

By Michael Desch  
All rights reserved.

**Chapter 4:**  
**Democracy and Israel's Military Effectiveness**  
[2nd Draft – December 2004]

Introduction

Israel also seems to be a perfect illustration of how democracy helps states wisely select and effectively prosecute wars. Clearly anticipating later triumphalist arguments, Israeli leaders boasted of the military virtues of their open political system. For example, Yigal Allon, the Commander of the *Palmach*, maintained that the fact that Israel was a democracy gave it a number of wartime advantages over the Arabs:

To be a political and social democracy in the midst of backwards, patriarchal, autocratic or dictatorial regimes was by itself an advantage.... The political history of the Middle East has shown that a genuine democracy such as Israel's could command the loyalty of its citizens as the regimes of the Arab countries had never been able to do. It guaranteed (to begin with) their fullest mobilization, both physical and moral, in times of national crisis; it enabled Israel to give arms to each and everyone of her citizens; and it ensured the qualitative superiority of her fighting forces, expressed in their fighting moral, in the qualities of leadership at all levels, and in the efficient use of military equipment. It was conducive to more stable government, and to a greater sense of unity and common purpose. It ensured a conspicuously higher level of government culture and education, of scientific and technological know-how, of basic physical health.<sup>1</sup>

Some contemporary scholars concur with this assessment. "Israel's ability to withstand Arab attempts to destroy it in one of the longest and most lopsided wars ever fought serves as an

---

<sup>1</sup>Yigal Allon, The Making of Israel's Army (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1970) 63.

indelible testimony to the strength of democratic culture” concludes Harvard University Professor Ruth Wisse.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Ruth R. Wisse, “On Ignoring Anti-Semitism,” Commentary (October 2002): 33.

The standard view is that the Jewish state was a small, embattled democracy that repeatedly won its wars in the face of overwhelming odds.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, its major ally the United States supposedly had no real strategic interest in assisting Israel aside from moral obligation and ideological affinity.<sup>4</sup> Finally, of the five wars in the COW/POLITY data-set that seem to indisputably support the triumphalists' view of the war-time superiority of democracy, three

---

<sup>3</sup>Standard military histories of Israel include Edward Luttwak and Dan Horowitz, The Israeli Army (London: Allen Lane, 1975); Trevor N. Dupuy, Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974 (New York: Harper and Row, 1978); and Chaim Herzog, The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the War of Independence Through Lebanon (New York: Vintage, 1982). Kenneth M. Pollack, Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 2 and 4, argues that numbers and other traditional indices of power were irrelevant in the Israeli cases.

<sup>4</sup>Geoffrey Wheatcroft, The Controversy of Zion: Jewish Nationalism, the Jewish State, and the Unresolved Jewish Dilemma (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996), 308. For an argument that shared values and strategic interest are compatible see "Remarks by the President to 1996 American-Israel Public Affairs Committee Policy Conference" (The Washington Hilton Hotel, April 28, 1996).

(1948, 1967, and 1973) involved Israel. Israel is therefore a “most likely” case for the triumphalists’ arguments about democracies’ ability to win wars and a hard case for theories that downplay the importance of regime-type in explaining military effectiveness.<sup>5</sup> If the triumphalists’ theories do not actually explain the outcome in these Israeli cases, there are serious grounds for doubt about them.

In this chapter I will first examine the status of democracy in Israel over the course of its history. Next, I will assess Israel’s military performance in its wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1969-70, 1973, 1982, and 1987-1993. I then show that the specific mechanisms optimists argue account for democracy’s military advantages – selection effects and war-time effectiveness – in fact do not explain Israel’s military performance in these wars. Finally, I conclude by arguing that alternative explanations such as the balance of military forces, the nature of the conflict, emulation, nationalism, and the level of development provide more convincing explanations of Israel’s military performance since 1948.

The general problem with arguing that it was democracy that accounted for Israel’s spectacular record in war time is that it rests on a logical fallacy: Israel is a democracy; Israel has won many of its wars; *ipso facto*, democracy must have been the cause. This is an example of the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Triumphalists have not shown that Israeli democracy

---

<sup>5</sup>Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science” in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Strategies of Inquiry Vol 7. Handbook of Political Science* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 118-19.

increased its likelihood of victory in any of the ways they suggest. In fact, the correlation between Israel's regime type and its military effectiveness could be, and I will show is, spurious.

### Was Israel a Democracy?

The conventional wisdom is that Israel has been a robust democracy from the very beginning of statehood in 1948.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many believe that Israel's democratic roots extend from the pre-state *Yishuv* as far back as biblical times.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting this view, the widely used POLITY data-set, consistently rates Israel as a "high democracy." On its twenty-one point Democracy Composite Index (-10 - 10), Israel scores 10 in 1948, 10 in 1956; 9 in 1967; 9 in 1969-70; 9 in 1973; and 9 in 1982 (the slight drop in Israel's democracy score was the result of its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip after 1967).

While Israel has been politically open for most of its history, this image of it being a consistently robust liberal democracy needs to be substantially qualified. Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak noted that "the democratic element in the ideologies of most movements in the *Yishuv* was mainly on the operative level, while on the fundamental level most parties carried traces of a pre-democratic or even undemocratic position."<sup>8</sup> This was certainly evident in the

---

<sup>6</sup>Howard M. Sacher, A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.] (New York: Knopf, 1996), 359 and Alan Dowty, "Is Israel Democratic? Substance and Semantics in the 'Ethnic Democracy' Debate," Israel Studies Vol. 4, No. 2 (1999) 4.

<sup>7</sup>Ira Sharkansky, "Israeli Democracy and Jewish History," Journal of Church and State Vol. 37, No. 2 (Spring 1995): 1-17.

<sup>8</sup>Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, Origins of the Israel Polity: Palestine Under the

early years of the Jewish state which saw its nearly complete dominance by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and his *Mapai* party.<sup>9</sup> His Labor Party colleague Golda Meir recounted a revealing exchange that highlighted the extent to which Ben Gurion was first among equals in the new Israeli government:

“Peretz Naphtali looked at [Ben Gurion] for a moment, smiled his charming smile and answered thoughtfully, ‘No, I wouldn’t say that [you conduct meetings democratically]. I would say rather that in the most democratic fashion possible, the party always decides to vote the way you want it to.’”<sup>10</sup>

---

Mandate (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 148.

<sup>9</sup>Gerald M. Steinberg, “Interpretation of Jewish Tradition on Democracy, Land, and Peace,” Journal of Church and State Vol. 43, No. 1 (Winter 2001): 2 and Michael Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion: The Armed Prophet Len Ortsen, trans. (Englewood cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), 36 and 161.

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Golda Meir, My Life (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1975), 154.

Looking back, Israeli historian Tom Segev concluded that while Ben Gurion and his colleagues were in principle committed to democratic political procedures, in practice they often flouted them when they thought it necessary “‘for the good of the state,’ ‘for security reasons,’ or even ‘for the good of the party.’”<sup>11</sup> Contrary to the conventional wisdom, Israel was a much weaker democratic polity in the early days of statehood than it would later become.

Moreover, Israel was never really a “liberal” democracy in the European sense.<sup>12</sup> Anti-liberal aspects of Israel’s political system included the restriction of ownership of much of the land in Israel to Jews; the continuing presence of Mandate-era Emergency Laws used primarily against the Arabs; the Basic Laws of 1992 making Israel a “Jewish” state; the absence of any bill of rights protecting personal liberties such as freedom of speech or the press; and the lack of separation of church and state.<sup>13</sup>

The continuing threat from the Arab world was one major source of Israel’s lack of commitment to liberalism. Israeli Arabs’ rights were widely circumscribed for fear of them becoming a fifth column.<sup>14</sup> This has led many Israeli historians and Arab scholars to deny that

---

<sup>11</sup>Tom Segev, 1949: The First Israelis (New York: Free Press, 1986), 285 and Peter Medding, The Founding of Israel Democracy, 1948-1967 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 181-82.

<sup>12</sup>Sammy Smootha, “Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype,” Israel Studies Vol. 2, No 2 (1997): 199-200.

<sup>13</sup>Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Religion and Democracy in Israel,” The Political Quarterly, Vol. 71, No. 3 (2000) 44 and Nadav Safran, Israel: Israel’s Embattled Ally (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 207.

<sup>14</sup>Ottolenghi, “Religion and Democracy in Israel,” 43; Sharkansky, “Israeli Democracy and Jewish History,” 17 and Ahmad H. Sa’di, “Israel as Ethnic Democracy: What Are the

Israeli Arabs even live in a democratic political system.<sup>15</sup>

---

Implications for the Palestinian Minority?" Arab Studies Quarterly Vol. 22, No. 1 (Winter 2000): 1-12.

<sup>15</sup>Simha Flapan, The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987) 11; As'ad Ghanem, Nadim Rouhana and Oren Yiftachel, "Questioning 'Ethnic Democracy:' A Response to Sammy Smooha," Israel Studies Vol. 3, No. 2 (1998): 253-67; and Baylis Thomas, How Israel Was Won: A Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999) 289.

Despite the overtly secular orientation of the Zionist movement, another important obstacle to liberalism in Israel was the fact that from the beginning Orthodox religious Jews exercised significant influence within the avowedly secular government.<sup>16</sup> Rather than being a liberal democracy in the classic European sense of recognizing the inviolability of individual rights, Israel was a “communitarian democracy” committed to advancing the rights of Jews over other groups and guided by a legal tradition and political culture based exclusively upon Judaism.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, Israel is widely regarded as something of a “dysfunctional democracy.”<sup>18</sup> The fact that Israel has a multi-party proportional representation system gives small, ideologically extreme parties disproportionate influence. This political structure makes it very hard for Israeli voters to know before hand what policies a government would pursue because the content of coalition agreements is not always predictable beforehand. All of this is not to deny that Israel is a democracy; but rather to suggest that Israel’s democracy has matured and consolidated over time but that it also remains illiberal and prone to instability.

---

<sup>16</sup>Eva Etzioni-Halevy, “The Religious Elite Connection and Some Problems of Israeli Democracy,” Government and Opposition Vol. 29, No. 4 (Autumn 1994): 480.

<sup>17</sup>Steinberg, “Interpretation of Jewish Tradition,” 4.

<sup>18</sup>Sacher, A History of Israel, 1014.

There are, however, a few areas in which Israel has hardly been democratic at all: in the formulation of its foreign policy and in the conduct of its wars.<sup>19</sup> Israel's parliament – the Knesset – has historically played little role in foreign policy decision-making.<sup>20</sup> But it has been in the areas of national defense and war that Israeli democracy has been most compromised.<sup>21</sup> Ben-Gurion set the tone from the very beginning of the state when he admitted that:

“I have never brought security issues to my party.... I always accepted a majority decision in my party, in the Histadrut, and in the Cabinet as self-understood.... But in security matters as I see them, there exists for me only my own conscience.”<sup>22</sup>

True to this principle and virtually by himself, Ben Gurion made the decision in 1956 to join France and the United Kingdom in their plot to foil Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's plan to nationalize the Suez Canal.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Ben Gurion gave the Knesset no say in the decision to

---

<sup>19</sup>Medding, The Founding of Israel Democracy, 226. Also cf 108-09; Benny Morris, Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999 (New York: Knopf, 1999) 662; Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, “Democratic National Security in a Protracted Conflict,” The Jerusalem Quarterly No. 51 (Summer 1989): 30; Amos Perlmutter, “Israel's Fourth War, October 1973: Political and Military Misperceptions,” Orbis Vol. 19, No. 2 (Summer 1975): 435; and Ze'ev Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army: 1874 to the Present (New York: MacMillan, 1985) 232.

<sup>20</sup>Sacher, A History of Israel, 430.

<sup>21</sup>Gad Barzilai, “War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict: Israel in a Comparative Perspective,” Comparative Politics Vol. 31, No. 3 (April 1999): 318.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Medding, The Founding of Israel Democracy, 123.

<sup>23</sup>Avi Shlaim, The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World (New York: Norton, 2001). 149 and Sacher, A History of Israel, 478.

build the nuclear reactor at Dimona, the cradle of Israel's nuclear weapons program.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Seymour M. Hersh, The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy (New York: Random House, 1991) 78.

This tradition of removing normal democratic politics from national security and war continued under Ben Gurion's successors. During the crisis preceding the Six Day War of June 1967, then Prime Minister Lev Eshkol was forced to take Ben Gurion's young proteges Moshe Dyan and Shimon Peres into his government. This government reshuffling was hardly the result of normal democratic procedure. Indeed, "it was a real putsch," Eshkol's wife Miriam maintained, "everyone was worried and nobody cared about the democratic process."<sup>25</sup> Certainly Moshe Dyan did not. "I oppose decisions made on majority vote on matters of security," he boasted, and like Ben Gurion Dyan maintained that "in security matters, there is no democracy."<sup>26</sup> Dyan was as good as his word when he was Defense Minister in Eshkol's Cabinet, launching the assault on the Golan Heights without securing the Prime Minister's approval.

---

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Michael B. Oren, Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 134.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Oren, Six Days of War, 229 and 152.

Probably the most egregious example of how war was exempted from normal democratic procedures in Israel was Defense Minister Ariel Sharon's decision to invade Lebanon in June of 1982. Sharon used the pretext of an assassination attempt against Israel's Ambassador to London Shlomo Agrov by the anti-PLO Abu Nidal faction to justify an invasion of Lebanon. Publically adhering to a "Little Plan" designed only to drive the PLO 40 kilometers away from Israel's northern border, Sharon secretly implemented his "Big Plan" in Lebanon to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization, weaken Syria, and fundamentally remake the Middle East without a formal cabinet vote.<sup>27</sup> Along with Sharon, a small cabal comprised of Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Foreign Minister Yitzak Shamir, and IDF Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan set into motion the Big Plan with no regard for the rest of the Israeli government or public.<sup>28</sup> As Israeli journalists Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ariv noted:

On the surface, Sharon was very careful to adapt his moves to Israel's accepted democratic and political conventions. He invested considerable energy in building the image of a reformed recalcitrant who would not dream of embarking on any consequential action without first submitting a detailed report, receiving prior authority, and explaining himself to the public. The paradox is that exactly the opposite was true: the image of obedience and cooperation was a thin but effective veneer masking a highly original method of circumventing democratic procedures. Instead of trying to takeover or disperse governmental institutions, as is the usual course of a coup d'etat, Sharon devised a formula for by passing the decision-making process and evading the supervisory prerogatives of the country's parliamentary system. Through chinks in that system,

---

<sup>27</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall 397 and Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 237.

<sup>28</sup>Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, Israel's Lebanon War (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984) 43.

he gained the freedom of maneuver necessary to implement his plan.<sup>29</sup>

Sharon enjoyed nearly complete authority to run the Israeli war effort in Lebanon until the Cabinet finally reasserted its authority on August 12<sup>th</sup>, by which point Israel was bogged down in what would become a costly and fruitless war.<sup>30</sup>

In sum, the conventional wisdom about Israeli democracy needs to be qualified in three respects: First, contrary to the POLITY data-set, Israel began as a weak democracy that only became more robust over time. Second, Israel has never been a liberal democracy as evidenced both by its treatment of the Arab minority and its lack of separation of church and state. Finally, Israel was scarcely democratic in terms of defense. All three of these facts about the state of democracy in Israel pose serious challenges to the triumphalists' claims that it was liberal democracy that made Israel so militarily effective.

#### Did Israel Win Most of its Wars

---

<sup>29</sup>Schiff and Ya'ari, Israel's Lebanon War, 302.

<sup>30</sup>Richard Gabriel, Operation Peace for Galilee: The Israeli-PLO War in Lebanon (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 158.

Another problem for the triumphalists' claim that democracy confers military advantages is that Israel's actual military performance is inconsistent with their argument. As we saw above, Israel has become more democratic overtime.<sup>31</sup> But, as Table 4.1 suggests, its military performance actually declined during this same period in the view of one of Israel's leading military historians.

**Table 4.1: Israel's Military Performance<sup>32</sup>**

War	Combat Performance
1948	↑
1956	↑
1967	↑
1969/70	↑□
1973	↑□
1982	↑□
1987-93 [Intifada]	□

<sup>31</sup>Medding, *The Founding of Israel Democracy*, 226; Smooha, "Ethnic Democracy," 207; Ruth Gavison, "Jewish and Democratic: A Rejoinder to the 'Ethnic Democracy' Debate," *Israel Studies* Vol. 4, No. 1(1999): 44; and Peter Preston, "Why Israeli Democracy Passes Litmus Test," *IPI Report* (June/July 1996): 6.

<sup>32</sup>Table compiled from van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive*. ↑= "good," ↑□= "mixed," □= "poor."

In fact, as measured by Israeli troops killed per Arab division engaged, the effectiveness of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) has steadily declined from 76:1 in 1956 through 98:1 in 1967 to 200:1 in 1973.<sup>33</sup> In short, Israel's level of democracy increased throughout the period from 1948 through the present but her military performance declined markedly. This is exactly the opposite of what the triumphalists would expect. This presents a real puzzle for the triumphalists' argument that a higher level of democracy increases the likelihood of victory.

