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Israel's Quest for Diplomatic Relations – The German-Israeli Controversy, 1955-1956

Introduction

In the history of the complex relationship between Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany, (FRG), the end of 1955 and beginning of 1956 marked a turning point. Until this period Israel had decided to defer the repeated FRG proposal, first submitted during the negotiations over reparations in 1952, to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries. But at the end of 1955, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, supported by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, decided to go ahead and establish diplomatic relations with the FRG. Among the principal reasons for this change in policy were Israel's serious diplomatic and security difficulties following the Czech-Egyptian arms deal in September 1955 and its efforts to procure weapons from the Western powers. No less significant was information about growing concern in the FRG Foreign Ministry that establishing diplomatic relations with Israel might undermine relations with the Arab states. In early 1955, the ministry had proposed setting up a consular mission in Israel. Now in an attempt to preempt a possible change in FRG policy, Israel invited the Germans to send the mission as a first step toward establishing full diplomatic relations. The FRG's decision to retract its proposal aroused severe disagreement between the two countries.

The dispute between the two countries at the end of 1955 and beginning of 1956 forms the core of this article, the aim of which is to analyze the positions of both sides against the background of their respective geopolitical situations and the complex political circumstances of the Cold War in the mid-1950s. The issues raised during those months and the policies that the two countries came to adopt in order to overcome this conflict affected their relations for nearly a decade, until Israel and the FRG finally announced the establishment of diplomatic ties in March 1965.

Israel, the FRG and Soviet Penetration of the Middle East

In the second half of 1955 the issue of diplomatic relations between Israel and the FRG aroused disagreement between two departments in the German Foreign Ministry, the Regional Department (Länderabteilung) and the Political Department (Politische Abteilung). The background was the idea that had been discussed since the beginning of the year by German and Israeli officials to establish a FRG consular mission in Israel, which both Germans

and Israelis viewed as an important step toward the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

It should be noted that following the signing of the reparations agreement (Luxembourg Agreement) in September 1952, the German government had supported the immediate establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The idea was strongly advocated by some leading officials of Israel's Foreign Ministry. Moshe Sharett, however, who served from December 1953 to November 1955 both as prime minister and foreign minister, did not accept this view; rather he favored slow and measured progress toward political relations with Germany.¹

Israel's decision at the end of 1955 to accelerate negotiations with the FRG toward launching the consular mission, as well as the debate within the German Foreign Ministry in fall 1955, were affected to a large extent by the arms deal between Czechoslovakia and Egypt which Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser announced on September 27, 1955. Israel's leaders were shocked by the news, since it meant a fundamental alteration in the balance of arms in the Middle East, which would enhance Nasser's efforts to achieve hegemony in the region and intensify his aggression against Israel. Israeli leaders, notably Ben-Gurion – who in February 1955 returned to the government as minister of defense and in November, following a general election, returned to his former post as prime minister – strongly believed that Nasser was looking for a »second round,« following the 1948 war. He argued that Nasser was planning to destroy Israel and that if the arms balance was not restored he might launch a war as soon as his army had absorbed the new weapons and was skilled enough to use them. The situation escalated further following Nasser's decision to intensify the blockade of Tiran and to form a joint Egyptian-Syrian command. The bulk of Israeli diplomatic efforts were focused on trying to convince the Western powers to sell high-quality weapons to Israel so that the arms balance would be restored. Simultaneously, a preemptive strike against Egypt was proposed by the IDF command, and especially its chief of staff, Moshe Dayan.²

While Israel worried about losing its deterrent power, the Western powers were mainly concerned with the Soviet ambition to penetrate the Middle East. It was clear that the arms deal was carried out in accordance with the Soviet Union's plan to enhance its influence there.³ Facing this new breach in their efforts to contain Soviet expansion, the United States and Great Britain

- 1 Roni Stauber, The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Debate over the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with Germany 1953-1955, in: *Yad Vashem Studies* 37/2 (2009), 9-51.
- 2 Mordechai Bar-On, *The Gates of Gaza: Israel's Road to Suez and Back, 1955-1957*, New York 1994, 1-24.
- 3 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, New York 1994, 523; Gustav Schmidt, *Die Auswirkungen der internationalen Vorgänge 1956 auf die Strukturen des Kalten Krieges*, in: Winfried Heinemann/Norbert Theodor Wiggershaus (eds.), *Das internationale*

tried to conciliate Nasser. This policy was based on the assumption that meeting some of Egypt's urgent economic and political needs might convince Nasser to support the West. This conciliatory approach toward Egypt had a considerable impact on the refusal of the Eisenhower administration to either equip Israel with quality weapons or to provide it with security guarantees.⁴

Moreover, Israel was required by both the Americans and the British to make territorial concessions in the southern Negev – the Alpha Plan, aimed at creating a land bridge between Jordan and Egypt – which it flatly refused to do. The pressure on Israel resulted from the American and British belief that the Arab-Israeli conflict was a major obstacle to their chief goal of creating a regional security system.

