

INTRODUCTION

BEYOND GEOSTRATEGY

The first half of the 1970s was a critical juncture for U.S.-Israel relations. Marked by a significant consolidation followed by temporary cooling, it has shaped American-Israeli dynamics ever since and, by extension, American policy and fortunes in the Middle East and beyond.

Existing scholarship on the dynamics of the American-Israeli relationship has tended to understate the significance of the Nixon years, due both to limited access to key documentary evidence and to a tendency to rely excessively on geostrategic factors that, though important, are insufficient on their own to explain the developments of the period. This book addresses both lacunae, making extensive use of recently opened archives and adding texture and nuance to established interpretations by identifying elements, in addition to geostrategic calculations, that help explain both the strengthening of relations and subsequent frictions.

Analysts have traditionally contended that President Richard M. Nixon and National Security Adviser (and, from September 1973, also secretary of state) Henry A. Kissinger deepened American-Israeli relations between the Jordanian crisis of September 1970 and the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973. During that time, Nixon and Kissinger saw the Jewish state as a “strategic asset” in the Middle Eastern arena and, by extension, in the global struggle against the Soviet Union, acting, to a certain degree, in defiance of the spirit of *détente* and the letter of the American-Soviet General Principals agreement concluded at the 1972 summit.¹ Some scholars also point to a sense of shared values and skillful practice of interest-group politics by Israel and its American Jewish champions during this period.² Similarly, scholars typically argue that after the 1973 war, the president and secretary of state constrained relations with Israel because they began to see the close association as a more mixed strategic blessing, and because the war had undermined domestic support for *détente* in the United States as it confirmed the perception that the Soviets could not be trusted.

While there is much truth to this geostrategic reading of events, it misses the role of ideational and psychological factors and the emotional impact on Nixon and Kissinger of specific choices made by Israel *outside* the Middle Eastern context. At the beginning of the decade, and especially during the lead-up to the 1972 presidential election, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and her ambassador to Washington, Yitzhak Rabin, led a “conservative turn” in Israeli policy that resonated deeply with the president and Kissinger. Coupled with a purposeful courtship of the evangelical movement, Israel’s public support for the administration’s approach in Vietnam and for Nixon’s reelection campaign won appreciation and sympathy in the White House, and fostered a sense of common purpose that went well beyond a strict strategic calculus. By the same token, in 1974, Israel’s discreet backing for the Jackson-Vanik amendment linking U.S.-Soviet relations to the Jewish emigration issue—backing itself motivated more by the self-image and emotional commitments of Israeli leaders than strategic considerations—undermined Nixon’s and Kissinger’s perception of Israel as a trusted, like-minded ally, since they both strongly opposed the amendment and placed great stock in the unswerving loyalty of friends. Ironically, Israel’s position in favor of Jackson-Vanik and, implicitly, against *détente*, was in many respects a natural extension of the “conservative turn” that the administration had encouraged and welcomed just a few years earlier. The friction of 1974, then, was to a considerable degree the child of the honeymoon of 1971–1973.

Ultimately, U.S.-Israeli tensions during the latter part of the Nixon-Kissinger era did not reverse the consolidation of the relationship during the earlier phase, but did leaven it with a modicum of caution. Thus, the basic “DNA” of the American-Israeli relationship in the last few decades—characterized as it has been by abiding connections punctuated by episodes of friction—was laid down during the Nixon years. Moreover, the “conservative turn” initiated by Meir and Rabin cemented the foundations for an alliance between elements in the Israeli leadership and conservative and neoconservative forces in the United States, which has had substantial longer-term implications and which continues to this day. True, the alliance sprang in large measure from developments on the global and American scenes beyond Israel’s control, and from an atavistic distrust of the Soviet Union the Israeli leadership shared with American neoconservatives; and yet, the active role Israel played was important, and complex. Part expediency, Israeli leaders simply sought to curry favor with the Republican president. Part ideology, and somewhat paradoxically, they also chose to covertly foster Jackson-Vanik, a neoconservative cause which Nixon opposed.

The book also seeks to serve a general theoretical purpose. By closely examining the evolution of U.S.-Israel relations during the first half of the

1970s, we can not only obtain better insights into the period itself and the enduring ways that it shaped the bilateral relationship, but also gain a greater appreciation of how, more generally, emotional attachments, self-perceptions, and subjective feelings of appreciation and disappointment interact with dispassionate geostrategic assessments to produce international relations outcomes.

