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A Unique Denial: Israel's Foreign Policy and the Armenian Genocide

ELDAD BEN AHARON*

ABSTRACT *This article focuses on the Israeli politicization of the Armenian genocide from the perspective of foreign policy. Since the early 1980s Israel's official position has been to not recognize the Armenian genocide. The issue of recognition came to the surface in 1982 after Turkey put pressure on Israel to cancel a Holocaust and genocide conference. This article shows that Israel agreed to pressure the conference organizers to cancel the conference in order to secure protection for Jews fleeing Iran and Syria through the Turkish border. This article also explores the role of informal ambassadors in shaping Israel's position on this issue. Using recently declassified archival documents and oral interviews with key Israeli stakeholders, this is the first investigation into the role of informal ambassadors, specifically the Jewish minority in Turkey, and the American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby. The article also addresses a secondary incentive for Israel's refusal to recognize the genocide: ethnic competition between Jews and Armenians as victims of genocide.*

Introduction

Why does the state of Israel not officially recognize the Armenian genocide? From time to time this question emerges in Israel's public and political debates. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs is very familiar with this sensitive issue in the context of Israel's diplomatic relationship with Turkey. During an official visit to Turkey in 2001, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres stated, 'We reject attempts to create a similarity between the Holocaust and the Armenian allegations. Nothing similar to the Holocaust occurred. It is a tragedy what the Armenians went through, but not genocide'.¹ This explicit statement reflects Israel's official stance on the Armenian genocide since Israel's establishment in 1948. This article will attempt to answer the question of why Israel does not recognize the genocide and

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1. Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres' statement on the so-called Armenian genocide: The Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.ataa.org/reference/peres.html>. (accessed 11 May, 2015).

shed new light on the phenomenon. It is important to note that Israel omits the Armenian genocide from history education textbooks and curricula, and neglects it in domestic political discussions in Israeli parliament. These omissions help to perpetuate the lack of recognition of the genocide. This topic deserves separate, focused attention and is beyond the scope of this article. I will focus primarily on Israel's foreign policy with respect to the Armenian genocide.

The issue of recognition of the genocide came to the surface in 1982 after Turkey put pressure on Israel to cancel a Holocaust and genocide conference, where the genocide was to be discussed. This was the first time Israel was forced to shape an official policy on the matter; a policy of non-recognition was adopted.

In this article I will show that Israel agreed to put pressure on the conference organizers to eliminate discussions about the Armenian genocide from the conference. I will argue that they did this in an effort to safeguard Syrian and Iranian Jews who were fleeing into Turkey. I will also argue that both Israel and Turkey used sub-state actors to promote their foreign policy interests on this matter. The Jewish Turkish elite and the American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby played this sub-state role.

In order to understand the foreign policy in this case, it is necessary to examine some of the features of Israel's relationship with Turkey. The only democratic Muslim country in the Middle East, Turkey is strategically located, sharing borders with Syria, Iran and Iraq. This strategic location makes the Israel–Turkey diplomatic relationship very important for Israel's national security. In addition, Israel and Turkey's militaries cooperate with training and share intelligence, and the two countries have a signed trade agreement. Therefore, the relationship is valuable for both countries.

This article will focus on the period between 1982 and 1983. Prior to this, between Israel's 1948 establishment and 1965, Israel did not have to address the Armenian claim for genocide recognition. This was due mainly to internal disagreements in the Israeli Armenian community and in the other diaspora communities. Between 1965 and the early 1980s the Armenian community started to come together and increase its pressure on Israel, trying to penetrate the political arena, but also the sacred zone around the 'Shoah'. They were demanding moral recognition of their genocide as another 'Shoah'.² No other post-genocide victim group lives in Israel and demands recognition of their genocide. Israel, however, officially recognizes all other twentieth-century genocides, such as those perpetrated in Rwanda, Cambodia and former Yugoslavia. One could therefore deduce that recognition of the Armenian genocide is a sensitive and problematic issue for the Israeli authorities. Peres' statement captures the tensions that exist between the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust: on the one hand, recognizing the Armenian genocide could jeopardize Israel's diplomatic relations with Turkey; on the other hand, the memory of the Holocaust represents a unique symbol for Israeli Jewish identity, and recognizing the Armenian genocide could infringe on the prominent status of the Holocaust.

In his book, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, Mark Levene asks a theoretical question: suppose 'there had been no Holocaust?' Levene suggests that it would not diminish the need to coin a term to describe the horrible destiny of all

2. See Yona Waitz, 'Memory in the Shadows of Genocide: The Memory of the Armenian Genocide in the Armenian Community in Jerusalem' (PhD thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010), p. 36.

other genocide victims.³ That is also my departure point for elaborating on the claims of uniqueness for the Jewish Holocaust. Genocide researcher and historian Dan Stone states that the field of genocide studies is stifled by the *uniqueness of the Holocaust* attitude and ethnic competition between genocide victims. Sociologist Jean-Michel Chaumont attempts to assess the role of the Jewish Holocaust in formation of identity in Jews, and ethnic competition among victims of the Nazi regime. He argues that ethnic competition exists not only between Jews and the Romani but also within Jewish community subgroups, such as Zionist Jews and antifascist Jews.⁴

Peres' statement cited earlier begs another question: is the Holocaust unique? Dirk Moses claims that the scholarly debate on the topic results from the different interpretations and philosophical perception of *Holocaust* scholars versus *genocide* scholars. Historians assess specific historical events, while social scientists make comparisons to be able to draw general conclusions.⁵ In this regard, Dan Stone suggests that Holocaust and genocide scholars can be divided along generational lines: 'the new generation of scholars of the Holocaust has begun to recognize that a similar break in experience was undergone by other groups that have suffered the horrors of genocide'.⁶

The historiographical debate on the uniqueness of the Holocaust can be grouped into three main lines of thought. The 'nationalist' group believes that the Holocaust is unique and unprecedented. The second group recognizes the Holocaust as unique, but uses the framework from this extensive and well-developed field as the departure point for assessment of other genocides. Members of the third group, the 'liberalists', approach the Holocaust as one of several twentieth-century genocides. Israeli historian Yisrael Gutman represents the 'nationalist' approach. He argues that the 'difference and the distinction are decisive, indicating the uniqueness of the Holocaust as historical phenomenon'.⁷ Other historians, such as Deborah Lipstadt, Leni Yahil, Lucy Dawidowicz, Steven Katz and Dan Machman agree with Gutman, insisting that the Holocaust is a unique and unprecedented phenomenon and therefore remain hostile to any comparison to other genocides or mass atrocities.

