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ISRAEL'S FOREIGN POLICY BEYOND THE ARAB WORLD

ENGAGING THE PERIPHERY

Jean-Loup Samaan



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Israel's Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World

For over 60 years, Israel's foreign policy establishment has looked at its regional policy through the lens of a geopolitical concept named "the periphery doctrine." The idea posited that due to the fundamental hostility of neighboring Arab countries, Israel ought to counterbalance this threat by engaging with the "periphery" of the Arab world through clandestine diplomacy.

Based on original research in the Israeli diplomatic archives and interviews with key past and present decision-makers, this book shows that this concept of a periphery was, and remains, a core driver of Israel's foreign policy. The periphery was borne out of the debates among Zionist circles concerning the geopolitics of the nascent Israeli State. The evidence from Israel's contemporary policies shows that these principles survived the historical relationships with some countries (Iran, Turkey, Ethiopia) and were emulated in other cases: Azerbaijan, Greece, South Sudan, and even to a certain extent in the attempted exchanges by Israel with Gulf Arab kingdoms. The book enables readers to understand Israel's pessimistic – or realist, in the traditional sense – philosophy when it comes to the conduct of foreign policy. The history of the periphery doctrine sheds light on fundamental issues, such as Israel's role in the regional security system, its overreliance on military and intelligence cooperation as tools of diplomacy, and finally its enduring perception of inextricable isolation.

Through a detailed appraisal of Israel's periphery doctrine from its birth in the fifties until its contemporary renaissance, this book offers a new perspective on Israel's foreign policy, and will appeal to students and scholars of Middle East Politics and History, and International Relations.

Jean-Loup Samaan is an associate professor in strategic studies with the Near East South Asia Center. Prior to that, he served for five years as a lecturer and deputy director of the Middle East Faculty at the NATO Defense College.

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Israel's Foreign Policy Beyond the Arab World

Engaging the Periphery

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First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Names: Samaan, Jean-Loup, author.

Title: Israel's foreign policy beyond the Arab world : engaging the periphery / Jean-Loup Samaan.

Other titles: Routledge studies in Middle Eastern politics ; 88.

Description: Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2018. |

Series: Routledge studies in Middle Eastern politics ; 88

Identifiers: LCCN 2017038228 | ISBN 9781138099876 (hbk) |

ISBN 9781315103907 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Israel--Foreign relations. | International relations.

Classification: LCC DS119.6 .S35 2018 | DDC 327.5694--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017038228>

ISBN: 978-1-138-09987-6 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-10390-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Werset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

For Ines and Emilie

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Acknowledgments

This book is the result of research conducted for an accreditation to supervise research defended at Sciences Po's Doctoral School in September 2017. Therefore, first and foremost, my thanks go to my supervisor, Frederic Ramel, professor of political science at Sciences Po, for his trust, his support and his precious advices all along the project. Moreover, I would like to thank the members of the defense committee: Ilan Greilsammer, Pascal Vennesson, Jean-Vincent Holeindre, Beatrice Heuser, and Alain Dieckhoff.

I also would like to express my gratitude to my former institution, the NATO Defense College, without which this investigation would not have been possible. From 2011 to 2016, the College offered me a wonderful working environment that enabled me to develop my project and turn it into a book. I greatly benefited from comments and exchanges with my former colleagues there: Florence Gaub, Guillaume Lasconjarias, and Andreas Jacobs. I am also indebted to the former course members of my elective on Israel's periphery doctrine. For two years, these officers and diplomats from a dozen of nations shared my passion for the topic and helped me, through our discussions, to refine my analysis.

In Israel, my sincere appreciation goes to all government officials and retired practitioners who accepted to meet with me and share their insights. The State Archives gave me an invaluable access to historical documents of Israel's foreign policy. In addition, Ariel Levite helped in our numerous and friendly conversations to better grasp the complexities of Israel's politics.

Finally, I am deeply grateful for the support of the editors at Routledge. Joe Whiting and Emma Tyce believed in the manuscript and supported me to turn the manuscript into a book.