There is little doubt that Israel won its 1948 War for Independence. But given the weak and unconsolidated nature of Israeli democracy at the time, it is hard to credit the outcome to the nature of its domestic regime.

Similarly, Israel and its democratic allies France and Britain won a decisive tactical victory over Egypt in the 1956 Suez War. Some analysts question, however, whether it ought to be considered a political victory because Nasser remained in power, the United States forced Israel to withdraw from the Sinai and the Gaza Strip, the defeat set back Egyptian rearmament by only a year, the Jewish state did not succeed in refashioning a new order in the Middle East, the United Nations force in the Sinai provided a shield behind which the Egyptians could rearm without fear of Israeli attack, and the free transit of Gulf of Aqaba still depended largely on Israel's strength alone. Despite these reservations, Suez probably still merits being considered an Israeli victory but it is not clear that this was the result of Israel's domestic political system.

---

<sup>33</sup>See van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 242-43.

Israel indisputably scored a decisive victory in the 1967 Six Day War. Opinion varies, though, about Israel's performance in the 1969-70 War of Attrition with Egypt along the Suez Canal. A few analysts count it as a win for the Jewish state.<sup>34</sup> Many others claim that Israel lost because Egypt managed to advance its surface to air (SAM) missile systems to the very edge of the Canal and Israel could do nothing to prevent that critical development which would have an important impact in the early stages of the Yom Kippur War.<sup>35</sup> Given that outcome and Egypt's creditable military performance, it is probably most accurate to consider the final outcome as mixed for Israel.<sup>36</sup>

While Israel is generally credited with victory in the October 1973 Yom Kippur War, there are grounds for regarding the outcome as somewhat mixed. The Israeli public certainly recognized that the war had been a close-run thing.<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, Israel scored a decisive victory over Syria on the Golan Front. On the other hand, the campaign on the Sinai Front was less decisive: while Israel pulled out a stunning tactical victory in the end, Egypt eventually achieved its tactical objective of securing Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. Politically, the war was a disaster for Israel: the Arab members of the Organization for Petroleum Exporting

---

<sup>34</sup>Safran, Israel, 266.

<sup>35</sup>Jonathan Shimshoni, Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 123 and 170.

<sup>36</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 296-97; Martin van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Forces (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 215; Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 189; and Pollack, Arabs at War, 98.

<sup>37</sup>Morris, Righteous Victims, 437.

Countries (OPEC) successfully brandished their oil weapon and the Western alliance split over aid to Israel. This has led some analysts to characterize the outcome as mixed.<sup>38</sup>

There is less debate about the outcome of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. While Israel succeeded in driving the PLO forces away from its northern border and later forced them to withdraw from Beirut, nearly two-thirds of the PLO fighters escaped to fight another day and the status of the PLO among Palestinians in the Occupied Territories actually increased as a result of Chairman Yassir Arafat's defiance of the IDF.

---

<sup>38</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 320-21; Trevor N. Dupuy, Elusive Victory: The Arab-Israeli Wars, 1947-1974 (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). 544.

Despite Israel's tactical victory over Syria, the general impression among Israelis was that overall that campaign was a failure too.<sup>39</sup> Syria was never ejected from Lebanon; indeed, by the mid-1980s it was once again the dominant power there. Israel's tactical victory over Syria came at a great cost as it revealed very sensitive Israeli military technology.<sup>40</sup> Israel's Lebanon War was clearly a political failure in that it achieved none of Israel's objectives; indeed, it created a new and more formidable adversary for Israel among Lebanon's Shia Muslims.<sup>41</sup> As Israeli historian Avi Shlaim concludes "there was no disguising the fact that the once legendary IDF had been compelled to leave Lebanon with its tail between its legs and that the real victor was

---

<sup>39</sup>Schiff and Ya'ariv, Israel's Lebanon War, p. 293; Benny Morris, Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-1999 (New York: Knopf, 1999), p. 590; Anthony H. Cordesman, The Arab-Israeli Military Balance and the Art of Operations (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1987), 55-6; and Dupuy and Martell, Flawed Victory, p. 154.

<sup>40</sup>Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 250.

<sup>41</sup>Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 259-61; Shai Feldman and Heda Rechnitz-Kijner, "Deception, Consensus and War: Israel in Lebanon" Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies Paper No. 27 (Tel Aviv: JCSS, October 1984), 3; and Gabriel, Operation Peace for Galilee, 116-17 and 126.

Hizbullah, the tiny Islamic guerrilla force.”<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, xxviii-xix. Also cf. Morris, Righteous Victims, 540.

Finally, most analysts conclude that Israeli military performance during the first Palestinian *Intifada* of 1987 through 1993 was at best mixed. “The fighting power of Israel’s once-heroic army steeply declined in front of opponents who are numerically and materially incomparably less powerful than itself” Israeli military historian Martin Creveld concludes.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, Israel’s performance in war has steadily deteriorated despite the increasingly democratic nature of Israel’s political system. This, of course, directly contradicts the triumphalists’ expectations that a higher level of democracy should increase the likelihood of victory.

#### Selection Effects

The Israeli cases also provide little evidence for the triumphalists’ selection effects argument. This triumphalist theory explains the propensity of democratic states to win their wars by virtue of the fact that democratic statesmen, desiring to remain in office, should be more cautious and therefore smarter about starting wars, only starting those they believe they can win.<sup>44</sup> But as Table 4.2 shows, of the three wars Israel started, just one unquestionably supports the selection effects theory that democratic leaders will be more cautious about starting wars.

#### **Table 4.2: Initiator and Outcome of Israel’s Wars**

---

<sup>43</sup>Van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 352.

<sup>44</sup>Miriam Fendius Elman, “Israel’s Invasion of Lebanon, 1982: Regime Change and War Decisions” in Fendius Elman, ed., Paths to Peace: Is Democracy the Answer? (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 329.

War	Israel Started?	Israel Won?
1948	No	Yes
1956	Yes	Yes/No
1967	Yes	Yes
1969-70	No	Draw
1973	No	Yes
1982	Yes	Draw
1987	No	No

The Six Day War of 1967 clearly counts in favor of the triumphalists’ theory. However, in 1956 Israel fought as part of an overwhelming coalition against Egypt and that victory was eventually reversed by the United States. The war in Lebanon in 1982 clearly demonstrates that Israel has not consistently initiated successful wars. In sum, the Israeli case provides little support to the triumphalists’ argument that democracies are smarter about the wars they initiate.

The main causal mechanism in the triumphalists’ selection effects argument is that democratic leaders are more cautious because they are more easily “punished” than authoritarian leaders when they start losing wars. The Israeli cases pose problems for this proposition. To begin with, Israeli leaders were not regularly punished for losing wars. The arguably mixed results of the Suez War (Israel reduced the *fedayeen* threat from Egypt but was forced to unilaterally withdraw from the Sinai and became increasingly isolated globally) did not adversely affect Ben Gurion’s political career.<sup>45</sup> True, both Defense Minister Moshe Dyan and Prime

---

<sup>45</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, pp. 183-185; Sachar, A History of Israel, pp. 513-14; and

Minister Golda Meir resigned in disgrace due to their many missteps during the Yom Kippur War. Despite these resignations, the Labor Party remained in power for four more years. Nor did Dayan remain in the political wilderness very long, as he returned as Foreign Minister in Menachem Begin's government in 1977. Even Israel's most dramatic military failure in Lebanon did not impose serious political costs on Begin and Sharon. To be sure, Begin did resign in 1983, but he did so largely for personal reasons.<sup>46</sup> Sharon lost his defense portfolio (largely because of the massacres at Sabra and Shatila), but remained in the cabinet and eventually became Israel's prime minister. Foreign Minister Shamir also later became prime minister. Israeli statesmen rarely suffered as severe punishments as their Arab adversaries when they lost their wars. The worst fate that befell an unsuccessful Israeli leader was an (often temporary) loss of office.

Conversely, Arab leaders who lost wars lost their positions permanently and often paid a far higher price. For example, after their defeat by Israel in the War of Independence, a large number of Arab leaders were severely punished: Husni Za'im in Syria was deposed and executed after 1948; King Abdullah of Jordan was assassinated in 1951; King Faruq of Egypt was ousted in 1952; and King Faisal and Prime Minister Nuri al-Sa'id of Iraq were assassinated in 1958 for trying to make peace with Israel. After the 1967 debacle, hundreds of Egyptian military leaders

---

Thomas Bayliss, How Israel Was Won: A Concise History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), 125.

<sup>46</sup>Schiff and Ya'ariv, Israel's Lebanon War, p. 284; Sachar, A History of Israel, p. 920; and Shalim, The Iron Wall, p. 419.

were “punished” by being demoted and even put on trial. King Hussein of Jordan also feared public retribution in 1967 after he lost the West Bank and Jerusalem. Ironically, undemocratic Arab leaders faced more regular and severe punishments than did their Israeli adversaries when they lost wars. By the triumphalists’ selection effects logic, Arab leaders had at least as much, if not more, incentive to be cautious about starting their wars.

Also, if the selection effects argument is correct, democratic leaders should be very attentive to domestic politics as they make their decisions about going to war. However, according to Michael Brecher’s exhaustive study of Israeli foreign policy decision-making, domestic political considerations played only a “marginal” role in 75% of major foreign policy decisions.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, throughout Israeli history, there is evidence that contradicts the triumphalists’ selection effects argument. For example, in the early days of the state, it was evident that Ben Gurion paid scant attention to his domestic popularity.<sup>48</sup> Nor does Israel’s successful 1956 Sinai campaign support the selection effects argument. Neither the Israeli public nor the cabinet strongly supported the war, as evidenced by the fact that Ben-Gurion went to great lengths to keep preparations for the operation secret from them.<sup>49</sup> There is not much evidence that

---

<sup>47</sup>Michael Brecher, Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 544-46.

<sup>48</sup>Michael N. Barnett, Confronting the Costs of War: Military Power, State, and Society in Egypt and Israel (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 157 and Safran, Israel, 127.

<sup>49</sup>Hugh Thomas, Suez (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 16; and Avner Yaniv and Robert J. Lieber, “Personal Whim or Strategic Imperative? The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon,”

domestic political concerns were of much importance to Ben-Gurion, who seemed to make strategic decisions overwhelmingly in terms of what he thought best for Israel's survival and prosperity.

---

International Security, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Fall 1983), p. 140; and Brecher, Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy, 65.

In general, Israel's victory in the Six Day War comes closest to providing strong support for the triumphalists' selection effects argument that democracies are more likely to start and then win their wars, although it is not without its problems for the triumphalists' case. Some analysts, for example, believe that the Arabs were actually responsible for starting the war through Jordan and Syria's connivance at al-Fatah attacks on Israel in 1965 and Egypt's expulsion of U.N. forces from Sinai and closure of Straits of Tiran in May of 1967.<sup>50</sup> If it is debatable whether Israel in fact started the war, then this case provides less support for the selection effects argument than the triumphalists think.

Israel's 1982 war against Syria in Lebanon provides no support at all for the triumphalists' selection effects argument. Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon began the war despite overwhelming opposition from the cabinet and the public, who opposed transforming a retaliatory raid against Palestine Liberation Organization forces in south Lebanon into a war with Syria.<sup>51</sup> As Chief of Military Intelligence Major General Yehoshua Saguy observed:

“One of the worst things a country can do is go to war when it is divided. I fear there's lack of consensus within the army itself, and

---

<sup>50</sup>Oren, Six Days of War, 1 and Safran, Israel, 381.

<sup>51</sup>Zeev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, Israel's Lebanon War (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 34, 55, 57, 127, 163; Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, pp. 239-240; Martin Gilbert, Israel: A History (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1998), p. 504; Lieber and Yaniv, “Personal Whim or Strategic Imperative?” p. 137; and Trevor N. Dupuy and Paul Martell, Flawed Victory: The Arab-Israeli Conflict and the 1982 War In Lebanon (Fairfax, VA: HERO Books, 1986), pp. 60, 148.

that's no way to march off to war.'"<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup>Quoted in Schiff and Ya'ari, Israel's Lebanon War, 57.

Whatever one might think of the wisdom of the Lebanon War, there is little evidence that their domestic political fates affected either Begin's or Sharon's calculations about the advisability of the war with Syria. For Begin, intervention in Lebanon was largely about saving the Christian community from a Holocaust at the hands of the Muslims.<sup>53</sup> Sharon, in contrast, just wanted to use the war to advance his plan to fundamentally reshape the Middle East to increase Israel's security.

In sum, the Israeli cases provide little support for the selection effects argument. Israel did not regularly start winning wars. Moreover, Israeli leaders were rarely seriously punished for poor wartime performance. Finally, there is scant evidence that Israeli leaders spent much time worrying about how their military performance would affect their domestic political standing any way.

#### Wartime Effectiveness

Nor do the triumphalists' specific arguments about democratic superiority once at war work very well in the Israeli cases.

*Rent-seeking:* The triumphalists' argue that democracies suffer less rent-seeking behavior by their governments and therefore tend to be wealthier. One important result of this is that it gives democracies greater wealth with which they can buy more military resources. Hence, they

---

<sup>53</sup>Schiff and Ya'ariv, Israel's Lebanon War, pp. 25, 34, 39, 220; Sachar, A History of Israel, pp. 900, 913, 916, 920; and Dupuy and Martell, Flawed Victory, p. 15; and Gabriel, Operation Peace for Galilee, 25.

are more apt to win their wars.

But lack of rent-seeking could not explain Israel's military successes because Israel was a classic example of a state with one of the major pre-conditions for rent-seeking: massive government intervention into the economy. This is not surprising inasmuch as the economic ideology of Israel has always been socialist and collectivist. As one historian of Israel points out: "[Israel] had originally been created by East Europeans who brought with them not the ideas of Western liberal, bourgeois democracy but the collective socialism of the old Russian intelligentsia."<sup>54</sup> Hence, Ben Gurion's view that "the state of Israel is not a capitalist state."<sup>55</sup>

Elsewhere he admitted that "I cannot yet call Israel a Socialist country, for we also encourage private capital, but in agriculture, industry and transport we can claim Socialist achievements, and even the beginnings of a truly communist society in the labor settlements known as *kibbutzim*, to which – so far as I know – there is no parallel anywhere else in the world."<sup>56</sup>

Democracy has done little to constrain the rise of state intervention and thereby provide Israel with more economic resources than its Arab adversaries. Indeed, Israel is one of the most centralized of democratic states.<sup>57</sup> It has one of the highest tax rates in the world at 65 percent.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup>Wheatcroft, 241.

<sup>55</sup>Quoted in Segev, 1949, 229.

<sup>56</sup>Quoted in Martin Gilbert Israel: A History (New York: William Morrow, 1998), 346. Also cf. Sacher, A History of Israel, 412; Barnett, Confronting the Costs of War, 159; and Safran, Israel, 111-12.

<sup>57</sup>Medding, The Founding of Israel Democracy, 109.

<sup>58</sup>Sacher, A History of Israel, 807 and van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 252-53

Also, the Israeli government spends more per capita than any other country in the world.<sup>59</sup> Not surprisingly, the Heritage Foundation ranks Israel very high (4 on a scale of 5) in terms of the level of government intervention into the economy.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup>Horowitz and Lissak, “Democratic National Security,” 4.

<sup>60</sup>See Kim R. Holmes, Bryan T. Johnson, and Melanie Kirkpatrick, 1997 Index of Economic Freedom (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, 1997), xxx, 242-44, and 255-57.

Ironically, Israel became less statist after 1967, just as its economic (and military) performance began to decline. Indeed, Israel achieved spectacular growth rates approaching 10 percent per year under a relatively centralized economic system; but as her economy liberalized, these growth rates shrank to one percent per year by the mid-1960s.<sup>61</sup> In sum, Israeli democracy has not served as a check on government intervention into the economy and so that cannot explain why Israel has won so many of her wars.

*Alliances:* Triumphalists suggest that another reason that democracies are more likely to win their wars is that they are better able to attract and keep alliance partners. Some believe that the lack of imperialistic behavior makes democracies less threatening to other states and hence more attractive as alliance partners. Others maintain that because democracies incur substantial domestic audience costs if they break a commitment to another democracy, they are less likely than a non-democratic ally to do so. Neither of these arguments holds up in the Israeli cases.

---

<sup>61</sup>Brecher, Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy, 326.

It is hard to argue that Israeli democracy made the Jewish state averse to the conquest of additional territory. In 1948, the Jewish state colluded with Jordan and seized territory well beyond the original U.N. mandate. In 1956, Israel joined with France and the United Kingdom to seize large chunks of the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and only withdrew after the United States put pressure on it. In 1967, Israel again occupied the Sinai Peninsula and also conquered the West Bank and Golan Heights. In 1973, Israel fought to maintain control of the Sinai and Golan and even crossed the Suez and occupied more Egyptian territory. In 1982 Israel invaded and occupied south Lebanon. Finally, the suppression of the first Intifada was undertaken to maintain Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza. As former *Mapam* party leader Simha Flapan lamented: “the concept of a democratic Jewish society might conceivably provide an alternative were it free from the impulse toward territorial expansionism”<sup>62</sup> Clearly, Israel did not attract other democratic allies because it was unthreatening to its neighbors.

