
Backing the “Good Guys”: American Governmental Policy, “Jewish Influence,” and the Sinai Campaign of 1956

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Israel has no greater strength than that which flows from these abundant sources of Jewish fraternity.

—Abba Eban

Reacting to the Surprise

The Sinai Campaign, in which Israel unexpectedly launched a major attack on Egypt after enduring a long period of harassment, caught the world (and the Egyptians) napping. Hostilities began on October 29, 1956, when Israeli paratroopers dropped from the sky to secure the strategic Mitla Pass in anticipation of a speedy advance by Israeli armored columns. When the news reached America five hours later, it came as a complete surprise to the Eisenhower administration, the Jewish community, and even the Israeli embassy. The situation became even more complicated a few days later when it was learned that Britain and France were acting against Egypt in concert with Israel. Even though Israel's grievances against Egypt were well known and of long standing—persistent terrorist attacks by Egyptian-backed *fedayeen* operating from the Gaza Strip, the Egyptian blockade of the Straits of Tiran and denial of the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping—no one had imagined that Israel might use force to rectify the situation.

President Dwight Eisenhower's understanding of the problem is perhaps best explicated by a long, unusually candid letter he wrote on November 2, 1956:

It does not seem to me that there is present in the case anything that justifies the action that Britain, France, and Israel apparently concerted among themselves and have initiated. . . . The real point is that Britain, France and Israel had come to believe—perhaps correctly—that Nasser was their worst enemy in the Mid East and that until he was removed or deflated, they would have no peace. I do not quarrel with the idea that there is justification for such fears, but I have insisted long and earnestly that you cannot resort to force in international relationships because of your fear of what might happen in the future. . . . [Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion] might think he could take advantage of this country because of the approaching election and because of the importance that so many politicians in the past have attached to our Jewish vote. I gave strict orders to the State Department that they should inform Israel that we would handle our affairs exactly as though we didn't have a Jew in America. The welfare and best interests of our own country were to be the sole criteria on which we operated.¹

With these views already in mind, but with the intelligence picture distorted in many ways (most especially as yet unaware that Britain and France were involved in the developing military action), Eisenhower convened a meeting of his key advisers soon after the news reached Washington. According to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who was present at the meeting, “the President thought that in these circumstances perhaps we cannot be bound by our traditional alliance, but must instead face the question how to make good on our pledge.”² By “pledge” Eisenhower meant the third clause in the Tripartite Declaration Regarding Security in the Near East of May 25, 1950, in which the United States, Britain, and France had declared that they would take action against states violating frontiers or armistice lines,³ and Israel, of necessity, had crossed the 1949 armistice lines in order to attack Egypt. Eisenhower’s desires to honor this pledge became U.S. policy during the Suez crisis, as was clearly indicated by a White House statement issued after the meeting, which read: “The United States, under this and prior administrations, has pledged itself to assist the victim of any aggression in the Middle East.”⁴

For Dulles, assisting the “victim” meant punishing the “culprit.” On the morning of October 30, in the midst of the mounting crisis, he took steps to ensure that Israel would be unable to obtain money from what he called “Jewish banks,” namely, Chase Manhattan, Bank of America/New York, Hanover Bank, and Manufacturers Bank, all institutions where the Israeli government had accounts and credit lines.⁵ Although Secretary of the Treasury George M. Humphrey told Dulles that there was only \$8 million in the “Jewish banks,” and \$5 million to

\$6 million in other New York banks ("it is just peanuts," he said, "and in such small amounts we really do not dare go to the banks"),⁶ he and Dulles agreed to prevent a visit to Israel by a team from the Export-Import Bank, which was expected to recommend a new loan to the Israelis of \$75 million. That same day Dulles suggested to Eisenhower that the flow of charitable contributions to Israel should be stopped.⁷

Facing formidable opposition, as this indicated, Israel and her supporters faced a tough battle if they were to win over American public opinion. The Israeli ambassador, Abba Eban, pointed out that there were three main difficulties. First, Israel had not established political grounds for its surprise attack on Egypt. Second, there had been no overt act of aggression by Egypt that would make it possible to describe the attack as a legitimate defensive measure.⁸ Third, there was a widespread feeling that Israel had timed the attack to take place during the American election campaign, when Eisenhower's hands would be tied by political considerations.⁹ Eban felt that the campaign to win public opinion had three urgent goals: to present the Israeli view to the media, to strengthen Jewish solidarity, and to solicit support in Congress.¹⁰

Eban acknowledged that the Israeli embassy could not offer an adequate response to the questions posed by the media and American Jewish leaders.¹¹ He commented dryly, "We tried to explain our motives but we could say very little about the targets and the goals of the Sinai operation."¹² On October 29, 1956, Israeli diplomats received instructions to describe the Sinai operation as a defensive measure and to emphasize that it had no connection to the British and French dispute with Egypt over the Suez Canal.¹³

America's perplexed Jewish leaders convened a meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations on October 30. Eban's deputy, Reuven Shiloach, attended. He subsequently commented, "For the first time in our memory there was reluctance to justify Israel's action without reserve."¹⁴ There were other reasons, as well, to be concerned about a possible rift between American Jewry and Israel: the problem of forcing the American Jewish community to oppose their own government, and the objection of American Jewish leaders to a war with Egypt.

