

CHAPTER 4

The “Sharettist Option” Revisited

NEIL CAPLAN

As complicated and intractable as the Israeli–Arab–Palestinian impasse has become, so too have our analyses of its causes become complex and even convoluted. Likewise, many of our proposed solutions have become marred by wishful thinking, self-delusion, faulty perception and self-fulfilling prophecy. Although a complete understanding of the dynamics of this protracted dispute requires close examination of all the protagonists, their deeds and their ways of thinking, the present discussion is only a fragment, one that attempts to shed some light on Israeli attempts to understand and respond to this still-unresolved conflict.

With the exception of the 1990s, Israel has fought and won a major war or battle in every decade since the 1947 United Nations recommendation to partition British Mandatory Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. In periods of post-war elation following Israel’s military successes and in times of relative calm, there is a tendency among pro-Israeli commentators towards relief and self-congratulation. But all too soon, according to the unhappy pattern, the optimism is shattered by a recurrence of violence, forcing these same analysts back to the drawing board.

Especially in times of tension, uncertainty and killing, Israel’s public and decision-makers alike revert to a security-driven mode of thinking that is based on the logic of *ein breira* (“there is no choice”) and of an “iron wall” that must be created and maintained to ensure the security of the Jewish state. These ideas, I would suggest, are themselves derived from a selective reading of the historical pattern of these recurring outbreaks. The prescription advocated by this school of thought is that Israel’s actions and

reactions must be guided by the premise that “the Arabs” understand and respect only force. Another belief of these “activists” is that “the Arabs” will one day accept the existence (although not the legitimacy) of a Jewish state in former Palestine only through repeated manifestations of Israeli power – whether acting as a proxy and protégé of an unbeatable world power, or through its own hard-nosed bargaining, self-protection via the “iron wall”, or retaliation operations with a “strong hand” or an “iron fist”.

This militant mindset has been popularized by heroic mythmaking around the legendary bravado and charismatic leadership of colorful figures like David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Dayan, and Ariel Sharon. Indeed, the history of Israel – its creation, trials and tribulations – has been largely told through accounts of the careers and achievements of these men, and the feats of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) which they were instrumental in creating and developing.

One of the few Israelis of stature who opposed the line taken by David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister and defense minister (1948–53, 1955–63), was Moshe Sharett (1894–1965). Sharett was the country’s first foreign minister (1948–56) and its second prime minister (1954–55). He was responsible for the less glamorous day-to-day diplomatic and political work that was required in winning international acceptance and alliances for the Jewish state, essential prerequisites for her prosperity and stability. If Ben-Gurion is seen as the father of the country, the IDF, and the Ministry of Defense, Sharett was the father of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose forerunner (the Political Department of the pre-state Jewish Agency) he, as Moshe Shertok, had personally created, staffed and directed.

Ben-Gurion and Sharett had worked in close if uneasy partnership since the early 1930s, but their relations reached the breaking point during 1955–56 as the country slid into the second of its recurring wars with the Arab states. During Sharett’s active career, but especially following his premature and forced retirement in June 1956, two competing approaches to Israel’s foreign and defense policy were already evident. Sharett’s own diary distinguishes between the “activist” and “Sharettist” approaches – a dichotomy which has subsequently guided the analyses of scholars like Michael Brecher, Avi Shlaim, Gabriel Sheffer, Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov and others. The so-called “Sharett school”, favoring caution and moderation in international diplomacy, competed with the so-called “Ben-Gurion school”, which favored daring and military prowess, while minimizing the importance of gaining or maintaining outsiders’ approval for Israel’s behavior.¹

Reproduced below for the English-speaking reader are extensive excerpts from a lecture given by Moshe Sharett at the Mapai Party’s Beit Berl on October 2, 1957, almost a year after Israel’s decisive victory in the

Sinai/Suez War and 16 months after his resignation from Ben-Gurion's cabinet and replacement as foreign minister by Golda Meir.²

Revisiting the text of Sharett's 1957 speech – allowed to speak for itself, with little further comment – serves as a reminder that there was, in Israel's formative years, someone who articulated an alternative vision to the “activist” one that has become erroneously viewed as being the only available course for the county's leaders to pursue. Rereading this text almost half a century later raises several interesting questions, to which readers are invited to attempt their own answers: to what extent has the original rivalry between the two approaches – military toughness vs. diplomatic moderation – been carried down through succeeding generations of Israel's political leadership? Has any leader since Sharett's heyday (1954–55) been truly willing or able to pursue a “Sharettist approach” in opposition to the self-fulfilling *ein breira* mentality? Looking back after all these years, does it not seem that the dominant activist approach has been given ample opportunity to prove itself – yet with little long-term benefit to show? Indeed, has it not shown itself, in retrospect, to be marred by dangerous doses of faulty perception, wishful thinking, and self-delusion?

