe Sharett's speech to the Knesset, October 18, 1955.
- <sup>6</sup> On the differences of opinion between Sharett and Ben-Gurion, see Gabriel Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett: Biography of a Political Moderate* (New York, 1996).
- <sup>7</sup> See Moshe Sharett, *Yoman Isbi*, Vol. IV, Yaakov Sharett (ed.), entry of October 13, 1955 (Tel Aviv, 1978), p. 1214.
- <sup>8</sup> Several theories exist as to Ben-Gurion's strategic intentions. See, for example, Mordechai Bar-On, *Sha'arei Aza: Mediniut Habitachon Vebachutz shel Medinat Yisrael, 1955–1957* (Tel Aviv, 1992) pp. 13–27, 54–75; Moti Golani, *Tibye Milchama Bakayitz...: Haderech Lemilchemet Sinai, 1955–1956* (Tel Aviv, 1998), Chapter 1; Benny Morris, *Milchemet Hagvul shel Yisrael 1949–1956* (Tel Aviv, 1996), p. 382 onwards; Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion*, Vol. 3, (Tel Aviv, 1977) p. 1148 and onwards.
- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, Sharett's conversation with Isser Harel, October 9, 1955, Moshe Sharett, op.cit., note 7, p. 1200.
- <sup>10</sup> See Zack Levi, op. cit., pp. 51–76.
- <sup>11</sup> On April 24, 1955, Defense Minister Ben-Gurion stated in a government meeting that "we have one natural friend....and that is France," Protocol of government meeting, Israel State Archives (ISA). However, he still did not give up completely on the idea of forging a defense alliance between Israel and the US. See Ben-Gurion Diaries (BGD), entry of May 12, 1955.
- <sup>12</sup> For more on this topic, see Herbert Druks, *The Uncertain Friendship: The US and Israel from Roosevelt to Kennedy* (London, 2001), pp. 153–173; Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (New York, 1993), pp. 49–55.
- <sup>13</sup> See N. Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy*, Vol. IV (London, 1987); Uri Bialer, "David Ben-Gurion u-Moshe Sharett: Hitgabshut Shtei Orientatziot Mediniot Uvitchoniot Bechevra Hayisraelit," *Medina Umimshal Yachasim Beinleumim*, II (1972), 74–81; Gabriel Sheffer, "Sharett, Ben-Gurion Vemilchemet Habreira be-1956," *Medina Umimshal Yachasim Beinleumim*, XXVII (1987), 7–27.
- <sup>14</sup> See Ben-Gurion's letter to Ada Golomb, February 2, 1957, Ben-Gurion Archives (BGA).
- <sup>15</sup> *Haaretz*, January 25, 1956; *The Times*, January 19, 1956.
- <sup>16</sup> Ben-Gurion Diary, entry of July 17, 1956, BGA.
- <sup>17</sup> *Haaretz*, February 17, 1956.
- <sup>18</sup> See Sharett's letter to Ben-Gurion, October 30, 1955, BGA.
- <sup>19</sup> Sharett reported to the government on the failed talks with the Americans regarding weapons supplies, and a detailed and extended discussion on the matter took place in two government meetings held on December 21 and 25, 1955, ISA. For more on current Israel–France and Israel–US relationships, see Uri Bialer, "Top Hat, Tuxedo and Cannons: Israel Foreign Policy from 1948 to 1956," in Moshe Lissak (ed.) *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz Israel since 1882, Vol. 4* (Jerusalem, 2009), pp. 634–701; Uri Bialer, "Ben-Gurion Ve-sheelat Ha-orientatzia Ha-beinleumit shel Yisrael 1948–1956," *Katedra*, XLIII (March, 1987), 170–171.

- <sup>20</sup> See minutes of the meeting convened by Ben-Gurion to clarify Israel's procurement needs, which took place on December 1, 1955, BGA file "Weekly Meeting Protocols."
- <sup>21</sup> Moshe Dayan, *Avnei Derech: Autobiographia* (Tel Aviv, 1976), p. 209.