The Israeli cases also do not lend much support to the argument that democracies will form stronger and more durable alliances because domestic audience costs make it hard for them to break their commitments. Historically, Israel has made three types of appeals for support from other democratic countries: 1) moral obligation; 2) strategic interest; and 3) common democracy.<sup>63</sup> Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, it is clear that Israeli leaders did not regard common democracy or moral obligation as a strong bond between states. Golda Meir was

---

<sup>62</sup>Flapan, *The Birth of Israel*, 236.

<sup>63</sup>On the use of the Holocaust see Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) 472; and Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 23.

particularly skeptical of the reliability of other democracies as allies:

The world is harsh, selfish, and materialistic. Even the most enlightened of governments, democracies that are led by decent leaders who represent fine, decent people, are not much inclined today to concern themselves with problems of justice in international relations.<sup>64</sup>

This pessimism was shared by the former head of the *Haganah* Yisrael Galili:

‘We belong to the generation that has witnessed the abandonment of the cause of democratic Spain, and is witnessing today the events in Greece and Indonesia. And it was only yesterday six million were abandoned to their fate and massacred?’<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, the most consistent element in Israeli alliance strategy has been to align with states that best serve its interests. As Shlaim explains, Israeli leaders had a quite pragmatic attitude about which states they aligned with dating from the days of the *Yishuv*, the pre-state Jewish community:

---

<sup>64</sup>Meir, *My Life*, 460.

<sup>65</sup>Quoted in Allon, *The Making of Israel’s Army*, 185.

Ben Gurion's appreciation of the strength of the Arab opposition led him to seek the support of an external power in order to compensate for the weakness of the Zionist movement. *His orientation was practical rather than ideological.* In the course of his career he advocated an Ottoman, a British, and an American orientation. Changes in orientation were dictated by the rise and fall in the influence of these great powers.<sup>66</sup>

Despite frequent appeals to other democratic countries couched in terms of obligation or common democracy, it is clear that Israeli leaders understood that the only solid basis for alliance was mutual interest. The fact that Israel was a democracy did little, save perhaps at the rhetorical level, to cement its bonds with other democratic states.

---

<sup>66</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 17-18 [emphasis added].

Nothing could make this clearer than the fact that in the early days of the Jewish state the Israelis had a difficult time finding allies in the democratic world. Democracies such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States were not inclined to lend much support to the Jewish state during the War of Independence. Nor was the all-democratic alliance that Israel joined to fight the Suez War particularly a model of harmony and cooperation.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, it is a myth that the democratic world came to Israel's aid in 1967 and saved the day. In fact, most of the democratic world tried to remain neutral during the Six Day War.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Israeli leaders felt that Israel had to win quickly before the democratic states intervened to impose a stalemate and save the Arabs from an even worse defeat.<sup>69</sup> Nor did the democratic world, with the exception of the United States, rally to Israel's aid in its moment of greatest peril in 1973. As Mrs. Meir recounts:

One day, weeks after the [Yom Kippur] war, I phoned Willy Brandt, who is much respected in the Socialist International, and said '... I need to know what possible meaning socialism can have when not a single socialist country in all of Europe was prepared to come to the aid of the only democratic nation in the Middle East. Is it possible that democracy and fraternity do not apply in our case?'<sup>70</sup>

The democratic world failed to support Israel in 1973 despite substantial pro-Israel "audiences"

---

<sup>67</sup>Moshe Dayan, Moshe Dayan: Story of My Life (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 184.

<sup>68</sup>Oren, Six Days of War, 213 and 217.

<sup>69</sup>Anthony H. Cordesman, The Arab-Israeli Military Balance and the Art of Operations (Washington, DC: AEI, 1987), 4 and Gabriel, Operation Peace for Galilee, 14.

<sup>70</sup>Meir, 446.

in many countries because of their dependence on Arab oil. Europe and Japan imported 85-90 percent of their oil from the region and not surprisingly they tilted toward the Arabs; in contrast, the United States imported only 7 percent of its oil from the Arab world so it could afford to be more supportive of Israel.<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, many democratic nations abstained rather than voting against the 1978 United Nations General Assembly resolution equating Zionism with racism. Israel could not even maintain good relations with democratic Austria under the premiership of Bruno Kriesky, a fellow Jew.<sup>72</sup> Finally, there was widespread condemnation in the democratic world of Israel's invasion of Lebanon and its suppression of the first *Intifada*.

In sum, despite common democracy, Israel could not, and did not, count on consistent support from the democratic world. While Israel did at times have close alliances with democratic states such as the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, these alliances were by no means permanent and they were based on common interests rather than democratic fraternity. Moreover, Israel often made common cause with non-democratic states such as the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, South Africa, and Jordan. Let us examine these cases more closely.

---

<sup>71</sup>Sacher, *A History of Israel*, 790-91; Safran, *Israel*, 496-97; and Schiff, *A History of the Israeli Army*, 220.

<sup>72</sup>Meir, *My Life*, 414-19.

**United States:** It is certainly the case that the United States has been Israel's most important ally. The key question is why this has been the case. Nadav Safran, for example, suggests that the fact that Israel was a democracy was central to the United States' willingness to align with the Jewish state.<sup>73</sup> However, the United States was quite ambivalent about Israeli independence in 1948, opposed the democratic coalition Israel fought with in 1956, and hamstrung the Israelis in 1967. It was not until the period after 1967 that the U.S.-Israeli alignment became the quasi-alliance it is today. Not surprisingly, even once the U.S.-Israeli alliance was consolidated, the Israelis were never very confident in it.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup>Safran, Israel, 571.

<sup>74</sup>Yoav Ben-Horin and Barry Posen, "Israel's Strategic Doctrine" RAND Report 2845-NA (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, September 1981), 9 and 24. More recently see Stephen J. Glain, "For Some Israelis, U.S. Aid Is a Burden, Some Say Strings Attached To Military Assistance Aren't Worth the Money," Wall Street Journal October 26, 2000, A23.

The U.S.-Israeli alliance was clearly based not on common democratic norms but rather on the U.S.'s strategic interest in having allies in the Middle East to balance against the Soviet Union and later Iran and Iraq.<sup>75</sup> Realizing that this *realpolitik* motivation on the part of the United States might some day lead it to abandon Israel, the Israelis and their supporters have sought to cloak the alliance in the mantle of common democratic fraternity.

Moreover, the Israelis candidly acknowledge that despite common democracy, there remain many sources of serious friction in the relationship. Indeed, Israeli leaders regularly complained that “the American ‘connection’ has usually acted as the main direct constraint on Israeli decision makers.”<sup>76</sup> True, the Israel Lobby, a loose connection of individuals and organizations committed to fostering and sustaining a close relationship between the United States and Israel, has been one of the most vocal and influential interest groups in American

---

<sup>75</sup>van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive 252 and Gilbert, 165, 225, 326, 367, 407, and 445.

<sup>76</sup>Yair Evron, War and Intervention in Lebanon: The Israeli-Syrian Deterrence Dialog (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 30.

political history.<sup>77</sup> But despite this important pro-Israel “audience,” the Israeli-American relationship has hardly been a model of consistent and strong alignment.<sup>78</sup> The ups and downs of the United States’ relationship with Israel are best explained by changes in U.S. interests rather than common democracy.

---

<sup>77</sup>Sacher, A History of Israel, 724.

<sup>78</sup>On this mixed influence of the Lobby see Warren Bass, Support Any Friend: Kennedy’s Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Adam Garfinkle, “The Israel Lobby, Part II,” Prospect August 29, 2002 [electronic version].

The U.S. Government was deeply divided about the establishment of the state of Israel. President Harry S. Truman was initially supportive of the Jewish state, in part for domestic political reasons and in part because he felt that the world owed the Jews their own state in partial recompense for the international community's inaction during the Holocaust. However, Secretary of State George Marshall and many bureaucrats in the State and War Departments believed that for strategic reasons the United States should be more "even-handed" in its view of the future of Palestine.<sup>79</sup> Initially, Truman's pro-Israel policy prevailed and the United States was one of the first countries to support partition and the establishment of an independent Jewish state.

However, by March of 1948 the Truman Administration did an about-face and instead of advocating Israeli independence endorsed a United Nations trusteeship over the whole of Palestine. The primary reason for this reversal was the United States' desire not to alienate the Arabs as the Cold War heated up.<sup>80</sup> This same concern led the United States to try to thwart Israel's crucial arms deal with Czechoslovakia during the War of Independence.<sup>81</sup>

After Israel's victory in the War of Independence, the U.S. Government took the position that Israel was in violation of the U.N. partition resolution by occupying Arab territory and forced Israel to withdraw from Gaza in 1949. Truman also became increasingly anxious about the

---

<sup>79</sup>Ahron Bregmand and Jihan El-Tahri, The Fifty Year's War: Israel and the Arabs (New York: T.V. Books, 1998), 28 and 38-39.

<sup>80</sup>Thomas, How Israel Was Won, 37, 64-65 and Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 158.

<sup>81</sup>Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 38.

Palestinian refugee problem caused by Israel's victory in the War of Independence. He began pushing for a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to construct an Islamic alliance against the Soviet Union.

Indeed, by 1950 the United States began to view Israel and the Middle East almost exclusively in the context of the Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the United States "leaned" on Israel to side with the United Nations in the Korean War. On the other, it also issued the Tripartite Declaration of May 1950 to establish a Middle East Defense Command which excluded Israel. Further, the United States placed an arms embargo on the region which hurt Israel disproportionately.<sup>82</sup> As Ben Gurion noted in his diary: "America did not raise a finger to save us, and moreover, imposed an arms embargo, and had we been destroyed they would not have resurrected us."<sup>83</sup> In 1953, the U.S. Government imposed sanctions on Israel to stop it from diverting the Jordan River. The United States would not supply Israel with arms before the Suez War because it opposed Israel's retaliatory policy against Arab states harboring anti-Israel-*fedeyeen*. Also, the Eisenhower Administration refused to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capitol forcing the American Ambassador to boycott Israel's Foreign Ministry until 1956. Finally, during this period Ben Gurion was never officially invited to

---

<sup>82</sup>Michael I. Handel, "Israel's Political-Military Doctrine," Occasional Papers in International Affairs [No. 30] (Cambridge: CFIA, July 1973) 19.

<sup>83</sup>Quoted in Segev, 1949, 35. Also cf. Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, 28 and Brecher, Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy, 330.

United States because of the ambivalence of both the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations.<sup>84</sup>

The tenuous nature of U.S. support for the Jewish state was not lost on Israeli leaders.

Yisrael Galili warned his colleagues that:

---

<sup>84</sup>Gilbert Israel, 273.

“It is irrelevant and even despicable to indulge in clever speculations about ‘whether,’ ‘can it be,’ or ‘would they dare?’ to set loose the Arab states against us? Or whether America ‘would’ or ‘would not let them.’ We must constantly remind ourselves that we have to defend ourselves. We have to cleave to the tangible. And what is the tangible? It is Jewish land, Jewish economy, Jewish arms, Jewish fighting men in the Land of Israel.”<sup>85</sup>

Israeli leaders were under no illusions about the strength of the U.S. commitment to the state of Israel in the early years.

This uncertainty about the U.S. commitment continued into the mid-1950s.<sup>86</sup> Concerned about a possible rapprochement between the United States and Egypt, Israeli intelligence agents initiated terrorist attacks against U.S. facilities which they hoped the Americans would blame on Nasser. Safran argues that it was continuing doubts about the firmness of the U.S. commitment to Israel’s security that led it to undertake the ill-fated Suez operation.<sup>87</sup> Israeli concerns about the firmness of the U.S. commitment were justified because the United States opposed Israel and its democratic allies France and the United Kingdom during Sinai campaign and was responsible for their ultimate failure. Reflecting Eisenhower’s frustrations with the Jewish state’s’ reckless

---

<sup>85</sup>Quoted in Allon, The Making of Israel’s Army, 188.

<sup>86</sup>Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 30 and Brig. Moshe Dayan, “Why Israel Strikes Back” in Donald Robinson, ed., Under Fire: Israel’s Twenty Year Struggle for Survival (New York: Norton, 1968) 18.

policies, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles began to refer to Israel as “the millstone around our necks.”<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup>Safran, Israel, 371.

<sup>88</sup>Quoted in Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 204.

Eventually, this brinkmanship achieved some of Israel's goals. The United States clearly became more solicitous of Israel's security concerns after Suez, fearing that if America did not support the Jewish state it might undertake further precipitous actions. But continuing uncertainty about the U.S. commitment led Israel to take an even more dramatic step in the mid-1950s to ensure continuing U.S. support. Israel's decision to begin a secret nuclear weapons program had as its central objective to guarantee that any war that threatened the survival of the state of Israel would also threaten the survival of the United States. Seymour Hersh, employing a biblical metaphor, characterized Israel's strategy as the "Samson Option" after the legendary Jewish hero who brought down the Philistines' temple, killing himself and 3,000 of his enemies. Following a similar logic, the Israelis designed their nuclear program as a means to bolster the U.S. commitment to Israel's survival. Their strategy for achieving this was to aim their nuclear weapons not just at the capitals of their Arab adversaries, but also at targets inside the United States' Cold War rival the Soviet Union.<sup>89</sup> The reasoning behind this was that since the Soviet Union would retaliate for any Israeli strike by attacking the United States itself, U.S. leaders could never allow the Jewish state to face so serious a threat that might lead it to undertake such a desperate act. Francis Perrin, a French nuclear scientist intimately involved in collaboration with Israel's nuclear program, recalled that:

“We thought the Israeli bomb was aimed against the Americans...

Not to launch it against America but to say , *If you don't want to*

---

<sup>89</sup>Hersh, The Samson Option, 17.

*help us in a critical situation we will require you to help us.*

*Otherwise we will use our nuclear bombs.””<sup>90</sup>*

One Israeli associated with the nuclear program confirmed that this was Israeli thinking:

---

<sup>90</sup>Quoted in Hersh, The Samson Option, 40. Also see, Avner Cohen, Israel and the Bomb (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 123; and Efraim Inbar, “Contours of Israel’s New Strategic Thinking,” Political Science Quarterly Vol. 111, No. 1 (Spring 1996): 45.

“We got the message. We can still remember the smell of Auschwitz and Treblinka. Next time we’ll take all of you with us.”<sup>91</sup>

The United States understood the threat implicit in Israel’s nuclear program and sought to derail it. Initially, the United States offered Israel participation in its peaceful nuclear program “Atoms for Peace.” This effort failed, however, as Israel refused to participate and continued to develop nuclear weapons. Next, the United States tried to use the emerging global non-proliferation regime to coerce Israel to open up its secret nuclear facilities at Dimona in the Negev Desert to international inspection. U.S. opposition to its nuclear weapons program merely led Israel to pursue it secretly.

Blackmail, both conventional and nuclear was one part of Israel’s strategy for ensuring closer relations with the United States. Another, more positive, element in this strategy was Israel’s efforts to make the case that it could serve as a strategic asset for the United States in its rivalry with the Soviet Union. This strategy made sense inasmuch as by 1955, the United States increasingly had come to view Nasser’s Egypt as a full member of the Soviet camp. The more the conviction spread within the U.S. Government that the Egyptian leader was a Communist dupe, the more the consensus grew in those same precincts that the United States should rethink its previously distant relationship with Israel.

The real watershed in U.S.-Israeli relations came during the Presidency of John F.

---

<sup>91</sup>Quoted in Hersh, The Samson Option, 42. Also see Cohen, Israel and the Bomb, 174.

Kennedy. The main impetus for improving U.S.-Israel relations was the growing realization that the two states had a common interest in containing Arab radicalism and excluding Soviet influence from the region. The clearest manifestation of this increasingly close alignment was the decision by the United States to sell to Israel one of its most advanced military systems: the HAWK anti-aircraft missile.

Lurking behind this veneer of common strategic interests remained continuing U.S. concerns about slowing the Israeli nuclear weapons program. Failing with Atoms for Peace and inspections, the U.S. Government sought to use conventional arms transfers to try to forestall the Israeli nuclear program. In a May 1965 memorandum, National Security Council staffer Robert Komer explicitly asked whether selling Israel 24 Skyhawk jets would keep it from going further down the path to an operational nuclear arsenal:

*“Can we use the planes to keep Israel from going nuclear? Desperation is what could most likely drive Israel to this choice. Should it come to feel that the conventional balance was running against it. So judicious US arms supply aimed at maintaining a deterrent balance, is as good an inhibitor as we’ve got.”*<sup>92</sup>

In sum, the increasingly close relations between the United States and Israel were the result of two factors: shared strategic interests in the Cold War Middle East reinforced by Israel’s implicit threat of nuclear blackmail.

---

<sup>92</sup>Quoted in Cohen, Israel and the Bomb, 212.