A second group of historians and genocide scholars argue that genocide studies should use the extensive and well-developed framework of Holocaust historiography as a prototypic case of genocide. Members of this group include Barbara Harff, Alan Rosenbaum, Alex Alvarez and Yehuda Bauer, who notes: 'the only way to clarify the applicability of definitions and generalizations is with comparisons. [...] the very claim that a historical event is unprecedented can be made only when that event is compared with other events of a presumably similar nature with which it shares at least some qualities'.⁸

3. Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State: Volume 1: The Meaning of Genocide* (London and New York: Tauris & Co., 2005), p. 3.

4. See Dan Stone, 'The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond "Uniqueness" and Ethnic Competition', *Rethinking History*, 8(1) (March 2004), pp. 127–142; Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La Concurrence Des Victimes: Génocide, Identité, Reconnaissance* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1997), p. 9.

5. Dirk Moses, 'The Holocaust and Genocide', in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 534.

6. Stone, 'Historiography of Genocide', pp. 127–142.

7. Yisrael Gutman, 'The Uniqueness and the Universal Character of the Holocaust', in *Struggles in Darkness* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Polaim, 1985), p. 62 (Hebrew), in Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (Transaction Publications, 2000), p. 15.

8. Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), p. 39.

The third group of scholars, the liberals, includes Yair Auran, Alexander Hinton, Mark Levene, Dan Stone, Adi Ophir and Donald Bloxham. In *The Final Solution*, Bloxham argues that the Holocaust needs to be explored as a 'particular example of a broader phenomenon'.⁹ The liberals assert that the Holocaust is just another form of genocide. In their view, all genocides have unique characteristics and the Holocaust's *never again* lesson does not rely on the Holocaust being unique. This short discussion highlights some of the diverse positions held by the scholars on this important issue.

In order to examine the question of why Israel does not recognize the Armenian genocide, I will assess recently declassified documents from the Israeli National Archive and supplement these with oral history interviews conducted in 2013. The primary sources include declassified documents related to the Israel–Turkey diplomatic relationship. Oral history accounts are used in this article as an important method of research, in addition to being an authentic and unique source. Oral historian Valerie Yow notes, 'Whatever the particular approach or discipline, the recorded in-depth interview can offer answers to questions that no other methodology can provide'.¹⁰ Conducted in Hebrew, the interviews indeed offered information that helps to answer my research question.

The Historiography of Israel's Foreign Policy

In order to explore Israel's foreign policy with respect to the Armenian genocide, a brief survey of the historiography of Israel's foreign policy is needed. In this section I will outline the explicit and implicit foreign policy incentives that have driven Israel since independence in 1948. In addition, I will sketch a few unique features the young state had to take into consideration in its foreign policy decision making.

Aharon Klieman has published extensively on Israel's foreign policy. He suggests that since Israel's early days, there have been two distinct spheres of foreign policy: public foreign policy and silent, behind-the-scenes foreign policy.¹¹ His concept of quiet diplomacy will have special relevance for the core argument of this article in my discussion of how silent diplomacy was used to safeguard Jews outside of Israel. In the meantime, I will use Klieman's two spheres as categories for describing seven themes I have identified in Israel's foreign policy.

In the public sphere, I have identified four themes: Israel's relationship with the major empires, the US, the Soviet Union and China; Israel's moral and human rights obligations; Israel's relationship with the Arab world; and the hierarchy within Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the silent sphere, I have identified three themes: the safeguarding of Jews outside of Israel, which is particularly relevant to the core of this article; securing the release of Jewish captives; and the trading of arms and military expertise. I will review these themes, starting with those in the public sphere.

9. Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 1.

10. Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), p. 9.

11. Aharon Klieman, 'In Silent Pursuit of National Interest', in Benyamin (ed.), *Statecraft in the Dark: Israel's Practice of Quiet Diplomacy* (Boulder, CO & Jerusalem: Westview Press/Jerusalem Post, 1988), pp. 55–74.

Israel's relationships with the great empires—the United States, the Soviet Union and China—are promoted through public diplomacy, and various scholars have examined the types of public diplomacy used with these empires. Abraham Ben Zvi discusses the extent of involvement of the US administrations in the Israel–Palestine conflict and the first Lebanon war, during the 1980s. He claims that during the first days of the operation in Lebanon Israel got the full support of the Reagan administration. However, when Israel expanded the operation in Lebanon, tensions emerged.¹² Gabriel Sheffer addresses the unique features of the treaty between Israel and US, and shows that Israel lost the support of the American public during the late 1980s. He explores which sectors of the American public Israel should align with to regain support.¹³ Yaakov Roi studied the diplomatic ties between Israel and the Soviet Union under Gorbachev's administration. His thesis suggests that during the last phase of the Cold War, the Americans demanded that the Soviets establish ties with Israel in exchange for support for the Soviet reforms.¹⁴