In the first half of the 1950s, diplomatic activity of the FRG, which won full sovereignty only in the spring of 1955, was focused on fundamental issues relating to its very existence as part of the Western world – a consequence of the unsettled inter-bloc dispute regarding the future of Germany as a divided country. Its leaders and foreign-policy makers were dealing with crucial issues such as the security of Western Europe vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and its satellites, agreement over the Saar province, rapprochement with France, admission to NATO, rearmament, creation of the West European Union and the country's complex relations with the US.⁵

Although the FRG was not directly involved in the intensive diplomatic activity of the Western powers in the Middle East, its leaders shared their deep concern about Soviet efforts to expand its influence in the region. Moreover, leading German diplomats pointed to the possible impact on the FRG's efforts to prevent any recognition on the part of the international community of the division of Germany as a permanent geopolitical fact and its persistent campaign to delegitimize and completely isolate its communist neighbor, the

Krisenjahr 1956: Polen, Ungarn, Suez. Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte, Munich 1999, 639f.

- 4 This position was presented by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in his meeting with Sharett in late October 1955. He declined Israeli requests for quality weapons, other than those for defensive purposes, and any formal guarantees for Israel's security. See John Foster Dulles State Department Microfilm, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University (hereafter Dulles Archive), MCO74/57. On the Eisenhower administration's policy toward the Middle East conflict in 1953-1956, see Abraham Ben-Zvi, *Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Origins of the American-Israel Alliance*, New York 1998, 19-57.
- 5 Dennis L. Bark/David R. Gress, *A History of West Germany*, vol. 1, *From Shadow to Substance, 1945-1963*, Oxford and Cambridge 1989, 324-334; Peter Eisenmann, *Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Krefeld 1982, 41-60, 67; Reiner Pommerin, *The United States and the Armament of the Federal Republic of Germany*, in: idem (ed.), *The American Impact on Postwar Germany*, Oxford 1997, 15-33; Anthony Glees, *The British and Germans: From Enemies to Partners*, in: Dirk Verheyen/Christian Soe (eds.), *The Germans and Their Neighbors*, Boulder, CO and Oxford 1993, 45.

German Democratic Republic (GDR). FRG leaders, and first and foremost Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, insisted that East Germany was Soviet-occupied territory in which 17 million Germans were being forced to live against their will. It was emphasized that only the democratically elected West German government was entitled to represent the German people (*Alleinvertretungsanspruch*).⁶

The FRG Foreign Ministry (Auswärtiges Amt) was established officially in March 1951 with the approval of the Western allies. FRG ambassadors were appointed almost immediately in Western capitals, and not long afterwards, in 1952, they were appointed to Arab countries as well.⁷ The German ambassadors in Arab countries played an important role in the debate that took place in 1955 within the Foreign Ministry in regard to the possible impact of a German decision to establish diplomatic relations with Israel on the FRG's ties with Arab states. Generally, they opposed the idea, claiming that it would gravely affect those relations. It was emphasized that despite the deep disagreement with regard to the Luxembourg Agreement and Arab efforts to prevent its ratification by the Bundestag at the beginning of 1953, relations between the FRG and the Arab world had been reinforced in the first half of the 1950s, particularly in the economic sphere.⁸

In mid-July 1955, based on the evaluations of ambassadors to Arab states, as well as discussions with Arab ambassadors in Bonn, Hermann Voigt, director of the Middle East division (Referat Vorderer Orient),⁹ a subdivision of the Regional Department, warned that the establishment of a German dip-

6 A discussion summary prepared by Abteilung 3 of the meeting of the heads of the FRG Foreign Ministry with Shinnar, May 1956, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (hereafter PA/AA), B12/1018; for the FRG diplomatic campaign to delegitimize the GDR in the 1950s, see William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949-1969*, Chapel Hill, NC 2003, 1-97.

7 Sven Olaf Berggötz, *Nahostpolitik in der Ära Adenauer. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen 1949-1963*, Düsseldorf 1998, 98; British Ambassador to Cairo Ralph Stevenson to the Foreign Office in London, November 1, 1952, Public Record Office (PRO), FO 371/ C10316/1.

