Key Elements of Israel's Foreign Policy Paradigms

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Israel lacks a coherent foreign policy paradigm. However, an analysis of Israel's foreign policy conduct since 1948 highlights seven key elements: the influence of the coalition system on foreign policy; the inability of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to exert control over policy planning; the conflict between realism and idealism in creating policy; the predominance of defense over diplomacy; the misperception of a zero-sum game with the Arab world; the tendency to be reactive instead of proactive; and the special relationship with the United States. For Israel to have a long-term, steady, consistent and effective foreign policy, these elements need to undergo change, and Israel needs to clearly define its goals vis-à-vis the region and the international community.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to start a discussion about strategies and paradigms in Israel's foreign policy. Its basic assumption is that this important topic has not been dealt with thoroughly enough in Israel's public discourse. This paper cannot bridge years of a lack of discussion, and so its main aim is to point to a few crucial components about the way Israel conducts its foreign policy.

There are different explanations as to why Israel's public discourse lacks a discussion about strategic thinking of its foreign policy, but a word of theoretical caution should be said beforehand: trying to assess what a country's foreign policy paradigms are is a difficult task. Paradigms are bound to shift as the nation, region, and larger global context change and develop over time. Because the state must consider its many national interests in formulating policies, paradigms are bound to be contradictory. That is why the discussion between foreign policy analysts too often ends with the saying "doing what is in the best interest of the country" without the ability to characterize a general strategy that leads it.[1]

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[1] For example, America's rhetorical commitment to spreading democracy is supposedly a leading component in its foreign policy strategy, yet it is negated by its support of non-democratic regimes.

For the purpose of this discussion, and because of the complexity of defining this term, a *paradigm* in foreign policy will be defined as a framework through which a government makes its decisions, encompassing values, experiences, perceptions, and assumptions. American historian Thomas Kuhn defines a paradigm as a "tradition of claims, counterclaims, and debates over fundamentals," while a paradigm shift is a change in the underlying assumptions which guide the paradigm.[2]

A pure paradigm in foreign policy is one in which the government clearly states its strategies, intentions and policies through speeches and declarations, and then follows up with actual steps which follow in line with its declarations. A paradigm can also be seen by looking at the overall actions of a state which have certain guiding principles to them, even if these actions were never declared officially by the state.[3] In this case, the paradigm might not even be an intentional policy of the government, rather how it acts in practice – but it can still be defined as the paradigm. Yet when a country talks in one way but acts in another, when it projects different opinions on similar topics, or when its actual steps do not enable us to see guiding principles to them, it will be challenging to define its foreign policy paradigms, besides mentioning that they are not concrete.

In the case of Israel, it is possible to identify seven key elements of Israeli statecraft since 1948, which - intentionally or not - form Israel's de-facto foreign policy paradigm: the influence of the coalition system on foreign policy; the inability of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to exert control over policy planning; the conflict between realism and idealism in creating policy; the predominance of defense over diplomacy; the misperception of a zero-sum game with the Arab world; the tendency to be reactive instead of proactive; and the special relationship with the United States. This paper will briefly describe and analyze each of these key elements:

1. The influence of the coalition system on foreign policy

Political scientist Robert Putnam penned the concept of the "two-level game" stating that "the politics of many international negotiations can usefully be conceived in a two-level game. At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures, while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments."[4]

The struggle of playing in both fields is not unique to Israel. Every government in every country deals with it on a daily basis. Yet in the Israeli case, it seems that the coalition system and the fact that every government is composed of different parties with

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[2] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Thomas Kuhn." Last modified 11 August 2011. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thomas-kuhn/
[3] Daniel C. Kurtzer, interview with Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, Jerusalem, 16 March 2013.
[4] Robert Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42(3), Summer 1988, p. 434.

different (and often completely opposed) agendas and ideologies makes this two-level game much more complicated.

Ministers in Israeli governments are often not assigned to specific portfolios accoding to their skill-set, but from the need to form a stable coalition. The foreign minister and the prime minister might even come from two different parties and have opposing ideas about Israel's foreign policy goals and priorities. The way the political system is handled results in prioritizing domestic considerations over foreign policy ones, even if this means lack of action or jeopardizing Israel's position in the international arena in order to preserve coalitions or to gain points in the domestic front. Therefore, it can easily be understood why former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once remarked that Israel has no foreign policy, but only domestic politics.