The second theme in the historiography, also in the public diplomacy sphere, is the debate on the moral and human rights impact of Israel's foreign policy. Yossi Beilin, former Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister (1992–1995), discusses the balance between Israel's unique national security concerns and human rights, and concludes that defence concerns tend to promote realist foreign policy at the expense of human rights.¹⁵ Daphna Sharfman takes a very clear position, criticizing Israel for establishing diplomatic ties with third world countries and dictatorial regimes that disregard human rights. In Sharfman's view, Israel has favoured commercial and military interests over human rights for many years.¹⁶ David Kamhi, on the other hand, argues that one cannot demand absolute justice in international politics. While he agrees that sometimes it is immoral to engage in arms trade with unreliable regimes, it is justifiable for the sake of Israel's national security.¹⁷

Israel's role in the geopolitics of the Middle East and the Arab world constitutes the third theme in the public sphere of Israel's foreign policy. Shimon Shamir suggests that we rethink the peace process with Egypt; he argues that even the fiercest opponents of the Camp David Accords were forced to recognize the benefit of the agreements with Israel. The most important result was the removal of the threat of war in the border area of southern Israel.¹⁸ Itamar Rabinovich addresses Israel's conflict with its northern neighbour, Lebanon, and the Israeli strategy during the first Lebanon war in 1982. He claims that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) entered Lebanon in order to change the local

12. Abraham Ben-Zvi, 'The Limits of Coercion in Bilateral Bargaining Situations: The Case of the American-Israeli Dyad', *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, 8(4) (1986), pp. 68–99.

13. Gabriel Sheffer, 'The United States–Israeli "Special Relationship"', *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, 9(4) (1987), pp. 35–44.

14. Yaakov Roi, 'Establishment of Relations between Israel and the Soviet Union under Gorbachev', in Benjamin Neuberger (ed.), *War and Peacemaking: Selected Issues in Israel's Foreign Policy* (Ramat-Aviv, Tel-Aviv: The Open University Publication, 1992), pp. 401–417.

15. Y. Beilin, 'Moral and Foreign Policy', in Daphna Sharfman (ed.), *A Light unto the Nations: Israel's Foreign Policy and Human Rights* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad publishing house LTD, 1999), pp. 63–80.

16. Sharfman, *A Light unto the Nations*.

17. D. Kamhi, 'Ethical Considerations of Foreign Policy', in Sharfman, *A Light unto the Nations*, pp. 119–125.

18. Shimon Shamir, 'Israel's View of Egypt and the Peace Process: The Duality of Vision', in W.B. Quandt (ed.), *The Middle East: Ten Years after Camp David* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1988), pp. 187–216.

political regime and not simply to create a buffer zone between Israel and Lebanon.¹⁹

The final historiographical theme in the public sphere involves assessing the political hierarchy within the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Daphna Sharfman argues that the Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Israeli parliament is dominated and monitored by former Israel Defense Forces officers. The outcome is that security interests are more heavily weighted than diplomacy interests, and foreign policy decision making is shaped by the demands of national security.²⁰ Aharon Klieman accepts Sherman's analysis, and stresses that the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs is marginalized and therefore becomes a political bureaucrat. He suggests that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is helpless against the dominating forces of Israeli national security agents; this is the result of the Israeli deterministic security dilemma. To support his claim he lists former foreign ministers who had military experience before taking office.²¹ Mordechai Gazit, however, disagrees with Klieman and Sharfman's observations. He suggests that, comparatively, Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is no different in structure to ministries in other countries; he asserts that Israeli diplomats are not bureaucrats, arguing that Israeli diplomats do indeed shape Israeli foreign policy.²²

In the next few paragraphs I will elaborate on the three themes within silent diplomacy. The first theme, safeguarding Jewish lives and helping Jewish communities abroad, is a unique concern for Israel. Daphna Sharfman points out that Israel is a Jewish nation, created to safeguard Jews worldwide. Therefore, according to Sharfman, this unique national feature has become the highest priority of Israel's foreign policy.²³ Yossi Beilin stated that Israel is aware that if someone wants to threaten Israel, they can do so by threatening the lives of members of the worldwide Jewish community; he notes that this is what makes Israel vulnerable. Beilin emphasizes that Israel has had to support problematic regimes in order to secure the lives of members of Jewish communities in such regions. He gives the example of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. Ceaușescu was known for favouring Jews, allowing them religious freedom and later accepting bribes to allow them to flee to Israel. In return Israeli politicians supported Ceaușescu's leadership in the American Congress, helping him to maintain Romania's economic status worldwide.²⁴

Leonardo Senkman conducted pioneering research highlighting the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' decision to secure the lives of Argentinean Jews, who were, along with members of the opposition parties, being persecuted, tortured and killed by the dictatorial Argentinean regime in 1976. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Jewish Agency helped Jews to flee to Israel with fake passports issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Senkman comments on the irony of this Israeli operation: at the same time, Israel was engaged in an arms trade with

19. Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon, 1970–1985* (rev. edn) (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 104–108, 161–173, 192–199.

20. Sharfman, *A Light unto the Nations*, pp. 40–41.

21. Klieman, 'In Silent Pursuit of National Interest', pp. 55–74. Klieman names all the former foreign ministers who had military experience, such as Ariel Sharon, Moshe Arens, Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Shamir and Moshe Dayan.

22. Mordechai Gazit, 'The Role of the Foreign Ministry', *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, 18 (1981), pp. 3–14.

23. Sharfman, *A Light unto the Nations*, p. 23.

24. Beilin, 'Moral and Foreign Policy', pp. 69–70.

Argentina's military regime, providing weapons for their battle against the opposition.²⁵

Klieman discusses the second silent diplomacy theme: securing the release of captive civilians and IDF troops. Because protecting Jewish life is such a priority, the lives of captured Jews can be used in negotiations against Israel. In order to avoid this it is essential, according to Klieman, for Israel to use the channels of silent diplomacy for these negotiations.²⁶ Klieman's analysis and the authentic and pioneering case studies by Beilin and Senkman provide analytic tools for my inquiry.