Despite some common strategic goals and Israel's nuclear blackmail, the U.S.-Israeli relationship hardly constituted an unshakable alliance. In the run-up to the Six Day War in June 1967, the U.S. sought to minimize its military commitment to Israel in the hopes of preventing the war which U.S. leaders feared would undermine its position in the region. Anticipating Israel's preemptive strike on the Egyptian Air Force, President Lyndon Johnson warned Israeli Foreign Minister Aba Eban that "*Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go it alone.*"<sup>93</sup> Israeli Defense Minister Dayan interpreted this to mean that: "the United States was not prepared to complicate her relations with Egypt in order to guarantee freedom of shipping for us."<sup>94</sup> He and other Israeli leaders questioned the depth of the U.S. commitment to Israel's security.<sup>95</sup> There was ample reason for them to doubt the United States' support for their war effort. The United States restricted arms shipments to Israel, tried to prevent the Jewish state from starting the war, and then sought to limit Israel's gains once the war began by urging it not to take Jerusalem. The United States also tried to restrain Israel from attacking Syria at the end of the war.

---

<sup>93</sup>Quoted in Oren, Six Days of War, 77 and Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 240.

<sup>94</sup>Dayan, Moshe Dayan, 379.

<sup>95</sup>Dayan, Moshe Dayan, 319-20 and 342-43.

The most dramatic evidence of the tension seething just below the surface in U.S.-Israeli relations was Israel's attack on the *U.S.S. Liberty*, an American electronic intelligence collection ship. Despite Israeli protestations to the contrary, many in the U.S. Government and military believe that the attack on the American spy ship by Israeli aircraft and ships was no accident.<sup>96</sup> The presence of this U.S. signals intelligence platform off the Sinai Peninsula, as the IDF was completing operations against the Egyptians, was evidence that the United States was spying on Israel.<sup>97</sup> James Bamford, a well-connected expert on the U.S. National Security Agency, suggested that the motive for the attack was Israeli concerns that the *Liberty* had collected electronic evidence of IDF massacres of Egyptian prisoners of war in the area of al-Arish.<sup>98</sup> Whether the attack was deliberate or not, it certainly demonstrated that the U.S.-Israeli alignment during the Six Day War was not free of strain.

Indeed, the United States did not really embrace Israel until after the Six Day War was won. Certainly, there was a non-strategic component to increasingly close ties between America and the Jewish state. As historian Peter Novick has documented, the Holocaust became much more salient among the American public – especially Jews – around the time of the Six Day

---

<sup>96</sup>James M. Ennes, Jr., Assault on the Liberty: The True Story of the Israeli Attack on an American Intelligence Ship (New York: Random House, 1979) is the primary indictment. See A. Jay Cristol, The Liberty Incident: The 1967 Israeli Attack on the U.S. Navy Spy Ship (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002) for case it was an accident.

<sup>97</sup>James Bamford, Body of Secrets: Anatomy of the Ultra-Secret National Security Agency from the Cold War through the Dawn of a New Century (New York: Doubleday, ?) 194.

<sup>98</sup>Bamford, Body of Secrets, 201-4.

War.<sup>99</sup> Many Gentiles also regarded Israel's apparently miraculous victory as providential. President Johnson, who had visited the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau just after WWII and was deeply affected by the experience, was like many other Americans inclined to be sympathetic toward the beleaguered Jewish state.<sup>100</sup> Certainly, a growing sense that the security of Israel was a debt the world owed the Jews for the Holocaust played some role in closer U.S.-Israeli ties.

---

<sup>99</sup>Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

<sup>100</sup>Hersh, The Samson Option, 127.

However, there was much more than moral obligation to the increasingly close U.S.-Israeli relations. Israel's stunning and decisive victory over the Arabs made clear that the Jewish state had become the strongest military power in the region. Many American officials therefore felt that closer relations would advance U.S. interests in the region. But undergirding this common strategic interest was also the continuing Israeli threat to use nuclear weapons in the event they faced a serious threat to the survival of the state of Israel. If anything, Israel's nuclear "blackmail" became much more important under the Prime Ministership of Levi Eshkol.<sup>101</sup> The result was the arms agreement of February 1968 that transformed the United States into Israel's largest arms supplier.

In many respects, the post-Six Day War period was the apex of U.S.-Israeli relations. Even during this time, however, the relationship was not without friction. The 1969-70 War of Attrition is a case in point: some Israeli scholars believe that it was U.S. pressure that forced Israel to end deep penetration raids against Egypt and agree to a cease-fire on less than optimal terms. Despite the ongoing conflict with Egypt, in January 1970 the United States put on hold the sale of 45 Phantom and 80 Skyhawk jets to Israel despite evidence of increasing Soviet military aid to Egypt. Another instance of the gap between the two democracies was the President Richard Nixon's endorsement of a more "even-handed" approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nixon and his Secretary of State William Rogers shocked the Israelis by advocating a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the territories Israel had occupied in 1967.

---

<sup>101</sup>Cohen, Israel and the Bomb, 236 and 240.

Like Johnson after the Six Day War, Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger regarded Israel as one of the United States' key Cold War proxies in the Middle East. They believed that Israel could help the United States check growing Soviet influence in the region. Israel's support of the embattled King Hussein of Jordan during the "Black September" crisis of 1970 also demonstrated its potential as a "strategic asset" in the region to counter regional threats to U.S. interests. Arab leaders in Egypt and Saudi Arabia certainly recognized the increasing harmony of interests between Israel and the United States due to the Cold War. As with Johnson, Nixon's support for Israel was based primarily on his calculation that it would further U.S. strategic interests.

But even this relatively close U.S.-Israeli alignment did not deter the Egyptians from intensifying their conflict with Israel. President Anwar Sadat believed that despite their support for the Jewish state, Nixon and Kissinger were not averse to the Egyptians turning up the heat on Israel to get them to negotiate a withdrawal from the occupied Sinai along the canal in 1972. The United States also sought to limit its military support for Israel in order to maintain a regional balance of power. In October 1973, as in May 1967, Israeli leaders like Moshe Dayan claimed that U.S. pressure caused Israel to delay full-mobilization and eschew preemptive strikes in order to assure the United States that Israel had not provoked the war. Both Kissinger and American Ambassador Kenneth Keating told the Israelis that there would be no U.S. aid if they started the war.<sup>102</sup> Once the Yom Kippur War began, Israel did not rely solely on democratic fraternity

---

<sup>102</sup>Dupuy, *Elusive Victory*, 408, fn. 3.

and moral obligation, but also used the threat of nuclear “black mail” to force the United States to undertake a massive resupply effort to make up the early losses of equipment and ammunition.<sup>103</sup>

Despite the massive military support the United States rushed to Israel during and after the war, there were clearly limits to its support for Israel. For example, Kissinger prevented the Israelis from dealing the Egyptians a knock-out blow by destroying the beleaguered 3<sup>rd</sup> Army trapped on the East side of the Suez Canal.<sup>104</sup> Moshe Dayan later recounted that this caused great tension between the two democracies:

---

<sup>103</sup>Hersh, The Samson Option, 227; Safran, Israel, 483; and van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 252.

<sup>104</sup>Quoted in van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 224.

“A crisis followed after we cut off and surrounded the Egyptian Third Army. At first it seemed that the two superpowers alone were involved. But it was soon evident that the United States and the Soviet Union had resolved matters between themselves, and the crisis turned into one between the U.S. and Israel.”<sup>105</sup>

Dayan was sure that the United States would sell-out Israel in the cease-fire negotiations in order to lift the Arab oil embargo. “During one of my talks with Dr. Kissinger,” Dayan remembered, “though I happened to remark that the United States was the only country that was ready to stand by us, my silent reflection was that the United States would really rather support the Arabs.”<sup>106</sup> There were indeed grounds for Israeli leaders to question whether U.S. support would be unconditional. President Gerald Ford subsequently threatened to reassess U.S. relations with Israel due to what he regarded as Israeli intransigence in its peace negotiations with Egypt. And under President Carter, the United States was much closer to the Egyptian than Israeli position at the Camp David peace talks in 1979.

During the Reagan Administration, the United States and Israel signed an “Agreement for Strategic Cooperation” in 1981 that came close to establishing a formal alliance between the two

---

<sup>105</sup>Dayan, Moshe Dayan, 543; Safran, Israel, 505-9; and Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 226.

<sup>106</sup>Dayan, Moshe Dayan, 512-13.

democracies. But even with the formal codification of the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership, Israel leaders were under no illusions that common democracy, by itself, represented much of the basis for an enduring alliance. Despite the strategic partnership agreement, U.S.-Israeli relations were never completely harmonious. Indeed, in 1981 U.S.-Israeli ties were strained by Israel's bombing of the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirik and its attack on the PLO's headquarter in Beirut. This led Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to be completely pragmatic in his view of the alliance with the United States. Begin understood that he needed to persuade American President Ronald Reagan that Israel could be a strategic asset in the Cold War.

The most vexing issue in U.S.-Israel relations during the Reagan Administration was the invasion of Lebanon. Triumphalists might point to the fact that Secretary of State Alexander Haig probably gave Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon the "green light" for a limited operation in Lebanon as evidence of the close alignment between the two democracies. However, Haig authorized only the Little Plan to drive the PLO 40 kilometers north of Israel's borders which Sharon briefed to Begin's cabinet.<sup>107</sup> Sharon and Begin recognized that there were limits to U.S. support and that neither Haig nor Reagan would support their more ambitious Big Plan to use their victory in Lebanon to fundamentally remake the Middle East. Indeed, Begin and Sharon intended to launch the Big Plan without notifying the Reagan Administration and hoped to win

---

<sup>107</sup>Zeev Schiff, "The Green Light," Foreign Policy, No. 50 (Spring 1983): 81.

its acquiescence by presenting it with a *fiat accompli*.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup>Avner Yaniv and Robert J. Lieber, "Personal Whim or Strategic Imperative? The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon," International Security Vol. 8, No. 2 (Autumn 1983): 136-37.

Once it became clear that Sharon had misled them about the purpose and scope of the incursion into Lebanon, Haig and Reagan sought to rein in Israel. The U.S. imposed cease-fire of June 11, 1982 saved the Syrian Army in Lebanon from complete destruction at the hands of the IDF.<sup>109</sup> There were many other instances during the Lebanon War where Israel and the United States worked at cross-purposes, thus belying the notion that America and the Jewish state were working hand-in-glove.

Probably nothing could better illustrate the discord just below the surface in U.S.-Israeli relations at the time than the Pollard Affair. Jonathan Pollard was an American Jew working for the Office of U.S. Naval Intelligence who was recruited to spy for Israel by a Ministry of Defense. Sharon himself initiated this whole operation because he was dissatisfied with the extent of intelligence sharing with the United States.<sup>110</sup> Pollard turned over highly classified intelligence and military operational data, some of which the Israelis later sold to Moscow.<sup>111</sup> It is hard to reconcile the Pollard Affair with the widely held image of two democratic states working together harmoniously. Indeed, to this day, the Pollard case complicates U.S.-Israeli relations.

The first *Intifada* from 1987 through 1993 further strained U.S.-Israeli ties. It exposed the split between the two democratic states both over the root of the problem (Israeli occupation

---

<sup>109</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy and Paul Martell, Flawed Victory: The Arab-Israeli Conflict and the 1982 War in Lebanon (Fairfax: HERO, 1986) 142.

<sup>110</sup>Hersh, The Samson Option, 16.

<sup>111</sup>Hersh, The Samson Option, 297.

versus terrorism) and the solution (the establishment of an independent Palestinian state versus more vigorous military suppression). During this same period, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in the summer of 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War also made clear that when push came to shove the United States would subordinate Israel's interests (in this case preventing Iraqi SCUD attacks) to its own (keeping Israel out of the war to hold together the Gulf War coalition).<sup>112</sup>

Overall, strategic interests, rather than common democracy, better explain the ebb and flow of U.S.-Israeli relations. During the period between 1948 and 1993, with the caveats offered above, common democracy has been a constant feature of the relationship. However, U.S.-Israeli relations have varied quite dramatically from the cool, arms-length attitude of the Eisenhower Administration to the relatively warm and close relations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Even though he argues that common democracy explained the close U.S.-Israeli relationship, Safran provides ample evidence that variation in strategic interests correlates quite closely with the state of U.S.-Israeli relations. He characterizes them as strained during the period from 1948 through 1957. Safran attributes this to the United States' desire to have Arab allies for the Cold War; uninterrupted access to oil; and access to air bases in the Middle East from which to launch nuclear strikes against the Soviet Union. Conversely, U.S.-Israeli relations improved between 1957 and 1967. This improvement, Safran suggests came about because the United States had become less dependent upon Middle Eastern nuclear bases; had concluded that

---

<sup>112</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 484.

the Arabs were unlikely to be U.S. allies in the Cold War; and U.S. dependence on Middle Eastern oil was deemed less critical. U.S.-Israeli relations were particularly close between 1967 and 1973. This was the result of the fact that the United States had concluded from the outcome of the Six Day War that Israel was the most potent military force in the region and alignment with the Jewish state could best further U.S. interests. In contrast, the period after 1973 saw a loosening of the relationship between the two democracies. This was due in part to the fact that the Yom Kippur War demonstrated the limits of Israel's military power in the region. Also, the Arab members of OPEC wielded the oil weapon with devastating effect against the economies of the developed world. The war also drew the Soviet Union more deeply into the region and increased its influence there. Finally, Europe decisively broke ranks with the United States in the Middle East, particularly over the issue of support for Israel. In sum, interests, rather than ideology, are the best explanation for American alignment decisions with Israel.

**France:** France was another democracy with which Israel has had quite variable relations. Initially, like much of the democratic world, the French were reluctant to recognize Israel for fear of antagonizing the Arabs. As its North African colonies became more restive in the mid-1950s, however, France began to realize that the Fourth Republic and the Jewish state shared some common strategic interests. This belief was carefully cultivated by Moshe Dayan in his efforts to get the French Ministry of Defense to sell Israel much needed arms:

“We face a common enemy, the Arabs. You are on the home front, while we are in the firing lines. Don't you think that when the home front lines are ablaze the arms should be transferred from

the home front to the forward positions.’”<sup>113</sup>

This line of reasoning was persuasive and France became one of the first democratic countries to sell Israel arms. France was Israel’s “great power patron” from mid-1950s through mid-1960s.

---

<sup>113</sup>Quoted in Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 87.

To be sure, there was lots of rhetoric about common democracy as the basis for the Franco-Israeli alignment. ““At this dangerous time,”” Ben-Gurion appealed to French Prime Minister Guy Mollet in 1956, ““the small and young republic of Israel appeals to the older and great French Republic with the certainty of mutual understanding.””<sup>114</sup> But France and Israel did not become close for reasons of common democratic fraternity, but rather because of their shared belief that Nasser’s Egypt was the common cause of all their troubles in the Middle East.<sup>115</sup> The French, in particular, blamed Nasser for supporting the rebels who were making their life so miserable in Algeria. Also, France’s own nascent nuclear program was critically dependent upon the computer skills of Israeli scientists.<sup>116</sup> Throughout this whole period, however, the Israelis never lost sight of the fact that their alignment with France was based on temporary common interests rather than permanent ideological fraternity.<sup>117</sup>

Nothing could make this clearer than the fact that Israel’s once quite close alliance did not survive the Six Day War. Indeed, France refused to support Israel in the run up to that war and even ended its long-standing policy of selling weapons to Israel on the eve of hostilities. French President Charles DeGaulle concluded that France’s strategic interests dictated that it must remain neutral in that conflict and he resisted supporting Israel despite substantial domestic

---

<sup>114</sup>Quoted in Brecher, Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy, 263-64.

<sup>115</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 162-64; Sacher, A History of Israel, 484; and Hugh Thomas, Suez (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 20.

<sup>116</sup>Hersh, The Samson Option, 30.

<sup>117</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 164.

audience costs “merely because public opinion felt some superficial sympathy for Israel as a small country with an unhappy history.”<sup>118</sup> Common democracy also did not prevent France from later developing quite close relations with one of Israel’s deadliest enemies: Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. In fact, the French were deeply implicated in the development of Saddam’s nascent nuclear program that the Israeli’s sought to preempt in 1981.<sup>119</sup> Clearly, democratic fraternity tells us far less than strategic interests about the course of Franco-Israeli relations over time.

---

<sup>118</sup>Quoted in Oren, Six Days of War, 100.

<sup>119</sup>Sacher, A History of Israel, 878-79.

**United Kingdom:** Relations between the democratic United Kingdom and Israel have also waxed and waned despite their common democracy. Britain's involvement with the Zionist movement pre-dated the establishment of the State of Israel. During the First World War, the British Government expressed support in principle for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine with the issuance of the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917. However, this endorsement of Jewish national aspirations had nothing to do with the political complexion of the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine – the *Yishuv*. Rather, it arose from some very straightforward strategic calculations. In endorsing Jewish statehood the British hoped to keep Russia in the war through appealing to Russian Jews; get the United States more committed to the Entente by pleasing American Jews; take the moral high-ground in Europe by endorsing the principle of national self-determination for a small but important European minority; and preempt a likely German declaration of support for an independent Jewish state. Overall, Britain's objective was to improve its position in the Middle East rather than foster a democracy in the region.<sup>120</sup>

If strategic interest could in some contexts lead Britain to support the *Yishuv*, in other situations it had precisely the opposite effect. For example, Britain's ardor for Zionism was dampened by the Arab Revolts and the Second World War. The need to keep the Middle East quiescent in preparation for a major war against the Axis led Britain in 1939 to issue a White

---

<sup>120</sup>Sacher, *A History of Israel*, 98-100; Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 73; Safran, *Israel*, 25; and Thomas, *How Israel Was Won*, 6.

