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Getting the Better of the Bargain: Technical Intelligence, Arms Sales, and Anglo-Israeli Relations 1967–1974

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ABSTRACT

This analysis explores the nature of Anglo-Israeli intelligence relations between 1967 and 1974, focusing in particular on how the legacy of the British mandate in Palestine, the influence of senior British diplomats, as well as wider commercial interests shaped attempts by intelligence officials on both sides to move this relationship beyond the purely functional. Whilst Israel looked to barter access to recently captured Soviet equipment for greater collaboration with the British in weapons development and arms sales, London demurred. Despite the urging of some in Whitehall, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office limited any collaboration to functional exchanges and kept them firmly in the shadows. The aftermath of the October 1973 war revealed the price paid by Britain. With Israel now dependent on Washington for the bulk of its military equipment, London's ability to exercise any influence over Tel Aviv in reaching an accommodation with its Arab neighbours diminished greatly.

Reciprocity has defined some of the closest intelligence relationships between democratic states. Not only are such relationships functional in terms of the intelligence shared and distributed but equally, shared norms, values, and even cultures that allow more junior partners to benefit exponentially inform them for the most part. They are so much more than utilitarian arrangements and, as such, have a durability, indeed longevity, which can and does survive periodic friction when political masters fall out.¹ It has often been noted, for example, that intelligence liaison and co-operation between Britain and the United States has allowed London to exercise influence in Washington's corridors of power that its otherwise diminished status as a global Power would have denied.² Equally, the 'Five Eyes' alliance, an Anglophone intelligence consortium pooling the signals and electronic capabilities of Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States is perhaps the most notable example of an intelligence alliance built on shared cultural and political norms as well as common security interests.³

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By contrast, intelligence relationships between democratic states, at best defined as transactional, receive less attention. Such relationships, whilst beneficial to the actors involved, receive definition more obviously and regularly by cost–benefit analyses and the desire of those involved to ensure that benefits accruing from the intelligence given will not be less than that of the information sought, whether in the short or medium term. Wider competing commercial or strategic hard power interests that limit the extent and intensity of co-operation can shape them, too. Equally, such arrangements are not without more abstract values, say historical experience, which can shape the nature of the interaction. This is particularly so where the legacy of violence between the actors in another era continues to exercise a pull on the memory and emotions of key decision-makers. It is often this legacy that limits intelligence sharing to the purely transactional, the grip of the ‘hand of history’ on the shoulder of the actors involved being too firm to easily shake off. This moves the debate over intelligence sharing and liaison beyond a ‘form of subcontracted intelligence collection based on barter’.⁴

One such relationship is Anglo-Israeli intelligence. Until the 1980s, historians of Anglo-Israeli relations regarded bilateral ties between London and Tel Aviv as, at best, cool. Powerful factors decided the nature of the relationship: the bloody legacy of Britain’s mandate, competing interests over the future of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and a British perception, held strongly by Foreign Office officials noted for their pro-Arab sympathies, that arms sales to Israel should not damage their perceived regional status quo and Britain’s increasingly beleaguered place in it.⁵ Despite a brief Cold War–driven flirtation in the early 1950s that Israel might offer Britain use of its military bases in any future conflict with the Soviet Union, the two states’ interests across the region remained far apart. Until the 1956 Suez crisis, such was the depth of suspicion between London and Tel Aviv that Britain drew up contingency plans for attacking Israel should the Israelis threaten to destabilise Jordan. It was one of the major British preoccupations in putting together the invasion of Egypt in that year.⁶

This raises the issue of the extent to which negative views of Israel held by many in the Foreign Office influenced Anglo-Israeli ties in other spheres, including intelligence liaison and exchange. Some files from the 1960s and 1970s relating to intelligence exchanges – particularly in the realm of electronic warfare and cyber technologies – remain closed to public scrutiny, as do similar files in Israeli archives. Those released by The National Archives in London suggest a picture, whilst partial, as rather mixed.⁷ In the immediate aftermath of the June 1967 war, British officials in the Directorate of Scientific and Technical Intelligence [DSTI], a subsidiary of the Defence Intelligence Staff [DIS], believed a closer association with a Power that had fought against and defeated foes equipped largely with Soviet bloc weaponry was in the

British national interest. With admiration for Israel's military achievements pronounced across much of Whitehall, Israeli officials, too, were keen for an exchange of technical intelligence on weapons design as well as future collaboration on research and development.⁸

However, wider concerns across government, not least relating to Anglo-Arab relations and a belief that such collaboration might upset once again a regional order still recovering from the effects of the June 1967 war, saw the renamed Foreign and Commonwealth Office [FCO] continuing to exercise a policy of highly selective engagement.⁹ For some in the field of defence intelligence, this was not only a missed intelligence opportunity but also a squandered commercial one. More broadly, it diminished Britain's ability to exercise political leverage on Tel Aviv that now looked to consolidate its newfound regional gains. The price paid by London came six years later. In the immediate aftermath of the October 1973 war, the intelligence emperor, Britain, had few clothes and very little with which to barter with an Israel by now firmly dependent upon the United States for its military and security well-being.