The last silent diplomacy theme is the controversial trading of arms and military expertise. Klieman argues that it makes up a significant part of Israel's silent diplomacy, and supplements public diplomacy.²⁷ David Kamhi argues that the primary goal of Israel's weapons trade industry is to promote research and development of new weapons, which in turn will keep Israel at the forefront, ahead of its enemies.²⁸ Naomi Chazan criticizes Israel for trading arms with South Africa's apartheid regime, stating that it was unreasonable in the 1980s. According to Chazan, after Israel signed a peace agreement with Egypt, Israel could have renewed diplomatic ties with other African nations. However, as a result of Israel's military cooperation with the apartheid regime of South Africa, these alliances could not be pursued.²⁹

The Israel–Turkey Diplomatic Relationship: A Historical Background

At this point I will move from the broader analysis of the Israel's foreign policy to a more narrow analysis of the diplomatic relationship with Turkey. The diplomatic relationship between the states was established in 1950, and Turkey was the first Muslim country to recognize Israel as a legitimate state. By examining the historiography of the Israeli–Turkish relationship one can gain insights into its dynamics. Ofra Bengio states that when it was established, 'Israel was patently not being courted by the surrounding Arab countries, and was indeed a complete outcast'.³⁰ Alon Liel, former Director General of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, argues that 'the diplomatic relationship between Israel and Turkey attracts attention in the Middle East and outside of the region because it is the only warm relationship the Jewish state has been able to establish and maintain with a Muslim country'.³¹ The relationship is indeed strategic and important for Israel in an exclusively Muslim region. David Granit, Israel's former ambassador in Ankara (1993–1995), observes that Turkey has been under pressure to sever the relationship over the decades.³² Bengio assesses the essence of Israel's view of the

25. Leonardo Senkman, 'Escape of Jews from Argentina during the Military Regime in 1976–1983', in Sharfman, *A Light unto the Nations*, pp. 93–118.

26. Klieman, 'In Silent Pursuit of National Interest', pp. 55–74.

27. Klieman, 'In Silent Pursuit of National Interest', pp. 55–74.

28. Kamhi, 'Ethical Considerations of Foreign Policy', p. 120.

29. Naomi Chazan, 'The Fallacies of Pragmatism: Israel's Foreign Policy towards South Africa', *Africa Affairs*, 82(327) (April 1983), pp 169–199.

30. Ofra Bengio, *The Turkish–Israeli Relationship: Changing Ties of Middle Eastern Outsiders* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 1.

31. Alon Liel, *Demo-Islam: A New Regime in Turkey* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), p. 185.

32. D. Granit, 'Israel–Turkey Relations since Israel was Established', Paper presented at the conference 'Turkey and Israel in a Dynamic Middle East', Begin-Sadat Institute, National Security Discussions, Bar Ilan University, Tel Aviv, 21–24 April 1996.

relationship with Turkey, explaining that 'Turkey was a strategic asset, a pivotal country for Jerusalem in the years of its total isolation in the region'.³³

Due to this isolation in the Middle East, the geopolitical landscape in the 1950s is a good starting point to describe and discuss the bilateral relationship. In the late 1950s, Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, decided to pursue strong relations with the Turkish state as part of a strategic treaty between Israel, Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia and Sudan against the Soviet powers and Nazr's Egypt. Ben Gurion, as the leader of the Yishuv (the pre-independence Jewish settlement in Israel), was pro-Ottoman and later pro-Turkish.

In the 1960s, Israel's goal was to establish alliances with Middle Eastern countries. Bengio argues that 'Israel and Turkey forged a top-secret alliance known as "the peripheral alliance" or "Phantom Pact"'.³⁴ Iran was a third member of that alliance, but Israel and Turkey were the main players. According to Bengio, Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion aimed to break 'the ring of isolation that the Arab countries had imposed on Israel by forming an alliance with the non-Arab countries of the periphery; stabilizing the region and forming a new balance of power strengthening relations with the West, especially the United States'.³⁵

Liel is convinced that Ben Gurion pursued the multi-member strategic treaty because a treaty between only two Muslim countries, such as Syria and Egypt, would have been a great threat to Israel's national security.³⁶ The strategic treaty lasted until the early 1970s and then disintegrated due to geopolitical changes in the Middle East.³⁷

The bilateral relationship cooled during the late 1970s and remained cold through most of the 1980s. This was due mainly to the first Lebanon war. The Turkish government and Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs heavily criticized Israel for that operation. In the early 1990s a golden period in the relationship began, which continued until 2003. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union were the first trigger. One could argue, however, that the Madrid peace talks and later the Oslo agreement between Israel and the Palestinians were an even bigger trigger. The Oslo agreement resulted in new hope for the Middle East, which greatly influenced Israel and Turkey's relationship. According to Liel, Turkey made the first move and Israel followed: 'the Turks made a strategic decision based on cooperation on national security, economy and technology, recognizing both countries' commitment to democracy as a significant and important bond, a bond that is equal to the bond Turkey has with its Muslim neighbors'.³⁸

The most recent phase in Israel and Turkey's relationship began in 2003 and continues to the present day. Gabby Levy, Israel's former ambassador in Ankara (2007–2011), blames the pro-Islamic and anti-Israeli rhetoric of Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan's regime for the decline of the relationship.³⁹ Liel also analyses the last decade of the relationship and argues that there has been a total compartmentalization between economics and diplomacy since Erdoğan became Prime Minister. On the one hand, Israeli–Turkish diplomacy is non-existent, but

33. Bengio, *The Turkish–Israeli Relationship*, pp. 2–3.

34. Bengio, *The Turkish–Israeli Relationship*, p. 33.

35. Bengio, *The Turkish–Israeli Relationship*, p. 40.

36. Oral interview with Alon Liel, 12 July 2013, Mevasseret Zion, Israel.

37. Liel, *Demo-Islam*, p. 184.

38. Liel, *Demo-Islam*, p. 188.

39. Oral interview with Gabby Levy, 24 July 2013, Or Yehuda, Israel.

on the other hand the Turkish government allows business to flow freely with Israelis.⁴⁰ Indeed, a report from Israel's Export and International Cooperation Institute supports this; the report shows that the value of exports from Israel to Turkey is 1.3 billion dollars and the value of imports is 1.8 billion dollars.