Even worse than the disagreement among Jewish leaders was their readiness to make it public. However, after two days of deliberations, the Presidents' Conference issued a statement which neither con-

demned Israel nor supported the Eisenhower administration. The statement, representing the unified stand of the organized American Jewish community and endorsed by sixteen Zionist and non-Zionist organizations, urged the U.S. government to make a “fresh appraisal” of the Middle East conflict. It asserted that

the conflict in the Middle East is not simply between Egypt and Israel, but between democracy and an expansionist dictatorship, between the free world and Nasserism backed by Moscow. . . . Events have also demonstrated the basic identity of interest of Israel and the Free World. It is in our own national interest to recognize this truth and to act upon it. We therefore call upon our government to shape its policies and chart its course in the light of these facts and this challenge.¹⁵

Exerting Pressure Through “Jewish Channels”

The U.S. government, meanwhile, in an effort to win the support of the Jewish community, tried to use prominent American Jews to influence Israel’s leaders. On October 30, Sherman Adams, the White House chief of staff, phoned Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, the former chairman of the Zionist Organization of America, who had close ties with the Republican party. Adams asked Silver to tell Ben-Gurion that Eisenhower was planning to make a coast-to-coast speech the next day, and since he wanted to avoid criticizing Israel, he wanted Ben-Gurion to pledge that Israel would not retain the territory it had conquered. If Ben-Gurion made such a pledge, Adams told Silver, Eisenhower would express deep appreciation and friendship for Israel in his speech.

Silver passed Eisenhower’s request directly to Ben-Gurion. The prime minister responded that he was willing to promise an Israeli withdrawal, but only if Egypt agreed to a peace treaty guaranteeing the cessation of hostile acts against Israel.

Ben-Gurion’s reply, the first authoritative statement of the goals of the Sinai operation, made it clear that Israel was not interested in making territorial acquisitions.¹⁶ Silver’s possible influence on Ben-Gurion’s reply or on the text of Eisenhower’s October 31 speech cannot be determined, but it seems unlikely that the use of unofficial channels to transmit Eisenhower’s message did anything to “soften” Ben-Gurion’s response. In all probability, the initiator of this attempt

to bypass Eban was unaware of the long-standing animosity between Silver and Ben-Gurion.

The Battle Moves to the United Nations

By November 1, 1956, when the United Nations General Assembly held an emergency session, Israeli forces had taken most of Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Dulles was scheduled to appear before the General Assembly at 5 p.m. At 8:40 that morning, he phoned the president, and Eisenhower told him "not [to] do anything that makes us look as if we are trying to get an excuse to pick on Israel."¹⁷

Later that same morning, though, the president changed course, telling Dulles, "It would be a complete mistake for this country to continue with any kind of aid to Israel which was an aggressor." Eisenhower thought "the sanctions outlined seemed a little mild."¹⁸ He told Dulles "to avoid condemning any nation, but to put his stress on the need for a quick cease-fire."¹⁹

On November 2, 1956 the General Assembly adopted a resolution introduced by Dulles which called for an immediate cease-fire and prompt withdrawal of all forces behind the 1949 armistice lines.²⁰

Eban's speech at the United Nations, which was broadcast nationwide, apparently did much to win understanding and sympathy for Israel's military action. Eban indicated that Israeli acceptance of a cease-fire would depend on Egyptian reciprocity, expressed reservations about troop withdrawals, and suggested direct peace negotiations between Israel and Egypt.

Israel stalled for the next two days, but after Britain and France launched an airborne attack on Port Said on the morning of November 5, Israel submitted its unconditional acceptance of the cease-fire to Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld. Israel's acceptance of the cease-fire did not relieve the mounting pressure. The Soviet Union questioned "the very existence of Israel as a state" if it did not immediately withdraw all forces from the Sinai.²¹ Aware of the Soviet threat, Ben-Gurion told the Knesset on November 7 that the armistice agreement with Egypt was dead, but that Israel was ready to enter negotiations with Egypt without any prior conditions. He added that Israel would not permit foreign forces to be stationed on its territory or in the areas it had occupied.²²

The Threat of Sanctions

The United States was sharply critical of Ben-Gurion's statement, perceiving it as a veiled policy to annex the occupied territories. On November 7 Eisenhower told acting Secretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr., that Ben-Gurion's statement was "terrible,"²³ but he softened his tone somewhat in a letter to Ben-Gurion: "It would be a matter of the greatest regret to all my countrymen if Israeli policy on a matter of such grave concern to the world should in any way impair the friendly cooperation between our two countries."²⁴ When Hoover gave the president's letter to Shiloach, he told him (after having cleared this with Eisenhower)²⁵ that "Israel's attitude will inevitably lead to most serious measures, such as the termination of all United States governmental and private aid, U.N. sanctions and eventual expulsion from the United Nations."²⁶