- <sup>22</sup> Benyamin Pinkus, *Me'ambivalentiut Lebrit Bilti Ketuva: Yiשראל, Tzarfat Ve'yehudei Tzarfat 1947–1957* (Sde Boker, 2005), pp. 468–485; Levi, op. cit., pp. 123–164.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, the report of the foreign and security policy makers who participated in the meeting, including Ben-Gurion, Sharett, Walter Eitan, Moshe Dayan, Ya'akov Tzur, and others, ISA B/16/2539.
- <sup>24</sup> Details on Israeli–French relations were taken from Sylvia Crosbie, *A Tacit Alliance: France and Israel from Suez to the Six Day War* (Princeton, 1974); Benyamin Pinkus op. cit., p. 269 onwards.
- <sup>25</sup> See Ya'akov Tzur, *Yoman Paris: Hama'aracha Ha'diplomatit Betzarfat 1955–1956* (Tel Aviv, 1968).
- <sup>26</sup> See Yosef Evron's descriptions of Peres' activity and resourcefulness in Yosef Evron, *Be'yon Sagrir* (Tel Aviv, 1968), p. 30 onwards; Bar-Zohar op. cit., III, p. 1171 onwards; Dayan op. cit., p. 185 onwards.
- <sup>27</sup> Dayan, op. cit., p. 207.
- <sup>28</sup> See BGD, July 17, 1956.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Zack Levi, op. cit., pp. 247–249; Benyamin Pinkus, op. cit., pp. 457–678.
- <sup>31</sup> The details about the development of Israel's nuclear capability were taken from Avner Cohen, "Kennedy, Ben-Gurion, Ve'hakrav Al Dimona: April–Yuni 1963," *Iyunim Betkumat Yiשראל* Vol. 6 (1996), 110–146; Avner Cohen, *Yiשראל Ve'haptzata* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 2000); Avner Cohen, *Hataboo Ha'acharon: Sod Hamtzav Hagar'ini shel Yiשראל Uma Tzarich La'aso Ito* (Tel Aviv, 2005); Zaki Shalom, "Memediniut 'Profile Namuch' Le'estrategiat Haktisha—Mimshal Kennedy Vehityachasuto Le'peiluta Hagar'init shel Yiשראל, 1962–1963," *Iyunim Betkumat Yiשראל, Vol. 5* (2005), 126–164; Zaki Shalom, *Bein Dimona le'Washington: Hama'avak Al Pituach Ha'optzia Hagar'init shel Yiשראל 1960–1968*, (Sde Boker, 2004).
- <sup>32</sup> See Ben-Gurion's comments at a meeting of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that took place on August 19, 1958, ISA A/3/7566, Protocol 34 C.
- <sup>33</sup> See, for example, BGD entry of October 29, 1958.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., October 27, 1957.
- <sup>35</sup> Golda Meir's comments at a government meeting held on August 25, 1958, ISA; Description of a conversation between de Gaulle and Meir that took place on August 6, 1958, in a telegram from Ya'akov Tzur to Ben-Gurion, ISA Foreign Ministry file FM/6/2348; *The New York Times*, August 6, 1958.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Arel Ginai, "Madua Mocheret Britania Neshek Yami Le'Yiשראל," *Yedioth Abaronoth*, August 29, 1958.
- <sup>38</sup> Letter from Golda Meir to Eliahu Eilat, January 16, 1958, ISA FM/6/4321.

- <sup>39</sup> See the telegram from Eliahu Eilat to Golda Meir, July 15, 1958, ISA FM/2/2322; Telegram from Michael Comay to Israeli embassies in London and Washington, July 10, 1958, FM /1/2322.
- <sup>40</sup> See memo from Mordechai Gazit to Golda Meir, March 9, 1959, BGA.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> See BGD, entry of November 13, 1958.
- <sup>43</sup> Greenberg, op. cit., p. 151; Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ke'off' Hachol: Shimon Peres, Biographia* (Tel Aviv, 2006), pp. 309–327.
- <sup>44</sup> See, for example, Meir's comments at the meeting with William Rountree and Stuart Rockwell, in which Eban and Herzog were also present. Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, October 2, 1958, Foreign Relation of the United States, Department of State, Washington (FRUS), Vol. XIII, 1958–1960, Arab–Israeli Dispute, pp. 95–97.