Paper restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine; hindering the establishment of the Jewish state.

Even after the end of the Second World War, the newly elected Labor Government in the United Kingdom continued to enforce the White Paper's restrictions on Jewish immigration into Palestine because it believed that good relations with the Arabs remained vital to England's Cold War position in the region.

Relations between Britain and the *Yishuv* became so strained by the United Kingdom's opposition to an independent Palestinian state that the two democracies were virtually at war with each other. As Israeli journalist Moshe Brilliant recalled:

“As a result [of the White Paper], His Britannic Majesty's bayonets barred the gates of the Jewish National Home to European Jews fleeing Nazi gas chambers and furnaces. Some shiploads which reached the Middle East were turned back to Europe to perish.

This disastrous experience made an indelible impression upon the Jews of Palestine. They became less sensitive to what the world thought of them, and less scrupulous about Marquess of Queensbury rules in their struggle for Palestine.”<sup>121</sup>

The bloody and costly war with the *Yishuv* led Britain ultimately to withdraw from Palestine and relinquish its mandate. It refused, though, to support Israel's declaration of independence. The United Kingdom also expelled Israel from the Pound Sterling bloc. British and Israeli air forces even engaged in combat over the Sinai in the latter stages of the War of Independence.

---

<sup>121</sup>Moshe Brilliant, “Israel's Policy of Reprisals,” *Harpers* Vol. 210 (March 1955): 72.

Until the mid-1950s, relations between the two democracies were anything but cordial.

Triumphalists might point to the fact that Britain joined its sister democracies France and Israel in the victorious Suez War coalition as evidence that common democracy leads to more effective alliances. Upon closer inspection, however, the Suez War provides little support for the proposition that democracies win their wars because they make stronger alliance partners. To begin with, despite common democracy, the United Kingdom was initially reluctant to side with Israel in the Suez War due to residual hard feelings from the independence struggle. Also, Britain did not want to antagonize the Arabs by openly siding with the Jewish state against Egypt. Finally, the United Kingdom remained wary of Israel due to the latter's policy of retaliations against Jordan, Britain's most important ally in the region.

Of course, Britain did eventually side with Israel in the Suez War, but it did so not out of democratic fraternity but rather because of their common interest in toppling Nasser. Despite common democracy, Ben Gurion remained skeptical of the reliability of "perfidious Albion" as an ally during the Suez War. "Personally, I have great admiration for the British people, for its democratic regime," he recalled, "but I doubt the strength and honesty of [Prime Minister Anthony] Eden."<sup>122</sup> Ben Gurion's distrust was well-warranted inasmuch as Britain tried to maintain the fiction after Suez that she and France were merely intervening to separate Israel and Egypt rather than operating in collusion with the Jewish state.

Finally, as with France, once Britain concluded that alignment with Israel was no longer in

---

<sup>122</sup>Quoted in Brecher, Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy, 271.

its strategic interest, democratic audience costs did nothing to prevent a rupture. Like France, Britain refused to support Israel in the Six Day War. Nor did Britain side with the embattled democracy during its greatest hour of need: the Yom Kippur War. In sum, changing interests, rather than common democracy, best accounts for Britain's varying relationship with Israel throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Germany:** Finally, another democracy with which Israel had an up and down relationship was the Federal Republic of Germany. A closer examination of this alignment also makes clear that interest, rather than democratic fraternity, provides the best account of its vagaries. The primary impetus for the Israel's rapprochement with the perpetrators of the Holocaust was not that Conrad Adenauer's Federal Republic of Germany was democratic. Despite Germany's transition to democracy, most Israelis were hardly ready to forgive and forget. Indeed, polls showed that 80% of Israelis opposed negotiations with even a democratic Germany.<sup>123</sup> Ben Gurion understood that negotiating reparations and establishing relations with the Federal Republic would cause a huge crisis in Israel – as it in fact did – but he was willing to ignore majority opinion and base his policy toward Germany on *realpolitik* considerations of Israel's national interest: Israel's economy was in terrible shape after 1948 and it needed substantial financial aid. German reparations would produce a huge cash infusion for the Israeli economy.

---

<sup>123</sup>Segev, The Seventh Million, 212.

Ben Gurion also reckoned that establishing relations with Germany could help to integrate Israel into the U.S. Cold War alliance system. Ben Gurion rationalized his efforts to the establish relations with Hitler's former countrymen as the best means of ensuring Israel's security:

“When I say that the Germany of today, the Germany of Adenauer and the Social Democrats, is not the Germany of Hitler, I am referring not only to the new regime ... but also to the geopolitical transformation that has taken place in Western Europe and the world.... Germany as a force hostile to Israel ... also endangers the friendship of the other countries of Western Europe and might even have an undesirable influence on the United States and the other countries of America. She is a rising force ... – and her attitude to us will have no small influence on the attitude of other countries that are allied with her.

In my profound conviction, the injunction bequeathed to us by the martyrs of the Holocaust is the rebuilding, the strengthening, the progress and the security of Israel. For that purpose we need friends ... especially friends who are able and willing to equip the Israel Defence Forces in order to ensure our survival.... But if we regard Germany, or any other country – as Satan, we shall not receive arms.”<sup>124</sup>

According to Israeli historian Tom Segev, Adenauer made a similar calculation, agreeing to pay substantial reparations to Israel for the Holocaust in return for Germany's rehabilitation as a full member of the Western alliance. The result was that the Federal Republic gave Israel \$812 million which covered 29 percent of its balance of payments deficit.<sup>125</sup> This aid played a key role in the economic and military development of the state of Israel in the 1950s and early 1960s.

As with France and England, this close relationship did not continue through the Six Day and

---

<sup>124</sup>Quoted in Brecher, Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy, 104.

<sup>125</sup>Sacher, A History of Israel, 426.

Yom Kippur Wars. The fact that common democracy did not make other states consistently reliable allies calls into question the triumphalists' claim that the reason democracies tend to win their wars is that they enjoy better alliances.

Another problem with this triumphalist claim is that in many instances, the most important allies of the Jewish state were not democracies at all. Indeed, the Israelis took a very pragmatic view of who to ally with and were willing to align with a variety of non-democratic, and sometimes quite unsavory, regimes if they thought it would increase the security of the state. This precedent was established from the early days of statehood. As we saw previously, the democratic world did not rush to Israel's side after independence. Israel did, however, find significant support in the Eastern Bloc from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. Subsequently, it would gain important allies in other undemocratic regions of the world.

**Soviet Union:** The Soviet Union was one of the first states to recognize Israel's independence. Soviet Representative to the United Nations Andrei Gromyko strongly endorsed statehood for Israel in a speech on November 29, 1947:

“The Jewish people had been closely linked with Palestine for a considerable period in history. As a result of the war, the Jews as a people have suffered more than any other people. The total number of the Jewish population who perished at the hands of the Nazi executioners is estimated at approximately six million. The Jewish people were therefore striving to create a State of their own,

and it would be unjust to deny them that right.”<sup>126</sup>

Despite the high-sounding rhetoric about history and the international community’s debt for its inaction during the Holocaust, the Soviets recognized the new Jewish state primarily to undermine the United Kingdom’s position in the Middle East and keep it from establishing a military base in the Negev.

Soviet aid to Israel was more than just rhetorical. The Communist Bloc provided arms to Israel before the United States did.<sup>127</sup> Without Soviet acquiescence, Israel would not have received large numbers of weapons and munitions from satellite states and likely would have lost the War of Independence.<sup>128</sup> Also, the Soviet Union permitted Eastern Bloc Jews with military experience to emigrate to Israel and this significantly bolstered the IDF’s fighting power in the War of Independence. These individuals made much better soldiers than did the inhabitants of Arab countries.<sup>129</sup> Despite a lack of common democracy, the Soviet Union provided Israel with decisive aid early in its existence.

---

<sup>126</sup>Quoted in Gilbert Israel, 150.

<sup>127</sup>Meir, My Life, 231.

<sup>128</sup>Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 159.

<sup>129</sup>Segev, 1949, 101 and 173.

**Czechoslovakia:** The main conduit for Eastern Bloc military aid to Israel during the War of Independence was Czechoslovakia. True, the Czech arms deal was negotiated when Czechoslovakia was still a democracy, but this vital military aid continued under communist rule. It was essential to Israel's victory in the War of Independence. Golda Meir concluded that "[h]ad it not been for the arms and ammunition that we were able to buy in Czechoslovakia and transport through Yugoslavia and other Balkan countries in those days at the start of the war, I do not know whether we actually could have held out until the tide changed, as it did by June of 1948."<sup>130</sup> Yitzak Rabin concurred: "Without the arms from Czechoslovakia ... it is very doubtful whether we would have been able to conduct the war."<sup>131</sup> Ben Gurion was even more categorical about the impact of the Czech arms:

"They saved the State. There is no doubt of this. Without these weapons, it's doubtful whether we could have won. The arms deal with the Czechs was the greatest assistance we received."<sup>132</sup>

These Czech arms came when no democratic country would sell Israel weapons.

**South Africa:** Israel has also made common cause with non-democratic states such as the

---

<sup>130</sup>Meir, 230-31 and Sacher, A History of Israel, 329.

<sup>131</sup>Quoted in Bregmand and El-Tahri, The Fifty Year's War, 43.

<sup>132</sup>Quoted in Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 37.

Apartheid regime in South Africa. In fact, Israel and the Apartheid regime were so closely aligned that they may even have secretly cooperated in developing each other's nuclear programs despite the Apartheid regime's abhorrent domestic political system.<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup>Hersh, The Samson Option, 263-83.

**Jordan:** However, Israel's most important and consistent non-democratic partner has been the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Cooperation between the *Yishuv* and King Abdullah began even before the establishment of the State of Israel. Indeed, this "collusion across the Jordan" was an important precipitant of the international phase of Israel's War of Independence. Both Israel and Jordan sought to forestall the emergence of an independent Palestinian state and connived with each other to accomplish that end in 1948. The Israelis allowed King Abdullah to occupy the West Bank; in return, the Hashemite monarch looked the other way when Israel seized other Arab areas in Palestine.<sup>134</sup> Though Jordan and Israel did engage in combat during the War of Independence, King Abdullah had no intention of destroying Israel.<sup>135</sup> "Abdullah and the Zionists spoke the same language, the language of realism," concludes historian Avi Shlaim, though "from different scripts."<sup>136</sup> This Israeli-Jordanian "special relationship" made possible Israel's decisive victory in 1948.

---

<sup>134</sup>Flapan, *The Birth of Israel*, 37 and 136.

<sup>135</sup>Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 271.

<sup>136</sup>Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*, 30.

The Israeli-Jordanian “informal alliance” survived King Abdullah’s assassination and the ascension to the throne of his grandson Hussein. Israeli leaders understood that both Israel and Jordan suffered from cross-border “raiding” by Palestinian forces in the 1950s and had a common interest in suppressing it.<sup>137</sup> Subsequently, Jordan did not really want to get involved in the Six Day War but Israel’s harsh retaliatory policy pushed King Hussein into Nasser’s arms.<sup>138</sup> Israel and Jordan fought for Jerusalem and the West Bank for a few days in June of 1967 with Israel driving the King’s forces back across the Jordan River. That conflict, however, did not stop Israel from coming to Jordan’s aid in its hour of need during the Palestinian uprising in Black September of 1970. Israel mobilized its forces to prevent Syrian intervention in support of the Palestinians.<sup>139</sup> Jordan reciprocated a few years later when King Hussein gave Golda Meir advanced warning in September of 1973 of the planned Egyptian-Syrian Yom Kippur attack.<sup>140</sup> Jordan also sat out most of the Yom Kippur War except for sending some token forces to defend Syria. Overall, the Jewish state and the Hashemite Kingdom cooperated much more than they fought over the years.

At various times, Israel also had cordial relations with other non- or sometimes-democratic states like the Shah’s Iran, Turkey, and the Lebanese Christian Phalange in 1982. In

---

<sup>137</sup>Dayan, “Why Israel Strikes Back,” 121.

<sup>138</sup>Eric Hammel, Six Days in June: How Israel Won the 1967 Arab-Israeli War (Pacifica, CA: Pacifica Military History, 1992). 21.

<sup>139</sup>Thomas, How Israel Was Won, and Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 172.

<sup>140</sup>Bregmand and El-Tahri, The Fifty Year’s War, 142.

all of these cases, the main concern was not the nature of the potential ally's domestic regime but rather whether alignment with that group furthered Israel's interests.

Israel has been willing to ally with both democracies and non-democracies as her interests dictated, but Israeli leaders regarded Jews in the *Diaspora* as their only truly reliable supporters.

As Yigael Allon put it: "Israel has had, has and will have, but one faithful ally: the Jewish people in its diaspora."<sup>141</sup> This is why Ben Gurion and other Israeli leaders have looked to Jews within the United States and other countries as reliable lobbies on Israel's behalf.<sup>142</sup> Common religion and ethnicity, the twin pillars of nationalism, rather than common democracy, have been the only sound basis for alliance in the view of most Israeli leaders.

In sum, common democracy has not guaranteed that Israel and the United States, France, Britain, or Germany have maintained close alliances. Moreover, Israel has often found non-democracies such as the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, South Africa, and Jordan to be reliable strategic partners. In all of these cases, the most important factor explaining Israeli alignments has been strategic interests rather than the domestic character of the regimes involved.

*Strategic Evaluation:* Triumphalists believe that democracies benefit from better strategic evaluation in wartime and this explains their propensity to win their wars. There are two possible reasons why democracy might help states make better strategic decisions: Some believe

---

<sup>141</sup>Quoted in Brecher, Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy, 340.

<sup>142</sup>Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 166 and Saul Friedlander, "Policy Choices Before Israel" in Paul Y. Hammond and Sidney S. Alexander, eds., Political Dynamics in the Middle East (New York: American Elsevier, 1972), 116.

that since democracies involve more people in the decision-making process, this increases the likelihood that the right decision will be made. Others argue that democracy fosters a marketplace of ideas out of which emerge the best policies. Either way, democracies are more likely to win their wars because they make better wartime decisions.

It is not clear, however, that Israeli democracy fostered better strategic evaluation and decision-making. Neither of the causal mechanisms triumphalists argue produce better decision-making adequately explain Israel's military victories. To begin with, despite the fact that in many respects Israel is a robust democracy, in the areas of national security very few Israelis have much meaningful input into the decision-making process. Members of the Israeli Parliament play little role in national security decision-making because the Knesset has no independent sources of information with which to make strategic assessments.<sup>143</sup> Also, the public in Israel tends to be very trusting of the government and military and rarely desires to second-guess national security decisions.<sup>144</sup> The net effect is that war-time decisions are made by a very small number of people in Israel.

Moreover, there is really not much of a marketplace of ideas in Israel on national security issues. One reason for this is the very draconian system of censorship which severely constricts the amount of information that the otherwise quite free and lively Israeli press can publish about national security matters. This was a legacy of the British Mandate's security regulations which

---

<sup>143</sup>van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 250.

<sup>144</sup>Safran, Israel, 327.

Israel's democratic leaders have found no reason to amend. Moshe Dyan, for example, once even conceded that "UN reports are often more accurate than ours."<sup>145</sup> It is not clear, though, that lack of information was the only problem. The legacy of the Holocaust has also made Israelis unwilling to critically evaluate their country and its policies.<sup>146</sup> Finally, Israel has few independent civilian defense analysts who provide alternative information and analyses on national security policy.<sup>147</sup> With little information, no desire to question official policy, and few independent experts, it is impossible to have an effective marketplace of ideas vetting national security policy in Israel.

---

<sup>145</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 108.

<sup>146</sup>Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 10.

<sup>147</sup>van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 247.

Historically, Israeli national security decision-making has not worked the way the triumphalists believe that it should in an open political system. For example, the Israeli decision to sponsor a covert series of attacks on U.S. facilities in Egypt with the intention of causing a rupture between those two countries backfired in the damaging domestic scandal known as the “Lavon Affair.” Similarly, many Israelis believed that Ben Gurion’s Suez gambit was not carefully thought-out. The Israeli cabinet was informed only the night before military operations began. The Labor Party’s coalition partners were notified just hours before the attack began.<sup>148</sup> The quality of the debate about Operation Kadesh could hardly have been very good because only ten Israeli civilians aside from Ben-Gurion knew about the war before October 25, 1956. In essence, Ben Gurion alone made all the decisions about the war. As his protege Shimon Peres recounted:

“I saw Ben Gurion when he faced momentous decisions, but I shall never forget that evening and night which followed it – between October 24 and 25, 1956.... In a certain place, a certain man had to make the decision, despite the fact that some of the essential data, for and against, were unknowable.... We sat – Moshe Dayan, the late Nehemia Argov and this writer – with Ben Gurion: not one of us envied him the long night that lay before him. The next morning we saw him ... the decision made....”<sup>149</sup>

This was hardly a democratic decision-making process and it was characteristic of how Ben

---

<sup>148</sup>Brecher, Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy, 232-34 and 275, fn. 3; and Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 93.

Gurion operated in the security realm more generally.

---

<sup>149</sup>Quoted in Brecher, Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy, 273-74.