On November 7 Nachum Goldmann, the president of the World Zionist Organization, sent a cable to Ben-Gurion warning that the American Jewish community had reservations about Israel's actions and could give Israel only limited support. He said that American Jews understood completely that Israel could not return to the status quo ante and also supported Israel's demand that Egypt renounce the state of war, remove its threat to Israel's existence, and guarantee freedom of passage for Israeli vessels in the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. On the other hand, he continued, it would be impossible to mobilize American Jewry to support an Israeli refusal to withdraw from the Sinai or accept an international peace-keeping force. Moreover, if there was an open dispute between Israel and the U.S. government on this point, there would be no possibility of rallying American Jewry to take Israel's side. What was needed, Goldmann said, was a step that would prevent an open split between Ben-Gurion and Eisenhower. He also warned "that if the U.S. takes steps against us, Germany will stop reparations."²⁷ To make sure that Ben-Gurion took his advice seriously, Goldmann concluded with another warning: the Presidents' Conference would not endorse a series of planned activities in support of the prime minister's Knesset speech until "the situation will be clarified."²⁸

That same day, November 7, the General Assembly adopted a second resolution calling for immediate Israeli withdrawal. Twenty-four

hours later, after Eban assured him of the feasibility of a qualified formula of withdrawal, Ben-Gurion capitulated.

The Election Campaign Factor

As was mentioned earlier, Eisenhower had the American election campaign on his mind throughout these events. On October 15, even before the Sinai Campaign began, he told Dulles that "he would not under any circumstances permit the fact of forthcoming elections to influence his judgment. If any votes were lost as a result of this attitude, that was a situation which would have to be confronted, but any other attitude would not permit us to live with our conscience."²⁹

On the night of October 29, Eisenhower later recalled, "some prominent Republicans called on me to say that for the only time in the political campaign they thought I might not win the election. Their reasoning was simple. . . . Perhaps it would be necessary for the U.S., as a member of the U.N., to employ our armed forces in strength to drive them [the Israelis] back within their borders. If this turned out to be the case, much of the responsibility would be laid at my door. With many of our citizens on the eastern seaboard emotionally involved in the Zionist cause, this, it was believed, could possibly bring political defeat. None of them, however, urged me to abandon my position."³⁰

Eisenhower, however, failed to identify the "prominent Republicans," nor does the phone call memorandum series for October 29 reveal any predictions of doom by members of the Republican establishment. Indeed, that same night Vice President Richard Nixon called Dulles to tell him that "he felt that no domestic political factors ought to stand in the way of our taking a firm position against the Israelis' aggression."³¹

The president's firm assurances to his associates that he would do "the right thing" and not bow to political pressure did not prevent him from participating in the political ritual of courting the Jews. In New York, Republican Jacob Javits, a Jew, was running for the Senate against a Democratic incumbent, Robert F. Wagner. As the Javits campaign moved into high gear, Eisenhower invited him to the Oval Office, and after their meeting joined with him in a ritual photo opportunity and press release.³² Javits received a final boost from Eisenhower and Nixon on November 5, two days before the election. Eisenhower

phoned to wish him success, saying, "I think you are going to win and win handsomely."³³

Between October 30 and November 6 (Election Day), two Republican senators, four Republican representatives, and three Democratic representatives wrote or wired the White House about the Sinai Campaign.³⁴ Only one of them, Congressman Curtis of Massachusetts, a Republican, indicated that his constituents were opposed to the United States taking drastic action against Israel.³⁵ Altogether, then, the pressure on the White House from Congress and voters does not seem to have been very strong.

More significant, however, was the criticism of Eisenhower's policies by Adlai Stevenson, his opponent in the presidential race. The Democratic candidate, challenging Eisenhower's policy toward Israel, insisted that Israel had to be given the arms needed to guarantee her territorial integrity. Stevenson's stance apparently did not gain him many votes, however, since Eisenhower won a landslide victory on November 6. The Democrats retained control of Congress, though, and this meant that Eisenhower had not been given an unlimited mandate.

The Public Relations Campaign

While Israel began a phased withdrawal of its troops from the Sinai, Eban and his associates launched a massive public relations campaign in the hope that popular pressure might induce Eisenhower to change his position.³⁶ In his briefing cable of November 12, 1956, Ben-Gurion described Israel's objectives as follows: the Egyptian army should not be allowed to return to the Sinai, an international force should be stationed in the Suez Canal Zone to guarantee free passage, the 1949 armistice agreement should be replaced by peace negotiations between Israel and Egypt, and Israel should retain the Tiran Straits.³⁷

All of this was in sharp contrast to American policy, which was based on preserving peace and avoiding the use of force to solve international disputes. From this standpoint, nothing could possibly justify the combined Israeli-British-French operation against Egypt. American policy had another fundamental goal as well: the buttressing of the United Nations as an instrument for achieving peace and as a forum for opposing the Soviets.

Thus American policy-makers preferred that the Middle East crisis be handled by the United Nations without American involvement. Israel's goal was to change U.S. Middle East policy and to obtain American assurances that the eastern part of the Sinai would be demilitarized, that the Egyptians would not regain the Gaza Strip, and that Israel would be permitted to hold Sharem al-Sheikh until free passage in the Straits of Tiran was guaranteed.³⁸

The American Jewish community was the object as well as the instrument of the Israeli public relations campaign. American Jews were to be briefed on the issues and then would disseminate views favorable to Israel in an effort to win wider support. The strategy was outlined at a meeting of the steering committee of the Presidents' Conference on November 7, 1956. A national education campaign would rally the Jewish community, using all the existing channels of communication—the United Jewish Appeal, Israel Bonds, trade unions, rabbinical groups, and various members of the Presidents' Conference. The strategy outline suggested that activities should stress the themes of a negotiated peace, Israel's opposition to communism, and acceptance of fair-play rules. These themes did not directly address the immediate issue in dispute but were intended to show that Israel was America's best friend in the Middle East, thus producing an atmosphere receptive to Israel's goals.