8 Already in July 1955 German ambassadors worldwide were asked to predict possible reactions in the countries where they served to the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. The objection of ambassadors in Arab countries to this diplomatic move was in contrast to the general opinion of other German representatives around the world, who predicted that official relations with Israel would contribute to the positive image of the FRG. Yeshayahu A. Jelinek, *Deutschland und Israel 1945-1965. Ein neurotisches Verhältnis*, Munich 2004, 266. See also examples of letters of German ambassadors in Arab countries concerning relations with Israel in: idem, *Zwischen Moral und Realpolitik. Deutsch-israelische Beziehungen 1945-1965. Eine Dokumentensammlung*, Gerlingen 1997, 339-350.

9 On this subdivision, which in 1958 changed its name to Referat Naher Osten, see Berggötz, *Nahostpolitik in der Ära Adenauer* (Anm. 7), 95-104; Niels Hansen, *Aus dem Schatten der Katastrophe*, Düsseldorf 2002, 402.

lomatic mission in Israel would lead to an extremely angry Arab reaction. Voigt had been born in Saron, a Templar colony near Jaffa, and had studied as a child in Haifa. In the internal correspondence of the Israeli Foreign Ministry he was referred to as an »unmistakable enemy of the Jewish People.«¹⁰ The Middle East division's analysis referred to potential damage to both the FRG's political status in the Middle East and to the extensive economic investment of German entrepreneurs in the region. As in the struggle waged by the Arabs against the reparations agreement in 1952-53, it was emphasized that other Western countries such as Britain and France would exploit the anger toward Germany to increase their economic activity in the region.¹¹

A contrary position in regard to diplomatic relations with Israel was presented by the Political Department of the Foreign Ministry. In a memorandum composed by Abraham Frowein, deputy head of the department, in early December 1955, it was claimed that in light of the growing tension between Israel and its neighbors and in view of Adenauer's statements since the signing of the Luxembourg Agreement that the FRG was interested in diplomatic relations, German refusal to move in that direction could be interpreted as taking sides in favor of the Arabs and would significantly affect the trust that was developing between Israel and the FRG.¹²

Due to the FRG's fear of Soviet expansion to the Middle East and the resulting more favorable attitude of Arab countries toward the GDR, the position of those who proposed postponing the establishment of official relations with Israel became dominant. It was during these months, toward the end of 1955 and beginning of 1956, following Adenauer's historic visit to Moscow, that the campaign to delegitimize and isolate East Germany reached a peak, manifested notably in the Hallstein Doctrine. This stipulated that establishing diplomatic relations with the GDR, that is, breaking the FRG's diplomatic blockade, would be answered with harsh diplomatic measures, including, possibly, the severance of diplomatic relations.¹³

10 Leo Cohn to Jakob Herzog, June 15, 1958, Israel State Archives (hereafter ISA), MFA-7939/1-A. In his memoir the Israeli ambassador to the FRG, Yohanan Meroz, mistakenly wrote that Voigt had served as the last consul of Nazi Germany in Jerusalem. Hansen clarifies this error and discusses the opposing assessments of researchers regarding the origins and the intensity of the unfavorable attitude of Voigt and members of his department – »die Arabisten« – toward Israel and its impact on FRG policy. Hansen, *Aus dem Schatten der Katastrophe* (fn. 9), 403.

11 Abteilung 3, Aufnahme diplomatischer Beziehung zu Israel, July 19, 1955, PA/AA, B12/1025.

12 Abteilung 2, Aufnahme diplomatischer Beziehung zu Israel, December 3, 1955, PA/AA, B12/1025.

13 The doctrine had been formulated by Wilhelm Grewe, the head of the Political Department. It won the support of Foreign Minister Heinrich von Brentano and especially of Secretary of State Walter Hallstein. In 1958 a German journalist named it the Grewe-Hallstein doctrine. He did not name it after Adenauer or even

Many in the FRG, among them politicians mainly from the opposition parties, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Liberals (FDP), as well as political columnists, criticized the Hallstein Doctrine as being too rigid, especially as it prevented any progress toward establishing diplomatic relations with East European countries. The debate culminated at the end of 1957 when the FRG cabinet, headed by Adenauer, broke off diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia in retaliation for its decision to establish diplomatic relations with East Germany.¹⁴

Another major fault of the Hallstein Doctrine lay in the fact that it exposed the FRG to »political blackmail,« as determined by an internal State Department document which analyzed in depth the FRG's Middle East policy in general and its relations with Egypt in particular.¹⁵ The Arabs threatened FRG diplomats that the establishment of official relations with Israel would be answered immediately by the institution of diplomatic relations with East Germany. In order not to diminish the credibility of its threat and the overall sense of its campaign to isolate the GDR, the FRG would have to sever its relations with Arab states, a move that would definitely harm its political and economic status in the Middle East.

