

Book Review

Annon Aran,

Israeli Foreign Policy since the End of the Cold War,

Cambridge and New York:

Cambridge University Press, 2021. 461 pp.

Raluca Moldovan*

Annon Aran, senior lecturer in International Politics of the Middle East at City University of London and a well-known Middle East commentator for the BBC, Bloomberg, *The Guardian* and *Financial Times*, provides readers with the first comprehensive outline of Israeli foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. At its core, the book is an historical account that traces chronologically the most important developments in Israeli foreign policy over the last three decades, yet it does not read like a typical history book, primarily thanks to the author's narrative talent. Aran is able to often make history come alive on the page by painting detailed pictures of events and political figures, thus giving readers the impression that they are actually watching occurrences unfold before their very eyes.

This impression, however, does in no way detract from the solid scholarly foundation of the book, as Aran used a wealth of primary sources (mainly from the archives of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs), as well as interviews with high-ranking Israeli domestic and foreign policy officials to support his argument. His main thesis is that Israeli foreign policy in the period in question shifted between three main positions, especially in relation to the thorny issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: entrenchment, engagement and unilateralism. As a general rule, prime ministers belonging to the right of the political spectre dominated by the Likud Party

* Associate Professor at Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania, Faculty of European Studies.

(Yitzhak Shamir, Benjamin Netanyahu and, to a certain extent, Ariel Sharon) have opted for an entrenchment stance which called for reliance on a foreign policy guided primarily by military might rather than diplomacy and an uncompromising position vis-à-vis the Palestinian question expressed through the idea of “peace for peace”, not “land for peace”. Prime ministers belonging to the Labour Party (Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres) favoured an engagement approach based on the idea of necessary territorial compromises to achieve a final status solution to the Palestinian question, which is why the Oslo process made the most progress during their time in office. Unilateralism is mostly associated with the policies of Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon (after he left Likud and formed his own party, Kadima) and Ehud Olmert and it rested upon the idea that downscaling the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank was in Israel’s national interest, but not as a result of an agreement with an Arab counterpart or with the Palestinians themselves.

Additionally, Aran highlights the prominent role that domestic concerns play in foreign policy decision-making and identifies three concentric circles in which these concerns originate: the first is made up of decision-makers (primarily prime ministers and their inner circle), the second is represented by the security network comprising serving and retired Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) generals, politicians, bureaucrats, private entrepreneurs who play an influential role in determining key foreign policy issues, while the final concentric circle is comprised of national identity narratives based on a few basic assumptions: first, Israel is a Jewish state in which religion does play a role in public life; second, Israel is a Zionist state in which Jews represent not just a religion, but a nation; third, the Holocaust is deeply embedded in Israeli identity; fourth, Israel is a democracy, with free and fair elections, a competitive party system and freedom of the media.

Aran devotes quite a bit of space (more than one third of the book) to the Israeli-Palestinian issue which forms the backbone of the book, tracing the origins of the Oslo process from the unsuccessful 1991 Madrid

Conference to the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993 and, later, to the incremental steps made towards reaching a final status agreement during the premierships of Rabin, Peres, Netanyahu and Barak, before explaining in detail why the Oslo process ultimately failed to produce any lasting agreement between the two parties. He examines the domestic factors that influenced the negotiations, as well as the behaviour and ideologies of the various actors involved, from Arafat to Rabin, from Clinton to Netanyahu and from Barak to Peres by providing short periodic glimpses into their worldview. The author also provides us with a thorough analysis of the ups and downs of Israel's special relationship with the United States and the role that Washington, as mediator, played in the peace negotiations, highlighting how the latter often used a carrot and stick approach to persuade Israel to accept various compromises, while at the same time pressuring the PLO to renounce its violent tactics.

In addition to the Palestinian file, Aran examines Israel's relations with three of its Arab neighbours, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, which took very different paths: while Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty in 1994 and have enjoyed a fairly smooth rapport ever since, things could not be more different in the case of Syria, a state involved in all the Arab wars against Israel starting with 1948. Despite repeated efforts to conclude a peace treaty, all such attempts failed, primarily because of the difficulty of finding a mutually acceptable solution to the issue of the Golan Heights, Syria remaining, to this day, a noteworthy threat against Israel, despite being weakened by a decade of bloody civil war. with regard to Lebanon, Aran provides detailed explanations of the causes behind the armed conflicts between Israel and Hezbollah, following the withdrawal of the IDF troops from Southern Lebanon in 2000, and emphasises that Shia Lebanese militia group still remains a formidable and unpredictable enemy, especially considering its close ties with Tehran.

The author also looks into Israel's ties with the European Union, correctly pointing out that the Jewish state prefers to have bilateral relations with individual European countries rather than with the Union as

a whole, on account of Brussels' support for the boycott against Israeli products and the rising tide of antisemitism in many parts of the EU. Several subchapters are dedicated to Israel's relationship with the Far East, especially India and China, both of which officially established diplomatic ties with the Jewish state in January 1992. At present, the Israel-China and Israel-India relations are mutually beneficial, especially from an economic and trade perspective and the trend is very likely to continue in the future.

No analysis of Israeli foreign policy would be complete without considering the country's relations with the Gulf Arab states, on the one hand, and with its archnemesis, Iran, on the other. Aran succeeds in painting a fairly succinct, but instructive picture of Israel's economic and diplomatic links with the Gulf Monarchies (two of which – Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates – signed peace treaties with Israel in 2019, known as the Abraham Accords), emphasising how Tel Aviv is now actively pursuing closer ties with Saudi Arabia: concluding a bilateral treaty with the powerful Gulf state has long been seen by Netanyahu as the ultimate diplomatic triumph. As far as Iran is concerned, Israel's foreign policy towards Tehran is undoubtedly dominated by security concerns regarding the very survival of the Jewish state in case Iran pushes forward with its nuclear program. Iran has been the source of much discord between Israel and the US during Barack Obama's second term, when Netanyahu bitterly opposed the negotiations leading to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal) and went so far as to address a joint session of Congress in 2015, heavily criticising the American president for pursuing negotiations with Iran.

The epilogue of the book traces the main directions of Israeli foreign policy under Netanyahu since 2009, when the leader of the Likud returned as prime minister, and one cannot help but notice certain critical notes in Aran's arguments: discussing Netanyahu's 2018 speech before the Knesset, in which he called the period since 2010 a "wondrous decade" for Israel, the author notes how the prime minister conveniently glossed over the less savoury aspects of the previous ten years, such as the controversial 2018

Nation-State Bill, which became part of the country's constitution and states that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people (with no mention of equal rights for the Palestinian Arab minority), thus cementing its deepening ethnocracy. The book's conclusion is somewhat bleak: Aran compares Israel under Netanyahu with Napoleon's Grande Armée, arguing that, while the country seems to leap from victory to victory, it might soon have to face its own harsh winter. Given the prolonged political crisis that has led to a record of four general elections in two years, Aran might well be correct in his assessment.

Overall, *Israel's Foreign Policy since the End of the Cold War* represents an engaging and informative read for Middle East scholars and students alike, as well as for the general public, and will undoubtedly remain a solid reference book for years to come.