Since the education campaign was not directed against the Eisenhower administration, it skillfully avoided the explosive issue of "dual loyalty." In addition to local meetings, a conference to be held in New York was scheduled for the following week. The activity outline suggested that rabbinical leaders should discuss the issue of negotiated versus imposed peace on television and through ads in newspapers. Ads on the peace theme signed by an interfaith group of prominent individuals and television panels on the subject were also suggested.³⁹

At the next meeting of the steering committee, on November 13, it was decided to convene a two-day conference in New York. The agenda included such issues as the communist threat to the Middle East, America's relationship to Palestine and Israel, U.S. interests in the Middle East, and the sequence of events that had led to the present crisis.⁴⁰ As before, the organizers were eager to avoid direct criticism of the administration. Instead they stressed the idea that Israel was a democratic society like the United States, an ally in the fight against

communism, and a land whose Western culture and values placed it in close affinity to America.

The New York conference took place on November 26–27, 1956. All of the speakers took up the themes suggested by the organizers. Dr. Maurice Eisendrath, the president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, spoke on the common values of Israel and America. Israel as a stronghold of anticommunism was the main point in the speech of Philip Klutznick, president of B'nai B'rith. The lack of a common foundation of moral values as an impediment to the cause of world peace and to a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict was the main theme of the speech by Donald Harvey Tippet, the Methodist bishop of San Francisco.⁴¹ Bernard Trager, chairman of the National Community Relations Advisory Council, emphasized the opportunity “to contribute toward the building of an American public opinion that will not merely support but impel our government toward a positive policy of seeking permanent peace through a freely negotiated treaty between Israel and Egypt.”⁴²

The 250 participants from twenty-four states concluded the two-day conference by adopting two resolutions. The first was a short one, made up of pro-Israel clichés that could easily win the support of any Jewish organization. The second resolution condemned Egypt for terrorism against Israel and for imposing a blockade and boycott. Emphasizing that Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was implacably hostile to the Western democracies and had opened the door to Soviet penetration of the Near East, it called upon the United States to recognize the fundamental identity of interests between Israel and the free world and to play a greater role in Middle Eastern affairs.

The conference concluded with a demand for an end to “conditions that would restore Egyptian domination over . . . the Straits of Tiran.”⁴³ It stated, further, that Gaza was not and had never been an Egyptian territory, adding that “a simple withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza opens up the dangerous possibility of its reoccupation by Egyptian military forces.”⁴⁴ Finally, the statement deplored the biased attitude of the United States in implementing the November 2 General Assembly resolution.

Jewish community leaders were asked to reissue this statement in their local media as a press release or as an ad endorsed by the local

heads of Jewish organizations.⁴⁵ In addition to urging such local activities, the Presidents' Conference arranged six regional conferences to take place in Providence, Atlanta, Baltimore, Cincinnati, San Francisco, and Chicago, with members of the Presidents' Conference participating.⁴⁶ These regional meetings took place in January and early February 1957, "to place before the American Jewish leadership the facts on the current crisis in the Middle East as it affects America's basic interests and Israel's survival."⁴⁷

While representatives of various Jewish organizations routinely called on State Department officials, only the Presidents' Conference met with Secretary Dulles in an official capacity. On January 17, during a 45-minute meeting with Dulles held at the request of the Presidents' Conference, Dr. Nachum Goldmann raised the question of the Tiran Straits and Gaza. Dulles, in response, referred to his speech to the General Assembly on November 1, 1956, when he had expressed the U.S. commitment to a permanent solution in the Middle East, and said "he would not commit himself on the timetable on withdrawal."⁴⁸ Dulles then delivered what Rabbi Philip Bernstein, the president of the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs, described as a "sermon" questioning Israel's long-range policy for coping with Arab hostility. He "reiterated that the U.S. is committed to the integrity and preservation of Israel and will not do anything contrary to that position."⁴⁹ Sticking to his broad policy statements, Dulles told the delegation that "the U.S. is working completely through the United Nations."⁵⁰

Renewed Warnings of Sanctions

On February 2, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, told the General Assembly that "I cannot predict the consequences which will ensue if Israel fails to comply with the will of the General Assembly as expressed in the pending resolution."⁵¹ This was the first of three warnings to Israel that were issued within the next three days. The second was included in President Eisenhower's letter of February 3 to Ben-Gurion. The third came from Dulles at his press conference on February 5, when he said, "If there was action by the U.N. calling for sanctions, we would have, of course, to give them

very serious consideration.”⁵² Later, in a conversation with Senator Smith of New Jersey, he specified that sanctions against Israel would mean cutting off financial aid and business transactions.⁵³

Dulles’s reference to sanctions triggered a stormy reaction on Capitol Hill. Senator Knowland of California, the Republican leader, issued a sharply critical statement,⁵⁴ while Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic majority leader, sent Dulles a letter opposing sanctions in which he argued that “the U.N. cannot apply one rule for the strong and another for the weak.”⁵⁵

Johnson’s support had been obtained by I.L. Kenen, executive director of the American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs, and Nathaniel Goodrich, the Washington representative of the American Jewish Committee. Kenen and other Jewish leaders approached several other senators as well.⁵⁶ As a result of their efforts, the use of sanctions was denounced on the Senate floor by Sparkman of Alabama and Humphrey of Minnesota (both Democrats) and by Smith of Maine, Saltonstall of Massachusetts, Kuchel of California, and Bridges of New Hampshire (all Republicans).⁵⁷ In addition, Senators Douglas of Illinois, Javits of New York, and Ives of New York (also all Republicans) publicly condemned the sanctions policy in other forums.