Obviously, the shortcomings of this book are my own.

Introduction

On August 23, 2012, an article from the Israeli newspaper, the *Jerusalem Post*, offered an assessment of the diplomatic achievements of the rather controversial Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman.¹ The Russian-born Israeli politician, West Bank settler, Liberman had been perceived by Western audiences as a bellicose foreign minister who did not hesitate in antagonizing Egyptians or Palestinians in his public statements. But on that day, the *Jerusalem Post* piece was offering a different narrative, actually making the case for a positive assessment of the policies conducted by Israel's Foreign Minister. Despite "anti-Israel bias" from UN agencies and the European Union, the newspaper argued that Liberman succeeded in his mandate by reaching out to countries in Africa and Asia: "Simply put, Liberman has revived Israel's 'periphery doctrine' of the 1950s, adjusting it to modern strategic realities."² The claims of the article regarding Liberman's achievements may have been debatable but the piece did reflect a significant trend in the rhetoric of the Israeli foreign policy debate at that time. Specifically, it identified with Liberman's agenda, the renaissance of the so-called "periphery doctrine," a concept that had been at the forefront of Israel's diplomatic agenda from the fifties to the seventies but had afterward completely disappeared.

By the end of 2012, numerous publications from newspapers and defense-related think tanks in Israel were reviving this idea. Like the *Jerusalem Post*, a research paper from the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies stated that "one of Israel's most notable political moves of recent years has been its reaching out to states on the Middle Eastern periphery in order to strengthen ties with them."³ For the Israeli foreign policy community, the root cause identified for this renaissance was almost always the same: the degradation of Israel's regional environment. For Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, it was "Israel's ongoing rift with the Arab world and its relative isolation in various arenas" that triggered the new periphery doctrine.⁴ In a blog post for *Times of Israel*, David Turner went further. He argued that Israel's return to the periphery doctrine was not only triggered by the crisis with Turkey and the Arab Spring but it also constituted "a long-term strategic response to shifting American policy priorities."⁵

Therefore, if the periphery doctrine resurfaced and looked for many pundits as a relevant answer to Israeli contemporary predicaments, we may wonder why

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there was a need to unearth a political concept from the fifties. Interestingly, Yossi Alpher, a retired Mossad agent, wrote that this revival was due to the fact that the security challenges faced by Israel were “reminiscent of those it faced in the early decades of its existence.”⁶ For Alpher, Israel faced a “new ring of hostility” that caused decision-makers to look for options based on past experiences. In other words, the periphery approach returned because political circles used analogical reasoning: they perceived a similar environment that called for a similar answer.⁷ This is where my research investigation started.

The research question

The starting point of my inquiry was a question with both academic and policy ramifications: how and why could an old political concept resurface in decision-making circles to address new security challenges? A follow-up question to this initial one was to evaluate the enduring relevance of the idea and assess if this renaissance was not a misleading fad. My initial discussions with diplomats and journalists revealed a surprising reality: the origins and content of this foreign policy concept were barely known for most of the observers.⁸ In my interviews in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, it was common knowledge that the very expression “periphery doctrine” dated back to the early years of the establishment of Israel as a modern State when its policymakers – among them its prime minister, David Ben-Gurion – designed this concept that aimed to drive the national foreign policy agenda.

Officials knew that the concept posited that due to the fundamental hostility of neighboring Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan) Israel ought to counterbalance this threat by engaging with the “periphery” of the Arab world. This was deemed a classic Israeli foreign policy principle. But often neglected is the fact that this “periphery” was not a clearly circumscribed space. As it soon appeared to me through the preliminary phases of the research, it was not a geopolitical concept that would identify specific territories to conquer, but rather a political metaphor loosely based on geography. Although it was evoked as the “periphery doctrine,” it had no doctrinal ramifications in the military sense. Therefore, I argue in the following pages, that it should better be understood as an intellectual matrix.