And, finally, two disturbing questions, given the difficulty of imagining the rise of a “Sharettist” politician in Israel in troubled times such as these: can the Sharettist approach, as outlined in the 1957 excerpts below, serve to inspire alternative, more creative, more humane, and ultimately more successful policy choices for Israel's leaders? Or will their struggle to achieve acceptance by and peace with the Palestinians and the Arab world remain unfulfilled?

Extracts from Sharett's Lecture at Beit Berl, October 2, 1957

The English translation below follows the one given in *The Jerusalem Post*, October 18, 1966, with corrections based on the Hebrew as published posthumously in the Labor Party publication, *Ot*, vol. 1, September 1966, under the title, “Israel & the Arabs: Two Views”.

This lecture was inadvertently omitted from the 1978 Hebrew edition of *Yoman Ishi* [Personal Diary, 1953–1957], Yaakov Sharett (ed.), 8 volumes (Tel Aviv: Sifryat Ma'ariv, 1978). Extensive excerpts from this talk will be included in the forthcoming abridged English edition of *Yoman Ishi* being prepared by Neil Caplan and Yaakov Sharett. Other portions of the English version of this important diary have appeared in “The 1956 Sinai Campaign Viewed from Asia”, *Israel Studies* 7:1 (spring 2002), 81–103, and “The 1953 Qibya Raid Revisited”, *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXXI/4 (number 124), summer 2002, 77–98.



I intend devoting this talk to the most pressing problem of Israel’s foreign policy: the problem of our relations with the Arab world that surrounds us.

This problem is older than the State itself. [--- The early pioneering settlers] were so filled with the sense of the historic justice of our claim that we did not consider how this justice looked from the other side. [---] Nor did we realize the depth of national consciousness in the Arab world. We said the Arab world was great and wide; it had many tens of millions of inhabitants; many hundreds of thousands of square miles of territory – it would make no difference to the Arab world as a whole if this small section of ours, one corner, were to lose its totally Arab character and acquire a totally Jewish character. [---] We offered them a mess of economic and social potage [---] and expected them to sell their national birthright. When I say this I am looking at it with Arab eyes. [---] [T]he suggestion that the Arabs lived on a very low standard and would therefore be responsive to material advantages was repeated in many publications.³

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With the end of the fighting in the Sinai Peninsula [in November 1956, while Sharett was touring Asia], I had the impression the country was caught up, again, in the illusion of an imminent peace: as though our decisive victory in Sinai had prepared the ground for peace. [---] I pondered how it was that we had not learnt enough from the first disappointment that had followed upon the [1949] Armistice Agreements [signed with Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria].

[---] The question of peace will not be solved either by material arguments or by logic. [---] [I]t is ultimately a matter of willingness [---] whether we create an atmosphere conducive to peace or at least remove mental obstacles to peace.⁴

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The course of conduct which Israel should best adopt in the face of Arab opposition and enmity permits of approaches which are diametrically opposed. At the same time there are a number of basic elements upon which responsible public opinion – within the parties and between them – has reached common consensus.

The first basic element is security. The territorial integrity of the State of Israel, the lives of its citizens, their property, freedom of movement, work and development – these must be defended at all costs. In this sphere there can be no compromise and no withdrawal, since the very soul of the state and the existence of its people are at stake.