As a result of these complex diplomatic considerations, toward the spring of 1956 FRG policy makers came to the conclusion that establishing diplomatic relations with Israel could significantly harm FRG interests. The German Foreign Ministry thus rejected the idea of ~~setting up~~ a German ~~consular~~

Brentano, like the Eisenhower Doctrine, as an expression of criticism and disrespect. Later, for the sake of brevity the press began to name it only after Hallstein, who was known as an ardent supporter of the doctrine. However by applying the doctrine, the FRG Foreign Ministry was able to accomplish one the main goals set by the leadership: preventing international recognition of East Germany. During Adenauer's term as chancellor, until 1963, besides East European countries that had long since recognized the GDR, only two other countries established diplomatic relations with the GDR: Yugoslavia in 1957 and Cuba in 1961. None of the other Western or nonaligned countries came out strongly against the FRG, though many were angered by West German pressure and wished to establish relations with East Germany. Gray, *Germany's Cold War* (fn. 6), 81-86; Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Konrad Adenauer: A German Politician and Statesman in a Period of War, Revolution and Reconstruction*, *Providence, RI 1997*.³⁰ Daniel Kosthorst, *Brentano und die deutsche Einheit. Die Deutschland- und Ostpolitik des Außenministers im Kabinett Adenauer 1955-1961 (= Forschungen und Quellen zur Zeitgeschichte 26)*, Düsseldorf 1993, 88-93.

14 Schwarz, *Adenauer* (fn. 13), 306-307; Gray, *Germany's Cold War* (fn. 6), 81-86; Kosthorst, *Brentano* (fn. 13), 191-203.

15 »Situation involved elements of blackmail.« Evaluation paper of the US Embassy in Bonn on German policy in the Middle East, July 29, 1957, US National Archives, College Park, 662A.80/7-2957.

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mission which, like the Israeli Cologne-based purchasing mission, would be granted the right to issue visas.¹⁶

The German-Israeli Dispute

It should be noted that it was not without considerable hesitation that Foreign Minister Heinrich von Brentano and particularly Adenauer rejected the idea of setting up a consular mission in Israel as the first step toward the establishment of full diplomatic relations. Both viewed diplomatic relations with Israel as an essential element in what they hoped would lead to a rapprochement between Jews and Germans, and a definitive expression of the country's complete disconnection from Germany's Nazi past.¹⁷

German and Israeli documentation, protocols of meetings as well as correspondence, reveals the gradual process in which opinion against establishing diplomatic relations with Israel was adopted by the FRG leadership. At a meeting in late December with Nahum Goldmann, acting president of the World Jewish Congress, Brentano expressed his support for the idea of setting up a consular mission in Israel, despite the opposition of senior officials in his office. Based on Goldmann's positive report, Sharett decided to ask the Israeli government to vote in favor of this move.¹⁸ A few weeks later, however, the German foreign minister retracted his promise. During a conversation in late January with Felix Shinnar, head of Israel's purchasing mission, it became clear that Brentano accepted the line supported by a growing number of high officials of the FRG Foreign Ministry who argued that establishing a consular mission in Israel at that point would cause significant damage to the FRG's position in the Middle East.¹⁹

Israel's Foreign Ministry reacted furiously to this new turn in events. The message delivered by Shinnar to the German Foreign Ministry and by Goldmann to Adenauer was that this position would undoubtedly arouse much anger among the Jewish public worldwide. Both Goldmann and Sharett were well aware of Adenauer's sensitivity to American public opinion in general and to that of American Jews in particular.²⁰ While Goldmann managed contacts with the Germans independently and was regarded by them as the main

16 On the Cologne-based Israeli purchasing mission, its functions and structure see Yeshayahu Jelinek, Purchasing Mission and Israel Economy, in: *Journal of Israeli History* 18/2-3 (1977), 191-209.

17 Brentano to Erich Ollenhauer, chairman of the SPD, March 1957, PA/AA, B12/1025.

18 Berggötz, Nahostpolitik in der Ära Adenauer (Anm. 7), 85; Moshe Sharett, Personal Diary, Tel Aviv 1978, vol. 5, 1312-1313 [Hebrew].