Until the Suez crisis, the view holds that intelligence liaison and sharing between Britain and Israel was limited. Some attributed this to the legacy of empire. Sir John Sinclair, head of MI6 – or 'C' – between 1952 and 1956, resisted the establishment of formal intelligence liaison precisely because his 'prejudices born from the brutality of the Palestinian era were unassailable'.¹⁰ Indeed, soon after the establishment of Israel in 1948, the first MI6 officer sent to Tel Aviv incognito, Nigel Clive, had his cover blown soon after his arrival: he was quickly withdrawn. A series of MI6 officers, some of them women, went to Israel having been 'declared' to their hosts throughout the 1950s.¹¹

The immediate run up to the Suez crisis saw some of this antipathy dissipate. Foreign Office officials largely opted to maintain clear diplomatic water from their Israeli counterparts, but a maverick group of senior MI6 officers led by George Young, deputy director for Middle East operations, saw closer ties with the Israeli secret intelligence service, Mossad, as part of a wider regional strategy to unseat President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. Sinclair, it seems, failed to exercise effective control over Young, who admitted to ignoring his superior's orders on the 'working level'.¹² Young established firm relations with Isser Harel, his Israeli counterpart, but it remains unclear if this intelligence relationship had any direct bearing on military plans surrounding the Anglo-French invasion of the Suez Canal zone, Operation Musketeer, on 31 October 1956. Britain's intelligence appreciation of Israeli military capabilities certainly left London in no doubt that the Israel Defence Forces [IDF] would rout Egyptian forces in Sinai. This assessment by Britain's Joint Intelligence Committee [JIC], however, found basis largely on careful analysis of open-source information, rather than any direct intelligence liaison with the IDF as to their actual military proficiency.¹³

It was not until Sinclair resigned in the aftermath of the Suez invasion and replaced by Sir Dick White that liaison with Israeli intelligence was put on a firmer footing.¹⁴ The siren-like call of Arab nationalism threatened both British and Israeli interests across the Middle East, not least in the Arabian Peninsula where, from 1957 onwards, Britain looked to construct a new edifice, the Federation of South Arabia, which would protect its military base in Aden. Equally, local conditions allowed the Egyptians to exploit anti-colonial sentiment, the appeal that Nasser carried across the airwaves via cheaply made transistor radios that amplified the seductive appeal of Arab nationalism across the Middle East.

Most in the Foreign Office wanted to work with, rather than against, Nasser and Arab nationalism and felt the failure to do so undermined British power and influence in the region.¹⁵ Indeed, White regarded those mainly on the right wing of the governing Conservative Party, advocating a continued British presence in Aden and South Arabia, as being 'motivated by a nostalgia for lost causes' who wished to exact revenge against Nasser for the humiliation of Suez.¹⁶ Equally, Foreign Office pro-Arab bias had long shaped the scope and scale of British arms sales to Israel. In 1953 despite a previous agreement to do so, London vacillated over the sale of 30 Centurion tanks to Tel Aviv, using the Israeli retaliatory action against the West Bank village of Kibya as the pretext for rejecting the request. The underlying reason, however, was London's treaty obligations to Amman: why supply British tanks for possible use against British troops. A similar request made by Shimon Peres, director general of Israel's Defence Ministry, was also turned down; London again cited concerns about upsetting the military balance *vis-à-vis* Jordan, although Israel's main military threat remained Egypt.¹⁷ Only in 1958 – following the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy in Iraq – did Britain relent in its arms policy to Israel and release the Centurion tanks. Even then, the Foreign Office ultimately decided the scale and scope of these sales, contingent on Israel's relations with Jordan and Tel Aviv remaining discreet about the scope and scale of its tank purchases from Britain.¹⁸

The case of Anglo-Israeli co-operation on 'Operation Mango' – a series of covert supply drops by the Israeli Air Force to Royalist tribesman in north Yemen fighting the Egyptian-backed government with the help of a British-led mercenary organisation – is a case in point. Even here, however, the British were semi-detached. The operation, for London at least, was largely a private initiative that used former British Special Forces as the link to Mossad. MI6 undoubtedly remained in the loop about what was being planned – one British mercenary, Colonel David Smiley, reported intermittently to MI6 – but it was an arrangement that appeared to suit all concerned. London saw benefits in turning a 'blind eye' to an operation it felt protected British interests in Aden; Israel equally saw gains in bleeding an Egyptian army in Yemen that by 1965 saw 60,000 of its troops bogged down fighting an unwinnable war.¹⁹

Useful intelligence emerged, too. Some British mercenaries reported on the performance of Soviet-built Egyptian aircraft to both London and Tel Aviv, whilst soil samples from villages subjected to chemical weapons attack – mainly bombs containing mustard, chlorine, or phosgene gas – went to the Israelis for analysis. The impact of the mercenary operation on Egypt's later combat performance in the June 1967 war remains difficult to gauge, although according to Moshe Dayan, a former Israeli chief of staff, the collapse of the Egyptian army in Sinai was in no small measure due to the erosion of its combat capabilities in the mountains of Yemen.²⁰

The battering Egypt's army endured in Yemen largely informed British intelligence analysis of the likely outcome of the conflict two years before its outbreak. In March 1965, charged with assessing all-source intelligence on given targets and distributing this to the relevant consumers across Whitehall, the JIC issued a detailed report that looked at the military balance between Israel and its Arab neighbours. The report has since been subject to a detailed historical analysis, which whilst noting several inaccuracies – not least in terms of Israel's force structure and the tendency of the report to underplay efficiency and quality in determining combat power – it nonetheless validated the core finding of the document: in any war, the Jewish state would emerge triumphant. Israel, the report argued, was able to realise its total combat power more quickly and bring it to bear more effectively than any combination of the surrounding Arab states.

The JIC assessment derived from collecting, collating, and analysing – three stages of the traditional intelligence cycle – open-source intelligence material in reaching its conclusions. The errors in assessing relative force strengths aside, the report's accuracy highlighted an enduring truth about intelligence:

In order correctly to assess the probable course of action by the assessment's subject, one is not compelled to first penetrate decision-making circles, not to employ elite spies, not to develop extraordinary means of collection It is apparently sufficient for intelligence services to be properly familiar with the strength and security perception of their subject and to intelligently analyze parameters of time, space and geography.²¹

This above narrative, however, exposes a wider truth: all too often, the understanding of the Anglo-Israeli intelligence relationship remains limited to a cursory understanding of ties between MI6 and Mossad. In light of their respective standing at the forefront of the intelligence world, this is perhaps understandable. In London's case at least, strategic appreciations of Israel, its capabilities, and the extent to which British foreign and defence interests could best be realised through closer ties with Israel, particularly in the collaborative realm of technical intelligence, was always a bureaucratic balance. In this case between, on one hand, the all source analysis produced by the JIC and, in particular the DIS, and on the other, the concerns of the Foreign Office always sensitive to Britain's ties with the Arab states.