If we base our understanding of the periphery on diplomatic cables and official speeches, it usually includes non-Arab States – mostly Turkey, Ethiopia, and Iran but also African countries in general and sometimes emerging Asian powers such as China or India. Some officials in the government also include ethnic minorities – primarily Christians and Kurds – in the region as parts of the periphery. This additional layer made the map of the periphery more confused as these ethnic groups would be located in countries like Syria and Lebanon, which logically could not be perceived as peripheral. But despite this hazy background, the periphery addressed a challenge that Israeli governments faced: regional isolation and the search for normalization. This is why starting in the late fifties and in the following decades, the concept gained traction and political ties were

developed by the Israeli decision-makers. But because all these peripheral partners aimed to maintain good, or at least stable, relations with Arab regimes, these exchanges with the newly established State of Israel would be discreet, if not secret, and mainly focused on the military and intelligence sectors.

Eventually, these relations would go through numerous crises, sometimes leading to the collapse of bilateral relations (Iran) or their suspension (Turkey, Ethiopia). Although the initial ambition was a regional policy, Israel applied the periphery principles only at the bilateral level. If one looks carefully at the endurance of the periphery concept in Israel's foreign policy debates, one would clearly identify its decline in the early eighties, following the dismantlement of Israel–Iran relations. But what we witness today with the recent renaissance of the concept is that although the idea was no longer used explicitly, its logic – or its underlying philosophy – remained significant. As a matter of fact, when the initial partnerships (with Iran, and Turkey) stumbled, they were progressively replaced by new ones with countries such as Azerbaijan and Greece. The selection of these countries obeyed the same logic of the periphery: balancing the threat or competition constituted by a State by siding with one of its competitors. But this time, the periphery doctrine was to be even more vaguely defined at the geographical level. It was to become a catch-all concept: sometimes Israel's outreach to countries as diverse as India, South Sudan and South Africa was characterized as illustrations of the “periphery doctrine,” putting into question the analytical utility of the idea.

The argument

Officials and journalists tend to call “ideas” or “paradigms” terms and expressions that in reality serve only a symbolical and temporary value with neither real substance nor influence on policy matters. For scholars of international relations, overestimating the relevance of a policy concept is a frequent danger.⁹ Therefore, it could be easily argued that if this “periphery” doctrine was loosely defined, it might be because it had only loose relevance and should be dismissed as a cyclical fad without interest for serious research. In the first phase of my investigation, this was in fact a frequent reaction I experienced from the people interviewed. To date, no official document has specified the purpose of the “periphery doctrine,” its content was only made explicit through scattered declarations or publications from Israeli politicians, military officials or strategic thinkers. Furthermore, the use of “doctrine” implies a clearly stated military plan with allocated resources and personnel to achieve a specific goal. This does not exist either. This is why one diplomat in Jerusalem even argued that it was “no more than folklore and should not be considered too seriously.”¹⁰

However, based on my findings, I argue differently. This book explains that this concept of a periphery was and remains a core driver of Israel's foreign policy. Practitioners may call the periphery a “doctrine” but it rather qualifies as a general paradigm of foreign policy that encompasses common perceptions and intended goals. To focus solely on evaluating the official character of the periphery concept would be misleading. While it may be mere “folklore,” it not

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only reflects the Israeli perception of its regional environment, but also sheds light on its conduct of diplomacy. In other words, the periphery captures the mindset of the national security establishment.

To support this argument, I demonstrate in the following pages how the periphery was borne out of the debates among Zionist circles concerning the geopolitics of the nascent Israeli State. Not only was this idea shaped by the foundation of Israel, it also derived from classic balancing behaviors identified elsewhere by International Relations scholarship and commonly associated with the *realpolitik* approach of the nineteenth century.¹¹ The record shows that the basic principles of the periphery concept – the balancing logic and its military and secretive dimension – provided guidance for the implementation of ties with the three historical peripheral allies: Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia. Moreover, the evidence from Israel's contemporary policies shows that these principles survived the historical relationships and were emulated in other cases: Azerbaijan, Greece, South Sudan, and even to a certain extent in the attempted exchanges by Israel with Gulf Arab kingdoms.