Israel's nuclear program was a prime example of a major strategic initiative which involved only a small number of decision makers and about which the public knew virtually nothing. The program was begun in great secrecy in the 1950s. Ben Gurion allowed no public debate about it. What little discussion there was within the government was kept to a very small number of officials. Whatever the merits of Israel's decision to pursue a nuclear weapons program, it is clear that Israeli democracy had little influence upon it.<sup>150</sup>

Arguably, the Six Day War was Israel's greatest military victory. In less than a week, Israel defeated the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria and conquered the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. But even this striking victory was hardly the result of flawless strategic evaluation. Few analysts would credit the Eshkol government with effective strategic decision-making in the run-up to the war. One particularly egregious blunder was for Israel to think she could make preparations for a strike against Syria without causing the Egyptians to mobilize too. Nor could one claim that Israel's strategy was better as the result of the thorough vetting it got in the marketplace of ideas because the Israeli public knew less about the course of the war than the public in any other state in the region.<sup>151</sup> But the real strategic misstep in the war was Israel's inability to decide what to do with the Occupied Territories. As far back as the *Yishuv*, Israeli leaders including Ben Gurion had foreseen that the occupation of territory with a majority Arab population would threaten the Jewish and democratic nature of

---

<sup>150</sup>Cohen, Israel and the Bomb, 72-3, 145, and 344.

<sup>151</sup>Oren, Six Days of War, 209-10 and Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 231.

the state of Israel.<sup>152</sup> Despite early recognition of this dilemma, the Israelis were incapable of formulating a clear strategy for the disposition of the Occupied Territories because the opposition to giving them up by a fraction of the electorate paralyzed the Israeli government. Ironically, it was precisely the electoral dynamics of Israeli democracy that made it difficult for any leader to unilaterally pull out of them.<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>152</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 55 and Segev, 1949, 19.

<sup>153</sup>Gilbert, Israel, 396; Wheatcroft, 312; and Safran, Israel, 102.

Israeli strategic evaluation during the War of Attrition was not very good either. Israeli leaders made a mistake in thinking that the thin series of fortifications on the Suez Canal known as the Bar-Lev line would constitute sufficient protection of its forward deployed forces.<sup>154</sup>

After the end of the War of Attrition, Golda Meir stifled discussion within her cabinet about Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's 1971 peace overture. As a result, Israel missed this possible opportunity to prevent yet another Arab-Israeli war.<sup>155</sup>

The 1973 Yom Kippur War was nearly a strategic debacle of catastrophic proportions for Israel. On the Sinai Front, the Egyptians achieved complete strategic surprise and successfully executed a very difficult military operation by crossing the Canal. Israeli military intelligence was caught completely by surprise.<sup>156</sup> On the Golan Front, the Syrians achieved a decisive breakthrough and almost nothing stood between them and Israel proper. Israeli strategic evaluation prior to the war left much to be desired.

---

<sup>154</sup>Sacher, A History of Israel, 745 and Perlmutter, "Israel's Fourth War," 441.

<sup>155</sup>Bregmand and El-Tahri, The Fifty Year's War, 130.

<sup>156</sup>Bregmand and El-Tahri, The Fifty Year's War, 144 and Avi Shlaim, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War," World Politics Vol. 28, No. 3 (April 1976): 348.

Hubris and ethnocentrism led Israeli political and military leaders to underestimate both the motives and the capabilities of their Arab adversaries.<sup>157</sup> There was plenty of evidence available to the Israelis that an attack was imminent but their over-confidence led them to discount it. To give the Egyptians their due, they executed a brilliant plan of strategic deception by mobilizing and demobilizing their forces 22 times before launching their actual attack from five separate locations. But the Israelis committed a variety of blunders too. For instance, the Israelis foolishly embraced the notion that tanks by themselves were sufficient for waging ground combat. Also, the Israelis completely misunderstood the Egyptians' attrition strategy which aimed not to reconquer the whole of the Sinai but rather just to gain a firm foothold on the Israeli side of the Suez Canal and then to bleed the IDF until Israel agreed to negotiate a withdrawal from the rest of the occupied Sinai. Relatedly, the Israelis misjudged the effectiveness of the Egyptian SAM system. It was also an error to allow the Egyptians to take the initiative in hostilities. Finally, the Israelis underestimated the impact that the Arab oil embargo would have on her main ally the United States.<sup>158</sup> Despite Israeli democracy, there was no market place of ideas in defense policy because many Israeli Cabinet members "voted for [Defense Minister Moshe] Dayan's proposals regularly because they accepted him as *the* authority in security

---

<sup>157</sup>Handel, "Israel's Political-Military Doctrine," 31; Chaim Herzog, The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East from the War of Independence through Lebanon [revised and updated] (New York: Vintage, 1984), 228; and Shlaim, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates," 348-80.

<sup>158</sup>Sacher, A History of Israel, 752; Safran, Israel, 312-14; Luttwak and Horowitz, The Israeli Army, 346; Herzog, The Arab-Israeli Wars, 254-55; and Chaim Herzog, The War of Atonement: October 1973 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), 31 and 278.

matters.”<sup>159</sup> Israel ultimately prevailed in the Yom Kippur War; but it did so in spite, not because, of its strategic evaluation.<sup>160</sup>

---

<sup>159</sup>Ezer Weizman quoted in Brecher, Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy, 466.

<sup>160</sup>Chaim Herzog, The War of Atonement: October 1973 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), 31 and 278; Herzog, The Arab-Israeli Wars, 236-39; Perlmutter, “Israel’s Fourth War,” 434-60; “Chief of Military Resigns in Israel; Blamed in Inquiry,” New York Times, April 3, 1974, 1 and 5; and Pollack, Arabs at War, 106-7.

Israel's June 1982 invasion of Lebanon was a strategic blunder of major proportions but Israeli democracy did little to prevent it.<sup>161</sup> Israel's open political system did not foster thoughtful debate through a vibrant marketplace of ideas. Begin refused to listen to the Israeli intelligence community when they provided the Prime Minister with evidence that the attack on the Israeli Ambassador in London was not instigated by Arafat's PLO. No one in the Cabinet bothered to check whether the PLO was really involved in the attack. Moreover, both the Israeli civilian intelligence service Mossad and military intelligence had grave reservations about Sharon's Lebanon operation. But Begin and Sharon completely ignored the intelligence experts' assessments in planning operation in Lebanon.<sup>162</sup> In addition, Sharon kept the cabinet completely in the dark about the scope of the Israeli operation and thwarted efforts by Israel's press to inform the public about what was going on.<sup>163</sup> Begin's Cabinet thought it was supporting a limited operation to drive back Arafat's forces 40 kilometers from the border rather than authorizing an all-out war against Syria and the PLO. There was remarkably little internal debate inasmuch as Sharon sold the Cabinet on his Little Plan while he in reality he intended to execute his Big Plan. Sharon similarly mislead the Israeli public about what he was doing in Lebanon. Begin and Sharon also used the Reagan Administration's support for Little Plan to

---

<sup>161</sup>Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, Israel's Lebanon War (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

<sup>162</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 398.

<sup>163</sup>Schiff and Ya'ariv, Israel's Lebanon War, pp. 33, 39, 41, 58, 97, 100, 101, 103, 113, 266-68, 303, 304; Shlaim, 397; Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, p. 246; Richard Gabriel, Operation Peace for Galilee: The Israeli-PLO War in Lebanon (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984),

silence domestic critics of Big Plan. Despite an elected legislature and a free press, Sharon was able to launch his Big Plan without subjecting it to debate in Israel's otherwise vibrant marketplace of ideas.

---

68; and Dupuy and Martell, Flawed Victory, pp. 96, 142.

Moreover, all the major decisions about the war were made by a small group of individuals: Sharon, Begin, Foreign Minister Yitzak Shamir, and Chief of Staff Gen. Rafael Eytan. Begin and Sharon treated the Cabinet as a “rubber stamp” rather than as an advisory or consultive body in the discussions of the Lebanon operation.<sup>164</sup> Israeli democracy did not ensure that large numbers of individuals participated in the decision-making process.

Finally, there is little evidence that Israeli democracy produced sound strategic evaluation during the First *Intifada*.<sup>165</sup> The Palestinian uprising of 1987-1993 was the long-anticipated consequence of Israel’s continuing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and posed for Israel the stark choice of whether it could continue to be both Jewish and democratic. Many mistakes were made but one of the most egregious was that Israeli intelligence fostered the rise of Hamas in the early 1980s in the hope of weakening the PLO. Israel discovered, to its misfortune, that this strategy would backfire terribly by creating a new and more formidable Palestinian resistance group.<sup>166</sup>

In sum, Israeli democracy did not guarantee sound strategic evaluation. There was a very impoverished marketplace of ideas in Israel because censorship and security restrictions severely constricted the public debate about national security affairs. Moreover, these same security regulations and a deeply entrenched willingness to defer to the government and the military on national security matters also ensured that only a very small number of individuals would be

---

<sup>164</sup>Schiff and Ya’ari, Israel’s Lebanon War, 48.

<sup>165</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 452 and Morris, Righteous Victims, 586.

involved in the decision-making process.

Ironically, this relatively undemocratic system of national security decision-making sometimes worked to Israel's advantage. Former Israeli Prime Minister Moshe Sharett reluctantly conceded that Ben Gurion was correct that Israel's security policy could not be run democratically:

---

<sup>166</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 459 and Sacher, A History of Israel, 963.

“I have learned that the state of Israel cannot be ruled in our generation without deceit and adventurism. These are historical facts that cannot be altered.... In the end, history will justify both the stratagems of deceit and acts of adventurism. All I know is that I, Moshe Sharett, am not capable of them, and I am therefore unsuited to lead the country.”<sup>167</sup>

Reflecting on the situation during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, former Israeli President Chaim

Herzog similarly observed that:

Mrs. Meir’s method of government brought about a system whereby there were not checks and balances and no alternative evaluations. Her doctrinaire, inflexible approach to problems and the government was to contribute to the failings of the government before the war. She was very much the overbearing mother who ruled the roost with an iron hand. She had very little idea of orderly administration and preferred to work closely with her cronies, creating an ad hoc system of government based on what was known as her ‘kitchen.’ But once war had broken out these very traits proved to be an asset.<sup>168</sup>

Thus, contradicting the triumphalists’ market place of ideas argument, this undemocratic system often worked well in wartime. In short, the fact that Israel is a democracy has not necessarily ensured better Israeli security policies but the lack of public input has not been uniformly a problem either.

---

<sup>167</sup>Quoted in Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 51-52.

<sup>168</sup>Herzog, The War of Atonement, 282.

*Public Support:* There can be little doubt that, until quite recently, the state of Israel could count on the overwhelming support of its citizens and soldiers when it went to war. But rather than democracy *per se*, the fact that the state was often fighting for its very existence between 1948 and 1973 surely provides a better explanation for that support.<sup>169</sup> Moshe Dayan explained why Israeli society came together in wartime despite seemingly overwhelming odds:

“the state of Israel had come into existence in the shadow of imminent destruction, and the memories of escape from fearful dangers have attended the people of Israel from the very dawn of their independence. These memories abide with us still, and go far to explain the depth of our preoccupation with security.”<sup>170</sup>

Golda Meir concurred: “we couldn’t afford the luxury of pessimism either, so we made an altogether different kind of calculation based on the fact that the 650,000 of us were more highly

---

<sup>169</sup>van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 125, 153, 197, and 241; John Laffin and Mike Chappell, The Israeli Army in the Middle East Wars, 1948-73 [Men-at-Arms Series] (Wellingborough, UK: Osprey, 1982), 4; Handel, “Israel’s Political-Military Doctrine,” 9; Barzilai, “War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict,” 327; and Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 116.

<sup>170</sup>Major-General Moshe Dayan, “Israel’s Border and Security Problems,” Foreign Affairs Vol. 33, No. ? (January 1955): 252-53.

motivated to stay alive than anyone outside Israel could be expected to understand and that the only option available to us, if we didn't want to be pushed into the sea, was to win the war.”<sup>171</sup>

---

<sup>171</sup>Golda Meir, My Life (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 233. Also see similar comments by David Ben Gurion and Moshe Dyan in Dyan, Moshe Dyan, 92, 396, and 441; and van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 153.

The death of six million Jews in the Holocaust was obviously an important source of the sense of urgency among Israelis about the need to ensure that Israel did not lose its wars.<sup>172</sup> As the Adolph Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in April 1961 demonstrated, Israeli leaders understood that the Holocaust could be used to construct a new Israeli national identity that superseded deep ethnic, religious, and political differences that would otherwise have divided the Jewish state.<sup>173</sup> The Arab threat provided a powerful impetus for unity among an otherwise very fractious Israeli society.<sup>174</sup>

The sense that the Jewish community was fighting for its national survival began in the *Yishuv* period. From the very inception of the Jewish state, the sense that national survival was at stake played a key role in forging wartime unity. “All knew in this opening round of our War of Independence,” Moshe Dayan recalled, “that there could be no retreat and no surrender.”<sup>175</sup> Yisrael Galili concurred:

““And if some stubbornly persist in asking, Is it within our power to stand up against an all-Arab assault? – our answer is: This is a foolish question! Is it within our power not to stand-up against

---

<sup>172</sup>Segev, The Seventh Million, 18 and 389; Segev, 1949, 286; Safran, Israel, 63; Inbar, “Contours of Israel’s New Strategic Thinking,” 43; and Friedlander, “Policy Choices Before Israel” 116.

<sup>173</sup>Segev, The Seventh Million, 328.

<sup>174</sup>Oren, Six Days of War, 18; Wheatcroft, The Controversy of Zion, 246; and Safran, Israel, 165;

<sup>175</sup>Dayan, Moshe Dayan, 92.

them? Have we any alternative? Have we any prospect of survival, other than by facing up to them with our full strength?”<sup>176</sup>

Similarly, there was little public dissent during the Suez War, though this may have been due as much to lack of public knowledge as to the overwhelming sense of common threat from Nasser’s regime.

Ironically, given how quickly the Six Day War was won, Israelis felt most imperilled in the run-up to it. The sense of threat was felt acutely throughout the country. It provided Israelis with a powerful incentive to support their government’s war effort. As Herut Party Knesset member Arye Ben-Eliezer remembered:

---

<sup>176</sup>Quoted in Allon, The Making of Israel’s Army, 191.

““We were not so few in number as there is a tendency to believe. By our side fought the six million, who whispered in our ear the eleventh commandment: Do not get murdered – the commandment that was omitted at Mount Sinai and was given back to us in the recent battles in Sinai.””<sup>177</sup>

“When I think back on these days [in 1967],” Golda Meir recalled, “what stands out in my mind is the miraculous sense of unity and purpose that transformed us within only a week or two from a small, rather claustrophobic community, coping – not always well – with all sorts of economic, political, and social discontents into 2,500,000 Jews, each and everyone of whom felt personally responsible for the survival of the state of Israel and each and everyone of whom knew that the enemy we faced was committed to our annihilation.”<sup>178</sup> Then-Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin attributed Israel’s remarkable victory in the Six Day War to the sense of national unity fostered by sense of imminent peril:

“I said at the time: ‘we have no alternative but to answer the challenge forced upon us, because the problem is not freedom of navigation, the challenge is the existence of the state of Israel, and this is a war for that very existence....’ This feeling that the war was to secure our very existence was shared by all the people in Israel.... Above all else, our victory was due to this sense....”<sup>179</sup>

The Six Day War was one of Israel’s most popular wars, largely because of the widespread sense

---

<sup>177</sup>Quoted in Morris, Righteous Victims, 311.

<sup>178</sup>Meir, My Life, 359-60 and Safran, Israel, 63.

<sup>179</sup>Quoted in Brecher, Decisions in Israel’s Foreign Policy, 334.

that Israel's survival was at stake.

In contrast, the 1969-70 War of Attrition generated significant dissent among Israelis because the threat did not seem so pressing and the Sinai Peninsula was not considered part of the Jewish homeland.<sup>180</sup> Indeed, Israeli democracy may have actually undermined public support for the war through the widespread public complaining about the war's growing cost in blood and treasure.

There was, however, no such hesitancy in Israel during the Yom Kippur War. Golda Meir recalled the mind-set at the time:

““We know that giving up means death, means destruction of our sovereignty and physical destruction of our entire people. Against that we will fight with everything that we have within us.””<sup>181</sup>

But, again, it was the sense of threat, rather than democracy, that brought the public squarely behind government's war effort.

---

<sup>180</sup>Barzilai, “War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict,” 323 and Shimshoni, Israel and Conventional Deterrence, 171 and 186.

<sup>181</sup>Quoted in Gilbert Israel, 445.