The study of technical intelligence remains something of a ‘Cinderella’ within the ever-expanding realm of intelligence studies. Moreover, those studies of academic note that have appeared focus primarily on the Cold War.²² By contrast, little of is relatively known of how the exchange of technical intelligence informed relationships beyond the established alliance structures of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO] and the Warsaw Pact. In the case of Britain, this should come as little surprise. The sharing of sensitive technical data, materials, and technology with Israel, let alone its public disclosure, remains a delicate matter for the British. Only in 2006, for example, revelations showed that in 1958 Britain had allowed 25 tons of surplus heavy water, purchased from Norsk Hydro in Norway, sold back to the Norwegians, knowing that the final destination would be Israel. Some sought clear ‘safeguards’ from Israel over its intended use of heavy water, a vital component producing plutonium from spent fuel and essential for developing a nuclear weapon. The Foreign Office, however, felt it unreasonable to demand such safeguards as this was a Norwegian transaction and responsibility rested with Oslo to demand appropriate guarantees as to its final use.²³

Still, by 1962, Britain concluded that Israel had an active nuclear weapons programme based on the amount of heavy water acquired by Israel, photographs of the Dimona reactor taken covertly by the British military *attaché* in Tel Aviv, and the likely role of so many French technicians present in the Negev. Some even suspected that Tel Aviv might have acquired nuclear secrets from pro-Israel sympathisers working at the British Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston. There certainly were precedents for such suspicions. In 1950, just two years after the founding of Israel, the Security Service, more popularly known as MI5, uncovered Cyril Wybrow, a British Jew working in the War Office’s Joint Intelligence Bureau, who had been passing classified information to the Israelis. He suffered immediate dismissal rather than prosecution, suggesting that the information divulged was relatively low grade.²⁴

Suspensions of dual loyalties lingered, however. MI5 interviewed several British Jews over their alleged connexions to Israel. One such figure was Nyman Levin, just eased out of his role as head of the nuclear weapons programme in early January 1965 when he died of a heart attack. It was widely believed that he was under investigation by MI5, although British authorities have never released the files relevant to his case with no case proved of collusion with Israel.²⁵ Still, such episodes created a wider climate of concern across Whitehall over how far to extend the hand of co-operation, if not collaboration, with Israel in matters related to technical intelligence and selling military equipment. What is readily apparent in this debate, however, is the clear divisions between what might be called the scientific and military professionals, who saw ties with Israel as not only desirable but necessary, and senior

civil servants, notably in the FCO, who remained decidedly wary. These divisions played out across Whitehall in the aftermath of the June 1967 war.

There is no doubt that admiration for Israel's victory in 1967 was widespread. The British Ministry of Defence [MoD] took a particular interest – and delight – in what they learnt of the performance of the Centurion tanks Britain sold to Israel over the previous decade. Equally, with 55,000 British troops stationed in West Germany – the British Army of the Rhine [BAOR] – officials in London were anxious to glean any information they could regarding Soviet weaponry and, believing these to reflect largely Soviet military doctrine, the tactics and strategies used by the Egyptian army. Above all else, the British wanted access to technical intelligence, a task falling the DSTI, responsible for designing and evaluating new weapons systems as well as developing effective counter measures against existing Soviet bloc weaponry and equipment. The Israelis knew they had material leverage that they could exploit. If Britain – and other NATO countries – wanted access to captured Soviet bloc equipment, Israeli knowledge was barter material for closer co-operation both in terms of access to particular items of British kit as well as research and development. What was to become apparent on the British side was that whilst the DSTI was responsive to such 'trading', other government departments, notably the FCO, remained more circumspect over exactly how far Britain could, or should jump, into a 'technical bed' with the Israelis.

Even before the June 1967 war, improving Anglo-Israeli ties had seen arms sales move beyond the purchase of just tanks. In the mid-1960s, the Israeli navy purchased three former Royal Navy submarines, including HMS *Totem*, renamed INS *Dakar – Swordfish*. The British used *Totem* for covert signals intelligence gathering in the Arctic circle off the Soviet coast. Refitted in Portsmouth with a conning tower that allowed for the underwater insertion of Special Forces, *Dakar* was lost on 24 January 1968 east of Crete with all crew on its final approach to Haifa.²⁶ Whilst a tragic loss, this episode demonstrated nonetheless Israel's continued interest in acquiring British weapons systems and technical intelligence. In so doing, the Israelis were prepared to trade technical intelligence for access to British weapons technology. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the realm of armoured warfare.

The IDF had already made an opening gambit to the British regarding tank design. In early 1968, the director of Armoured Warfare Research at Bovington, Bayley Pike, visited Israel and held a series of meetings with Major-General Israel Tal, widely regarded as the 'Don' of Israel's armoured Corps. Tal expressed his desire to co-operate with the British on any technical matters related to the performance of IDF Centurion tanks during the war, not least the performance of their main armament, the 105 mm gun. In return, Tal asked permission to allow Israeli experts to probe officials at Bovington on issues related to innovations in armoured warfare that could be of use to the IDF. In particular, Israel hoped to purchase the next generation of British tank,

the Chieftain, and two had already reached Israel to allow their suitability for desert warfare to be assessed.²⁷