Taken altogether, these findings help us to understand Israel's pessimistic – or realist, in the traditional sense – philosophy when it comes to the conduct of foreign policy.¹² The history of the periphery doctrine, its genesis and later development, sheds light on fundamental issues such as Israel's role in the regional security system, its overreliance on military and intelligence cooperation as tools of diplomacy, and finally its enduring perception of inextricable isolation.

Contribution to the literature on Israel's foreign policy

Although the “periphery” doctrine is a well-known topic of Israel's history, it has not yet brought about authoritative research or substantial academic discussion. The reason is that scholarship dedicated to Israel's foreign policy is primarily focused on the history of Israel's conflict with Arab countries.¹³ Both political scientists and historians devoted their time to investigating what appeared to be – rightfully so – the core issue of Israel's foundations: its relations with its direct neighbors. Only a few studies have analyzed Israel's relations with Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia. There has been no in-depth appraisal of these diplomatic efforts in relation with the periphery concept.¹⁴

In general, three views tend to shape the analysis of Israel's foreign policy. The first explains Israel's international behavior as primarily, if not uniquely, a reaction to its regional environment.¹⁵ For instance, Efraim Inbar, a political scientist from Bar-Ilan University, writes “Israel is a small state whose fortunes are largely determined by external factors.”¹⁶ In other words, the geographical isolation of the country is identified as the primary key to understand the evolution of its diplomacy.

Another approach puts emphasis on Israel's foreign policy as a reflection of its social fabric and political system. Actors involved in domestic politics such as the settlers or the armed forces become, in that view, determinants of the

diplomacy-making.¹⁷ For instance, Yoram Peri from Tel Aviv University argues, the military does shape the strategic orientations of Israel. Based on a study of the military's role during the second Intifada, Peri analyzes the central role of the armed forces "in setting Israeli foreign and defense policy, wielding influence at the supra-political level, the strategic level, and the operational level, no less than at the tactical military level."¹⁸

Finally, the third approach underlines the role of ideology, namely Zionism, as the overarching driver of Israel's political orientations. In the last two decades, scholarship has highlighted Israel's identity as an explanation for its foreign policy.¹⁹ For such authors, Israel's diplomatic tradecraft had to be put into perspective with Zionist debates that preceded the establishment of the modern State. It was crucial to understand the founding myths and the national narratives that shaped Israeli identity. This is why for instance, in his book, *The Iron Wall*, historian Avi Shlaim sees Vladimir Jabotinsky's theory of building an Israeli State along an "iron wall" against Arab foes as the revealing paradigm of Israel's foreign policy over the last decades.²⁰

From that perspective, this book aims to fill a gap in the literature in two ways. First, I show in the following chapters that the "periphery doctrine" is not a secondary topic of Israel's foreign policy history that shall remain in the background of Israel's troubled relations with the Arab world. I show how the developments in both issues mutually affected one another. In fact, one cannot grasp the intricacies of Israel's peripheral partnerships without looking at the simultaneous evolution of its relations with Arab neighbors. Second, this manuscript endeavors to follow the path of that political idea, the periphery, from its intellectual build-up to its policy application. Throughout that effort, I aim to underline that the three drivers identified earlier – geographical constraints, domestic politics, and ideology – played a role in the endurance of the periphery approach. In that sense, my research evidenced that the periphery idea was not simply a natural reaction because of Arab hostility. Zionist thinking, in particular the works of Jabotinsky, also brought about the doctrine. But ideology was only one dimension: bureaucratic battles and the dominance of the military and intelligence services within the national security apparatus forged the implementation of the doctrine.

All in all, my study carefully underlines the importance to be mindful of these three dimensions – geopolitical, bureaucratic, and ideological – to comprehend the evolution of the periphery doctrine. Beyond this case study, this multidimensional analysis should enrich scholarship on other areas of Israeli contemporary foreign policy.