An example of this problematic tendency can be seen in the fact that in 2013 while the Middle East experiences huge changes, Israel did not have a foreign minister. Prime Minister Netanyahu has been keeping this portfolio for MK Avigdor Lieberman who was on trial and therefore could not serve as a minister. Israel has decided not to have a foreign minister due to domestic political considerations.

2. The inability of the MFA to exert control over policy planning

Another outcome of Israel's political system and political environment is an inability to have one foreign policy or concrete guiding principles that the leaders, government and bureaucracy follow. Aharon Klieman stated that "What makes this depressing state of Israeli foreign affairs doubly offensive is that there is no explanation for it other than the demands of coalition-building, supreme egos, and bureaucratic 'turf wars,' all of which completely override diplomatic sensitivities and concerns."[5]

This fragmatisation of foreign policy results in having foreign policies that are not handled by one ministry; lack of long-term strategic planning; the Prime Minister deciding and implementing the foreign policy and handling it by his own team; and a weakening of the foreign ministry bureaucracy and administration. This leads to a situation in which no one – not inside Israel or outside of it – can clearly state who the authority is. This may well be a question that ambassadors and world leaders on diplomatic visits ask themselves as they get shuffled from meeting to meeting and receive contradictory messages by ministers and MKs competing for turf.

Additionally, some major components of Israeli foreign policy are based on personalized diplomacy which is preferred over the trained-professional-official diplomacy. Prime Ministers often use their own personal envoys and advisors to deal with issues which they consider important and by that bypass the advice of experts and the foreign ministry's bureaucracy. The MFA is noticeably excluded from issues which should be

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[5] Aharon Klieman, "The Sorry State of Israeli Statecraft." *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 7(2), 2013, p. 15.

handled in their sphere, while other ministries and individuals are tasked with these responsibilities.

For example *Hasbara* (Israel's public diplomacy campaign) is handled by the MFA but also by the Prime Minister's office, by other agencies in different ministries, and previously by a special ministry that was active in 1974-1975 and in 2009-2013; Arms transfers, as another example, are dealt with by Ministry of Defense; The relations with the world Jewry is being dealt with in a few other ministries besides the MFA; and more. This tendency can also be seen in the fact that historically the MFA was notably missing from some crucial actions and decisions that are supposedly under its capacity. Over and over again, other agencies step within the ministry's turf, undermining its responsibilities and power.[6]

The most extreme example of this phenomenon was seen in September 2010 when Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's foreign minister at the time, gave a speech in the United Nations that contradicts the official policy of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Netanyahu's reaction was to claim that Lieberman's position was not coordinated with him, that the foreign minister represents his position and not the official Israeli one, and that the prime minister is the one handling the negotiations with the Palestinians and not his foreign minister.[7]

Reality in Israel after the 2013 general elections complicates the situation even further: as mentioned, the foreign ministry was without an acting minister throughout the year, while a new ministry was established to deal with international relations. In practice, when Israeli and Palestinian officials negotiate, it is the minister of justice that represents Israel (due to a coalition agreement between her and the Prime Minister) and a private special advisor to the Prime Minister who accompanies her.

3. The conflict between realism and idealism in creating policy

Another domestic factor which deserves special attention is the careful balance between Israel's idealistic goals and the use of realistic measures to attain them. As Raymond Cohen states "...[s]ome of the most effective aspects of Israeli foreign policy flatly contradict the tenets of pragmatism. To rehabilitate a shattered people and build a state required hefty doses of ideological romanticism, heroic mythology, benign illusion, and rhetoric hyperbole - in short, what we call 'unrealism'."[8]

Hertzl's words, "if you will it, it is no dream", represent the Israeli ethos; they are the light-motif of the Zionist campaign. The creation of the State of Israel would probably not have been achieved if it chose to look at everything in realistic measures. The Israeli ethos is believing that the unrealistic is possible. Daniel Kahneman's and Amos

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[6] Ibid, p. 11.
[7] Natasha Mozgovaya and Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: Israel, Palestinians can reach Mideast peace in a year," *Haaretz*, 28 September 2010.
[8] Raymond Cohen. "Israel's Starry-Eyed Foreign Policy," *Middle East Quarterly* 1(2), June 1994, pp. 28-41.

Tversky's term of "optimistic overconfidence" is probably a good way to understand Zionism and Israel's campaign through the years.[9] Luckily, and against all odds, this idealism, unrealism and overconfidence has prevailed and enabled the creation of the Israel and its development.