This was part of a wider Israeli effort to gain access not just to British equipment but to Britain's research and development facilities, in effect trading technical intelligence for technical know-how with joint Anglo-Israeli teams to engage in collaborative evaluation on a range of military equipment. A joint party of military and civilian experts from Britain visited Israel between 27 January and 2 February 1968 at Tel Aviv's instigation to lay the groundwork for how both sides might best profit from analysis of the copious amount of Soviet equipment captured. The delegation expressed cautious optimism about reaching suitable arrangements, although it was by no means uniform across the British service representatives. The army in particular remained keen to extract more information regarding IDF tactics used against Egypt, but the Israelis proved reluctant to divulge such information without exacting something of similar value from the British. In particular, Israel hoped that with their greater weapons development capabilities and test ranges, Britain could be of use in helping fast track Israel's research and development programmes.²⁸

One name that began to figure prominently in this proposed exchange of information and wider research and development was Professor Efraim Katchalsky, chief scientist of the Israeli MoD and, later, under the surname Katzir, the fourth president of Israel between 1973 and 1978. Katchalsky hoped to place the exchange of technical intelligence with Britain on a more formal footing that would cover the exchange of information related to non-conventional weapons development, notably biological and chemical weapons.²⁹ Already a noted scientist, he received access to one of Britain's most sensitive military research facilities, Porton Down, although admission to more sensitive on-site areas of military research and development in chemical and biological weapons was necessarily restricted. Still, by offering London access to captured Soviet chemical warfare equipment, the Israelis hoped London might sign an 'Information Exchange Agreement' allowing Israel to develop what Katchalsky termed 'defensive measures'. Such trading arose elsewhere: Israel offered British officials access to captured Soviet Styx anti-ship missiles – the Royal Navy was keen to learn of their guidance systems; in return, Israel asked for information in the field of Electronic Counter Measures.³⁰

There were clearly advantages for both sides, and there is no doubt that the DSTI team visiting Israel remained keen to explore what they regarded as propitious grounds for future collaboration. The Israelis were prepared for captured equipment to be sent to Britain where it could be subjected to extensive field trials in the presence of Anglo-Israeli teams. This included 'certain chemical warfare items', the Soviet T55 tank, as well as captured radios, mines, tank ammunition, anti-tank missiles, and air-to-air missiles as

well as detailed examination of captured papers, handbooks, and the serial numbers of various weapons systems. The study of intelligence often overlooks the latter, but examination of serial numbers allows trained analysts to build up a picture of weapons production and development whilst also giving some indication of the likely size of an opponent's military formations. The hope was for parallel trials in Israel. The matter went to the JIC. Whilst noting the possible advantages, the FCO voiced serious concerns and balked at signing any formal memorandum on the exchange of technical intelligence. Already sensitive to the – unfounded – allegations that London had colluded with Washington in helping Israel crush so completely three Arab states, the FCO Eastern Department raised objections to any collaboration with Israel over research and development into chemical weapons.³¹ One official cited 'political difficulties vis a vis the Arabs if it ever became known' that Britain had entered into any such agreement with Israel on such matters. Another, with reference to the wider eddies of the Cold War, noted 'Communist propaganda would have a field day'.³² The envisaged political difficulties of allowing Israel access to British research and development facilities was such that the FCO looked to refer the matter through the JIC to the Cabinet for ministerial consideration.

The FCO attitude towards closer ties with Israel was shared by the foreign secretary, George Brown, who would resign from office soon after. Something of a maverick, his personal animus towards Prime Minister Harold Wilson reflected their respective positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Whereas Wilson possessed sympathy for the Jewish state, Brown actively sought a reconciliation with Cairo and believed that unless Britain took a firm stance in support of Amman, Jordan was likely to succumb to more seemingly ascendant radical forces across the Arab world. It was a view shared by the head of the FCO Eastern Department, William Morris, who believed, 'Britain's material interests in the Arab world much more important than those in Israel'.³³ Because the value of intelligence is often hard to measure in purely material terms, decision-making circles can dilute its value when wider considerations are at play. Morris' comments were certainly of a piece with how far Britain was prepared to go in transferring sensitive technologies to Israel. Whilst Tel Aviv demonstrated consistent interest in acquiring British and Canadian civilian nuclear technology in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, London and Ottawa 'refrained from establishing close nuclear ties with Israel . . . primarily because of concern that they would upset their relations with Arab states'.³⁴

Still, despite growing FCO unease, the DSTI team still hoped a memorandum of sorts could be drawn up that related solely to evaluating captured Soviet weapons and equipment, which the IDF General Staff now tried to link to a more grandiose arrangement: access to wider British weapons development programmes. London met this condition with consternation and

indeed, also towards some officials in Israeli military intelligence who felt that their patient, incremental approach that built trust with their British counterparts best served the exchange of technical intelligence. British officials rejected these new conditions, and the Israelis backtracked on their insistence. It led the JIC, however, to note, 'information about captured equipment is finite and we shall stand firm on the refusal to barter it with undertakings of more lasting significance'.³⁵

By spring 1968, the British had become more circumspect in offering detailed appreciations of military equipment in which Israel had a clear interest. In early April, the Israeli military *attaché* at London, Brigadier General Zvi Zamir – soon to become director general of Mossad – handed the DIS a list of items of particular interest to the IDF. These ranged from 'spoofers' to disrupt early warning radar, on-line tele-printers, ground surveillance radar, mortar locating radar through to various proximity fuses, and laser-range finders being developed for the new generation of Chieftain tanks, technology that, at the time, Britain was seen to have a comparative advantage. The British frowned on using an intelligence channel to pass on this request, telling Zamir that they regarded this appeal as a commercial transaction not an exchange of technical intelligence. Procedurally, the British were right, but an element of bureaucratic obfuscation was at play here. Pushing the Israeli request through commercial channels limited the *quid pro quo* involved in intelligence exchanges, forcing the DIS to keep Israel at arms-length. Perhaps sensing the real reason for the British insistence on adhering to accepted procedure, Zamir equally insisted that such requests be handled through intelligence channels, claiming that as officials from the DSTI had been given access to captured Soviet equipment, Israel had the 'moral right to do so'.³⁶