Two preliminary observations can be made so far. First, based on the analysis presented above, one can argue that the bilateral relationship was affected by Israel's standing in the Arab world, weakening when Israel was in conflict, especially during and after Israel's wars, and stabilizing in times of hope. Second, the future of the relationship will depend on the results of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the peace process in the Middle East. These preliminary conclusions will form an important part of the discussion in the following sections on the bilateral relationship and the Armenian genocide.

The 1982 Holocaust and Genocide Conference and Israel's Foreign Policy

This section will focus on the 1980s, giving special attention to a major scandal regarding the Armenian genocide. In this decade the issue of the genocide came up in diplomatic discourse for the first time, and began to influence the Israel–Turkey relationship. In 1982 Israel Charny, Elie Wiesel and Shama Davidson initiated a pioneering international conference called the 'International Conference on Holocaust and Genocide', which was to be held in Israel. Among numerous discussions on the Holocaust and current developments in genocide research, there would also be six lectures and panels on the Armenian genocide. Yad Vashem officially sponsored the event, and many international scholars had confirmed their attendance. The organizers also received fellowships and grants from Jewish funds of Holocaust survivors, and it looked like it would be a promising event.

Israel Charny claims that a few months before the conference, he, Wiesel and Davidson started to receive implicit and explicit messages from Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs encouraging them to cancel the conference. Charny recalls that at this time the organizers published a list of participants, many of whom were Jews. Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs used this list to contact each of the participants and ask them not to attend the conference. Charny claims that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also contacted Tel Aviv University, where he was working at the time, to pressure him to cancel the conference. Moreover, Charny states that Jewish organizations worldwide, and particularly in the United States, cancelled cheques they had given as donations to support the operation of the conference. At this point Yad Vashem also revoked its sponsorship and the conference was in danger of being cancelled.⁴¹ These developments lead one to wonder why Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked so hard to cancel a conference. In our interview, Charny describes an encounter he had while he was organizing the conference. During that period he was living in a flat a few streets from Tel Aviv University campus. He recalls:

One afternoon, on my way back home from work at the faculty, a man was waiting for me in front of my building. He introduced himself as Jack Veissid, president of the Jewish community of Istanbul, and he said that he had come to meet me. He explained in a very explicit tone that the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs was very concerned about my

40. Oral interview with Alon Liel, 12 July 2013, Mevasseret Zion, Israel.

41. Oral interview with Israel Charny, 17 July 2013, Jerusalem, Israel.

conference, and that Jewish lives were in jeopardy. Veissid then said that Iranian and Syrian Jews were fleeing through Turkey's borders, and the Turks would close the borders if the conference took place.⁴²

In effect, Veissid said that the conference would put the lives of these Jews in danger.

In a document sent to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed by Avner Arazi, Israeli consul in Istanbul, one finds motivation for preventing the conference and corroboration for Charny's story. In this secret document, recently retrieved from the Israeli National Archive as document 404, Arazi states:

The main reason for our reckless attempts to cancel the conference was the hint that we received about Jewish refugees from Iran and Syria crossing into Turkey. [...] Veissid found that all the arguments he prepared against the conference were insignificant compared to the issue of the refugees [...] Veissid used this argument out of a sense of urgency and responsibility to our Jewish brothers and used it to convince Charny and his other partners to cancel the conference.⁴³

This very important message clearly illustrates the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' hidden motivation and elucidates previous attempts to understand Israeli foreign policy with regard to the Armenian genocide. This is a crucial piece of evidence, shedding clear light on the Israeli motivation for the policy of non-recognition.

This document shows that Israeli officials were dealing with a behind-the-scenes crisis at the time of the conference while they were pressuring the conference organizers. In the document Arazi goes on to explain that Turkey did not fully appreciate that Israel, a democratic state that values freedom of speech, had crossed the line for Turkey. He writes, 'we invested significant effort in order to reduce damages to Turkey from the Armenian participants. As a military regime, Turkey doesn't fully understand the limits of a democratic state in interfering with freedom of expression'.⁴⁴

The document also sketches the real-time decision-making process that Israeli officials apply when assessing the authenticity of a threat to Jewish life. Arazi notes that 'Turkey has always been very helpful about helping refugees fleeing through its borders. It would be unprecedented for them to send Jewish refugees back to Iran and Syria'. Whether or not the threat was real, Arazi explicitly states that the Israeli officials had been 'acting urgently' to cancel the conference. At this stage of my analysis, I will compare these discoveries with the historiography of the 1982 conference. In his book *The Banality of Indifference*, Yair Auran attempts to expose the issue of denying the Armenian genocide in exchange for protection of fleeing Jews. He notes that the Israeli Broadcasting Association's 1990 documentary film, 'Journey to Armenia', was cancelled.⁴⁵ He argues, 'The deterioration of relations with Turkey might hamper the exit of Jews from other Muslim countries, apparently Iran and Syria'.⁴⁶ He did not reference his source for this important argument. According to Arazi in document 404, rescuing the Jews from Syria and Iran was a decisive argument for cancelling the 1982 conference. Moreover, in the same chapter of Auran's book in which the documentary incident

42. Oral interview with Israel Charny, 17 July 2013, Jerusalem, Israel.

43. The Israeli National Archive, Secret Document File 103.1/404, 17 June 1982.

44. The Israeli National Archive, Secret Document File 103.1/404, 17 June 1982.

45. Yair Auran, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publications, 2000), p. 359.

46. Auran, *The Banality of Indifference*, p. 359.

is mentioned, he refers to the conference scandal of 1982;⁴⁷ he does not, however, cite the Jewish refugees argument in that context.