Yet this cannot be a foreign policy paradigm or an agenda. Avoiding realistic measures and believing that everything will resolve itself because it had in the past, is not a foreign policy. It might work in certain areas, but certainly not always and not everywhere. Therefore, the belief that Israel's foreign policy problems will be solved if it only believes hard enough is one fueled only by idealism and bound to fail.

4. The predominance of defense over diplomacy

The threats against Israel, from the moment it was established, have been numerous and serious enough that no one can fathomably question Israel's commitment to defensive measures. This has led to prioritization of defense over anything else – including diplomacy – in Israel's conduct both domestically and internationally. It has generated a military culture within Israel, first established as a result of the founding fathers' security-centered approach to state formation, then perpetuated throughout the years by mandatory conscription, large reserve forces, the education system, culture, civil society, institutionalized forms of socialization, and more. Israeli scholars from various fields have shown numerous times that whether defining Israel as a "militaristic state", an "army that has a state" or just a state in which the military has a crucial role – it is evident that the military has huge power in Israel and the security establishment influences almost all parts of Israel's daily life, including its foreign policy.[10]

This security dominance has almost totally emptied the role of foreign policy and civil-strategic thinking, and it blocked the construction of a consistent foreign-policy paradigm which is not security oriented. The military establishment is the center of knowledge and decision-making for all matters and all departments depend on this establishment for confronting national problems. The defense establishment makes decisions in what should rightfully be the MFA's sphere. For example, Israel's relations with both Egypt and Jordan are mostly handled by the security establishment rather than by the MFA.

5. The misperception of a zero-sum game with the Arab world

Throughout Israel's first decades, its policy makers pursued a dual strategy of gaining a powerful ally (along with economic resources and weapons from that nation) while trying

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[9] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Conflict Resolution: A Cognitive Perspective," in Kenneth Arrow et al. (eds.), *Barriers to Conflict Resolution* (New York: Norton, 1995), pp. 44-60.
[10] See, for example: Baruch Kimmerling, *"*Patterns of Militarism in Israel,*" European Journal of Sociology* 34(2),1993, pp.196-223*;* Yoram Peri *Generals in the Cabinet Room* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006); Yagil Levy, *Israel's Materialist Militarism* (Madison, MD: Rowman & Littlefield/Lexington Books, Series: Innovations in the Study of World Politics, 2007).

to divide the Arab world in order to prevent collective military action against it.[11] Israel also worked to create alliances with non-Arab countries in its periphery. Israel had a tendency to perceive conflicts with the Arab world as a zero-sum game in which the victory of one comes at the expense of the other. History has refuted this perception and demonstrated that Arab states often act according to their own national interests which sometimes align with the interests of Israel, at times even over pan-Arab goals.

One example of a win-win outcome is the Israeli-Egyptian 1979 peace treaty. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem effectively reoriented Egypt away from its former policy of anti-normalization with Israel and towards a strategy of peacemaking. To the rest of the Arab world, it was not a welcome move and Sadat was perceived as a traitor. However, Egyptian and Israeli national interests were both met. This change in viewing the situation as a zero-sum game was followed by the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan in 1994, another example that the "Arab world" is not a unified group that has one approach towards Israel.

Yet even after these changes, it seems that Israel is reluctant to see that not everything that other Arab or Muslim countries offer is necessarily opposing its interest. For example, the Arab Peace Initiative (API) was a huge change in the Arab countries traditional hard-line approach of the "three no's" decided in the Arab League summit in Khartoum in 1967 (no peace, no recognition and no negotiation with Israel). The Arab nations behind the API sought to advance their interests which were not necessarily in opposition to Israeli interests. The initiative was ultimately mostly ignored by Israel and even rejected in some statements, without Israeli leaders offering a rebuttal. It might as well be that Israel could not accept the API as it is, especially because of the refugees component in it, but Israel's official position proves the zero-sum-game approach: instead of encouraging the Arab League, instead of answering the API with a "yes, but…" approach, or instead of initiating a peace initiative of its own – Israel's position was to either ignore or reject the API, as if anything offered by the Arab League is necessarily harming Israel.

6. The tendency to be reactive instead of proactive

One way of looking at foreign policy is on a range from reactive to proactive. A policy is reactive if it comes as a response to an external event or to another nation's policy. On the other hand, a proactive policy requires foresight and pre-planning. On this range, Israel's policies are not usually the result of proactive planning; rather they are often molded by external forces and the circumstances Israel finds itself in. This more traditional approach is not necessarily always wrong, but when a state is constantly reacting to external stimuli, it misses out on the opportunity to set the agenda with policies that clearly present the state's position to the rest of the world.