In the field of technical evaluation, sympathy for Israel's position came at the highest level of the DIS. Its director-general, Air Chief Marshal Sir Alfred Earle, believed that if British 105 mm tank ammunition supplied to the Israelis proved in anyway deficient in penetrating the armour of Soviet-supplied Egyptian tanks, this information should, as a matter of course, be shared with the Israelis. When approached by Zamir, Earle agreed that the exchange of research and development information between Israel and Britain should be comprehensive, 'including the practical operational applications resulting from the evaluation of data thus acquired'.³⁷

Personal relations between the DSTI and Israelis had in fact developed from the formal to the outright friendly. The British officials knew that the technical data that they could extrapolate from access to an array of captured Soviet equipment was unprecedented. Until this point, such technical intelligence had been piecemeal and largely dependent on the British Commanders-in-Chief Mission to the Soviet Forces in Germany based out of East Berlin. Moreover, despite clear divisions over when, not if, to extract a price from the British, the Israelis remained open to entertaining requests regarding

access to a range of Soviet equipment. The FCO, however, was keen to remind the DIS of official government policy. On 15 May 1968, a memorandum went to the MoD reminding DSTI staff that the JIC would evaluate requests for exchanges of intelligence and research and development.

All this is set against a background that the Israelis have in their possession large quantities of captured Soviet equipment, in which our own technical intelligence departments have a considerable interest. *Our objective therefore is to co-operate with the Israelis so far as valuable information is made available to us, but without getting a one-sided bargain*, contravening either our arms sales or release of military information policies, or engaging in wide ranging exchanges in sensitive fields which might seriously damage our relations with Arab states if they became known, and lead to renewed charges of a special relationship between our armed forces and those of Israel.³⁸

But there were attempts at nurturing a closer relationship of sorts. Keen to extract as much as possible from the reservoir of Eastern bloc equipment, the British now agreed to send to Israel H.W Pout, the assistant chief scientific officer projects of the DSTI. An expert on guided weapon radar control systems, Pout was given clear instructions on what he could and could not discuss with the Israelis. He was under strict FCO instructions to 'exclude from consideration nuclear matters and biological and chemical warfare'. The accompanying FCO instructions to the Pout mission noted that whilst exchange of conventional equipment could come on a case-by-case basis, Britain would not engage in any exchanges on 'nuclear matters' that might contribute towards developing Israeli technology in this field.³⁹ Meanwhile, discussion on biological and chemical warfare was to remain, as much as possible, theoretical in nature, making clear to the Israelis that 'there would be no question of collaboration with us contributing to the development by Israel of an offensive (B&C warfare) capacity'.⁴⁰

Between 16 and 23 June 1968, Pout toured Israel's main scientific and technical sites that either directly or indirectly dealt with weapons research and development. There is little doubt that Israel rolled out the proverbial red carpet. Escorted by Katchalsky, Pout met scientists, technicians, and senior MoD officials at the Weizman Institute, the Armament Development Authority, the Israeli Institute for Biological Research, the Office of the Chief Scientist, as well as Hebrew University in Tel Aviv. What he saw and heard impressed him, not just in terms of technical achievements of such a young country but the vigour and sheer energy witnessed all around him. His subsequent report to London was not only glowing in its praise but also made important policy recommendations that, if accepted, would have shifted the relationship with Israel beyond a purely functional exchange of technical intelligence based on national interests alone:

The constant threat from without, combined with the indefensible boundaries of the 1949 armistice have given the country generally, and the Armed forces, an unequalled

sense of urgency, purpose, and unity. One is conscious of this at all time travelling about Israel and talking to the people, whether highly placed or the man in the street. After the Britain of 1968, a visit to Israel is a tonic.

He then added:

To base our sales policy on weapons of defence only would be tantamount to condemning Israel to defeat: even now, Israeli planning must be based on the brief, annihilating attack, although military advances are no longer a necessary part of the plan.⁴¹

Sentiment aside, hard economic calculations also played a part in his report. Israel's technological feat in developing the Gabriel anti-ship missile system impressed him, even more so when he discovered that research and development costs for the whole system was £4 million. His own estimate of the total costs for developing a system of equal complexity in Britain would have been £50 million and nearer £150 million in America. Such technological prowess moved Pout to recommend, 'There would be considerable advantage in bringing our establishments and industry into closer contact with development groups dedicated to economy and value for money'. A memorandum of understanding would define the type and scale of collaboration between British and Israeli scientists, perhaps including Electronic Counter Measures, tank design, anti-tank weapons, warhead design, propellants, and, controversially given his brief, chemical and biological weapons focusing on 'incapacitating agents' with Israel developing the ability to use chemical weapons to deter those of Egypt in attacking Israeli towns. Several Israeli scientists he met made the same point: 'Gas used in Yemen was a mixture of mustard and V agent', and Israel had to respond. Whilst detecting an element of hysteria, Pout noted, 'In their position I would be bound to agree that the IDF must have an attack capability as a deterrent'.⁴²

One curious element in Pout's report was an apparent unease expressed by some Israeli scientists over the nature of ties to Washington. Whilst recognising that American generosity had been essential to their survival, 'The Israelis regard themselves as essentially European in character' and that 'charity is not the basis for the firm economic development of a nation'. This interpretation of Israel's behaviour perhaps confused sentiment with the hardheaded pragmatism of decision-makers in Tel Aviv; whilst Israel was trying to link access to Soviet weaponry to greater collaboration with Britain in research and development, it was using the same leverage to draw a commitment from Washington on future arms sales. Facing the mainly Soviet armed and supplied North Vietnamese army in Southeast Asia, the United States was desperate for technical intelligence on Soviet weaponry, surface-to-air missiles, and their guidance systems being a particular priority. In August 1967, evaluation teams from the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] and the American Defence Intelligence Agency [DIA] – collectively known as 'Project MEXPO' – acquired access by the IDF to what one report called 'low priority items'. It

was clear to American intelligence officials, however, that the Israelis were 'holding out' to await the results of parallel discussions on the result of weapons sales to Tel Aviv.⁴³

