

[Rubinovitz on Samaan, 'Israel's Foreign Policy beyond the Arab World: Engaging the Periphery'](#)

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Jean-Loup Samaan. *Israel's Foreign Policy beyond the Arab World: Engaging the Periphery.* Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics Series. London: Routledge, 2017. 172 pp. \$140.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-138-09987-6.

Reviewed by Ziv Rubinovitz (Sonoma State University) **Published on** H-Diplo (September, 2018)
Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

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Recently, and particularly following the turmoil in the Arab world since 2011, Israel's relations with several of its neighbors have soured. In light of this, policymakers and researchers have focused more attention on Israel's relations with its periphery, referring back to the concept formed in the late 1950s but reshaped nowadays. The book under review is one of the most thorough studies to date on this issue; however, it is not alone. Another recent book on this topic is *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies* (2015) by former Mossad (Israel's intelligence service) operative Yossi Alpher. There are also articles that cover this issue, many of which are included in the rich bibliography of this volume.[1] Periphery—despite referring to the margins—is one of the core issues in Israel's foreign policy. Israel's relationship to the periphery is connected to its relations with the Arab world. Basically, the worse its relations with Arab states were, the more eager Israel was to warm up to the countries beyond the Arab world though still in the region, in other words, the periphery. But it should be noted that usually, relations are relative; they have context. This is true for any country, especially smaller countries. All of Israel's foreign relations were and are affected by external events, mostly in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The fact that relations are relative affected Israel's relations with both Iran and Turkey, the two most important countries in Israel's periphery outlook. Thus, Arab-Israeli wars usually brought Iran and Turkey to condemn Israel either publicly or privately. Peacemaking processes typically worked in the other direction with Turkey; Turkey signed pacts of cooperation with Israel in the 1990s after the Oslo Process was in motion, because the process eased some of the inherent tension in relations with Israel. Arab-Israeli peace did not affect Iran's relations with Israel, since by early 1979, these relations were already terminated. The author emphasizes that it is the Turkish military that supported relations with Israel. The same is true with Egypt. In the Middle East, military forces have major roles in domestic politics and affect or control foreign policy. For Israel, this is what keeps relations stable. Thus, it was less concerning to Israel who the figurehead in Egypt was, as long as it knew that the military supported peace.

The book covers the conceptual and political origins of the policy since the 1940s and 1950s and the rise and fall of the bilateral relations that were formed under this policy with Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia. It also places the policy in an international relations theory framework, naturally associating it to the realist school. The author, Jean-Loup Samaan, admits the difficulty in making this

association. This seems like an intellectual exercise that might divert the book from a foreign policy analysis. However, the very basic notion that states balance against power or against threats, as Kenneth N. Waltz (*Theory of International Politics* [1979]) and Stephen M. Walt (*The Origins of Alliances* [1987]) discuss in their seminal works, applies also to Israel in its confrontation with the hostile region surrounding it and certainly indicates that Israel acts according to the principles of realism.

The core of the periphery policy was the geopolitical setting in which Israel found itself, based in the center of the Middle East, surrounded by hostile Arab states. This was clear also before the establishment of Israel; therefore, the Jewish community in Palestine reached out to Arab non-Muslim minorities, like the Maronites in Lebanon and the Kurds in Iraq. The other aspect was the connection with non-Arab countries in the second and third tier around Israel. The author details these relations and early conceptual foundations throughout the book.

Nevertheless, Samaan correctly states that the concept of periphery was never defined clearly by Israeli politicians; therefore, there are various takes on which countries (except Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia, which scholars and practitioners agree on) and ethnic or religious minorities (except for the Iraqi Kurds and the Lebanese Maronites) were part of the policy. As a result, some studies include Morocco—an Arab and Muslim country, but geographically remote—in the periphery,[2] while others do not. In the same spirit, current relations that Israel has with Arab states—mostly in the Persian Gulf region—are in the region but remote from Israel and are included in several studies as part of the periphery.[3] The problem of conceptual overstretching is common in social sciences.[4] Israel's periphery seems to be marching on this path too.