19 Shinnar to Sharett, January 31, 1956; Goldman to Sharett, February, 13, 1956, ISA, MFA, 304/4.

20 Goldmann to Sharett, February 13, 1956, ISA, MFA, 304/4.

spokesman of the Jewish people, his moves in regard to the FRG were coordinated with the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

In late February-early March 1956 it seemed that the pendulum had swung back in favor of setting up the mission. This was the outcome of Israel's vigorous protests and Goldmann's efforts. Even SPD leader Erich Ollenhauer sided with Israel and at Israel's request met with Brentano. In mid-March the German foreign minister officially informed the Israeli Foreign Ministry that the government of the FRG had decided to send a consular mission to Israel. Under Israeli pressure, he also agreed to set the month of May as the date of the delegation's departure.²¹ A month later, however, following a meeting in Istanbul of FRG ambassadors in the Middle East, the pendulum swung back again. Senior FRG Foreign Ministry officials were joined by FRG ambassadors in the Middle East at a meeting chaired by Secretary of State Walter Hallstein. The ambassadors reinforced the opinion already dominant among Foreign Ministry officials that the establishment of relations with Israel could dramatically harm diplomatic as well as trade ties with Arab countries. In addition, it was again forcefully argued that in retaliation the Arabs would no doubt establish diplomatic relations with East Germany, a move that would strengthen the position of its patron, the Soviet Union, in the Middle East. This position was presented after the meeting to Adenauer and won his full support.²²

Nasser well understood that the FRG's struggle against any political recognition of its communist neighbor would make it vulnerable to political blackmail. In a public speech in April 1956, he declared that despite his support in principle for the idea of German reunification, he would not hesitate to recognize East Germany if the FRG established diplomatic relations with Israel. Adenauer heard similar threats from Anwar El Sadat, a leading member of Nasser's regime, who visited the FRG in May 1956. During the Istanbul meeting, Egypt was recognized as a key country in regard to relations with the GDR. German diplomats estimated that Egypt's decision to recognize the GDR would encourage other Arab countries to act in a similar manner.²³

As noted above, the issue of establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and the FRG aroused a dispute between two major departments in the German Foreign Ministry, particularly toward the end of 1955. Following the ambassadors' meeting in Istanbul and the institution of the Hallstein Doctrine as a central pillar of German foreign policy, there was growing consensus among FRG policy makers that it should postpone the dispatch of the mission indefinitely and thus avoid even the lowest tier of diplomatic

21 Brentano to Shinnar, March 14, 1956, ISA, MFA, 247/11.

22 Shinnar to Sharett, May 14, 1956, MFA, 304/4; Jelinek, *Deutschland und Israel* (fn. 8), 287f.

23 Hannfried von Hindenburg, *Demonstrating Reconciliation*, New York 2007, 49.

relations with Israel. A clear expression of this agreement was the participation of both Wilhelm Grewe, head of the Political Department, and Freiherr von Welck, head of the Regional Department, alongside Hallstein in a meeting with Shinnar, in which the Germans' final decision not to send the mission was presented.²⁴ The head of the German Foreign Ministry argued that a linkage existed between Arab recognition of the GDR and discussions on the future of Germany between the Western powers and the Soviets.²⁵ Indeed, the stumbling block to any progress toward official relations between Israel and Germany could be understood only from the broad perspective of relations between East and West and the »problem of Germany.«

Since the establishment of the FRG in 1949, Adenauer had placed the concept of *Westbindung* at the center of FRG foreign policy. This meant complete integration of the FRG in the Western world as a central pillar of the new Europe and of NATO. According to Adenauer and the CDU/CSU ruling fraction, the establishment of the FRG as a strong, stable democratic society, both economically and militarily, backed by an uncompromising Western world, was a necessary condition for the unification of Germany as a democratic country. FRG foreign policy worked to block any agreement with the Soviet Union that could undermine that policy.²⁶

The negotiations held in Geneva in the second half of 1955 between the Western powers and the Soviets concerning the so-called German Question, as well as other issues – reduction of the armed forces and arms limitation in Europe – did not bear fruit. However, Adenauer continued to be troubled by a possible agreement between the Western powers and the Soviet Union at the expense of the FRG, due to a more relaxed atmosphere created between the two blocs following the death of Stalin and the conversations and meetings held in 1955 between the leaders and foreign ministers of the superpowers.²⁷ As a result, toward the end of 1955 and the first half of 1956, FRG policy makers carefully examined any statement made by politicians and high-ranking officials, mainly in the US, as well as in France and the UK, who advocated reaching a compromise with the Soviet Union. Adenauer repeat-

24 Shinnar to Sharett, May 14, 1956, MFA, 304/4.

25 Ibid.

26 FRG concern lest an agreement with the Soviets lead to a reduction of American and British army units stationed in Germany and to the formation of demilitarized zones without an overall agreement on German reunification, was expressed at a meeting of Foreign Minister Brentano with the foreign ministers of the US, Britain and France shortly before the meeting of the Western and Soviet foreign ministers in Geneva at the end of 1955. Protocol of the meeting in the French embassy, December 1, 1955, Dulles Archive, MC074/31.

