

Uri Bialer. *Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone.* Perspectives on Israel Studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. 370 pp. \$48.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04621-5.



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“A Nation Like Any Other?” or, How Pragmatism Has Defined Israeli Foreign Policy

The normalization agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and, most recently, Sudan, have left the scholarly community largely underwhelmed. To quote Paul Scham, a scholar at the Middle East Institute and the director of the Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies at the University of Maryland, these “farcical treaties” “simply made official what everyone who cares about these matters knew had been going on for years, namely extensive intelligence and military cooperation directed at the common enemy, Iran.” Scham further emphasizes that unlike previous recognition treaties with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, these new agreements are with Arab countries that “had never fought Israel and had no bilateral issues with it at all.” Scham is right to point out that these treaties do nothing to advance Israel’s peace with the Palestinians; rather, they “simply highlight the current stalemate and the lack of any expectations of progress.”[1] Yet these seemingly “farcical treaties” are also

products of principles that have characterized Israel’s foreign policy since the founding of the state and are rooted in Jewish and Zionist diplomacy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In *Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone*, Uri Bialer contends that American scholars, especially political scientists, have focused almost exclusively on the Arab-Israeli conflict and hence minimized other existential objectives that have preoccupied Israeli foreign policy from 1948 to the 1990s. Instead, Bialer identifies Israel’s struggle “to build a state and to ensure its existence; its political, economic, and social fortitude; and its security” as the “supreme goal” of Israeli foreign policy (p. 5). While the author does not dismiss the salient issues of war, peace, justice, and morality, his main focus on pragmatic matters of state-building and efforts to end Israel’s political isolation may add an interesting albeit incomplete perspective on recent developments.

As a founder and senior researcher in the Israeli Foreign Ministry's Department of Research and Policy Planning with more than twenty-five years of experience as a reserves officer in the Strategic Planning Division of the Israel Defense Forces and a long academic career in the Department of International Relations at Hebrew University, Bialer brings a wealth of experience and training to the study of Israeli foreign policy. This book represents a summary of his findings and synthesis of the literature in a relatively young but quickly expanding field of study. Most of the scholarship only emerged in the 1990s due to Israel's long-standing secrecy and a piecemeal declassification process that provides a somewhat fragmented picture of its foreign policy. Bialer's work draws from recently declassified materials in Israel's State Archives, especially documents of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, but also fills in some of the missing pieces through Israel's various bilateral relationships and the archival information made available by other countries like the United States, Great Britain, France, or, more recently, Russia and Poland.

While his account spans the period from the early days of the state of Israel to the Oslo Accords, Bialer clearly focuses on the main principles that have guided Israeli policy throughout and can be summed up in the book's subtitle, "A People Shall Not Dwell Alone." In a direct challenge to a biblical blessing ("Behold, it is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not reckon itself among the nations," Numbers 23:9) that the nation of Israel shall dwell alone as part of God's unique plan for his people, the author charts Israel's main foreign policy objective as one of rejecting isolation in favor of being recognized as a legitimate member of the international community. Elie Podeh calls it the "Desire to Belong Syndrome"[2]—Israel's struggle to be both accepted into the community of nations at large and included in a strategic or regional alliance in specific. In fact, Bialer argues that Israel's desire to reach acceptance and recognition is a continuation of Jewish and Zionist dip-

lomacy that began in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and remains at the core of the state's identity.

Bialer divides his study into four parts to lay out his case for Israel's primary policy objective—to build a state and secure its existence. In the first part he focuses on lessons learned pre-1948 that continued to reverberate throughout the state's existence. He defines Herzlian diplomacy to advance the cause of Zionism as "tactical pragmatism" that had as its objective external political support and recognition (p. 321). Operating within the confines of Jewish existence, Jewish and Zionist diplomacy, he argues, could count on the solidarity of Jews as a nation, while at the same time having to depend existentially on others due to their lack of sovereignty. Bialer zeroes in on the issue of dependency as the *raison d'être* of Jewish diplomacy and later, Israeli foreign policy—"the need of the relatively weaker Jews to cope politically with the stronger, hostile countries surrounding them by creating a positive international predisposition toward themselves" (p. 15). In the second part the author discusses the three main goals that have shaped Israeli foreign policy to secure the state's existence: the struggle for recognition, the importation of oil, and the encouragement of *aliyah* (immigration). In the third part Bialer explores Israel's relations with France, sub-Saharan Africa, and the United States, and in the final part he traces Israel's diplomatic efforts after the Peace Treaty with Egypt in 1979. He concludes his discussion with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the failures of the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords.

Bialer emphasizes Israel's agency in charting its course in the international arena of Cold War politics, decolonization, Jewish persecution, and regional wars. He describes the young state's foreign policy as pragmatic, innovative, and secretive. Bialer's synthesis covers a lot of ground by highlighting widely covered and less-well-known policy initiatives. His chapter on Israel's economic diplomacy, in particular, discusses findings of re-

cently declassified material on the Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline and Israel's secret maneuvering to secure fuel from Iran. Bialer also highlights Israel's ingenuity when it came to Jewish immigration from countries that restricted or prohibited emigration. In order to secure *aliyah* from Eastern Bloc states between 1949 and 1961, Israel would serve as a "clandestine economic bridge" for these countries and procure prohibited goods such as industrial products and other strategic materials in exchange for Jewish immigrants (p. 144). Bialer highlights a few of the most daring immigration efforts that have only recently come to light regarding rescue operations in Syria and Poland.