In the case in question here, the periphery has two different meanings that do not sit well together. On the one hand, it refers to geography, and basically deals with Israel's reaching out to countries in the second and third tier around it, as a means to balance the hostility of its immediate neighbors. One exception is on Israel's eastern front, where, beyond Jordan with which Israel has had complicated relations since its inception, lays Iraq, a second-tier state that has been most hostile to Israel, thus Israel reached out to Iran (a third-tier state) to balance Iraq.[5] On the other hand, the periphery refers to non-state actors—namely, ethnic and religious minorities, some of them in first- and second-tier states. These are not based on geography but on ethnicity and religion, and fundamentally refer to non-Muslims (such as the Maronites in Lebanon) or the Kurds. The strategic reasons for contacting the Iraqi Kurds were to get them to rebel against Baghdad, so that Iraq's army will be distracted, and to gather intelligence on the Iraqi regime and help Jews fleeing Iraq. Israel had access to the Iraqi Kurds through Iran until 1975, when Iran and Iraq signed a deal that included Iran terminating its support for the Iraqi Kurds, thus also winding down Israel's. Samaan records a renewal of Israel-Kurdish relations in the 2000s, but his account falls short in documenting important developments from recent years, most important is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's endorsement of Kurdish independence starting in 2014, which not only does not align with US policy (more on this aspect follows) but also seems to support secession, which for obvious reasons Israel had been against since 1967.[6]

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was the political father of the concept of engaging the periphery. The author cites his biographer Michael Bar-Zohar who briefly discussed the concept of improving relations with the periphery and perhaps the most important part in creating the regional

non-Arab alliance: selling it to the United States, specifically to President Dwight Eisenhower. By presenting this to Eisenhower, Ben-Gurion tried to market Israel as a strategic asset, associated with two regional US allies: Iran (under the shah) and Turkey. In 1958, when Israel pursued the alliance and Ben-Gurion wrote to Eisenhower, the United States was keeping a distance from Israel as it attempted to court Arab countries, particularly Egypt. This was also two years after the 1956 Sinai War, which struck a serious rift in US-Israel relations. Ben-Gurion wanted to be invited to the White House to discuss the deal, but never was.[7] Hence, in this aspect, the periphery policy failed immediately. But in other aspects it was quite successful, at least for a while. There was a mismatch between Ben-Gurion's expectations and US expectations from the peripheral alliances. Ben-Gurion wanted Israel's periphery policy to help open the door for Israel in Washington, while the United States wanted bilateral relations between Israel and Iran and between Israel and Turkey to work for the benefit of the West and the US itself, though not necessarily as a tripartite alliance; thus it encouraged Iran and Turkey to cooperate with Israel.

Being sidelined by the United States virtually for its whole first decade of existence made Israel anxious. Without superpower backing, and with a hostile surrounding that was openly discussing a second round of war with Israel in order to eliminate it, led by the charismatic Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser who was calling for unity of the Arab world behind him, Israel felt the urge to reach out to the non-Arab states who also had issues with Nasser. The realist view that the enemy of one's enemy is one's friend proved true. But this means that the mutual enemy may cease to be an enemy, putting the balancing alliance against him into question, as indeed happened. Samaan discusses this well in the book. But there is a broader context that could have been discussed more carefully, in my view. That is that all of Israel's relations—with the Arabs, with the peripheral states or peoples, and with the broader international community—depend on the Arab world. This is true in relation to not only the periphery, which the book deals with, but also the international community. Countries—including great powers and superpowers—were forced to decide whether to have relations with Israel or not.[8] Israel understood that it needed to market itself in alliance with other states, while it was still vulnerable and far weaker than it became in later years. Israel's peripheral relations, in other words, were not just in context with its relations with the Arab world but also in context with its global standing. This aspect is underdeveloped in Samaan's account.

There was only one short-lived aspect in the periphery, as described by Samaan, that went beyond bilateral relations, and that was Trident, an intelligence sharing pact of the Israeli, Turkish, and Iranian intelligence services. Apparently, Israel was doing most of the talking, and did not get much in exchange. Thus, as much as Israel would have wanted to form a regional alliance, it became impossible given the limited cooperation of the potential allies. They also preferred these relations to remain as quiet as possible, given their relations with Arab states that made relations with Israel problematic, even if desired. As detailed throughout the book, it was usually Israel's partners who insisted on maintaining relations through the intelligence services and not the foreign ministries.

Jumping to recent developments, in the section discussing China, the author quotes Israeli minister Naftali Bennett saying that in meetings in China (in 2013, while he was minister of economy) his delegation was not asked even once about the Palestinians or the occupation, which indicated that China was becoming a friend. The disregard of the Palestinian issue in communication with Israel as a litmus test for sincere relations is noticeable. But is it durable? Would it not be raised at all, ever? It may be an over-reading of a certain decision at a specific time.

But how far can the periphery go? Different studies provide different answers and then include or exclude certain countries and minorities. When it comes to recent years and the apparent revival of the periphery concept, it becomes complicated to make a convincing argument that newer relations bear the same logic as those formed in the late 1950s.