A second document, document 519, written by Arazi two months later, complements document 404. The second document clarifies why Israel decided to submit to Turkey's pressure to cancel the 1982 conference. Recalling a conversation he had with Kamuran Gürün, Turkey's Secretary of State, Arazi notes:

Gürün thinks that our help to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in preventing the Armenians from attending the conference primarily served us, the Jews. He argued that if Armenian participants had attended the conference, they would have helped to reinforce the anti-Semitic elements who attempt to blur the Holocaust and the existence of extermination camps with a scientific approach.⁴⁸

Arazi goes on to write that he responded to Gürün that 'it was not in consideration of the Jews but our commitment to relations with Turkey. The conference was to be open to all researchers studying the phenomenon of genocide, and for all nationalities, and it's not about putting the Armenian genocide and the Jewish Holocaust in the same box'.⁴⁹ Gürün's argument, trying to convince Arazi that the Israeli activities aimed at cancelling the conference stemmed from considerations of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, aligns well with the Israeli sensitivity towards the uniqueness of the Holocaust, which was discussed in the introduction. Instead of agreeing, Arazi chose to adhere to the official argument. What is fascinating about this conversation is what Arazi did not say: he did not refer to rescuing Jewish refugees. Such a declaration might send a message to the Turkish authorities that the strategy was effective (Israel did respond to the threat on Jewish lives), and could be used again in the future.

From Charney's testimony and Arazi's statements in document 404, it is clear that the lives of Iranian and Syrian Jews were at stake; the Turkish Foreign Ministry did not hesitate to use this sensitive situation to exert pressure on Israel. Israel responded immediately to stop Armenian participation in the conference. One can look at this scandal in light of the geopolitical climate of that period (resulting particularly from Israel's operation in Lebanon), and the patterns of dynamics between Israel and Turkey suggested by Liel and Granit in the previous section.

In an interview, Yossi Beilin deepened the insights gained from document 404 regarding the lengths Israel is willing to go to in order to protect Jewish life. He said that whenever Jewish lives are at stake, Israel does what needs to be done without hesitation. In the case of Turkey and the Armenian issue, rescuing Jews in the diaspora trumps recognizing the Armenian genocide. Beilin went on to explain how Israeli foreign policy is shaped:

We create a list of priorities, not just on small and marginal issues. These are difficult issues and difficult decisions, and only those in high levels of government have to deal with these dramatic dilemmas. The most difficult dilemmas arise when dealing with issues of aliyah⁵⁰ and the protection of Jewish life. One could say that this is a very cynical process, but it is not cynical. It is policy. This is how we shape foreign policy.⁵¹

47. Auron, *The Banality of Indifference*, pp. 354–355.

48. The Israeli National Archive, Secret Document File 103.1/519, 26 August 1982.

49. The Israeli National Archive, Secret Document File 103.1/519, 26 August 1982.

50. The return of Jews to Israel from the diaspora.

51. Oral interview with Yossi Beilin, 6 August 2013, Herzliya, Israel.

Beilin's account supports the previous evidence from declassified documents 404 and 519.

As this section illustrates, the Armenian genocide was, and still is, a sensitive issue, and the Turkish government felt compelled to impose very strict boundaries for Israel. Using the threat to Jewish lives was indeed the best card the Turkish government could use. Arazi's response to Gürün illustrates this power dynamic; Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is vulnerable to the Turkish Foreign Ministry's requests. In addition to their direct pressure on Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Turks used members of the Jewish community in Turkey to exert behind-the-scenes pressure on Israel.

Informal Ambassadors: The Turkish Jewish Elite

In this section and the next, I will address the exceptional role played by Jewish communities abroad in shaping Israel's official stance on the Armenian genocide. In this section I will explore the role of the Turkish Jewish community; in the next section I will look at the American Jewish community. In 1983, the Jewish community in Turkey numbered 20,000, according to data from Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁵² This is a relatively small number compared to Turkey's population of 67 million in the same year. This Jewish community had three leaders at the time: Rabbi David Asioe, the religious leader; Jack Kamhi, a prominent businessman with connections to high-profile Israeli politicians; and lawyer Jack Veissid, the community's president, who delivered the message to Charny about the threat to Jewish refugees.

According to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Jewish community in Turkey had an advantage over other minorities there. Because the Turkish authorities were extremely concerned about their negative public image with respect to treatment of minorities (especially the Armenians and Kurds), they resolved to make an example of their treatment of the Jews. The Jewish community in Turkey received a fair degree of independence and freedom.⁵³ In a historical analysis, Gabby Levy presents another layer of the relationship between the Jewish community and the Turkish authorities. Levy argues that the Jewish community in Turkey lived well, as long as there were no problems with Israel; for that matter, things were even better before Israel was established. From the Turkish point of view, especially in the right-wing political debate, once Israel was established, the Jewish community could go to Israel.⁵⁴ Levy claims that when Israel's actions sparked criticism from Turkey, the Jews became anxious of a backlash from the Turkish authorities and immediately sided with Turkey. The Armenian issue caused a lot of difficulty for the Jewish community in Turkey, which is why the community stood behind Turkey's position. Comparing the Turkish Jews' position to other diaspora communities, Levy comments, 'This is not the Jewish community in Australia or the United States, which enjoys freedom of speech'.⁵⁵

52. The Israeli National Archive, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Re: Discussion Regarding the Turkish Israeli Bilateral Relations. Saved Document File 103.1, 12 October 1983, Hebrew, p. 4.

53. The Israeli National Archive, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Re: Discussion Regarding the Turkish Israeli Bilateral Relations, p. 4.