Research method

To support my argument, I combine an analysis of the first period of the periphery doctrine during the Cold War era and the contemporary developments. The investigation looked at five selected cases of bilateral relations: Israel–Iran, Israel–Turkey, Israel–Ethiopia, Israel–Greece, and Israel–Azerbaijan. Additionally, I collected

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information on cases of lesser importance but that still offered insights: Israel–South Sudan, Israel–India, Israel–China, and Israel’s relations with Arab minorities (Christians, Kurds). If the periphery doctrine forged in the fifties called for a regional alliance, its implementation remained for the most part at the bilateral level, between Israel and each of its partners. Despite some limited multilateral initiatives in the military-intelligence domain, bilateralism remained the rule. Therefore I chose to reflect this reality by looking at each relation separately.

Case studies were not meant as mere descriptions of diplomatic relations that would have turned the book into a compilation of separate monographs. Instead, I designed the cases by looking at each of them for the drivers of the relation – the ideological component, the geopolitical context, and the bureaucratic variable. In that sense, I kept the cases connected to the overall discussion of the periphery concept.²¹

Given the scope of my research, the investigation is based on a survey of Israel’s diplomatic history from its foundation to nowadays. With this aim, I used various types of sources. First, I researched institutional and private archives. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave me access to declassified diplomatic cables for the early years of the periphery doctrine. In particular, I explored Israel State Archives for the years 1957, 1958, and 1959, which constitute the key moment for the formation of the alliance. I crossed these official sources with US official documents declassified by the US Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency (diplomatic cables, memoranda, intelligence briefings) or revealed by the organization WikiLeaks. Dozens of relevant cables were found in the WikiLeaks/Cablegate archive, including documents to and from the State Department and the US embassies in Tel Aviv, Ankara, and elsewhere. In Tehran, parts of the diplomatic materials from the US Embassy during the reign of the Shah have been released following the takeover by the Islamic revolutionaries. Private archives of major Israeli policymakers were also used to better evaluate the individual dimension of the decisions being taken and the importance of the personal ties developed through the process. That included essays, memoirs, speeches, and sometimes correspondence from key actors (David Ben-Gurion, Shimon Peres, Golda Meir, and Abba Eban, among others). These sources usually confirmed, occasionally amended or complemented the official archives. Sometimes, the intimacy described by Israeli statesmen of their relations with foreign leaders underlined the importance of the human factor, something that could not have been measured through diplomatic cables and official reports.

For the third part of the book, which deals with contemporary events, access to official material was obviously more difficult because of the classification obstacle. So I relied both on documents accessed through international and local media outlets (primarily the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Haaretz*, and *Jerusalem Post*). More importantly, I conducted interviews through a series of four field trips to Israel. Each field trip lasted one to several weeks and included meetings with officers, diplomats, politicians, journalists, as well as scholars. In total, about 60 interviews were conducted. Given the sensitivity of the topics and

the official responsibilities of the interviewees, interviews were not recorded and I decided to maintain general anonymity and to refer only to the exchanges by mentioning the professional affiliation of the person.

Finally, the analysis exposed in this book also benefited from participant observation. As a NATO official, working as an advisor for the Middle East Faculty of the NATO Defense College, from 2011 to 2016, I had the privilege of meeting and working on a regular basis with Israeli representatives of the ministries of foreign affairs and defense. This enabled me to discuss this research in an informal way and to refine, and sometimes revise, some of the early findings of my research by putting it to test with practitioners.