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[11] Avi Shlaim, "Israel between East and West, 1948-56," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36(4), 2004, p. 657; Shibley Telhami, "Israeli Foreign Policy: A Static Strategy in a Changing World," *Middle East Journal* 44(3), 1990, p. 401.

In rare occasions, Israel has taken a proactive approach The 1993 Oslo Accords is such an example. It is unique in almost all its components: an initiative that started outside of the government by private individuals, was adopted by the MFA, brought to the attention of the Prime Minister only after major progress was already made, becoming Israel's official policy and being implemented. Sadly, the outcome of the Oslo Accords was one which probably leads most Israelis to believe that Israel is better off not having a proactive approach in foreign policy. However even those who believe it was a success acknowledge that in this case Israel's proactive approach was not a strategic initiative of the leader; it was rather an almost private agenda that found its way to the MFA and from there to the Prime Minister who adopted it.

Other examples that show a proactive Israeli approach is Israel's campaign to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear and the unilateral withdrawals from southern Lebanon in 2000 and from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Yet more than anything else, these examples prove once again that Israel has the ability to be proactive, but it does so only when it comes to security issues and when it can conduct its policy unilaterally without international alliances (even in the Iranian case, the Israeli threat is that if the world does not act it will do so on its own).

7. The special relationship with the United States

The special relationship between Israel and the US is based on soft factors and hard factors. Soft factors mostly include common values between Israel and the US. Hard factors include the military, strategic and other shared interests both countries share with one another.[12] This delicate relationship is the backbone of Israel's conduct in the world. Israel believes that the US will always support it, both diplomatically and militarily. The US has, and in Israeli eyes will always, veto serious decisions in the UN Security Council that might harm Israel. Israel believes that the US will advocate for Israel and will stay its ally regardless of what Israel does. This Israeli reliance on the US seems to be the smartest move Israel has made in its foreign policy. If there is one paradigm created by strategic thinking, it is Israel's reliance on the US. Israel has succeeded in maintaining this relationship throughout the past decades.

Yet a policy that is based almost solely on the relationship with one ally, even if it is the greatest power in the world, is risky. It makes other countries hostile to the close relations between the countries, and makes the relationship between the US and countries which oppose Israel's action difficult. The US is willing to pay a high price for this relationship, but Israel has to be prepared for a moment in which this strong alliance – even if it prevails – will not be as strong as it currently is. Israel might also find itself in a position where it has to accept some US positions which it does not necessarily agree with. Additionally, since the US is gradually losing some of its power in the world, it might feel less confident than before to "defend" Israel in the international arena as it did

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[12] Yaacov Bar Siman Tov, "The United States and Israel since 1948: A "Special Relationship?," *Diplomatic History* 22(2), Spring 1998, p. 232.

in the past; and even if it does – the strong Israeli-US connections might not be enough when the US is no longer a lone super-power in the world.

Conclusion: Towards a paradigm change in Israel's foreign policy

This paper is a call for a discussion. Although it deals with the problems and not the solutions, it seems fair to say even at this stage that the discussion about changes needed in Israel's foreign policy has to focus on some key issues:

Israel has to change its political system in a way that will enable effective foreign policy that is not influenced so heavily by domestic politics; the administration and bureaucracy dealing with foreign policy have to be reorganized – either by empowering the MFA or by tightening and establishing connections between different governmental bodies dealing with similar or close topics; the mindset of the leaders dealing with foreign policy has to be changed: foreign policy should not be looked at as a zero-sum-game between Israel and the Arab world; Israel has to be more proactive and initiative in its diplomatic efforts; it should not rely only on the strong relationship with the US; it should strive to find common interests even with countries which oppose some of its actions and will not support every move it makes; and it should change the belief that things will work for the best if we just believe hard enough.

All these deserve more research and discussions. Yet they all have to be accompanied by a clear understanding of what are the goals of Israel's foreign policy. Is Israel headed for a two state solution or not? Does it want to promote regional alliances or not? Is it willing to find shared interests with countries that oppose some of its conducts? It seems that Israeli leaders, the government bureaucracy and Israeli public do not have clear answers. Without that, it is hard to have a long-term, steady, consistent and effective foreign policy.