The Evidence

Until recently, conditions were inauspicious for a balanced assessment of the evolution of American-Israeli relations in the early 1970s. The potent mix of the controversial figure of Nixon, the sensitive Jewish dimension, and the perennial Arab-Israeli conflict lent an overly polemical cast to much of the extant literature.³ The veils of official secrecy were compounded by the acute sensitivity of issues like Israel's nuclear capability, as well as by Nixon's policy-making style. Secretive by nature, suspicious (sometimes rightfully so) of leaks, and desirous to retain presidential deniability in a policy area he deemed domestically explosive, Nixon played his Israeli policy cards very close to his chest. As National Security Council (NSC) staffer William Quandt testifies, few ever knew what the president was thinking,⁴ and sometimes, at crucial junctures, no one did.⁵ The result is that Nixon's early Israeli record has remained under-addressed in the literature.

During the last few years, a much more promising research climate has emerged. The passage of time allows for a more detached perspective and, though the record remains incomplete, recently declassified Israeli and American documentation affords an excellent basis for better understanding how Nixon's Middle East policy evolved and how Jerusalem endeavored to affect it. To date, however, studies have employed this historiographic opportunity to reconsider specific dimensions of Nixon's record rather than the comprehensive picture.⁶

The book will address this gap, drawing upon a substantial range of American, Israeli, and translated Soviet documentation. American archival collections include, for instance, Kissinger's telephone conversations and the Nixon tapes, which offer particularly telling insight into the flavor and content of the policy-making deliberations that took place between Nixon and Kissinger, as well as between Nixon, Kissinger, and third parties (such as Ambassador Rabin, Reverend Billy Graham, or Attorney General John Mitchell). The papers of the American Jewish organizations, as well as the Oral History collections at the New York Public Library, have not been sufficiently tapped by international history scholars and provide invaluable insight into intracommunity deliberations and the complex triangular

interrelationships between Jerusalem, Washington, and the American Jewish community.

As for Israeli documentation, although most of the Israeli government's deliberations are still under lock and key, the recently declassified documentation from the Prime Minister's Office combine with the papers of Meir-aide-turned-ambassador Simcha Dinitz to provide critical access to the most sensitive channel of communications between the Prime Minister's Office and the White House.

These materials are supplemented by compilations of recently declassified Soviet documents (in translation) and several interviews conducted with the former chairperson of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, as well as veterans of the clandestine Israeli organization in charge of Soviet Jewish affairs, *Nativ*. In aggregate, this documentary base opens new vistas on the most crucial research questions at hand.

Chapter Overview

This book has four substantive chapters, bound together by the illustrations each of them provides for the book's central theoretical thesis: psychological and ideological factors figured importantly in the shaping of American-Israeli relations during the Nixon years.

The first chapter, "Joining the Conservative Brotherhood," examines the forging of the American-Israeli "special relationship," focusing mainly on the evolution of Nixon's role vis-à-vis Israeli principals and American Jews. At the beginning of his presidency, Nixon leaned toward the State Department's view that regional instability benefited the Soviets, Israel's intransigence was the root cause of Soviet gains in the region, and the administration could not simply sit idly by.⁷ He valued the goal of "honorable extrication" from Vietnam so much that, as files from Nixon Presidential Materials Project reveal, he contemplated the idea of offering Moscow concessions in the Middle East (presumably in Israeli currency) in exchange for Soviet assistance in Vietnam.⁸ The idea never materialized into policy directives, partly because of his obsession with Jewish political clout.⁹ The new archival disclosures of Nixon's early ambiguous commitment to Israel reveal just how profound his shift was when, in December 1971, he dramatically raised the scale of his administration's commitment to Israel in all the crucial dimensions: financial aid, diplomatic backing, and military supplies.¹⁰

While the prevailing, geostrategic analysis identifies "Black September" 1970 as the turning point in American-Israeli relations, recent archival revelations show that Nixon's shift toward Israel was completed more than a year later and in part for different reasons; namely, Israel's

manifest support of Nixon in the contexts he valued most: Vietnam and success against political opposition at home.¹¹ These elements in the Israeli conservative turn were well attuned to Nixon's obsession with loyalty and assuaged his hitherto lingering suspicion that Israel was under the sway of his perceived domestic enemies.¹²

The next two chapters explore another foundation of the partnership between Israel and conservative American forces: the struggle for Soviet Jewry.