The plan of the book

Based on the findings of the research, the following is divided into three parts and seven chapters that support the main argument about the enduring salience of the periphery doctrine in Israel's security apparatus. Part I looks at the genesis of the periphery doctrine. In Chapter 1, the historical and theoretical foundations of the concept are our starting point. We explore how the intellectual environment of the early twentieth century influenced the design of the periphery. European diplomatic practices of covert counterbalancing alliances during the nineteenth century played a role that is evidenced here. Indeed, the intrinsically pessimistic belief with regards to Israel's regional environment and the practice of clandestine foreign policy as a means, reveal commonalities with the past European security complex. We then look at the early strategic debates within Zionist circles in the thirties. In particular, we observe the political ideas of Vladimir Jabotinsky, whose pessimistic philosophy greatly inspired Israel's diplomatic posture. This leads us to the first concrete mention of a "periphery doctrine" by politician Baruch Uziel in the early fifties and, approximately at the same time, Reuven Shiloah, an adviser in the inner circle of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and founder of the Mossad.

Chapter 2 shows how the "periphery doctrine" as an intellectual matrix for the conduct of foreign policy impacted Israel's security establishment, with consequences that go far beyond the mere ideological debate. The periphery strategy did enforce political actors over others – the military and the intelligence services against the diplomats – and did consolidate a mainstream view in the Israeli national security sphere – the zero-sum game mindset and the reliance on clandestine relations.

Part II explores the first period, or first age, of the periphery strategy. In the following chapters (3, 4 and 5) I show how the grand strategy designed earlier led to close but discreet ties with Ethiopia, Turkey, and Iran. I also detail the attempts – which eventually failed – to build bridges with Christian and Kurdish communities in the Arab world. For each case, we highlight the conditions that paved the way to the development of bilateral relations. I also look at the key actors behind the partnerships: the politicians and the armed forces but also external players such as the US, whose support to the Israeli initiative definitely

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ensured its acceptance by Turkish, Iranian, and Ethiopian regimes. Finally, the historical perspective allows us to look also at the causes behind the decline of these ties.

This leads us to Part III with two chapters (6 and 7) that deal with the current environment, and more specifically look at the changes and continuities in the periphery strategy. Chapter 6 explains how the periphery remained a powerful intellectual matrix that drove Israeli efforts to replace former allies such as Turkey and Iran by new ones. In other words, Israel's diplomatic and military apparatus adapted to these challenges by using the same intellectual framework to engage with other countries such as Greece and Azerbaijan to replace, respectively, Turkey and Iran. To a certain extent, these latter can be seen as part of the periphery of the periphery. Nevertheless, it is made clear in the analysis that these new partners are of lesser importance to Israel than Turkey and Iran used to be during the first decades of the periphery strategy.

Finally, Chapter 7 looks at the increasing use of the periphery concept in remote places such as in Asia – with Israel's India and China policies – and the Persian Gulf – through the much-speculated, and so far largely overblown, exchanges between Israel and Arab kingdoms. These latest occurrences of the periphery tend to turn the idea into a catch-all concept that is less and less grounded into a geographical frame. At the same time, however, it still reflects the long-term importance of the concept at the level of political imagination.

Notes

- 1 Founder and leader of the extreme right party, Israel Beytenou (“Israel our Home”), Avigdor Liberman was minister of foreign affairs twice, from February 10, 2009 to December 18, 2012, and from November 11, 2013 to May 6, 2015.
- 2 Michael Freund, “Fundamentally Freund: Periphery Doctrine's Rebirth,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 23, 2012.
- 3 Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, “Revival of the Periphery Concept in Israel's Foreign Policy?,” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 15, No. 2, July 2012, pp. 27–40, p. 27.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 5 David Turner, “After America Leaves: Israel's ‘New’ Periphery Doctrine,” *Times of Israel*, November 1, 2012.
- 6 Yossi Alpher, “Israel: Alternative Regional Options in a Changing Middle East,” *NOREF Report*, June 2013, p. 1.
- 7 On the misuses of analogies in foreign policymaking, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992.
- 8 Interviews with the author in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, January 2012, February 2013, January 2015.
- 9 On the role of ideas in foreign-policymaking, see among others, Daniel W. Drezner, “Ideas, Bureaucratic Politics, and the Crafting of Foreign Policy,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 44, No. 4, October 2000, pp. 733–749; Jeffrey Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997; Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane, *Ideas and Foreign Policy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993; Morton Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution, 1974.