27 See for example Dulles' declaration on July 26, 1955; North Atlantic Military Committee, October 12, 1955, Dulles Archive, MC074/30; Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (fn. 3), 517.

edly claimed that the Soviets were trying to mislead the West with their »peace offensive.«²⁸

West German concern about a possible agreement between West and East that would include Western consent to waive the FRG's demand for a united and democratic Germany had a great influence on the decision to reject any formal step toward establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. Arab recognition of the GDR, which might encourage other countries, particularly from the nonaligned group, to act in the same manner, could strengthen the political and economic position of the GDR.²⁹ In addition, it might help the Soviets to convince the Western powers to accept the existence of the GDR as a permanent and legitimate geopolitical entity.³⁰ In his conversation with Israeli Ambassador Eliyahu Sasson during his visit to Rome, Brentano named a number of countries – Yugoslavia, Finland, Sweden, India, Indonesia, Austria and Switzerland – that wished, according to information obtained by the FRG Foreign Ministry, to establish relations with the GDR and might act on the basis of the Arab precedent.³¹

In their messages to the Israeli leadership, the heads of the FRG Foreign Ministry repeatedly claimed that not only were West German interests being taken into consideration but those of the West in general. The establishment of relations between the Arab countries and the GDR would increase the influence of the Soviets in the Middle East, a process that Israel was following with great concern, especially after the September 1955 arms deal between Egypt and Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, continuing friendly relations between the FRG and Arab states might aid Western efforts to block Soviet penetration of the Middle East.³¹

Sharett and the heads of Israel's Foreign Ministry rejected the German arguments decisively. They regarded the FRG decision to postpone ~~the opening of the consular mission~~ as a severe blow to Israeli diplomacy and a victory to the Arabs since the FRG had virtually »surrender[ed] to unbridled Arab blackmail,« to quote Sharett.³² The dispute between Israel and the FRG in regard to the ~~consular~~ mission occurred when tensions between Israel and its neighbors, especially Egypt, had increased considerably. Thus, the angry Israeli response to the new FRG policy appeared to have partly resulted from

28 Konrad Adenauer, *Erinnerungen 1955-1959*, Stuttgart 1967, 156. In order to prevent any intention to invite representatives of the GDR to the Geneva conference in 1955, the FRG refused the invitation of the Western powers to join talks with the Soviets.

29 Eliyahu Sasson, Rome, to the head of the Western division of Israel's Foreign Ministry, Jerusalem, July 5, 1956, ISA, MFA 304/63.

30 Schmidt, *Die Auswirkungen der internationalen Vorgänge* (fn. 3), 648.

31 Shinnar to Sharett, May 14, 1956, ISA, MFA 304/4. A discussion summary prepared by Abteilung 3 of the meeting of the heads of the FRG Foreign Ministry with Shinnar, May 1956, PA/AAB, B12/1018.

32 Baruch Gilad (ed.), *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel*, Jerusalem 2008, vol. 11, 174 [Hebrew].

the difficult political and security situation that Israel found itself in at the end of 1955 and the first half of 1956. Fear of an Egyptian military buildup and Western appeasement of Nasser increased the sense of threat and isolation among the Israeli leadership and public.³³

Arms procurement from the US was Israel's main concern. At the end of 1955 Sharett led a major effort to persuade the Americans to supply arms to Israel. If Israel received massive supplies of weapons to balance the quantities of weapons transferred to Egypt as part of the Czech arms deal, Sharett hoped to eliminate the need for a preemptive war, for which IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan was pushing. Despite all his efforts Sharett failed, however, to convince the Americans, who were concerned about an escalation in the arms race in the Middle East and growing Soviet intervention in the region, to supply large quantities of weapons to Israel. This failure of the Israeli foreign minister, which was also the beginning of the end of his political career, occurred at about the same time as the German decision to postpone the idea of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. Both affairs had begun at the end of 1955 and reached a climax in the spring of 1956. However, the FRG's position in the West was strengthening and it was considered a close ally of the US. In a conversation with senior officials in the Israeli Foreign Ministry at the end of 1955, prior to the dispute over the consular delegation, Sharett expressed his hope that the FRG would become an ally of Israel, namely that its growing influence in Europe and its special relationship with the United States would be an advantage for Israel. His position was shared by all senior officials in the ministry and Israeli representatives in Europe.³⁴