Bialer's study also provides a needed corrective to an American historiography that has been disproportionately preoccupied with questions surrounding the genesis and rationale of the special relationship between the United States and Israel. The strategic partnership between the two countries has undoubtedly been at the center of both Israeli and American geopolitical calculations in the region for the past six decades, but it is all too often portrayed as a patron-client relationship, whereby Israel as the junior partner is given little agency in defining the contours of the strategic partnership. Bialer, however, asserts that in Israel's drive to obtain nuclear weapons it was "the United States, despite being a superpower" that "often failed to impose its will on little Israel" (p. 260). In fact, Israeli "acrobatic maneuvers" not only delayed the revelation of its clandestine operations at Dimona, but also fooled US inspectors long enough to make Israel's progress on its nuclear program irreversible (p. 270). Bialer does touch on the fact that the pursuit of the nuclear option sparked fierce disputes within the Israeli leadership and the scientific community, thereby illustrating that, apart from realpolitik, matters of ideology and morality also vied for the soul of Israeli identity and policy.

It is noteworthy what Bialer's account does not address in great detail. While the Arab-Israel

conflict serves as much of the backdrop to Israel's economic diplomacy, its drive for recognition, its globalist efforts to secure *aliyah* for hundreds of thousands of Jews from Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, and its determination to procure weapons, the Israeli-Palestinian situation receives little attention. The conflict with the Palestinians has not diminished Israel's focus on recognition, *aliyah*, and weapons' procurement, but it has at the same time undermined the core objective of Israel's foreign policy—which, according to Bialer, is for a people not to dwell alone—often leading to Israel's political isolation and condemnation rather than acceptance on the international stage. The unresolved conflict with the Palestinians, or as Bialer puts it, Israel's "rejection by those living in its own neighborhood" has illustrated the "depth of the problem" (p. 332).

The book's subtitle clearly highlights Bialer's emphasis on Israeli realpolitik and the constants of pragmatism in its foreign policy rather than the role of ideology and its shifting meanings in Zionist discourse. In his focus on Israel's desire for recognition and normalization, the author does not address the inherent tension in Zionist thought between the desire for the Jewish nation to be a nation like any other ("like all the nations," *ke-khol ha-goyim*) and the call for the Jewish nation to be morally and politically exceptional ("a light unto the nations," *or la-goyim*).^[3] In a recent essay for the *Journal of Israeli History*, Alexander Kaye explores the evolution of the "*or la-goyim*" concept in Zionism to highlight both the continuities as well as fluctuations in Zionist discourse, especially as it relates to Prime Minister David Ben Gurion's speeches.^[4] Ben Gurion features prominently in Bialer's emphasis on realpolitik. The discussion of the ideological or messianic components of Zionist diplomacy, however, are largely absent from his constructivist analysis of Israel's foreign policy. He does briefly touch on the inherent tension between realpolitik and what he calls "idealpolitik" (p. 320) in his epilogue, but concludes that Israel "adhered to the principle that politics is the art of the pos-

sible, while also refusing to concede on the ultimate strategic goal—to build, fortify, and protect the state (p. 322). “Idealpolitik” did trump pragmatic considerations in Israel’s pursuit of Nazi war criminals, however. Bialer notes that “the capture of Adolf Eichmann and his trial in Jerusalem in 1961 marked the first public expression of this policy,” when “Israel prioritized justice and morality over considerations of realpolitik stemming from its diplomatic relations with Argentina and its ties with that country’s large Jewish community” (p. 323).

While Bialer’s emphasis lies on Israeli realpolitik, his historical exploration of Jewish diplomacy and the struggle for recognition amid the constant of an existential threat does touch on issues of Israeli identity and self-perception. And if perception is reality, a clear separation between “realpolitik” and “idealpolitik” may be more apparent than real.

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Notes

[1]. Paul Scham, “Farcical Treaties,” Middle East Institute, October 6, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/farcical-treaties>.

[2]. Elie Podeh, “The Desire to Belong Syndrome: Israel and the Middle Eastern Defense, 1948-1954,” *Israel Studies* 4, no. 2 (1999): 121-49. “Suffering from a growing sense of insecurity and isolation in the face of Arab animosity, Israel aimed to secure Western support in order to consolidate its position in the Middle East” (p. 121).

[3]. Michael Brenner, “A State Like Any Other State or a Light unto the Nations?” *Israel Studies* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 3-10.

[4]. Alexander Kaye, “‘Or la-goyim’: From Diaspora Theology to Zionist Dogma,” *Journal of Israeli History: Politics, Society, Culture* 38, no. 1 (2020): 191-211, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13531042.2020.1782810>.

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