Public Affairs to gain support in the House of Representatives also proved fruitful.⁵⁸ Led by Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, forty-one Republican congressmen urged the administration not to require an Israeli withdrawal until Egypt agreed to begin negotiations, while on the Democratic side of the aisle, Emanuel Celler of New York, on behalf of seventy-five Democratic congressmen, demanded that Israel be guaranteed free passage through the Suez Canal and Tiran Straits before withdrawing from Sinai.

The seventeen member organizations of the Presidents’ Conference endorsed an appeal to Eisenhower that said, in part, “To apply sanctions on Israel for non-compliance would stand out in striking contrast to the failure of the U.N. to impose or even to suggest the imposition of sanctions on Egypt for her six years defiance of the Security Council resolution on Suez or against the Soviet Union for its inhuman and ruthless suppression of the Hungarian struggle for freedom.”⁵⁹ The appeal was wired to the White House, and the text was published in a full-page ad in the *New York Times* on February 11.

American Policy Changes Course

Subjected to so much pressure from Congress, unions, and the media, the Eisenhower administration decided to soft-pedal the threat of sanctions. Instead, on February 11, Dulles handed Eban an aide-memoire reiterating the U.S. position "that Israeli withdrawal from Gaza should be prompt and unconditional, leaving the future of the Gaza Strip to be worked out through the efforts and good offices of the United Nations."⁶⁰ While the United States would not give any assurances that the restoration of Egyptian control over Gaza would be prevented,⁶¹ the aide-memoire confirmed—and this represented a shift in American policy—that the Gulf of Aqaba constituted international waters and therefore "no nation has the right forcibly to prevent free and innocent passage in the Gulf and through the Straits giving access thereto";⁶² moreover, the United States "is prepared to exercise the right of free and innocent passage and to join with others to secure general recognition of this right."⁶³ This commitment, however, was conditional upon the prior withdrawal of Israeli forces.

Doubtful that Israel would be satisfied with these assurances, Dulles told Eisenhower that if Israel did not withdraw after receiving the aide-memoire, the United States would have to deal with a sanctions resolution in the United Nations and "it will be tough."⁶⁴ He warned the president that congressional pressure was rapidly increasing. Eisenhower realized once again how hard it was to carry out foreign policy without congressional backing.

Dulles, however, did not think congressional backing would be enough. He told Henry Luce, the media mogul, that he now understood, as George C. Marshall, his predecessor as secretary of state, had learned from experience, that it was nearly impossible to conduct a foreign policy not approved of by the Jews—but nonetheless, Dulles said, he was going to try it. Dulles insisted that he was not anti-Jewish, but was merely acting in accord with what George Washington had said in his Farewell Address—an emotional attachment to another country should not be permitted to interfere in foreign policy.⁶⁵

Around the same time Dulles also commented to Ambassador Lodge about "the terrific control the Jews had over the media and the barrage which the Jews have built up on congressmen."⁶⁶ Eisenhower himself was fearful that "if congressional sentiment is as solid, Eban

knows it and tells his government, they laugh at the secretary and the president.”⁶⁷

Threatened by the anti-sanctions pressure from Congress, Dulles “did not want the Israelis to know we were weak . . . at all,”⁶⁸ so he instructed Lodge to forestall the General Assembly deliberations on sanctions with a resolution in the Security Council. He and Lodge reasoned that the time-consuming procedural switch from the Assembly to the Council would provide room for maneuvering on the language of the Security Council resolution. They also discussed the possibility of introducing a resolution that would cut off new aid and the impact of a formula limited to government-to-government sanctions. Dulles suggested that congressional pressure would be reduced if Lodge said something to the effect that the United States was trying very hard to find a solution acceptable to both sides.

As a *Washington Post* editorial indicated, now that Israel had received assurances about free passage through the Straits of Tiran, it was generally felt that “it is now Israel’s turn to be reasonable.” Meanwhile, Eban was pushing hard to obtain Israel’s assent in principle to the aide-memoir of February 11 while seeking clarification of the U.S. assurances.⁶⁹ Ben-Gurion understood the advantages of the U.S. offer, but was reluctant to accept. Thus Israel welcomed the principles set forth in the aide-memoire but called for discussions between the two states to work out arrangements for implementing the American commitment to guarantee free passage in the Straits and to find a solution for Gaza that could be presented to the United Nations.⁷⁰

This was not the response Dulles wanted. He told Eban that bilateral negotiations leading to a solution that Israel and the United States would then impose on the United Nations were out of the question. So was an American guarantee of free passage through the Straits, since it would involve the deployment of U.S. forces and therefore would have to be ratified by Congress.