It remains unknown is whether the DIS ever knew about these evaluation teams; Washington wanted to keep their activities on a need-to-know basis. Israel eventually softened its stance towards the MEXPO by January 1968, granting the CIA and DIA access to all the captured Soviet equipment requested. It remains unclear, however, if a reciprocal deal emerged at this stage for the purchase of the desired items of American equipment.⁴⁴ Given that the Pout mission occurred after Project MEXPO concluded, Israel was still hedging its bets. Still, if Pout's assessment of his hosts Europhilia intended to endear the JIC and FCO towards a warmer embrace of Israel, it failed. Whilst Pout was still in Israel, the MoD, under the guidance of the JIC, deemed research and development too sensitive to warrant further collaboration with Israel: communications equipment and guided weapons topped the list. The reason given had little to do with security and everything to do with commercial gain. 'It is not considered any useful purpose would be served by providing detailed information [to the Israelis] since the firms concerned [in Britain] would be unwilling to deal with Israel and thus jeopardise more lucrative Arab markets'.⁴⁵

Equally, the FCO believed that the seemingly *ad hoc* Israeli approach in approaching various departments across Whitehall was deliberate. Across the vast machinery of government, there was suspicion amongst some officials that Israel hoped to either exploit any gaps in policy co-ordination, gain access to information withheld by one department, or get the better of any deal. This was a particular concern when it came to discussing chemical and biological weapons as well as nuclear 'matters'. As one official opined:

One of the considerations which we have been concerned to emphasise from the start has been the necessity of close coordination [across Whitehall] to ensure that the exchange [of information with the Israelis] is a fair one. Given the piecemeal way in which the Israelis tend to approach different institutions and departments, this consideration will require to be borne firmly in mind.⁴⁶

In the end, Pout's enthusiastic support for greater research and development collaboration with Israel fell afoul of the FCO, the JIC effectively doing its bidding in preventing closer ties between the DSTI and its Israeli counterparts. Technical exchanges of information continued over the next year; Britain after all had agreed to sell its Chieftain tank, more powerful than the Centurion, to the IDF. Now preliminary discussions occurred over the possible sale of 60 Royal Air Force [RAF] Hunter fighter aircraft as well as up to 50 Harrier ground attack jump jets, an aircraft of radical design and technology that was only just entering front-line service with the RAF. Harrier's ability to take off from makeshift airfields or even become airborne through vertical take-off

capability was particularly appealing to the Israelis. Operating from relatively few runways – which as the IAF had demonstrated in 1967 could be vulnerable to a devastating first strike – the Harrier offered flexibility and survivability although it was designed as primarily as a ground attack aircraft rather than a fighter.⁴⁷

Again, however, fears that such a sale might jeopardise arms sales to the wider Arab world and place British arms manufacturers at a competitive disadvantage if faced with an Arab boycott proved decisive. On the eve of a visit by the former Israeli chief of staff and now deputy defence minister, Lieutenant General Zvi Tzur, to London in February 1969, a briefing note spelling out *de facto* British arms sales policy effectively stymied any hope that the Israeli delegation may have entertained of concluding a deal. It is worth quoting at length:

From the professional point of view, there is a great interest in the way that in which the Israelis are dealing with their defence problems and the benefits from arms sales and, to a lesser extent, the exchanges of information cannot be disregarded. But in their context, our defence relations with Israel are of little importance compared to those with other states in the Near East. Israel has no defence facilities which we need and her enemies are not our enemies and some indeed are our friends. Closer defence links with Israel would be so easy to achieve and so welcome to her compared with the exasperation we [the UK] often find in trying to work with the Arabs, or even Iranians and Turks. Nevertheless, it is clear where our interests lie, and probably our responsibilities too: when we have to make a choice we cannot choose Israel. Our defence relations with Israel must be limited to achieving a balance which is clearly reasonable compared with our relations with other countries and especially the Arabs. Some visits by senior officers to Israel, some training of Israelis in this country, some co-operation in search and rescue between Israeli forces and the RAF in Cyprus: to go beyond this would be to seem to take sides in the controversy between Israel and the Arabs.⁴⁸

Any Israeli illusions about where British interests lay were soon disabused. Not only did hopes of purchasing the Harrier prove a chimera, so did any hopes of purchasing the Chieftain tank. This deal collapsed by 1969. The British now claimed the sale of Chieftains would upset the military balance in the Middle East, whilst the Israelis suspected that fears over the potential impact on Britain's trading relations with the wider Arab world remained the real cause. The subsequent sale of Chieftains to the Libyan government would suggest greater weight to the latter interpretation. The FCO preferred to hide behind adherence to a policy that only allowed the sale of 'defensive' equipment to Israel whilst doing nothing that might undermine peace efforts led by Swedish diplomat, Gunnar Jarring, under the auspices of the United Nations.⁴⁹ Even application of this stricture was selective: the Chieftain, with its heavy armour and massive 120 mm main gun, had after all constituted a defensive weapon system. It seems the defensive needs of Libya were more pressing than Israel's despite the fact, on British insistence, that Tel Aviv maintained a studied silence regarding the purchase of the Chieftain lest it rankle policy-makers in Washington.⁵⁰ The most surprising element perhaps

was that a Labour government led by Wilson, a premier otherwise known for his sympathy towards Israel, confirmed the Libyan sale. By 1970, Tel Aviv could look, but only occasionally touch, what London was prepared to offer.