Lebanon, though, was a far different story. Initially, there was considerable public support for the war in Lebanon but it was based on the belief that the war would be limited to a 40 kilometer operation to push PLO forces from Israel's northern border. There was little public support for the more ambitious goals envisioned in Sharon's Big Plan.<sup>182</sup> Of course, this lack of public enthusiasm did not prevent Sharon from implementing the Big Plan. Israeli democracy did little to bolster support for the wider war. Indeed, as with the War of Attrition, some analysts suggest that Israel's democratic political system contributed to the failure in Lebanon by allowing open dissent to sap public support for the war. As Geoffrey Wheatcroft observes, "Lebanon was the first of Israel's wars openly to divide rather than unite the country."<sup>183</sup>

Finally, the Israeli public was deeply divided about the wisdom of Israel's strategy for suppressing the *Intifada*.<sup>184</sup> As with Lebanon and the War of Attrition, many Israelis wondered whether the conflict was necessary. As Gad Barzilai notes, "All of Israel's controversial wars have been wars of choice" rather than wars of necessity.<sup>185</sup> Rather than democracy, the most consistent explanation for the fluctuation in the level of public support for of Israel's wars has been whether or not most Israelis thought that a particular war was necessary for Israel's

---

<sup>182</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 421; Schiff and Ya'ari, Israel's Lebanon War, 127; Barzilai, "War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict," 324; Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 255-57; Dupuy and Martell, Flawed Victory, 59-60; Feldman and Rechnitz-Kijner, "Deception, Consensus and War, 5 and 44; and Evron, War and Intervention in Lebanon, 105.

<sup>183</sup>Wheatcroft, The Controversy of Zion, 302.

<sup>184</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 460 and Barzilai, "War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict," 324-25.

<sup>185</sup>Barzilai, "War, Democracy, and Internal Conflict," 328.

survival. *Troops:* Triumphalists believe that the culture of liberal individualism inherent in democratic armies makes their soldiers superior: officers lead better and soldiers fight with greater initiative, in their view. There is no doubt that the IDF produced officers with superior leadership skills to those of the Arab armies. But Yigal Allon attributed this not to Israel's democracy but rather to necessity:

“Israel, in her unique situation, may under no circumstances lose in war, neither in great battles nor in minor actions. Thus Israel's command personnel – whose task it is to prevent defeat and achieve victory – are entrusted with a responsibility the gravity of which has no parallel in any administrative authority in the country's civilian life.”<sup>186</sup>

Likewise, most analysts attributed the combat prowess of Israeli soldiers not to their culture of liberal individualism but rather to the fact they faced no other choice but to fight well or face national extinction.<sup>187</sup> As one IAF pilot recalled:

“We have no alternative but to be the best. Losing supremacy in the air is the equivalent of having the nation walk into the sea. I don't think it's likely to happen.”<sup>188</sup>

Finally, the triumphalists' explanation does not work very well in the Israeli case because the IDF's ethos was more “aristocratic” than democratic. This elitist ethos, in turn, contributed to

---

<sup>186</sup>Allon, *The Making of Israel's Army*, 250. Also cf. Cordesman, *The Arab-Israeli Military Balance*, 10 and 21.

<sup>187</sup>van Crevald, *The Sword and the Olive*, 197. Also cf van Crevald, *The Sword and the Olive*, 125-26; Oren, *Six Days of War*, 17; Zeev Schiff, “The Green Light,” 37-38 and Brecher, *Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy*, 324.

<sup>188</sup>Quoted in Schiff, *A History of the Israeli Army*, 153.

the IDF's military effectiveness, in the view of many analysts.<sup>189</sup>

There is little doubt, for instance, that the IDF enjoyed better leadership and superior initiative in the 1948 War of Independence. But this was due more to the sense of greater urgency on the part of the Jews fighting only two years after the end of the Holocaust than to the democratic nature of the state. Yigal Allon noted that the Arab threat appeared ominous at the time:

---

<sup>189</sup>Luttwak and Horowitz, The Israeli Army, 70 and 74.

“As a whole, the Israeli forces were still inferior to those of the enemy in numbers, equipment and geostrategic conditions but superior in organization, discipline, fighting spirit, unity, and a sense of *no alternative*. ‘Either you win the war, or you will be driven into the Mediterranean – you individually along with the whole nation:’ this was the meaning of no alternative, a phrase widely used at this time by troops and civilians alike to express the nation’s consciousness that it was fighting for its survival.”<sup>190</sup>

This sense of no alternative contributed markedly to the willingness of Israeli soldiers to fight effectively in Israel’s War of Independence.

The Holocaust image was also regularly invoked in Israel’s other wars including the Six Day War.<sup>191</sup> Brigadier General Israel Tal, a division commander on the Sinai front, noted that:

“‘Other people, other armies can afford to lose a second and third battle. They have strategic depth for retreat, recuperation, reorganization and can initiate a new counter-offensive – we cannot. *We cannot afford to fail in the first battle.*’”<sup>192</sup>

His colleague Colonel Shmuel Gonen echoed this sentiment: “ ‘if we do not win, we will have no where to come back to.’”<sup>193</sup> This sense of “no alternative” fostered superior initiative among the

---

<sup>190</sup>Allon, The Making of Israel’s Army, 36-37.

<sup>191</sup>Oren, Six Days of War, 97.

<sup>192</sup>Quoted in Handel, “Israel’s Political-Military Doctrine,” 40.

<sup>193</sup>Quoted in Oren, Six Days of War, 179. Also cf. Laffin and Chapell, The Israeli Army

soldiers of the IDF during the Six Day War. Yitzak Rabin explained that:

---

in the Middle East Wars, 3 and Morris, Righteous Victims, 662-63.

““Our airmen, who struck the enemies’ planes so accurately that no one in the world understands how it was done and people seek technological explanations and secret weapons; our armored troops who beat the enemy even when their equipment was inferior to his; our soldiers in other branches... Who overcame our enemies everywhere, despite the latter’s superior numbers and fortifications – all these revealed not only coolness and courage in battle but ... an understanding that only their personal stand against the greatest dangers would achieve victory for their country and for their families, and that if victory was not theirs the alternative was annihilation.”<sup>194</sup>

There is a widespread recognition, which was amply confirmed by the Israeli experience in the Six Day War, that men fight do not fight primarily for ideologies like democracy.<sup>195</sup> Rather, because of the greater danger facing the Israelis in 1967, they had much greater motivation to fight than their Arab adversaries who had little reason to fear that defeat would mean national extinction.

Conversely, the 1982 War in Lebanon demonstrates that when the need is not seen as pressing, soldiers in democratic armies can manifest serious deficiencies in both leadership and initiative. There was no consensus among Israelis that the PLO threat from Lebanon represented more than a nuisance. Given this assessment, military discontent with the prolonged war grew quickly as the operation appeared to have bogged down and losses mounted. Leadership was adversely affected by Israeli military dissatisfaction with the Lebanon operation. For example, an IDF brigade commander resigned his commission rather than lead his troop into what

---

<sup>194</sup>Quoted in Sacher, A History of Israel, 660.

<sup>195</sup>Hammel, Six Days in June 133-34.

promised to be bloody urban combat in Beirut.<sup>196</sup> Senior IDF officers also admitted that their troops in Lebanon demonstrated little of the initiative that they had shown in previous wars.<sup>197</sup>

Yair Yoram, an IDF paratroop commander, testified to this lack of initiative after the war:

“Q: There was a claim that [IDF] commanders hesitated to take the initiative once they suffered some casualties.

A: In this war there was some problem in the realm you are talking about, since no pressure was felt. You did not face enemy pressure.

Q: But there were operational orders to complete missions by the hour ...

---

<sup>196</sup>Schiff and Ya'ari, Israel's Lebanon War, 215-12.

<sup>197</sup>William Claiborne, “Israel Studies Lessons of Lebanon War,” Washington Post ?, 1 and 18; and Yezid Sayigh, “Israel's Military Performance in Lebanon, June 1982,” Journal of Palestine Studies Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn 1983): 42.

A: I am trying to explain the phenomena, not to justify it. There was a feeling that it was preferable to go slow but be safe [rather] than to [advance] rapidly but at a risk.”<sup>198</sup>

The Lebanon operation sapped the morale of even the IDF’s most elite troops. The key factor here was not Israel’s democratic political system, but rather the fact that the Lebanon incursion was not seen as necessary to ensure national survival.

---

<sup>198</sup>Quoted in Feldman and Rechnitz-Kijner, “Deception, Consensus and War, 52.

As the result of the Lebanon War, the quality of Israel's military leadership declined markedly.<sup>199</sup> This was largely attributable to the fact that many of Israel's best and brightest no longer regarded service in the IDF as necessary to defend the survival of the state of Israel. Rather, as the continuing occupation of Lebanon took its toll, and large chunks of the IDF were tied down in increasingly distasteful occupation duties in the West Bank and Gaza suppressing the *Intifada*, a general sense of malaise took hold within both Israeli society and its armed forces.<sup>200</sup> Israel was certainly not less democratic in this period than it had been in 1948 or 1967; indeed, overall the Jewish state was more democratic. The explanation for variations in leadership and initiative in the IDF lay elsewhere, primarily in the nature of the conflict. The IDF fought well in wars for national survival; it fought poorly in wars that did not involve such high stakes.

#### Alternative Explanations

The triumphalists' argument that Israel's remarkable military performance over the years was the result of its democratic political system also ignores a number of alternative explanations for Israel's military effectiveness.

*Numbers:* The conventional view was that Israel won its wars despite being consistently outnumbered by the Arabs in men and materials.<sup>201</sup> (See Table 4.3) As Yigal Allon put it, Israel

---

<sup>199</sup>Cordesman, The Arab-Israeli Military Balance, 107.

<sup>200</sup>Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 170-71.

<sup>201</sup>For examples of the conventional wisdom see Pollack, Arabs at War, 3 and 5 and Laffin and Chapell, The Israeli Army in the Middle East Wars, 7.

faced Arab military forces of “overwhelming military superiority.”<sup>202</sup> If one looks just at the overall balance in total manpower on each side, Israel appears to be outnumbered any where from 6:1 to 1.4:1 in its wars between 1948 and 1982. Even today, Israel seems hopelessly outmatched by the Arabs in population (33:1), active duty military forces (12:1), combat aircraft (5:1), and tanks (3:1).

---

<sup>202</sup>Quoted in Allon, The Making of Israel’s Army, 3 and 34.

But this widely held image of Israel as a small, outnumbered state facing much larger Arab armies is now regarded as a myth by most contemporary Israeli historians. Indeed, in many of its wars, Israel enjoyed numerical superiority over its Arab adversaries in many key indicators of military power.<sup>203</sup> (See Table 4.4) Also, Israel rarely faced all of the Arab states fighting together simultaneously and so overall comparisons of forces do not accurately reflect the real numbers that Israel faced. Thus, this carefully crafted image of an Israeli David confronting an Arab Goliath bears little resemblance to the reality between 1948 and 1993.

Israel's War of Independence is a good illustration of Voltaire's famous dictum that God favors the big battalions. Israel enjoyed two key advantages over the Arab forces in this war. First, the Arab coalition was not a monolith uniformly committed to the eradication of the Jewish state. Rather, it was a fractious and mutually suspicious assemblage whose members spent almost as much time furtively glancing back over their shoulders at their putative allies as they did glaring at their Jewish adversaries.<sup>204</sup> This lack of unity clearly undermined the effectiveness of the Arab military coalition. Yisrael Galili offered what he thought was:

“... a realistic estimate of the force that the Arab countries can marshal for their ‘holy war’ in Palestine. Mention was made of the weakness of the Arab armies, their low military standard, and of the lack of ideological motivation among their rank and file. Inter-Arab rivalries and mutual antagonisms were also stressed.”<sup>205</sup>

---

<sup>203</sup>On Israel's advantages in military-age manpower and troops at various periods see van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 32 and Dupuy, Elusive Victory, 19, 93, 121, and 231.

<sup>204</sup>Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 36; Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 197; van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 82; and Morris, Righteous Victims, 219.

<sup>205</sup>Quoted in Allon, The Making of Israel's Army, 185.

Second, Israel actually enjoyed nearly a 3:1 advantage in military manpower over the Arabs by the end of the war. Such a numerical advantage in troops has historically been a reliable predictor of victory and that was certainly true in 1948.<sup>206</sup>

---

<sup>206</sup>Dupuy, Elusive Victory, 93; Shlaim, The Iron Wall, 35; Morris, Righteous Victims, 217; Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 10; and Safran, Israel, 44-50.

Nor was it the case that an out-numbered Israel won over a much larger Egyptian force during the Suez War of 1956. Rather, Israel and its allies enjoyed better than a 2:1 advantage over the Egyptian forces in the Sinai.<sup>207</sup> This was largely thanks to the Anglo-French operation against Egyptian forces deployed along the Suez Canal which reduced Egyptian forces facing the Israelis by half. Since France, Israel, and the United Kingdom overwhelmingly outnumbered the Egyptians, the outcome of the war was inevitable given the preponderance of forces arrayed against Egypt.

Nor was Israel decisively outnumbered in the Six Day War. On the Sinai Front, the ground balance was about even but the Israelis were able to achieve local superiority in a number of locations which made it possible for them to make decisive breakthroughs.<sup>208</sup> The overall balance did not look so grim either: Israel had as many front-line troops as the entire Arab coalition.<sup>209</sup> However, the most important advantage Israel had in 1967 was that Arab unity was largely illusory and the Jewish state never really had to face a united coalition of adversaries. Eric Hammel concludes that at the time of the Six Day War, “Arab unity was a myth ... and the Arab joint command was a sham.”<sup>210</sup> Given this lack of unity, Israel was able to engage and largely defeat the Egyptians in the Sinai early in the war without facing attacks from either Jordan or Syria. Israel was then able to turn its attention to Jordan without fear of attack from Syria or

---

<sup>207</sup>Luttwak and Horowitz, The Israeli Army, 143.

<sup>208</sup>Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 135-36.

<sup>209</sup>Dupuy, Elusive Victory, 231.

<sup>210</sup>Hammel, Six Days in June, 149.

Egypt. Finally, once Egypt and Jordan were knocked out of the war, Israel was able to turn its full attention to wresting the Golan Heights from Syria. In the Six Day War Israel had the luxury of facing divided Arab adversaries which it could engage and defeat piecemeal. Thus, the overall balance was not a good indicator of the actual numbers of opponents the Jewish state faced.

To be sure, in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel did fight and win against numerically greater forces. However, the actual ratio of forces engaged was not 6:1 but rather 1.3:1. Moreover, there are a number of other plausible explanations for Israel's victory aside from the nature of the regimes on each side.

Finally, Israel's initial military victories in Lebanon against the Syrians and the PLO are also largely attributable to a preponderance of Israeli power. 76,000 Israeli soldiers engaged and defeated roughly 15,000 regular PLO fighters and 30,000 Syrian soldiers giving Israel almost a 2:1 advantage in Lebanon.<sup>211</sup> In the Bekkah Valley, Israel achieved a 3:1 advantage over Syrians (61/2 to 2 divisions). In addition, Israel had qualitative advantages over Syria as well. Moreover, as a result of the peace treaty with Egypt and long-standing amicable relations with King Hussein's Jordan, Israel did not have to worry about Arab forces on other fronts and could devote bulk of her forces to the Lebanon War. This was typical of the situation Israel faced in most of her wars.

Aside from numbers, Israel also had other military advantages including interior lines of communication, better intelligence, greater mobilization capacity, and unity of command which

---

<sup>211</sup>Dupuy and Martell, Flawed Victory, 86-91.

were important force multipliers. None of these advantages are directly attributable to the fact that Israel was a democracy but all of them are sufficient to explain Israel's remarkable track record in its wars with the Arabs.

*Nature of the Conflict:* Israeli military performance varied closely with the nature of the conflict in which it was involved. As Table 4.1 shows, Israel did well in conventional wars for its survival, especially 1948 and 1967. In contrast, Israel fought poorly in unconventional wars where its survival was not at stake such as Lebanon in 1982 and the Palestinian *Intifada* in 1987. This is not surprising because as Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld notes:

[the 1982 Lebanon War] was the first war in Israel's history for which there was not national consensus. Many Israelis regarded it as a war of aggression.<sup>212</sup>

The abysmal performance of the IDF, and indeed the Israeli Government as a whole, was even more marked in Israel's efforts to suppress the *Intifada*. As van Creveld observes *à propos* the military problems Israel faced in dealing with the uprising:

Never known for its discipline, the IDF's traditional strengths – originating in the *Yishuv*'s prestate military organizations – had been initiative and aggressiveness in defeating Arab armies in short, sharp wars. Now those very qualities started turning against it in a prolonged conflict that demanded patience, professionalism, and restraint.<sup>213</sup>

“It is far easier to resolve classic military problems,” the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin

---

<sup>212</sup>Gilbert, *Israel*, 504.

<sup>213</sup>van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive*, 344.

concluded, but “[i]t is far more difficult to contend with 1.3 million Palestinians living in the Territories, who do not want our rule, and who are employing systematic violence without weapons.”<sup>214</sup>

---

<sup>214</sup>Quoted in Gilbert, Israel, 526.

Throughout the period between 1948 and 1993, the Arab armies facing Israel tended to be more focused on internal security than fighting external wars.<sup>215</sup> The many internal missions Arab forces had to perform such as protecting the government from domestic rivals and repressing restive minority groups seriously undermined their effectiveness in fighting conventional military forces like the IDF. None of the Arab states could devote their full military resources to fighting Israel due to internal threats in their own countries. Thus, the fact that the Arabs faced unconventional threats and had to organize their forces to deal with them put Israel's adversaries at a marked disadvantage.