Eisenhower Returns to Sanctions

On February 16 Dulles and Lodge met with Eisenhower in Thomasville, Georgia. In general, they felt “that the strongly emotional attitude of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and of Foreign Minister Meir

made it unlikely that there would be any important change of position."⁷¹ Dulles maintained that the United States had gone as far as possible to make withdrawal acceptable and easy for Israel, warning that "to go further would . . . make it almost certain that virtually all the Middle East countries would feel that the U.S. policy toward the area was in the last analysis controlled by the Jewish influence."⁷² If this happened, he concluded, the Arab countries would go over to the Soviet Union.

In light of all this, Eisenhower decided to support a General Assembly resolution to suspend governmental assistance and private aid to Israel and to begin to prepare for sanctions. He hoped that Jewish endorsement of this policy could be obtained by contacting "leading Jewish personalities" sympathetic to the administration and asking them to "help to organize some Jewish sentiment in support of what might be the President's final position."⁷³

On February 17 the White House released the text of the aide-memoire of February 11, accompanied by a presidential statement asserting that the aide-memoire and the U.N. resolution of February 2 "provide Israel with the maximum assurance that it can reasonably expect at this juncture, or that can be reconciled with fairness to others."⁷⁴

The next day Ben-Gurion instructed Eban to be firm on two key issues: (1) no evacuation without effective guarantees of free passage through the Straits of Tiran, and (2) no Egyptian reoccupation of Gaza. The Israeli people, Ben-Gurion said, were prepared to endure sanctions; and if necessary, Israel's security had to come before the satisfying of public opinion abroad.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, when Senator Knowland learned, on February 16, that the administration was again promoting sanctions, he threatened to resign from the U.S. delegation to the United Nations. Dulles later commented that "the pressure of the Jews largely accounts for Knowland's attitude."⁷⁶

Dulles advised Eisenhower to meet with congressional leaders before the sanctions vote at the United Nations, for he felt it was essential to gain broader public support and to share the responsibility for such a critical decision.⁷⁷ Sherman Adams, the White House chief of staff, and James Hagerty, the presidential press secretary, agreed that congressional support and consent were necessary if Eisenhower was to pursue so unpopular a policy. Sanctions alone, however unpopular,

were not the only issue, they warned; the Eisenhower Doctrine itself might be at stake.

On February 20 Eisenhower met with a bipartisan group of twelve senators and fourteen congressmen to discuss the sanctions question. Unless Israel was held in check, he warned, guerilla warfare would spread, oil supplies might be interrupted, Russia would gain influence in the Middle East, and the whole world order would break down. The U.S. decision about sanctions was subject to the United Nations resolution, he claimed, implying that the United States had no influence over the United Nations. Furthermore, Dulles added, "the firmness of the U.S. position constituted . . . the crucial issue, particularly since much of the world, including the Israeli government, believed Israel could in crucial moments control U.S. policy. Should the Arab nations see any confirmation of this belief, they would [be] compelled to turn to Russia."⁷⁸

Unconvinced by these arguments, the majority of the congressional leaders at the meeting made it clear that in their view the imposition of sanctions on Israel would reflect a double standard. Thus Eisenhower, Dulles, and Lodge failed to win unanimous support for a statement calling on Israel to withdraw and threatening to impose sanctions if Israel refused. An alternative proposal calling for a congressional resolution expressing unity with the administration was also rejected.

One White House staffer later described the meeting as a "bag of worms."⁷⁹ Eisenhower himself said that it was disheartening to know that political considerations played so large a role in the decisions taken by such high-ranking leaders. In his memoirs he blamed the "Jewish vote" for influencing the bipartisan meeting. Although only one participant, Congressman Taber of New York, came from a district where the Jewish vote was significant, Eisenhower nonetheless was convinced that Jewish influence was paramount and labeled Senators Knowland and Johnson as particularly obstructionist.

With congressional leaders reluctant to share the responsibility for imposing sanctions on Israel, Eisenhower decided to take his case to the people. He did so the same night in a nationwide television and radio address. In it he repeated the arguments he had made to the congressional leaders earlier that day, but without mentioning the word "sanctions."

Ethnic and Religious Politics Applied to Gain Support

The Eisenhower administration had plenty of solid information indicating that the American Jewish community was hostile to its Middle East policy. An analysis of the telegrams sent to the White House on February 20, the day following the president's speech, showed that almost 90 percent came from Jews. Moreover, only 10 percent of them supported the president, while 90 percent were in opposition.⁸⁰ Clearly, the Jewish community was overwhelmingly and outspokenly against the administration's policy.

Following up on the decision made at Thomasville to reach out to sympathetic Jews, Eisenhower, on February 18, had called Barney Balaban, the president of Paramount Pictures, and asked for a list of Jewish leaders he could meet with.⁸¹ In addition to naming himself, Balaban suggested Louis Novins, one of his associates at Paramount, Samuel D. Leidesdorf, treasurer of the United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York, Jacob Blaustein, former president of the American Jewish Committee, William Rosenwald, general chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, Philip N. Klutznick, president of B'nai B'rith, Mendel Silverberg, a lawyer and Republican activist in Los Angeles,⁸² and Irving Engel, president of the American Jewish Committee.⁸³ With the exception of Blaustein and Klutznick, none of these men had been active in Jewish organizations concerned with the political aspects of U.S.-Israel relations. Most of them had been involved in fund-raising, and none were formally associated with the Zionist movement.

