



# *T*he United States and the State of Israel

David Schoenbaum

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*T*here are few states outside of Europe whose diplomatic relationship with the United States have had the extensiveness of critical analyses that Israel has; it truly has been "special." Certainly Israel does not have a monopoly on this attribution, since to this distinctive list must be added Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup> In any case, there is probably no other regional actor, certainly in the Middle East, that has received the quantity of attention that Israel has with its principal political benefactor, the United States. With the popularity of the theme, this survey of the bilateral relationship is not meant to be just another of its ilk on the bookshelf. Indeed, Schoenbaum, a journalist and a historian, sets out a presentation guided by the historical method established by the great German historian, Leopold von Ranke, coupled with, the author says, a utopian vision that is left, however, for the reader to deconstruct.

While there are no startling revelations, since most of the source material for the book is secondary, this is a professional his-



torical analysis, not merely a chronology, but one rich with perspective, befitting the author's intellectual mentor. There is an acknowledged effort to gather as much material as possible in order to present a realistic and honest accounting for a relationship that, contrary to the propaganda—or accurate descriptions of perceptions—set out by Arab sources (original or proxy) since Israel's birth, has always been smooth. The general method the author employs is to blend a description of the complexity of American domestic politics with its demands for participation and open-endedness and a discussion of the American Jewish mosaic, which has components that are not necessarily pro-Israel and, indeed, can be anti-Israel.

For Schoenbaum, there are three themes that undergird America's affinity to the Jewish state: (1) There is a need to satisfy some sense of rectification in the mass American psyche to compensate for the excesses of fellow European Christians with respect to the Holocaust; (2) American political culture is ensconced in the value pool of the Judeo-Christian ethic; and (3) there was for years a purely pragmatic reality bounded by the politics of the Cold War. Now certainly American Jews are *a* reason for the contact between the two countries. But as Schoenbaum points out, the real reason for the "special" nature of the relationship goes well beyond the standard banter of Jewish money for campaigns or the vitality of the Jewish vote. Undoubtedly, the Jewish issue in American politics becomes a factor in its foreign policy, but only if you set aside the realists' disdain for public opinion in the conduct of a democracy's foreign affairs—and Schoenbaum does that. Thus the domestic basis for U.S. foreign policy towards Israel is placed in a context of bureaucratic factions within a governing system working together purportedly to relate to the multiple demands emanating from the Middle East region while simultaneously interacting with domestic constituencies; not an easy setting from which a unified foreign policy is to emerge.

American involvement with Israel is directed on many levels, and each of its facets is a complex calculus. There is the patently obvious U.S. involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the attendant peace process. But also, the analyst must focus on peripheral issues involving Israel as a regional political actor such as American hostages in Beirut, the Iran-Iraq War, and most recently, the Gulf War. U.S. policy towards Israel is also but one layer in a process of global awareness. For forty years or more we were a part of the Western Alliance facing a global challenge from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, "Despite all affinities, the relationship remained as pragmatic, even paradoxical, as ever. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution



and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. aid for Israel was based on what Israel could do against Soviet clients" (p. 7). As the principle of transitivity, that is, new times bring new realities, continued to guide the unraveling of global politics, the American diplomatic system learned how to recognize and deal with the American Jewish political spectrum, which includes groups from the most ardent Zionist organizations to the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) to the American Council for Judaism. Some discussion is also brought out on the inner workings of both the American and the Israeli government providing the basis for a full appreciation of how policy is actually formulated.

Schoenbaum contends that there are three themes that project a positive and supporting diplomatic position toward Israel: (1) The United States has continuously been a stalwart ally of Israel more as a matter of principle than necessarily an unconditional supporter; (2) the belief and contentious calculation that Israel is a "strategic asset," even after the Cold War has lost its threatening perceptive stimulus; and (3) Israel's geographic location, appended as it is to a region in which so much of the world's oil reserves remain, and a multibillion-dollar customer for American arms sales means its importance is guaranteed.

Missing from Schoenbaum's work is a candid appreciation of the participating personae, the idiosyncrasies of the decision makers creating the crises and resolving the conflicts. There is only titillation: During the Watergate crisis, Henry Kissinger, we are told, "was exasperated by speculation that he was only keeping his distance from Watergate, and irritated again by Nixon's hints that Kissinger's absence proved Nixon was still in charge" (p. 225). Little is given to help us to understand the brittle talks at Camp David between President Carter and Prime Minister Begin or the tenseness between President Reagan and Prime Minister Shamir. There is also a minor typographical error: the Egyptian Revolution occurred in 1952, not 1953 (p. 90). The bilateral political dynamics are reflected by events which are then related to other events or to politicians and diplomats over time, not necessarily chronologically but nevertheless historically. It would have been an additional contribution, admittedly requested by a political scientist, to provide some sort of reasoned reflection on the issue of influence that the organized American Jewish community has in bringing about a foreign policy that coincides with Israel's national interests, since the issue of public opinion and foreign policy is at the core of contemporary methodological concerns in foreign-policy analysis.



Overall, this historically encyclopedic approach to U.S.-Israeli relations is not a source book for data. Rather it is a beautifully constructed intellectual backdrop to be used as a contextual referent for those who would like to appreciate better any single event or period in the relationship between the two states between the years 1948 and 1993.

#### **Note**

1. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe and Middle East, *Saudi Arabia and the United States, the New Context in an Evolving "Special Relationship"* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981).

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