Given the early logic of the periphery policy, the last part of the book is more problematic and less convincing, as the author acknowledges and struggles with. Samaan takes the reader through his dilemmas concerning his investigation and interviews in Israel. This is a fair way to deliver the challenges regarding the topic at hand, although eventually loose ends remain loose. Placing China as part of the periphery seems odd, and even the author writes that these relations seem opportunistic, not strategic. India may work to an extent, but not fully. Their geographic location makes it hard to grasp the logic that the periphery applies to them. If they are included, why not others that are remote as well from the Middle East?

However, it seems logical to view and analyze Israel's relations with Greece and Cyprus, Azerbaijan, and even South Sudan, in context of the periphery policy. Nevertheless, there is no match in any of these countries' locations and geopolitical standing to that of Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia. Certainly, Israel's government is aware of this. But perhaps the new relations on the outskirts of the Middle East are not intended to replace the failed relations from the past. Moreover, it seems more reasonable that Israel does not really need Greece to replace Turkey, Azerbaijan to replace Iran, and certainly not South Sudan to replace Ethiopia, in the role they played in the 1950s. Israel is by far more powerful than in the 1950s and has a stronger political and economic standing than all of its new allies. This makes them instrumental for Israel in countering, but not balancing, its once-allies-now-rivals Iran and Turkey. Does Israel truly need allies to play the role that Turkey and Iran played in the 1950s?

Broadly speaking, the real issue is how Israel sees itself and its relations with the Middle East.[9] Can Israel "feel at home" in the region? Former Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman said once "We're Europe," making clear that in his view—though certainly shared by a plurality if not majority of Israelis—Israel is physically located in the hub of the Middle East, but has virtually nothing to do with it, politically, ideologically, economically, and partly even culturally. This means that Israel did not—and perhaps does not—have incentives in strengthening ties with the surrounding countries, except on the most necessary matters. Otherwise, its economy is Western oriented.

Another issue that is not discussed enough in the book is the apparent coincidence of Israel's loss of its periphery allies and its strengthening relations with Arab countries. The balance seems obvious: until the late 1970s, Israel had not been able to create relations with Arab states and balanced this with its strong relations with non-Arab Middle Eastern states, mostly Turkey and Iran. But in the late 1970s, Israel made its most important strategic alliance with Egypt (this is true in the long run, even though relations have not been very warm since the early 1980s) and lost Iran. In January 1979 the shah left Iran, in February Ayatollah Khomeini founded the Islamic Republic and ceased all ties with Israel, and in March Israel formally signed peace with Egypt, which was in the making since 1977, and actually since 1974.[10] Later, Israel made peace with Jordan (1994) and was intensely pursuing peace with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Oslo Accords, 1993) and with Syria throughout the 1990s and even later. The latter two processes failed, but the point is that Israel was making peace with the surrounding Arab states. Therefore, the need for relations with non-Arabs diminished,

and this became even illogical when Iran became an Islamic Republic that viewed Israel as an enemy and when Turkey had been ruled by the AKP (Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party).

One aspect of the Israel-Iran relations that is not highlighted enough in the book is oil. Being one of the few Middle Eastern countries without oil reservoirs made Israel's quest for oil a national security issue of the highest level. Oil-poor countries went to significant lengths to buy oil. Israel found Iran as an ally based, in part, on oil. Given the rivalry between Iran and Egypt then, Iran was happy to detour the Suez Canal and not pay Egypt for passage of oil tankers on their way to Europe. Israel offered an ideal detour, even though it first demanded laying a pipeline from Eilat, Israel's southern port, to Ashkelon, north of the Gaza Strip. Oil became the most important commodity traded between Israel and Iran. At the peak, in the 1960s, Iran supplied nearly 85 percent of Israel's oil.[11] Israel was virtually totally dependent on Iran, which the Israeli government was unhappy with, but it also indicated a high level of trust in the shah. This was the major concern for Israel when the shah's regime collapsed in late 1978.[12]

Greece is a historic rival of Turkey and there was—as Samaan writes correctly—a balance between them in the Arab-Israeli conflict. When Turkey was close to Israel, Greece was pro-Arab. But since the break of the Israel-Turkey alliance, Greece opened to Israel and now they have a close relationship, whereas Turkey is now a mutual rival in political and energy matters. But in 2016, when Israel and Turkey signed their reconciliation agreement, Greece and Cyprus could not be certain that their new alliance with Israel would be honored—by Israel.[13] This means that they both understand that strategically, they are inferior to Turkey in what they can offer Israel. But since Israel recovered its relations with Turkey but not without suspicion and doubt, Israel had not withdrawn from its alliance with Greece and Cyprus.

