Rubinovitz on Aran, 'Israeli Foreign Policy since the End of the Cold War'

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Several books analyzing Israeli foreign policy have been published recently.[1] Uri Bialer’s highly acclaimed book, *Israeli Foreign Policy* provided a much-needed framework to understand and analyze Israel’s foreign relations in its early decades, up to the 1980s. Amnon Aran’s book appears to take off where Bialer’s book ends, as it starts in 1990-91, at the end of the Cold War. Aran’s book is a good read into Israeli foreign policymaking and its domestic constraints—particularly concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; therefore, it is a worthy and important addition to the literature.

The book’s conceptual framework argues that there were three strategies that Israel has employed since 1990: entrenchment (under the leadership of Yitzhak Shamir, 1990-92; and Benjamin Netanyahu, 1996-99, 2009-21)—both Likud leaders), engagement (under Yitzhak Rabin, 1992-95; and Shimon Peres, 1995-96—both Labor leaders), and unilateralism (under Ehud Barak, 1999-2001—Labor; Ariel Sharon, 2001-06—Likud and later centrist Kadima; and Ehud Olmert, 2006-09—Kadima). The lion’s share of the book discusses in detail the post-Cold War Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the numerous efforts to resolve it peacefully. This makes Aran’s book a go-to source on this aspect of Israel’s foreign policy. Aran analyzes every turn in the negotiations, and the main takeaway is that domestic political constraints and considerations tempered with peacemaking, referring mostly to right-wing parties and politicians who had enough political power to do so. This is not a surprising conclusion, but it isn’t the whole story. Considerable security and political concerns played a genuine role in Israel’s reluctance to make more concessions under any of the abovementioned prime ministers, even the most dovish—Rabin, Peres, Olmert, and partly, Barak.

The book’s title gives the impression that it analyzes the post-Cold War era, roughly up to present day. But it actually ends with the end of Olmert’s term in 2009. Its main focus is on Israel’s relations with the Palestinians and other Middle Eastern actors. Israel’s relations with great powers like the European Union, China, India, and predominantly, the United States, are presented mostly in context of the Israeli relations in the Middle East. Aran is correct to present Israel’s relations with most of these powers as being heavily impacted by its relations with the Palestinians and to a lesser degree, with other Arab nations. But not everything in these relations is determined by the Palestinian issue. Unfortunately, this is not emphasized enough. Oddly, relations with Russia are not discussed at all despite the fact that the latter came back to the Middle East after decades of exclusion and plays an important role for Israel in different aspects, such as being the source for mass immigration (nearly one million people emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel in the 1990s), as well as Russia’s
geopolitical and strategic role in the Middle East.[2]

Despite the common international image, Israel’s foreign policy is not solely focused on the Palestinians. As any other country, Israel has many vital and marginal interests and addresses them simultaneously and continuously. No doubt, the relations with the Palestinians are a central issue on Israel’s agenda, but certainly not the only one. Moreover, in the recent decade it seems that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been sidelined by the empowering of Iran after the Iraq War and the Iranian nuclear program that seems to have progressed quite significantly since US president Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, "Iran nuclear deal") in May 2018. Regional developments have a significant effect on both Israel and the Palestinians, but in Aran’s analysis this aspect is not given sufficient room.

The most recent realignments in the Middle East, including the normalization of relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (the “Abraham Accords”)—and with Morocco and with Sudan (although the latter one seems to be suspended)—and the mostly covert rapprochement with Saudi Arabia prove the point that with the growing mutual fear of Iran, Israel managed to broaden and deepen its relations in the Arab world without resolving first the Palestinian issue.[3] In other words, not all of Israel’s relations with the Arab countries are tied to the Palestinians.

As much as relations with one’s neighbors are important for any country, the decades-long Arab hostility toward Israel led the latter to focus on its relations with the greater world, and particularly with the United States. Aran refers to this but does not provide a thorough analysis of Israel’s standing in US public opinion or its relations with the Jewish community that used to be Israel’s strongest ally, and does not discuss the partisan divide over Israel between Democrats and Republicans that has had significant impact on Israel’s foreign policy.[4] The analysis too often overlooks the role of inputs from the United States that are vital to understanding Israel’s policy at any given period.

For instance, on June 14, 2009, Netanyahu gave his Bar Ilan speech (p. 389). But Aran provides no context for this significant statement. Ten days earlier, US president Barack Obama gave his landmark Cairo speech, which laid down Obama’s vision for the Middle East. It put immense political pressure on Netanyahu to respond. The Bar Ilan speech was Netanyahu’s response. One cannot understand its role and content without Obama’s Cairo speech.[5]

I wish to highlight four key shortcomings. First, as mentioned above, the analysis ends with the end of Ehud Olmert’s term as prime minister in 2009, not with Benjamin Netanyahu’s following twelve-year era as prime minister, which is summarized in the epilogue. This is odd because Netanyahu turned out to be the most important figure in Israeli politics in the post-Cold War era and his long term as prime minister deserves a careful study. The Netanyahu era is significant for the understanding of Israel and its foreign relations nowadays.[6] The epilogue provides an overview of several key issues from Netanyahu’s long term but does not offer a detailed analysis.