A growing estrangement that began to mark Anglo-Israeli relations under Wilson's Labour government continued apace after 1970 with the election of a new Conservative administration under Edward Heath. At a time when Britain's well-being was increasingly dependent on Arab oil – the discovery of North Sea reserves had yet to come on stream – and London anxious to support a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict that addressed the issue of Palestinian refugees, British policy looked to balance between continued support for Israel's existence and support for Palestinian self-determination. The new foreign secretary, Alec Douglas Home, articulated this publicly during the so-called 'Harrogate speech', given to a meeting of Yorkshire Conservative Party members on 31 October 1970. At that moment when there was no formal recognition of Israel by any group of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the speech was met with disdain in Tel Aviv, which sensed the continued influence of Foreign Office 'Arabists' behind Home's words. The Scottish Labour MP and Zionist activist, Maurice Miller, provided a more pithy summation, noting, 'Britain needs oil more than Jaffa oranges and it looks like this is the kind of thinking that will dominate the [Conservative] cabinet'.⁵¹

The exchange of intelligence continued, albeit on a limited basis, although there were exceptions where exigencies demanded as events in Jordan now proved. Faced with the growing militancy of armed Palestinian factions, notably the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, that threatened the Hashemite dynasty in Jordan, King Hussein unleashed his army against their redoubts in and around the capital Amman in September 1970. The MI6 station chief in Amman, Jon 'Bill' Speares, before the events later known as 'Black September', established a secure radio link with the Jordanian monarch. It now served as a conduit to pass IDF intelligence assessments to the Jordanians, a key source of information once Syrian forces looked to intervene on the side of the Palestinians.⁵²

Still, London remained suspicious that Israel might seek to take advantage of the crisis and seize Jordanian territory that abutted the Golan Heights. Even so, and despite Jordanian requests for British – and American – airstrikes against Syrian forces, London demurred. Ultimately, Jordanian Armed Forces proved their worth, turning the tide against the Palestinian guerrillas and Syrian forces, thereby securing the monarchy. But the episode raised serious questions for London and Tel Aviv. The British might well have seen the survival of the monarch as a key strategic interest but lacked the military wherewithal, let alone the political will, to match words with deeds. In Israel, the debate amongst the leadership increasingly centred on whether to strengthen Hussein's hand or allow Jordan effectively to become Palestine.

The intelligence passed to the king via Speares demonstrated Tel Aviv's preference for the regional *status quo*. The view, however, that 'Jordan is Palestine' retained an appeal that continues to resonate amongst some elements of Israel's political right to this day.⁵³

Elsewhere, arranging military exchange visits occurred albeit on an *ad hoc* basis. In November 1971, for example, the IAF hosted a team of RAF officers over four days at the Ramat David air base. With both air forces now equipped with the American-built F4 Phantom fighter-bomber, the RAF were keen to learn from the tactical experience of the Israeli crews who had flown the aircraft against Soviet-equipped Egyptian forces in the recent War of Attrition and, in particular, how they had countered the surface-to-air [SAM] missile sites. These weapons equipped Warsaw Pact forces across Central Europe and, given its frontline role in West Germany, the RAF was keen to glean any information that could help counter this threat if the Cold War turned hot. IAF professionalism impressed the RAF officers involved, an admiration that convinced them of the need for further exchanges, a key recommendation of the post-visit report. It was not to be. By the time the October 1973 'Yom Kippur' war broke out, military exchanges between Israel and Britain were negligible, restricted to the work of their respective military *attachés*.⁵⁴

In the October 1973 war, Israel again captured vast amounts of Soviet-supplied weapons and equipment from Syria and Egypt, much of it replacing the losses both had incurred following the 1967 hostilities. Much of this equipment had yet to enter frontline service with Warsaw Pact forces. The technical intelligence as well as the tactical and operational knowledge gained by the IDF in overcoming two armies equipped with this latest Soviet weaponry – the Sagger anti-tank missiles and Soviet SAM missiles – was self-evident to any Western intelligence professional.

Anticipating that the warmth in relations between the DSTI and their Israeli counterparts could be rekindled, ministers in the Heath government hoped that Israel would grant British technical experts access to some of the captured loot. The British defence secretary, Peter Carrington, was particularly vexed about the apparent success of Soviet SAM missiles downing Israel's F4 Phantoms. The effectiveness of Egyptian infantry in using the Sagger anti-tank wire-guided missiles to knock out so many Israeli tanks, including Centurions, in the first days of the war also struck Heath. The prime minister now queried Carrington if the BAOR struck the right balance between its armour and infantry units.⁵⁵

The DIS director-general, Admiral Sir Louis Le Bailly, asked the British military *attaché* in Tel Aviv to see if, in the war's immediate aftermath, the Israelis would now co-operate in the 'mutual exploitation of Soviet equipment'.⁵⁶ But the limited returns of co-operating with the British on technical intelligence after June 1967 and, more presciently, London's arms

embargo imposed on all sides in the conflict – including a moratorium on the use of British and Cypriot bases by United States Air Force planes flying resupply missions to Tel Aviv – were fresh in the Israeli collective memory. Moreover, Britain also imposed restrictions on American high altitude reconnaissance flights operating from British bases during the war, insisting that Tel Aviv should not acquire any imagery intelligence resulting from these operations.⁵⁷ British perfidy proven saw access denied. Also dashed were hopes that some crumbs of technical comfort might come from the Americans. Still smarting from Heath's decision to deny the use of British airbases, Washington was in no mood to do London's bidding with the Israelis.⁵⁸

Moreover, with Israel increasingly dependent on American manufactured arms and equipment, London had no leverage that it could realistically use in the realm of research and development to gain access, an area that marked a clear Israeli need for co-operation and collaboration in the aftermath of June 1967 war. As the newly formed 'Middle East War Aftermath Intelligence Coordinating Committee' in Whitehall reported in November 1973, the British were now set to miss 'potentially the greatest source of intelligence on Soviet equipment and tactical doctrine ever presented to the Western world'. Not only were the DIS prevented from touching, they could not even look.⁵⁹ The role reversal was striking, marking a decisive shift in the power relationship between the Israeli supplicant and the British supplier and where London's voice now counted for very much less.