When analyzing Sharett's extremely angry response to the FRG's new policy, as expressed, for example, in his correspondence with Shinnar, the personal aspect should also be taken into account. It reflected deep disappointment that the policy he had led since the signing of the Luxembourg Agreement – slow and measured progress toward political relations between Israel and the FRG – had failed. This line was based on the assumption that the FRG considered ties with Israel a vital element in its effort to demonstrate its complete severance from its Nazi past and was willing to conform to the pace determined by Israel in the path toward the expected rapprochement. Moreover, the FRG's refusal to establish diplomatic relations was a severe blow to the reputation of the foreign minister during the most critical period of his political career. He struggled, but he was eventually abandoned by his

33 On the tense atmosphere in Israel in the autumn 1955 following the arms deal and the fedayeen infiltrations, see Bar-On, *The Gates of Gaza* (fn. 2), 178f.

34 Sharett, *Personal Diary* (fn. 18), vol. 5, 1261; Jakob Tzur, *Paris Diary*, Tel Aviv 1968, 197 [Hebrew].

colleagues both in the government and in Israel's ruling party (Mapai), who joined the militaristic line led by Dayan and supported by Ben-Gurion.³⁵

Following instructions from Jerusalem, Israeli Foreign Ministry officials and delegates expressed profound disappointment and anger when they met their German counterparts, but protests were restricted mainly to the diplomatic level. The Foreign Ministry was careful not to exacerbate the conflict with the FRG. It seems that the fear of harming implementation of the reparations agreement was the major cause of extreme Israeli caution. Three years had passed since the signing of the agreement. The Germans were carrying it out to the letter, and occasionally even *ex gratia*. In addition, in 1955 Shinnar managed to sign an important economic agreement with the FRG Federal Ministry of Finance, according to which Israel would receive annually 40 million marks at very low interest as interim financing on account of the reparations allocation for the following year. Moreover, in accordance with the Luxembourg Agreement, in June 1956 the Bundestag approved a government initiative to expand the Federal Compensation Law (*Bundesentschädigungsgesetz*). Based on calculations made in Israel, 450 million dollars would be allocated as compensation to victims of the Nazi regime, and 100 million dollars would be given to Israeli citizens over the next five years. »I don't know whether I should explain to the people sitting around this table what an additional income of 20 million dollars per year means, particularly if we consider that the US grant won't be more than 30 million dollars,« said Sharett at a government meeting held in January 1956.³⁶

A salient example of Israel's decision to avoid overt confrontation with the FRG was its disapproval of the Social Democrats' intention to publicly criticize the government for its policy regarding the consular mission. »It is against our interests to become a contentious issue between the government and the opposition. We must do whatever we can prevent it. It would be a sad situation and politically disastrous if relations between Israel and Germany would cause a conflict between the government and the opposition,« wrote the heads of Israel's Foreign Ministry to the Israeli mission in Cologne.³⁷ In addition, the Israeli government did not rescind some fundamental decisions intended to improve relations with the FRG that had been taken before the

35 Motti Golani, *Israel in Search of a War: The Sinai Campaign, 1955-1956*, Brighton 1998, 2 f., 22 ff.; Uri Bialer, *Top Hat, Tuxedo and Cannons: Israeli Foreign Policy from 1948 to 1956*, in: *Israel Studies* 7/1 (2002), 10-13.

36 Minutes of the Israeli government meeting on January 8, 1956, stored in the ISA library.

37 Discussion in the Israeli Foreign Ministry with the participation of the foreign minister and the general director, May 17, 1956, ISA, MFA, 304/4; Ilzar to Anug, July 2, 1956, ISA, MFA, 304/9. These sources contradict Shlomo Shafir's claim that Israel tried to mobilize the SPD against the government but was blocked by SPD leader Erich Ollenhauer. Shlomo Shafir, *An Outstretched Hand*, Tel Aviv 1986, 98 [Hebrew].

current dispute. These included the decision to allow Israeli missions to international committees to vote on issues relating to the FRG instead of automatically abstaining, as was the custom until then,³⁸ and the decision taken at a cabinet meeting in January 1956 to cancel the restriction on travel to Germany that appeared in Israeli passports.³⁹