54. Oral interview with Gabby Levy, 24 July 2013, Or Yehuda, Israel.

55. Oral interview with Gabby Levy, 24 July 2013, Or Yehuda, Israel.

Turkish historian Rifat Bali agrees with Levy's assessment. He notes:

The Turkish Jewish community's leadership maintains a very low profile in terms of expressing solidarity with Israel. Not only does the Turkish public have an extremely negative perception of Israel and of the demonized ideology of Zionism, but expressions of support for Israel by Turkish Jews would immediately raise allegations of disloyalty to Turkey.⁵⁶

In another publication, Bali states that the Turkish Jewish community strived to 'retain their own Jewish culture and identity alongside their Turkish identity'.⁵⁷ However, the strong Islamist and nationalist powers in Turkey prevented the Jews from achieving this balance.⁵⁸ Both Levy and Bali give insight into the difficult situation in which the Turkish Jews found themselves; they were expected to show loyalty to their native country at all times. Liel states that the Turkish government used members of the Turkish Jewish community to put pressure on Israel. Kamhi, a prominent member of the community, was especially useful because of his connections with high-profile leaders in Israel, such as Shimon Peres. In addition to using him with regard to Israel, Liel notes that during the golden period of the bilateral relationship the Turkish government used Kamhi as an informal ambassador to the Jewish lobby in the US, for example to pressure them to reject the Armenian genocide resolution.

After this introduction to the Jewish community in Turkey, I move on to a more detailed examination of the leadership's role in preventing recognition of the Armenian genocide. Returning to the 1982 conference, recall that Jack Veissid was sent to deliver a message to its organizers about the potential threat to Jewish refugees. Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs comments that the community in Turkey could not be used for the advantage of Israel: 'Even though there is a slight improvement in the status of the Jewish community, there is no opportunity to use them as a tool for our foreign policy. We can only use their leadership in technical or humanitarian issues'.⁵⁹ Who was using who seems clear here; namely, Turkey was using the Jewish community leadership not only as Jewish messengers to the Jewish state, but also as messengers for the Turkish cause. As Levy argues, there was a power imbalance.

It is now also clear that the Turkish Foreign Ministry sent Jack Veissid as the messenger to Charny to convince him to cancel the 1982 conference. Perhaps the Israelis knew about this mission and did not object, but Israel did not control Veissid, the Turks did. Based on Beilin's description of how priorities are set in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, one can conclude that they considered protecting the Jewish community in Turkey a higher priority than recognizing the Armenian genocide.

56. Rifat Bali, 'The Turkish Jewry Today', The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, <http://jcpa.org/article/turkish-jewry-today/> (Last accessed on May 11th, 2015).

57. Rifat Bali, *Model Citizens of State: The Jews of Turkey during the Multi-Party Period* (Dickinson University Press, Zoryan Institute: United Kingdom, 2012), p. 15.

58. Bali, *Model Citizens of State*, p. 15.

59. The Israeli National Archive, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Re: Discussion Regarding the Turkish Israeli Bilateral Relations, p. 4.

Informal Ambassadors: The American Jewish Pro-Israeli Lobby

The American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby also acts as a sub-state informal ambassador. Before assessing their role in the Armenian recognition issue, I will briefly introduce the dilemma faced by diaspora Jews with respect to supporting Israeli interests. While Jews in America are a minority group, they belong to a deeply rooted community operating in a liberal democracy that offers minorities a pluralistic climate. Jews are represented in key positions in American political, economic and cultural arenas. Therefore, while I will argue that both the Turkish Jews and the American Jews operated as informal ambassadors with respect to Turkey's Armenian issue, they take on this role from a very different starting position.

Israel Charny discusses the dilemma of diaspora Jewish communities, saying 'it is never exactly clear when it is "proper" for Jews outside of Israel to rally unanimously behind Israel, and when it is appropriate for them to maintain independence or even be critical of Israel's abuse of government power in Realpolitik'.⁶⁰ Abraham Foxman takes it one step further, defining the dilemma for American Jews as 'the perceived tension between the love that most American Jews feel for their spiritual homeland, Israel, and their loyalty to the country whose citizenship they are proud to claim, the United States'.⁶¹

Keeping their distinct circumstances in mind, it is possible to evaluate the role of the American Jewish community in the context of the Armenians, Turkey and Israel. In a document discussing a meeting between Gürün and the American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby, one finds answers to the question of where the American Jewish community stands on the spectrum between unquestioning support and criticism of Israel. In the meeting in New York, Jack Torchner, speaker for the World Jewish Organization, addressed the Turkish Secretary of State: 'we will not watch Turkey attack Israel day after day, while we offer you our support'.⁶² This statement is not a general demand; it is very specific.

The rabbi who participated in the meeting explains that for the preceding eight years the Armenians had been putting tremendous pressure on the Jewish lobby to support their cause for recognition, commenting that 'so far we have been able to reject this pressure'. He elaborates, 'the Armenian Archbishop comes to visit me every week, in order to get our help with the Armenian issue. What can we say to our people to justify our support for the Turkish position? You need to provide us with reasonable arguments that will satisfy Jewish and Israeli public opinion, and this will only happen if you improve your attitude towards Israel'.⁶³ Also during this meeting, Israel Zinger, Secretary-General of the American Jewish Organization, demanded that Gürün create an easier environment for the Jewish Turks.⁶⁴

The American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby gives an explicit, unequivocal message to Gürün: if you want our help with the Armenian problem, which includes rejecting the Armenian Archbishop's pleas, Turkey must improve its attitude

60. Israel Charny, *The Book of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide* (Tel-Aviv: Institute of International Conference on the Holocaust and genocide, 1982), p. 311.