A meeting with Dulles was scheduled for February 21, to be followed by a possible meeting with Eisenhower, but after the president's speech on February 20, the group decided that they would not meet with him.⁸⁴ According to Klutznick, the eight participants at the meeting with Dulles expressed their views forcefully in response to the secretary's directness, pleading for time to allow influence to work. Dulles doubted that any influence would "shake that fellow" Ben-Gurion.⁸⁵ One member of the group expressed the general mood by telling Dulles that "to try to bludgeon Israel against its own vital interests is morally wrong."⁸⁶

Meanwhile, press reports about administration efforts to pressure Israel through non-Zionist Jews caused a storm among Zionists and a

flat denial by the Jewish conferees. Balaban said, "It is my personal conviction that in matters involving justice and morality in the present crisis there can be no such distinctions between Zionists and non-Zionists."⁸⁷

In addition to its unsuccessful effort to win over the American Jewish community, the administration also tried to coax Christian leaders to speak up in support of its Middle East policy. Christian support, it was felt, would balance the perceived "Jewish influence."

In mid-February, as the storm against sanctions was building, Dulles expressed concern that "the views of the Protestant church groups never get reflected . . . in Washington in any way."⁸⁸ Instead, he told Roswell Barnes, associate general secretary of the National Council of Churches, the "Jewish influence" was "completely dominating the scene." Dulles particularly criticized the Israeli embassy for "dictating to the Congress through influential Jewish people in the country." Referring to the myth of the Elders of Zion, he told Barnes that "a great deal depends on whether Ben-Gurion can control our government's policies through the Jewish pressure here."⁸⁹ The "non-Jewish elements," he said, would have to roll up their sleeves. "We need very badly to get some more vocal support from people other than the Jews and those very much influenced by Jews."⁹⁰

Dulles was well aware that he was playing with dynamite. As he told Congressman Vorys of Ohio, a fellow Republican who was anxious for the Christian churches to respond, "the great trouble is [that] those who are ready to be alerted are extreme anti-Semites."⁹¹

Since the gentleman from Foggy Bottom did not want to compound his difficulties by becoming involved with anti-Semites, he concentrated on the mainstream Protestant establishment. Contacting both Barnes and Edward Elson, pastor of the National Presbyterian Church, he urged that the clergy use their pulpits to solicit support for the administration's Middle East policy. The two church officials assured the secretary of state that some of the ministers in New York would include "something" in their Sunday sermons.⁹² James Hagerty, the press secretary, also showed some interest, and met with Dulles to discuss how they might garner the support of Catholics, Presbyterians, and Methodists.⁹³

In the event, however, massive Christian support was not forthcoming. When Dulles pressed for a statement by the president of the World

Council of Churches, he was told that it could only be issued by the Council's general board.⁹⁴ All in all, non-Jewish groups seemed to have little interest in the administration's Middle East policy.⁹⁵

Israel's Readiness to Withdraw

The first cracks in Israel's firm stand on Gaza and the Tiran Straits surfaced during a brief visit by Eban to Jerusalem.⁹⁶ On his return, Eban presented Dulles with a "softened" Israeli position especially in respect to Gaza. Israel would no longer insist on keeping troops or a civil administration in Gaza, and stipulated only one condition for withdrawal: that the United Nations, and not Egypt, control Gaza's civil administration.⁹⁷ As for the issue of free passage through the Straits, Israel was now willing to drop its demand for an American guarantee, if the United States would formally recognize Israel's right, under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, to protect its ships as an exercise of the inherent right of self-defense.

Dulles agreed to issue a statement accepting Israel's new proposals, and on the night of February 24 prospects for a settlement seemed promising. But ultimately Eban's effort to separate the issue of the future regime in Gaza from that of free passage through the Straits failed, because Secretary General Hammarskjöld rejected Israel's request that a naval unit be included in the United Nations Emergency Force to ensure free passage through the Straits. In addition, he reaffirmed Egypt's rights in the Gaza Strip under the 1949 armistice agreement, insisting that a U.N. administration could only be established there under Egyptian jurisdiction.⁹⁸

At this point Dulles referred Eban to the French leaders Guy Mollet and Christian Pineau, who were in the United States on an official visit.⁹⁹ The two French leaders suggested a formula providing international sanction for Israel's right of self-defense in case its security in the Gaza vicinity was violated after withdrawal. Pineau also suggested a procedure for bypassing the antagonistic General Assembly. The United States, France, and Israel would state their views in respect to the international and legal situation in Gaza, and would get the General Assembly to acquiesce passively.

Ben-Gurion responded favorably to the French proposal. On March 1, 1957, Golda Meir, the Israeli foreign minister, told the Gen-

eral Assembly that Israel would withdraw on the assumption of free passage in the Straits of Tiran and the establishment of exclusive U.N. control in Gaza. If these expectations and assumptions were shattered by Egyptian aggression, Israel would exercise its right of self-defense, and its doing so would be supported by the United States and France.