The second shortcoming of the book is the insufficient discussion of Iran—Israel’s greatest concern in the last twenty if not thirty years—that is scarcely discussed (pp. 101-102, 217-218, 396-399). There are very few consensual issues in Israel’s foreign policy. The threat posed by Iran—the nuclear program, Hizballah in Lebanon, and Iran’s sponsorship of the Assad regime in Syria—are among
them, alongside the importance of relations with the United States. Iran became a “trademark” issue for Netanyahu, who served as prime minister more than fifteen years in total, but it wasn’t “his” alone.[7] The current Israeli government holds a similar view of Iran, and differs only in some of the means to cope with it. Many of Israel’s clandestine and overt actions against Iran were conducted under other prime ministers. Surprisingly, this is scarcely discussed in the book.[8] The Iran nuclear program raises serious foreign policy questions for Israel, such as: How should Israel deal with the possible Iranian nuclear capability if Iran indeed enriches enough uranium? What would happen with Israeli nuclear opacity and ambiguity? What might be the necessary tradeoffs in other arenas for Israel to cope with a nuclear Iran?

The third issue is the imbalance between Israel’s regional and extraregional relations. The book focuses on regional relations and only briefly analyzes Israel’s relations beyond the Middle East. However, due to the early Arab hostility, Israel sought relations with the greater world, particularly with great powers, with the United States being the most important. But only part of these relations is tied to the Palestinians or the Arab-Israeli conflict. And even relations that started after Israel began reconciling with its neighbors—as with China and India—went well beyond the Arab-Israeli context. This seems to be the case with India and its strategic alliance with Israel in the last twenty years.[9]

Unlike its relations with other great powers, Israel prefers to strengthen its ties with the United States over making hard decisions and concessions to the Palestinians or other Arab nations, and numerous times Israel did just that—hardened its positions vis-à-vis its Arab counterpart and invested in the relations with the United States. This is not something Israel invented in the post-Cold War era. From the beginning of the peace process with Egypt in the mid- and late 1970s, a key goal for Jerusalem was to strengthen its relations with Washington, even at the expense of reaching a deal with Egypt at that time, although reaching peace with Egypt was indeed the ultimate goal.[10] Aran’s book doesn’t reflect this balance between the United States and the Arabs in Israel’s mind.

The fourth and final shortcoming is that there isn’t enough emphasis on how the international structural change—from the Cold War to American hegemony with the disintegration of the Soviet Union—impacted Israel and its neighbors (especially Soviet clients like Syria). This shift was a tectonic change. In chapter 1, Aran discusses how the Shamir government didn’t see any difference with the end of the Cold War, but that was incorrect, as Shamir quickly found out with the increasing pressure applied by Secretary of State James Baker to attend the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991. Israel was born into the Cold War and, like most if not all new countries, it had to relate to the superpowers’ confrontation. Israel leaned toward the United States, certainly after it ended its era of neutrality (1948-50).[11] And after more than forty years of a Cold War mind-set, it had to adjust to the new reality and rethink its role in the US worldview. There is no discussion of this change. How did the United States view Israel once the Cold War ended? Was Israel a liability for US relations with the Arab nations? If so, did it understand this? How did Arab countries view the situation and what signals did they send to Washington and Jerusalem? Clearly, after Labor won the 1992 elections, Israel’s worldview changed, as Aran correctly demonstrates. But the global context of this change should have been made more explicit.

Finally, one more point should be mentioned: In the recent decade, Syria’s ongoing civil war and Iran’s and Russia’s heavy presence in Syria has become another major issue on Israel’s foreign policy
agenda. This goes unmentioned in the book despite being a key development in the region and in Israel’s outlook.

The book contains a few factual errors. For instance, there was no “third Sharon government” (p. 317). It was the thirtieth government before and after January 10, 2005, when Labor replaced Shinui as the Likud’s partner in the government and Labor ministers took the oath of office.[12] So this was not a new government, which is what the author’s use of the term “inauguration” implies.

Regarding sources used, the author conducted many interviews with former Israeli politicians and aides (the list is in the appendix), which have provided most of the new information this book offers. However, he heavily relies on these interviews and memoirs by state officials. While the bibliography is very rich, it lacks many studies and accounts of the processes he is analyzing that could have helped in solidifying the story.[13] There is also a large body of journalistic accounts that could have helped in telling the story of the events but is scarcely used. While archived documents are not open to research on this era, these sources are vital.

In summary, this book provides a rich analysis about a key issue on Israel’s foreign policy agenda, but this comes at the expense of the broader picture and the tradeoffs for Israel between the Middle East arena and elsewhere. The lack of a thorough analysis of Netanyahu’s twelve-year term leaves the reader with insufficient details and analysis to truly understand where Israel stands at the present day, shortly after Netanyahu was replaced.

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Notes

[1]. To name just the most recent: Uri Bialer, Israeli Foreign Policy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); and Emmanuel Navon, The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2020).


[6]. For an analysis of Netanyahu’s era, see Robert O. Freedman, ed. *Israel under Netanyahu*.


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