61. Abraham H. Foxman, *The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 21.

62. The Israeli National Archive, Saved Document File 103.1/287, 22 April 1982.

63. The Israeli National Archive, Saved Document File 103.1/287, 22 April 1982.

64. The Israeli National Archive, Saved Document File 103.1/287, 22 April 1982.

towards Israel. This is an answer to Charny and Foxman's dilemma: the American Jewish community appears to 'rally unanimously behind Israel'. One could argue that this is just one document, evidence of one meeting, and may not represent the official attitude of the American Jewish community. However, the Turkish Foreign Minister only meets with the American Jewish community once every few years. It is therefore reasonable to assume that this document represents the perspective of the World Jewish Congress on the issue of the Armenian genocide at that time, and the perspective of the American Jewish community on supporting Israeli foreign policy.

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue that 'the core of the (American Jewish) Lobby is comprised of American Jews who make a significant effort in their daily lives to bend US foreign policy so that it advances Israel's interests. Their activities go beyond merely voting for candidates who are pro-Israel to include letter-writing, financial contributions, and supporting pro-Israel organizations'.⁶⁵ This argument might be applicable to Turkish foreign policy. It seems that if one assesses the conversation between Gürün and leading figures of the World Jewish Organization, one can conclude that the American Jewish community functions as, and could be called, the pro-Israeli lobby.

So far it seems that the American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby is committed to Israel and Israel's interests, as well as the interests of the Jewish community living in Turkey. Hence, they support Turkey's suppression of the Armenian genocide only if Turkey maintains good relations with Israel.

The Geopolitics of Memory: Israel's Foreign Policy and the Armenian Genocide

This final section will tie together findings from the previous sections and provide concluding answers to why Israel does not officially recognize the Armenian genocide. I have attempted to further the debate on Israel's Armenian genocide policy from the perspective of foreign policy, and am able to draw a number of conclusions. First, I conclude that Israel's main motivation for not recognizing the Armenian genocide is to protect Jews in potentially hostile Muslim countries. The declassified documents and complementary oral accounts are important pieces of evidence that have allowed me to penetrate the secret and silent diplomacy of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Israel's foreign policy is dictated by the need to protect Jews, and this is a systemic policy, not an anecdotal case study. This conclusion is supported by the primary sources as well as the historiography on Israel's foreign policy. The 1982 *Holocaust and genocide conference* scandal needs to be placed among the other cases revealed in the historiography. Taken together with the accounts of Sharfman, Senkman and Beilin, the accounts of protecting threatened Jews from Iran and Syria have allowed me to penetrate to the behind-the-scenes workings of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One can argue that Israel's objective remains the same in all these examples: to protect Jews. Israel turned a blind eye to immoral behaviour in Romania, supplied weapons to a military dictatorship in Argentina and now stops short of doing the 'right' thing for the Armenians, all in an effort to protect Jews in danger.

65. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 18.

My second conclusion is that Jewish communities outside of Israel have not only supported Israel but have also played a role in formulating Israel's foreign policy on the genocide. I demonstrate this with the example of the Turkish Jewish community and the American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby. Motivated by the vulnerability of their community, Turkish Jewish community leaders Veissid and Kamhi worked very hard to pressure Israeli officials, using the threat to Jews both within and outside of Turkey as a tool to prioritize Turkish interests above the interests of the Armenian community. The powerful American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby, on the other hand, was not motivated by vulnerability. It attempted to promote two agendas: to protect Jews in the Middle East, and to encourage a cooperative alliance between Israel and Turkey that would benefit Israel. In exchange they would support Turkey on the Armenian issue.

I have also briefly addressed the ongoing historiographical debate on the uniqueness of the Holocaust and ethnic competition. My third conclusion, based on an analysis of the discussion between Gürün and Arazi, is that ethnic competition and a desire to keep the Holocaust unique is only a secondary motivator for Israel's refusal to recognize the Armenian genocide. Because of his familiarity with Jewish sensitivity regarding the Holocaust, Gürün argues that Arazi would not want to jeopardize its uniqueness. The way Arazi responded does not suggest that this sensitivity affected his actions. One might hypothesize that Gürün also knew that many Jewish and Israeli scholars do maintain that the Holocaust is unique, those referred to as the 'nationalist' group earlier in this article. However, this is a secondary and complementary factor to the main interests of Israel's foreign policy and the geopolitics of memory.

Finally I must turn attention to the current literature. As I highlighted in my analysis of document 404, in *The Banality of Indifference* Yair Auron refers to Jews fleeing from Syria and Iran in the 1990s, but does not reference any primary or secondary sources. The research void, namely the absence of primary and secondary references, continues in Auron's second publication, *The Banality of Denial*. One could argue that at the time of his research, the documents were still classified and unavailable to him. That said, I would like outline two points of critique of Auron's methodology. In *The Banality of Denial*, Auron argues that 'because of the different nature of the present study, it is based more on present sources, mainly newspapers and other media, speeches, writing, and less on archival sources. It is difficult to imagine that archival sources, when they will be available, would change the main lines of the picture we describe'.⁶⁶ With the attention to Auron's last quote, this article shows that archival sources do shine new light on Israel's non-recognition of the Armenian genocide. My first point of critique is that Auron could have conducted oral interviews to confirm or dismiss his preliminary hypothesis about Jews fleeing from Syria and Iran in the 1990s. My second critique is that although Auron discusses sub-state actors, such as the liberal American Jews, who are relevant to the Armenians and their battle for recognition, he omits the important analysis of the sub-state actors who are relevant to Israel's foreign policy (the American Jewish pro-Israeli lobby and the Turkish Jewish community). This article addresses Auron's research void, seeking to inject fresh, solid insights into Israel's reasons for refusing to recognize the Armenian genocide.

66. Yair Auron, *The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2004), p. 7. For examples regarding the pro-Armenian informal ambassadors, see pp. 101–109 and 111–118.

In conclusion, Israel is motivated by geopolitical interests in the Middle East. The ongoing, urgent need to protect the lives of Jews in the region far outweighs the benefit of recognizing the genocide perpetuated against the Armenians, genocide that occurred 100 years ago.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.