On March 2, 1957, Eisenhower sent Ben-Gurion a letter stating that the United States would see that the hopes and expectations expressed by Mrs. Meir "prove not to be vain."¹⁰⁰ Israel's struggle to secure the political goals of the Sinai Campaign was now practically over. The restoration of Egyptian control over the Gaza Strip was a violation of all the assurances Israel had been given, and assumptions could not turn back the clock.

Summary

The preparations for the Sinai operation were handled with maximum secrecy to prevent both enemies and friends from deciphering Israel's goals and objectives.¹⁰¹ This clandestine policy, which entailed collusion with two colonial powers, Britain and France, had a political cost. Since the military operation against Egypt was top-secret, public opinion supporting it, in Israel and in the United States, could not be rallied before it began.

In Israel Ben-Gurion was able to muster a political consensus on the first day of the operation. The Israeli people saw the war as justified because of the numerous terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians and because of the Egyptian blockade of Israeli shipping in the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran.

The situation was different in America, however. Many Americans, both Jews and Gentiles, were sympathetic to Israel, but the Eisenhower administration regarded the use of force to solve international disputes as abhorrent. Eisenhower and Dulles held firmly to this conviction even though Egypt's president, Nasser, had aligned himself with the Soviet bloc; and because they adhered to this line, American diplomatic efforts during the Suez crisis had the effect of frustrating the victory won by Israel on the battlefield.

The Jewish community became a linchpin in the contest to sway American public opinion. Jewish leaders took arguments justifying Israel's right of self-defense and skillfully shifted their focus to suit

American political considerations. The Presidents' Conference statement of October 31, 1956, is a case in point. It simply ignored Israel's reasons for launching the massive military operation against Egypt. Instead, it asserted that "the conflict in the Middle East is . . . between democracy and an expansionist dictatorship, between the Free World and Nasserism backed by Moscow."¹⁰² This argument complemented the administration's prime objective of containing international communism and the Soviet Union, and played on the Cold War theme of the time.¹⁰³

The new focus brought about by such efforts helped to reshape and rephrase the political agenda in the United States. The war in the Middle East was not treated as the outcome of regional differences; instead, it was described as part of a global conflict in which the United States and Israel belonged to the same camp. Shifting the Arab-Israeli dispute into a different context made it much easier to identify the "good guys" and the "bad guys." Once the two sides were so labeled, it was only logical for the American Jewish community to claim that it was in America's national interest to support the "good guys," and this was exactly what the various speakers did at the conference in New York on November 26-27, 1956.

The resolution adopted by the conference included another element that had great appeal for opinion-makers. It called for fair-play rules of negotiation. Later, when the threat of sanctions against Israel surfaced, the denial of fair-play rules became a major issue for congressional critics of the administration.

The effectiveness of American Jewry's influence in American politics can be measured by its ability to build alliances around issues about which it is concerned. "Mom and apple pie" themes introduced into the public relations campaign by the Jewish community played a crucial role in rallying support for the Israeli cause. The coalition supporting Israel was made up of a wide range of groups. Included in its ranks were isolationists who resented the United Nations in general and its double standard in particular; Christians concerned about the status of Christianity in Africa and Asia, and eager to see fundamentalist Islam contained; cotton growers worried about falling cotton prices in the commodities markets and out to weaken Egyptian competition; shipping companies that wanted to teach Egypt a lesson for impeding the right of free passage through the Suez Canal; Democrats

opposed to the Republican administration's impartiality in the Arab-Israeli dispute;¹⁰⁴ unions that advocated "fair play" rules in labor as well as international disputes;¹⁰⁵ and the media, which were accustomed to granting equal time to opposing sides on any major controversy.¹⁰⁶ It was the extremely broad range of this coalition that made the Jewish community so effective an interest group.

Jewish influence was further enhanced by the unified stand and cohesive position that American Jews displayed throughout the Sinai crisis.¹⁰⁷ By 1956 the centrality of Israel had become a major factor in consolidating the commitment of American Jewry to political support of Israel. Apparently the Eisenhower administration was not aware of the depth of Jewish feelings for Israel when it attempted to lure "non-Zionists" into supporting its proposed sanctions policy. Pro-Israel sentiment was so pervasive that critical views by Zionist leaders like Nachum Goldmann were suppressed long after the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai,¹⁰⁸ while open criticism was confined to fringe groups like the anti-Zionist American Council for Judaism and had no impact.

Jewish influence was even more effective because the president and his close aides perceived it as a menace. Ample records of phone calls from the Oval Office and the secretary of state's office indicate that Eisenhower and Dulles genuinely believed that American Jews exercised overwhelming political power over U.S. Middle East policy. The president and his secretary of state spoke of this supposed Jewish influence so often that they might be seen as obsessed with the notion. Thus it was only natural for Sherman Adams, the White House chief of staff, to follow the line set by his boss, concluding in his memoirs: "Consideration for the great body of private opinion in the United States favoring Israel was a large factor in every government decision on the Middle East issues, especially in the crisis that arose later when the Israelis, deliberately rejecting our pleas against their use of force, moved into the Sinai Peninsula and gave the British and French their excuse for attacking the Egyptians at Suez."¹⁰⁹

Notes

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