*Emulation/Socialization:* The Israelis were quite assiduous in studying and imitating the world's most successful military powers. This willingness to learn and imitate the world's best militaries, no matter what their political complexion, was certainly an important element in Israeli military prowess. The pre-state *Haganah* was trained by a British military officer named Orde Wingate. His training gave the *Yishuv* decided advantages over its Arab adversaries. World War II service with British also gave the nascent Israeli army valuable combat experience the Arabs never had. Thus, even before the establishment of the state of Israel, the Jews had many of the

---

<sup>215</sup>Norvell De Atkine, "Why Arab Armies Lose Wars," Middle East Review of International Affairs Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 2000): 6 and Hammel, Six Days in June 390 and 423.

essential elements of a “typical” modern military force.<sup>216</sup>

---

<sup>216</sup>Allon, The Making of Israel’s Army, 10-11 and 18; van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 359.

After the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the IDF continued to emulate the most successful military formats of other countries. For example, the IDF copied the military organizations of other advanced, industrial powers such as Britain and Switzerland.<sup>217</sup> Israel's "short-war" doctrine was dictated by Israel's geographic position, its demographic constraints, and its fragile economy. Recognizing that these factors were very similar to those shaping Prussian and German military strategy, Israel closely studied those cases as well.<sup>218</sup> In fact, Israel was scarcely constrained by political ideology in who it learned from and emulated. One particularly sensitive issue in Israel is the extent to which Israeli military doctrine and tactics drew from the experience of Nazi Germany. For instance, the IDF employed the Wehrmacht's "mission-oriented" command philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*.<sup>219</sup> The IAF was in many respects modeled on the Nazi *Luftwaffe*.<sup>220</sup> And Israeli mobilization policy drew heavily upon the German territorial *wehrkreis*-model.<sup>221</sup> Finally, much of what Israel learned about the doctrines and practices of armored warfare came from Nazi Germany.<sup>222</sup> A great deal of Israel's military

---

<sup>217</sup>Hammel, Six Days in June, 50-51.

<sup>218</sup>van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 106; Morris, Righteous Victims, 302; and Cordesman, The Arab-Israeli Military Balance, 13-14.

<sup>219</sup>Hammel, Six Days in June, 107 and van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 169. But Luttwak and Horowitz, The Israeli Army, 54 claim this is a uniquely Israeli mode of military operations.

<sup>220</sup>van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 112 and 141 and Luttwak and Horowitz, The Israeli Army, 121.

<sup>221</sup>Handel, "Israel's Political-Military Doctrine," 18.

<sup>222</sup>van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 65 and 123; and 169; Dupuy, 335; Hammel,

success is attributable to the fact that the IDF patterned itself on the successful militaries of the developed world irrespective of whether they were democratic or not.

---

Six Days in June, 84; Sacher, A History of Israel, 477; and Luttwak and Horowitz, The Israeli Army, 92 and 130.

Conversely, with only one partial exception, the armies of the Arab world did not emulate the successful armies in other parts of the world. That exception was the Jordan's British trained and led Arab Legion. Formed in the image of the British army, the Arab Legion was the most effective Arab military organization in the Arab world. However, when the Jordanians severed their close ties with Britain and expelled the British military officers who trained and led the Legion, the fighting effectiveness of the Jordanian Army declined to the low standard of the rest of the Arab world.<sup>223</sup>

Arab militaries were weak and ineffectual in part as the result of the policies of various colonial powers which consciously sought to keep them from posing a threat to their rule.<sup>224</sup> Rather than replicating their own military formats in their Arab colonies, the imperial powers created local militaries that were weak and posed no threat to their rule. This legacy, of course, persisted after independence and contributed greatly to Arab military ineffectiveness. Most Arab militaries shared four common weaknesses: 1) poor tactical leadership; 2) poor information management; 3) poor weapons handling; and 4) poor maintenance.<sup>225</sup> Not surprisingly, these

---

<sup>223</sup>Pollack, Arabs at War, 284.

<sup>224</sup>Cordesman, The Arab-Israeli Military Balance, 10.

<sup>225</sup>Pollack, Arabs at War, 547.

problems seriously undermined Arab military effectiveness in the various wars with Israel. “Let us recognize the truth,” Ben Gurion noted, “we won not because we performed wonders, but because the Arab army is rotten.”<sup>226</sup>

---

<sup>226</sup>Quoted in Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 238. Also see Y. Harkabi, “Basic Factors in the Arab Collapse During the Six Day War,” Orbis Vol. 11, No. 3 (Fall 1967): 678-79.

*Nationalism:* It is clear that ideology did play some role in Israeli military success against the Arabs. But that ideology was not liberal democracy but rather nationalism.<sup>227</sup> Indeed, Zionism was a classic example of a 19th Century European nationalist movement. And like many other European nationalist movements, nationalism and liberalism were often in tension in Israel.<sup>228</sup>

Greater national consciousness was an important military asset for the embryonic Jewish state. The *Yishuv* had many potential divisions (Sephardim vs. Ashkenazim, secular vs. religious, left versus right). The common Arab threat solidified the sense of Israeli national identity which in turn increased the willingness of Israeli society and soldiers to support the war effort and fight effectively.<sup>229</sup>

In contrast, there was little evidence – despite much pan-Arab rhetoric – that the Arab-Israeli wars ever generated much nationalist sentiment in the Arab world, beyond Palestine. According to Israeli historian Benny Morris, this put the Arabs at a distinct military disadvantage vis-a-vis the *Yishuv*:

For the average Arab villager, political independence and nation-hood were vague abstractions; his loyalties were to his family, clan, and village and, occasionally to his region. Moreover, decades of feuding had left Palestinian society deeply divided.<sup>230</sup>

---

<sup>227</sup>Habarki, “Basic Factors in the Arab Collapse,” 680 and Gilbert, *Israel*, 174.

<sup>228</sup>Norman G. Finkelstein, *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (London: Verso, 2001) 1.

<sup>229</sup>Harkabi, “Basic Factors in the Arab Collapse,” 680.

<sup>230</sup>Morris, *Righteous Victims*, 192. Also see Luttwak and Horowitz, *The Israeli Army*, 28; Hammel, *Six Days in June*, 8; and Sacher, *A History of Israel*, 164.

Given this, it is not surprising that Israel generally was more militarily effective than its Arab adversaries.

This imbalance in nationalist sentiment played a significant role in explaining the outcome of the 1948 War of Israeli Independence. The Arab coalition attacking Israel could rarely act cohesively. This disunity had two sources: First, the Palestinians themselves were divided internally by the feud between the Husseini and the Nashashibi clans.<sup>231</sup> This Arab disunity during the War of Independence greatly aided the Jews. Israeli leaders were well aware that the lack of Palestinian national consciousness reduced the threat they faced. As Ben Gurion observed:

““It is now clear, without the slightest doubt, that were we to face the Palestinians alone, everything would be all right. They, the decisive majority of them, do not want to fight us, and all of them together are unable to stand up to us, even at the present state of our organization and equipment.””<sup>232</sup>

Most Arabs just did not regard the liberation of Palestine as an issue worth dying for so there was little enthusiasm for attacking Israel in 1948.

Second, the Arab coalition was divided because the rest of the Arab world was rightly suspicious that King Abdullah and the leaders of the nascent Jewish state had cut a deal to divide Palestine and their intervention during the international phase of the War of Independence was

---

<sup>231</sup>Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 75 and Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 173.

<sup>232</sup>Quoted in Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 73.

driven in part by the desire to thwart this deal.<sup>233</sup> These other states each had separate and sometimes incompatible reasons for participating in the war. For example, the Egyptians saw attacking Palestine as means of forestalling further British in-roads into Jordanian-controlled Palestine. “The political divisiveness and internal rivalries among the Arab leaders,” recalled Flapan, “kept them from mounting a unified drive toward war and made their weak military position inevitable.”<sup>234</sup>

---

<sup>233</sup>Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 126.

<sup>234</sup>Flapan, The Birth of Israel, 132.

The lack of an overarching sense of Arab nationalism clearly undermined Arab military effectiveness in other wars as well. For example, no other Arab state came to Egypt's rescue during the Suez War. During the Six Day War, Syria supported terrorism against Israel as much to counter Nasser's claim to lead the Arab world as to hurt the Jewish state.<sup>235</sup> Few Arab states joined Syria and Egypt's attack on Israel in October 1973. No other Arab states came to Syria and the PLO's rescue during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Conversely, on a few occasions nationalism also worked to the Arabs' benefit. For example, in the War of Attrition and the early stages of the Yom Kippur War, the Egyptians fought more effectively because their soldiers were fighting for territory they regarded as part of Egypt. Conversely, the Israelis were not fighting to defend Israeli territory until it looked as though the Arabs might breakthrough and threaten Israel itself. Similarly, the Israelis found that their invasion of Lebanon sparked a nationalist conflagration that eventually forced them to withdraw in virtual defeat. Finally, the reason the Israelis had such a difficult time suppressing the First *Intifada* was because it was motivated by a huge upsurge in Palestinian nationalist sentiment among the population of the Occupied Territories.<sup>236</sup> In short, nationalism provides a powerful explanation for the varying levels of military effectiveness in the different stages of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

---

<sup>235</sup>Hammel, Six Days in June, 8.

<sup>236</sup>Morris, Righteous Victims, 597.

*Level of development:* Finally, the dramatically different levels of economic development between the Israelis and the Arabs certainly also account for their different levels of military effectiveness. Israel was essentially a developed country facing a number of underdeveloped adversaries.<sup>237</sup> Given that a higher level of economic development is associated with both democracy and military effectiveness, it is hardly any surprise that Israel was both a democracy and more militarily capable than its Arab neighbors. As Finance Minister David Horowitz observed:

““The [Arabs’] standard of living is low: There are no parties, there is no democracy. There is nothing. That’s because they’re living at a pre-capitalist level. As for us, if we triple the population in a few years, our GNP will equal that of the entire Arab world put together. We shall have an industrialized country.””<sup>238</sup>

Table 4.5 makes this increasing difference in the wealth of the Jewish and Arab communities in Palestine very clear.

**Table 4.5: National Income Distribution in Palestine, 1936-47<sup>239</sup>**

	National Income	Per Capita National Income

<sup>237</sup>van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive*, 70. Also see. Luttwak and Horowitz, *The Israeli Army*, 63; Flapan, *The Birth of Israel*, 41; Horowitz and Lissak, *Origins of the Israel Polity*, 16; Safran, *Israel*, 108; Schiff, *A History of the Israeli Army*, 117-18; Friedlander, “Policy Choices Before Israel,” 123; and Dan Horowitz, “Flexible Responsiveness and Military Strategy: The Case of the Israeli Army,” *Policy Sciences* Vol. 1, No. 2 (1970): 191-205.

<sup>238</sup>Quoted in Segev, *1949*, 38.

<sup>239</sup>Horowitz and Lissak, *Origins of the Israel Polity*, 21, Table 1. [Figures are in million of Palestinian Pounds]

Year	Palestine	Jews	Arabs	Palestine	Jews	Arabs
36	34.8	10	15.8	25.5	47.5	16.3
39	30.2	17.2	13.0	20.2	27.8	12.5
42	84.0	48.0	36.0	51.4	94.0	32.0
43	92.3	52.1	40.2	55.0	99.3	34.8
44	125.5	70.6	54.9	72.0	128.6	46.0
45	143.4	80.1	63.3	79.1	138.3	51.3
46	170.0	96.0	74.0	90.0	157.4	57.8
47	200.0	110.0	90.0	101.0	169.3	67.7

Israel was essentially born a developed country because it was founded by emigres from developed parts of Europe. In particular, a major influx of capital came with Germans in the Fifth *Aliyah* of 1932-39. Israel's high level of economic development helped it to produce a much more modern infrastructure compared to its Arab neighbors. This First-World level of development has given the Jewish state still more advantages in its wars with its less developed adversaries.<sup>240</sup>

Arab underdevelopment clearly reduced their armies effectiveness compared to the IDF.

---

<sup>240</sup>Luttwak and Horowitz, The Israeli Army, 170 and Cordesman, The Arab-Israeli Military Balance, 8-9.

As Israeli military analyst Zeev Schiff observes:

“The Arab armies ... were large but they were peasant armies, the vast majority of fighting men being illiterate and the gap between soldier and officer immense. Organization was faulty, ammunition stores ill-prepared, and medical facilities inadequate.”<sup>241</sup>

In contrast, Israel’s relatively higher level of development conferred clear military advantages to the Jewish state. Luttwak and Horowitz suggest that:

---

<sup>241</sup>Schiff, A History of the Israeli Army, 41.

“Perhaps the most obvious [Israeli advantage] was the higher average level of technical skill of Israeli manpower.... In this respect Israel, as the more developed society, had a built in advantage over her Arab antagonists for, if ultra-modern weapons can be acquired overnight, the skills required for their successful use can only be learned more slowly.”<sup>242</sup>

Israel had, in the words of one Israeli newspaper editor, “the only European army in the Middle East.”<sup>243</sup> It also has its own defense industry which is on a par with those of rest of the developed world. The most striking evidence of Israel’s huge technological lead was the development of its own nuclear program.

Israel’s technological lead provided it with important advantages in almost all its wars with the Arabs. Israel won the Suez War in part because it had a much more highly developed military.<sup>244</sup> Israel’s nuclear weapons probably played a key role in preventing the Syrians from exploiting their break through on Golan in 1973.<sup>245</sup> Finally, Israel’s lop-sided success in the air battle over the Bekkah Valley in 1982 was clearly the result of its technological advantage over the Syrians.<sup>246</sup> The imbalance in the level of economic development between the Israelis and

---

<sup>242</sup>Luttwak and Horowitz, The Israeli Army, 283-4.

<sup>243</sup>Quoted in Segev, 1949, 267.

<sup>244</sup>Allon, The Making of Israel’s Army, 59;

<sup>245</sup>van Creveld, The Sword and the Olive, 232 and 280-81; Morris, Righteous Victims, 404-5; Shlomo Aronson, “The Nuclear Dimension of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Case of the Yom Kippur War,” Jerusalem Journal of International Relations Vol. 7, Nos. 1-2 (1984): 116-29. But for a contrary view see Yair Evron, “The Relevance and Irrelevance of Nuclear Options in Conventional Wars: The 1973 October War,” Jerusalem Journal of International Relations Vol. 7, Nos. 1-2 (1984): 144-45;

<sup>246</sup>Gabriel, Operation Peace for Galilee, 92-100;

Arabs made most of the confrontations between the two, in the words of one American defense analyst, akin to a war pitting “the Wehrmacht against the Apaches.”<sup>247</sup>

### Conclusions

In sum, at first glance, Israel appears to provide lots of evidence to support the triumphalists’ argument that democracy confers military advantages upon states at war. Israel, a small state surrounded by millions of Arabs, nonetheless prevailed in major wars in 1948, 1967, and 1973. Many in Israel and around the world attribute this amazing record of military victory to the fact that Israel was democratic and its adversaries were not.

But a closer examination of the Israeli cases casts doubt on the claim that democracy was the root of Israel’s military effectiveness. First, Israel was hardly democratic in the conduct of its wars. Second, Israel’s military performance across these wars was quite varied. Third, neither the triumphalists’ selection effects nor their war-time effectiveness arguments actually explain the outcome in most of these cases. Fourth, other factors provide better explanations for the variation in Israel’s military performance. Finally, to believe that it was Israel’s democratic political system that explained its military track record, one would also have endorse the questionable counter-factual argument that Israel would have performed equally well against non-Arab authoritarian regimes. If one wants to understand the roots of Israel’s remarkable military record since 1948, it makes sense to look at other factors besides the fact that it was a

---

<sup>247</sup>Quoted in Clifford A. Wright, “The Israeli War Machine in Lebanon,” Journal of Palestine Studies Vol. 12, No. 2 (Winter 1983): 39.

democracy.

**Table 4.3: Overall Balance in Manpower<sup>248</sup>**

Year	Egypt	Jordan	Syria	Palestine	Iraq	Israel	Fr./UK	Ratio
48	300,000	60,000	300,000	50,000	-	140,000	-	5:1
56	300,000	-	-	-	-	175,000	3,000	1.7:1
67	400,000	60,000	300,000	-	250,000	200,000	-	5:1
73	400,000	60,000	350,000	-	400,000	200,000	-	6:1

<sup>248</sup>Sources: www.onwar.com

82	-	-	222,500	15,000	-	174,00	-	1.4:1
----	---	---	---------	--------	---	--------	---	-------

**Table 4.4: Balance in Manpower of Engaged Forces<sup>249</sup>**

	Jordan	Syria	Palestine	Iraq	Israel	Fr./UK	Ratio
	-	-	7,700	-	21,000	-	1:2.7
)	8,000	6,000	7,700	5,000	96,000	-	1:2.6
)	-	-	-	-	45,000	22,000	1:2.2
00	45,000	-	-	-	110,000	-	1.3:1
	-	60,000	-	-	63,000?	-	1:1.05

<sup>249</sup>Sources: Dupuy, Pollack, and van Creveld.

00	5,000	60,000	-	20,000	310,000	-	1.3:1
	-	30,000	15,00	-	76,000	-	1:1.7