Perhaps the most damning account of British policy resides in the published memoirs of former Labour foreign secretary, David Owen. Condemning both Heath and Home for refusing to allow the supply of tank shells for the British-made Centurion tanks crucial to Israel's war effort, he opined, 'It showed not just Arab influence within the Foreign Office but a total lack of principle in standing by one's commitments ... British influence with Israel never recovered, for perfectly understandable reasons. It was a craven act which had everything to do with the threat of being cut off from Arab oil and for which I had nothing but contempt'.⁶⁰ Relations did not improve nine years after the Yom Kippur war by disclosures that Israel continued to sell military equipment to Argentina both during and after the 1982 Falklands War. The argument put forward by Tel Aviv that such military exports were crucial to its balance of payments echoed the very arguments used by Whitehall in weighing the value of arms sales to the Arab Middle East.⁶¹ Not until the visit to Israel in 1986 by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher did intelligence relations return to anything like that warm, albeit brief, transactional glow experienced in the immediate aftermath of the June 1967 war.⁶²

Today, the Anglo-Israeli intelligence relationship is probably as close as it has ever been and across a range of activities, from counter-terrorism to efforts to disrupt Iran's regional ambitions, including in the nuclear realm.⁶³

Moreover, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq saw British Armed Forces buy Israeli military equipment, notably the Heron 'Watchkeeper' drone and Popeye missile system, to plug gaps in capability that would otherwise have limited British military operations. Equally, when first deployed in Afghanistan in 2002, the British army drew heavily on Israeli expertise, mainly from IDF operations in southern Lebanon, in how to deal with threats from suicide bombers and Improvised Explosive Devices.⁶⁴ Elsewhere, the Government Communications Headquarters [GCHQ], alongside the United States National Security Agency [NSA], has shared information with their Israeli counterpart, Unit 8200 – also referred to as Israel's Intelligence Signals National Unit – presumably on shared targets of interest across the Middle East, notably Iran and its nuclear programme.⁶⁵ If such a thing as a golden age of Anglo-Israeli intelligence and defence co-operation exists, it is probably occurring now.⁶⁶

Israel, however, remains an intelligence target for both the United States and Britain. In January 2016, the release of material by Edward Snowden on Wikileaks revealed that GCHQ and the NSA had co-operated for over a decade on 'Operation Anarchist', allowing both agencies to hack into the video feeds of IAF aircraft and drones on operational flights. For Israel, it was a major security breach; for the British and American crypto-analysts, it was a real coup, allowing the gathering of real-time information on IDF military operations and, most important, offering a priceless forewarning of any Israeli intent to launch pre-emptive strikes designed to degrade Iran's nuclear programme.⁶⁷ It is a salutary reminder that the path of Anglo-Israeli relations, not least in the realm of intelligence sharing, has rarely been smooth.⁶⁸

Competing regional interests have often led to estrangement, with the shared antipathies towards Cairo in the 1960s producing a brief period of co-operation as both London and Tel Aviv looked to clip Nasser's wings. But commercial gain and London's determination to protect existing interests and develop others across the Arab Middle East saw British and Israeli interests quickly diverge by 1970. In this process, the FCO often exercised the greatest influence across Whitehall and, in particular, the JIC. By contrast, professional interest as well as admiration for Israel's victory in June 1967 saw the MoD and DSTI adopt a more benign attitude towards Israel's military needs. In the hierarchy of power, however, the DIS was always the poor relation in influencing policy, unable to compete with the FCO – and likely MI6 – in drafting JIC assessments. In most matters relating to the Middle East, ministers usually deferred to their trained diplomats.

To be sure, certain areas always remained beyond the pale in the realm of technical intelligence sharing with Israel. Collaboration over nuclear, chemical, and biological warfare remained taboo, despite the best efforts of the Pout report to elicit some change in JIC attitudes. One could ask if an opportunity for greater defence collaboration was lost, pushing Tel Aviv towards

Washington and denying crucial political leverage to London in the wider Arab-Israeli conflict. Perhaps the trajectory of Israel's military ties to the United States had already been set with the sale of Hawk missiles under the Kennedy Administration and soon after with the deal to supply Israel with Skyhawk jets. The access given to Project MEXPO that pre-dated the Pout visit also underscored that shift.

Still, the Anglo-Israeli intelligence relationship highlights a wider truth. Whilst the idea of democratic peace largely negates violent conflict between states defined by open government, the competing interests of Israel and Britain across the Middle East made for an uneasy relationship. Israel's perception of its existential needs ran counter to a Britain seeking to shore up an ailing economy. Of course, British influence across the region was in decline, its moment in the Middle East as described by the historian, Elizabeth Monroe, long passed. Britain tried to punch above its weight but, by 1967, its interests were undoubtedly rooted in commercial advantage rather than strategic assets gained. The aftermath of the October 1973 war was testament to this fact. British intelligence and, in particular, the DIS, admired Israel's military achievements and saw the value in sharing technical intelligence aimed at bolstering the British Armed Forces. But the competing interests identified above could never be reconciled. A shared cultural tradition, the very essence of the 'Five Eyes' alliance, was conspicuous by its absence. Moreover, if a reciprocity of sorts defined Anglo-Israeli intelligence relations between 1967 and 1974, it was defined by 'the reciprocity of barter', a reciprocity still to emerge fully from the shadows of the Palestine mandate. To paraphrase Lord Palmerston's famous quip, not all democratic states in an intelligence relationship become close friends. Rather, they become nodding acquaintances who, more often than not, come together by the shared pursuit of short-term interests.⁶⁹

Notes

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Notes on contributor

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