The story of Netanyahu's apology to then prime minister (later president) Erdogan in March 2013 for the casualties in the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010 is not accurate. First, the scene was orchestrated by the United States, and it was planned to take place at the Ben-Gurion Airport just before President Barack Obama left Israel, not hours after he departed. The text Netanyahu read on the phone was coordinated with the US, and Obama was present when Netanyahu placed the call. Obama was the key for the rapprochement between the two US allies. Only after the phone call took place, Obama left.[14] This indicates the real motive for the Israeli-Turkish reconciliation: pleasing the US, which goes beyond the Israeli and Turkish interest to cooperate amid regional challenges, particularly the civil war in Syria. But even this cooperation or coordination would be limited. Otherwise, the two countries would not mend their relations, given the ideological and strategic gaps between them. Therefore, it seems that the US factor was most important in this affair, although its effect was only temporary, and relations have not been fully recovered.

There are a few errors in the text: on page 47, in the last full paragraph, it should be resolution 181, not 1981. On page 62, the name of the founder of modern Turkey is Mustapha Kemal Ataturk ("father of the Turks"). On page 79, the Iraqi nuclear reactor was bombed on June 7, 1981, not in September. By then, Israel assessed, it would have been already operative, and therefore immune from strikes out of concern for environmental consequences.

In conclusion, this is a thoughtful book that deals with one of Israel's core foreign policy aspects. It is a good introduction into Israel's foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s and even into recent years,

although some of the cases—as the author recognizes many times—do not fit the patterns of the past. But by looking at these cases, one can perhaps narrow the concept of Israel's periphery policy to a more workable definition for future studies. This book is a worthy starting point.

Notes

[1]. Broad views of the “new periphery” include Yoel Guzansky, “Israel’s Periphery Doctrine 2.0: The Mediterranean Plus,” *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 1 (2014): 99-116; and Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, “Revival of the Periphery Concept in Israel’s Foreign Policy?” *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 2 (2012): 27-40.

[2]. Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel’s Search for Middle East Allies* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), chap. 3.

[3]. This book deals with the Gulf states in chapter 7, citing among others Guzansky, “Israel’s Periphery Doctrine 2.0.”

[4]. On conceptual overstretch, see Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (1970): 1033-1053.

[5]. On the complicated relations between Israel and Jordan, see for instance Avshalom Rubin, *The Limits of the Land: How the Struggle for the West Bank Shaped the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); and Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[6]. Shira Efron, *The Future of Israeli-Turkish Relations*, Report RR2445 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), 32-33, citing public Israeli support of Kurdish independence since 2014, while also noting that in 2017 Israel toned it down due to the unease in Washington after the Kurdish referendum in 2017 over independence. See also Gallia Lindenstrauss and Oded Eran, “The Kurdish Awakening and the Implications for Israel,” *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 1 (2014): 83-93. They argue that despite the potential Palestinian context to Kurdish independence, Israel would recognize a Kurdish state due to the major benefits Israel would have from it in its broader regional relations with Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

[7]. Avi Shlaim, “Israel, the Great Powers, and the Middle East Crisis of 1958,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 27, no. 2 (1999): 188-189; and Michael Bar-Zohar, “David Ben-Gurion and the Policy of the Periphery,” in *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations, Pre-1948 to the Present*, ed. Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, 2nd. ed. (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 197.

[8]. For instance, Japan participated in the Arab boycott on Israel until the 1980s because of its dependence on oil from the Middle East. Jonathan Goldstein, “Israel and Japan: From Erratic Contact to Recognition to Boycott to Normalization,” in *Israel and the World Powers: Diplomatic Alliances and International Relations beyond the Middle East*, ed. Colin Shindler (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 234-263.

[9]. Elie Podeh, "Israel in the Middle East or Israel and the Middle East—a Reappraisal," in *Arab-Jewish Relations: From Conflict to Resolution?*, ed. Elie Podeh and Asher Kaufman (Brighton: Sussex University Press, 2006), 93-113.

[10]. Louise Fischer, "Turning Point on the Road to Peace: The Government of Yitzhak Rabin and the Interim Agreement with Egypt (Sinai II)," *Israel Studies* 19, no. 3 (2014): 55-80.

[11]. Uri Bialer, "Fuel Bridge across the Middle East: Israel, Iran, and the Eilat-Ashkelon Oil Pipeline," *Israel Studies* 12, no. 3 (2007): 29-67.

[12]. Ziv Rubinovitz and Elai Rettig, "Crude Peace: The Role of Oil Trade in the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Negotiations," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2018): 371-382.

[13]. Aryeh Mekel, "Turkish-Israeli Reconciliation Places Greece and Cyprus in a Bind," *Haaretz*, June 28, 2016, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2989466> [in Hebrew].

[14]. Ilai Z. Saltzman, "Honor as Foreign Policy: The Case of Israel, Turkey, and the Mavi Marmara," *International Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2015): 249-273.

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