Israel's response to the West German refusal to establish a ~~consular mission~~ was one of the last issues handled by Sharett. In June 1956, twenty-three years after he had become head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency and laid the foundations for Israel's Foreign Ministry, Sharett, who opposed the idea of war against Egypt that Ben-Gurion was now considering very seriously, was forced to resign from the government. Shortly before, Ben-Gurion offered the post to Golda Meir, who wholeheartedly supported Ben-Gurion's security policy and was very loyal to him. In contrast to Sharett, Meir demonstrated an emotional resistance to the gradual rapprochement between Jews and Germans, although she supported the reparations agreement and all contacts with the Germans that could contribute to the strengthening of the State of Israel.⁴⁰

Conclusions

In his instructions to Shinnar on how to respond to the FRG decision to suspend the decision to ~~send a consular mission to Israel~~, which according to his diary he had spent hours drafting,⁴¹ Sharett emphasized that with regard to its policy toward Israel, the FRG was not entitled to ignore the Holocaust and its moral obligation to the Jewish people and Israel. Here the foreign minister determined a principal line of Israeli policy toward the FRG which continued even after unification: the usage of Holocaust memory in bilateral relations, including in issues related to political strategy, while emphasizing the existential threat posed to the Jewish state by its neighbors. »*Germany is not like other states* [...] particularly now that Israel sees itself more than at any other time since the end of the War of Independence as besieged. Its very existence is in danger,« wrote Sharett to Shinnar, asking him to deliver this message to the FRG foreign minister.⁴²

Toward the end of 1955, even before the beginning of the controversy over the ~~consular mission~~, Israeli diplomats expressed concern that in the wake of the FRG's success in gaining full sovereignty and its increasing political prestige in NATO and Europe, it would ascribe less importance to its relations

38 Memorandum of West Europe Department, Israeli Foreign Ministry [Summer 1956?], ISA, A/7939/1.

39 Shinnar to the deputy of West European Department, January 18, 1956, ISA, MFA, 304/9; Livne to Shinnar, April 22, 1956, ISA, NFA, 304/9.

40 Meron Medzini, Golda Meir, Tel Aviv 2008, 365 f. [Hebrew].

41 Sharett, Personal Diary (fn. 18), vol. 5, 1364.

42 Sharett to Shinnar, February 22, 1956, ISA, MFA, 304/4 (my emphasis).

with the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Following the FRG's decision not to proceed toward establishing diplomatic relations with Israel as a result of Arab threats, they argued that Israel should realize that the memory of the Holocaust and the will for rapprochement with the Jewish people did not constitute major factors in FRG diplomatic considerations and that with the implementation of the reparations agreement the Germans felt that they had fulfilled their moral obligation to the Jewish people.⁴³

As time has shown, this assessment was too simplistic. It did not capture the deep commitment of Adenauer and his close advisors to relations with Israel and ignored their conviction that rapprochement with the Jewish people was a key factor in shaping the image of the FRG as a new democratic Germany. The peculiar geopolitical situation of FRG and its complex interests in Europe and the Middle East, its inflexible policy toward the Soviet Union and the communist world and, in particular, its uncompromising campaign to delegitimize the GDR dictated a policy that entailed, among others, the decision to postpone indefinitely formal relations with Israel. The German leadership faced a difficult dilemma and, as always, political considerations gained the upper hand. For the next ten years, however, the ambivalence in FRG foreign policy continued.

In 1955-56, when Israeli officials were trying vigorously to expand the country's diplomatic relations and to break the Arab boycott, they perceived FRG policy as a blow to these efforts. At the same time, however, prominent members of Israel's Foreign Ministry strongly insisted that despite the dispute over diplomatic relations, the FRG might become one of Israel's leading diplomatic assets in the future. They stressed that Israel enjoyed great sympathy among those who influenced FRG public opinion – journalists, public figures, leading politicians, policy makers, and first and foremost Adenauer. Therefore, diplomatic activity and public relations in the FRG, utilizing sympathy toward Israel and the sense of moral obligation in the wake of the Holocaust, and at the same time avoiding open confrontation with Adenauer's government, might serve Israeli interests. Leading officials in the ministry's West European Department also determined that the FRG would increase its economic support in an attempt to solve the contradiction between its wish to deepen its relations with Israel and its inability to establish official relations. This highly accurate assumption would be adopted in the coming years by Ben-Gurion and would become a central component in his »German policy,« which was extended to military cooperation as well.

43 A discussion in the Israeli Foreign Ministry, May 17, 1956, ISA, MFA, 304/4.

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