- <sup>45</sup> See memo from Avraham Kidron to Foreign Ministry Director-General Chaim Yachil, and to the Prime Minister's Office and Israeli embassies throughout the world, January 4, 1960, BGA.
- <sup>46</sup> BGD, entry of July 22, 1958.
- <sup>47</sup> BGD, entry of July 23, 1958.
- <sup>48</sup> BGD, entry of August 12, 1958.
- <sup>49</sup> BGD, entry of July 18, 1958; also, Meir's comments at the government meeting that took place on August 25, 1958, ISA.
- <sup>50</sup> See, for example, Sharett's comments on this topic in his letter to Ben-Gurion of May 22, 1959, Ben-Gurion Archives.
- <sup>51</sup> Protocol of the conversation between Golda Meir and James Richards, May 3, 1957, ISA FM/33/5935.
- <sup>52</sup> Protocol of government meeting held on May 20, 1957, ISA.
- <sup>53</sup> Meir's comments in the government meeting that took place on May 7, 1957, ISA.
- <sup>54</sup> Meir's comments at the government meeting that took place on August 25, 1958, ISA.
- <sup>55</sup> See Harman's report to Meir on his conversation with Arthur Dean, October 11, 1958, ISA FM/33/5935.
- <sup>56</sup> See, for example, BGD entry of October 28, 1958.
- <sup>57</sup> Minutes of the conversation between Meir and Dulles on October 2, 1958, ISA, FM/33/5935
- <sup>58</sup> See, for example, Meir's conversation with Herter on June 28, 1960, ISA, FM/3/3294.
- <sup>59</sup> See, for example, Meir's report at the government meeting of October 20, 1957
- <sup>60</sup> Letter from Abba Eban to Golda Meir, May 13, 1958, ISA FM/2/3091.
- <sup>61</sup> Minutes from the Meir–Dulles conversation on October 2, 1958, FM/33/5935.
- <sup>62</sup> BGD, October 28 and December 13–14, 1958.
- <sup>63</sup> From a telegram containing a report on a conversation between Meir and Herter, in the presence of Avraham Harman, Lewis Jones and William Hamilton, on September 30, 1959, ISA FM/9/2314; See “Memorandum of a Conversation,” op. cit., pp. 202–203.

- <sup>64</sup> See interview with Zvi Zur (August 16, 2000), Yitzhak Rabin Center, Tel Aviv, pp. 93–95.
- <sup>65</sup> See Yossi Goldstein, *Rabin, Biographia* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 108–116.
- <sup>66</sup> See letter of Haim Ben-David (Ben-Gurion's military adjutant) to members of the military general staff, May 5, 1960, BGA.
- <sup>67</sup> See interview with Zvi Zur, op. cit.
- <sup>68</sup> Ezer Weizman, Dov Goldstein, *Lecha Shamayim, Lechab Aretz* (Tel Aviv, 1975), p. 195.
- <sup>69</sup> Yitzhak Rabin and Dov Goldstein, *Pinkas Sherut*, Vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1979), pp. 104–105.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- <sup>71</sup> Rabin, 1979 (see note 69), p. 105.
- <sup>72</sup> Chaim Herzog, *Derech Chaim: Sipuro shel Lochem, Diplomat Venasi* (Tel Aviv, 1997), p. 192.
- <sup>73</sup> For more on this subject, see Goldstein, op.cit., pp. 108–120.
- <sup>74</sup> Herzog, op.cit., p. 195.
- <sup>75</sup> Report of Avraham Harman to Foreign Minister Golda Meir on the Ben-Gurion–Eisenhower meeting (of March 10, 1960), March 11, 1960, ISA, FM1/6723/130.02.
- <sup>76</sup> Bar-Zohar, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 1373; Mati Golan, *Perez* (Tel Aviv, 1982), p. 105.
- <sup>77</sup> Report on the June 14, 1960 meeting between Ben-Gurion and de Gaulle, BGA.
- <sup>78</sup> Cohen, op. cit., pp. 108–109; Bar-Zohar, op. cit., Vol. 3, pp. 1388–1389.
- <sup>79</sup> Herzog, op. cit., p. 195.