The second chapter, "Israel, Soviet Jewish Emigration, and Ideal politik," offers the first detailed, archival-based analysis of Israel's Soviet Jewish emigration policy during the Nixon years, with a particular emphasis on Israel's Jackson-Vanik record.¹³ There has been a debate in the literature around the questions, did the Israeli government, as contemporaneous right-wing critics charged and some scholars continue to argue, genuinely endorse a low-key stance on the Soviet Jewish emigration issue in order to avert a confrontation with Nixon,¹⁴ or would it be more accurate to assign Israel major "behind-the-scenes" responsibility for the galvanization of Jackson-Vanik forces?¹⁵ On balance, the evidentiary record supports the latter view, showing that Meir herself established a policy of official neutrality in the skirmish between the White House and Congress combined with discreet backing for Jackson-Vanik.¹⁶ Ideology played a crucial role in Israel's Soviet Jewish emigration policy, leading Jerusalem to drag its feet in response to the administration's demands that it disavow the amendment and in so doing, to put at risk a carefully cultivated relationship. Israel's leaders ran a secret and effective campaign in support of Jackson-Vanik because the amendment addressed some of their most fundamental emotional dispositions and ideological goals, which in this instance trumped the dictates of Realpolitik.

The third substantive chapter, "Kissinger, Soviet Jewish Emigration, and the Demise of Détente," shifts to the Soviet Jewish movement on the American scene. By focusing on Kissinger's failure to block Jackson-Vanik, The chapter again argues the salience of ideological and psychological factors. Kissinger failed in large part because he was not in sync with the basic ideological undercurrents of his policy environment. He was too wedded to a realist outlook and to the strategic design of detente to fully grasp the deep ideological attraction Jackson-Vanik had for Americans: it enabled America to regain the moral high ground it had lost in Vietnam¹⁷ and it appealed to two pillars of the American self-image: a "nation of immigrants" and a "redeemer nation." The contribution of Kissinger's own psychological makeup to his failure in this policy sphere is related also to another key finding emerging from the documentary record: the policy Kissinger pursued in practice was inconsistent with the perceptive guidelines for sound statecraft he had devised as a historian. He overcommitted the administration to a

single course and, in so doing, inflicted more damage to Kissinger's détente policy than was necessary.

Why did Kissinger fail to follow his theoretical insights through to their logical, real-world conclusions? He was thwarted in part by overextension and by the complications reality always presents to those seeking to implement preconceived designs. But at least as salient were more personal factors: his limited ability to adjust to unexpected and challenging decision-making environments, his difficulty listening to the views of domestic advisers and adversaries, and his growing hubris after years of power and what he perceived as foreign policy successes.¹⁸

The chapter also reconsiders, on the basis of new evidence, why Jackson-Vanik struck a responsive chord with both American Jews and the American public at large, and why the administration failed to legitimize détente with those audiences and with Israel. The evidence shows that the struggle for Soviet Jewry became, both by happenstance and design, a common rallying point for both Israel and the more conservative and neoconservative segments of American society—segments that would soon become the backbone of Reagan's domestic support—solidifying their relations in the post-October war period.¹⁹ Despite the fact that Brezhnev had warned Nixon and Kissinger about the probability of war well before it erupted and stood his ground firmly against opposition to détente within the politburo once it started,²⁰ many Americans quite naturally saw more confrontational Soviet actions—such as the massive airlift during the war and the support for the Arab oil embargo and radical Arab regimes in its aftermath²¹—as proof that Moscow could not be trusted. Conservative and neoconservative leaders and commentators—quite a few of them Jews for whom the war had given existential pause and rekindled group identity²²—argued that the conflict revealed the illusory nature of détente.²³ Meanwhile, Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy in the aftermath of war, however considerable an accomplishment, both reignited tensions with Israel²⁴ and undermined détente because of the manifest exclusion of Moscow.²⁵ Ultimately, Nixon, Kissinger, and other proponents of détente found themselves unable to prevail in the battle to preserve the domestic legitimacy of détente, their failure symbolized by the passage of Jackson-Vanik.

The concluding chapter, "Nixon's Final Months, the Legacy of the Period, and the Lessons of the Case," begins by tracing the development of American-Israeli relations in the final months of Nixon's presidency and the enduring impact of the changes that had occurred in the bilateral relationship during the early 1970s. It then elaborates at length on rich insights the case offers for students in four fields: American history, Israeli history, American-Israeli relations, and foreign policy-making and international affairs.