The second basic element is the Arab refugee problem. Here, perhaps,

one cannot speak in quite the same overall and absolute terms as with security. Nonetheless, I feel one can safely say that the point of view in this country generally opposes the return of the refugees; and this view is justified, in the short as well as the long term. I do not want to treat the problem in detail, since that deserves an entire lecture in itself. But I do want to say that, in our analysis of this issue, we at no time declared that not a single Arab refugee must return, under any circumstances. We did state that the return of the Arab refugees to this country cannot constitute a solution to their problem. By that we implied that, if there existed a program to reunite families, its scope could be broadened. Instead of bringing back children up to the age of 15, we could also admit them up to 18; or we could allow in sisters, aunts, etc. This would be a response to the sufferings of the individual and the family. Arab families resident in Israel would be responsible for the absorption of their children and relatives. This is a question of human consideration, but not political right. The state does not acknowledge the absolute right of any refugee to return, nor is it prepared to shoulder the burden of concern for their absorption into the economic and social fabric of Israeli life.⁵

There is a third basic element on which all are agreed, including Herut: Israel's vision and aim are not eternal warfare, but peace with the neighbouring Arab peoples.

The fact that the nation shares a common view on these three basic elements does not suffice to solve the problems of day-to-day policy. There is still room for two approaches, and I believe that these two approaches indeed exist. The one approach says that the only language the Arabs understand is force. The State of Israel is so tiny and so isolated; it may perhaps be so weak (in terms of relative area, population and potential) that, if it does not increase its actual strength by a very high coefficient of demonstrated action, it will run into trouble. From time to time the State of Israel must give unmistakable proof of its strength, and show that it is able and ready to use force in a crushing and highly effective manner. If it does not give such proof, it will be engulfed and may even disappear from the face of the earth.

As far as peace is concerned – says this school of thought – it is doubtful in any event. Whatever happens, it is very remote. If peace comes, it will only be when the Arabs are convinced that this country will not be brought to its knees. There are better prospects of peace coming because they are convinced of our strength than through speeches about Israel's honest and genuine desire for peace. The problem of peace, therefore, need not hamper our considerations when it comes to deciding on some large-scale show of strength to solve a problem of everyday security. If such measures as reprisal raids or new campaigns fan the flame of hatred once again, that need cause no alarm; the flame is burning whatever we do. On the other

hand, if we desist from vigorous reaction for fear of stepping up enmity, we shall lose more than we gain.

If we add to these arguments the natural human inclination to react; if we add the special sensitivity characteristic of the Jew that people may perhaps suspect him of weakness; if we add the proximity in time to the Golden Age of our triumph in war, the laurels won by the Israel Defense Forces [in October/November 1956] – we shall understand the factors behind the atmosphere fostering this approach, over and above the political and military considerations, which are very weighty in themselves.

According to the second school of thought, the question of peace must not be lost sight of for one single moment. This is not only a political consideration; in the long view, it is decisive from a military point of view. Without diminishing the importance of considerations of day-to-day security, we must always bring the question of peace into our overall calculations. We have to curb our reactions. And the question always remains: Has it really been proven that reprisals establish the security for which they were planned?⁶

Let us assume that the first school of thought holds sway. Clearly, for every Arab assault there must be a reaction. This reaction can only take a military form. Do people consider that, when military reactions outstrip in their severity the events that caused them, grave processes are set in motion that widen the gulf and thrust our neighbors into the extremist camp? How can this deterioration be halted? Is the problem given due thought, or has the military routine merely seized control of the situation?

Those who support the first approach say that the evolution of events was inevitable. Arab hatred of Israel is an immutable element of the situation. The integration of the Arab–Israel dispute into the Cold War has become a part of world realities. The situation grew inexorably more and more complicated, and the danger to Israel inevitably increased. In the absence of a vigorous reaction, things would have been worse, the crisis would have come sooner and matters would have been more serious. We obtained arms, in France, for example, only thanks to a certain course of action, and it was thanks only to the victories we won that our security was assured. We had hoped that the impact of the blow we struck would also have brought peace closer, since that is the only language our neighbors understand. If this prospect has failed to come to fruition, that’s because it never existed anyway. The situation is grave. We do not claim that everything is fine as it is, but in our grim circumstances this approach has won us considerable gains.

It is difficult, indeed, to question these achievements. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that, if we had adopted a different approach, if we had sought to minimize incidents rather than play them up, if we had not taken the course of Qibya, Gaza and so forth, then the political deployment of

the other side would have assumed a different pattern. Nasser might perhaps not have been forced into the Czech deal [i.e., for Soviet arms, announced in September 1955], and the Soviet Union might not have found such an easy opening for its penetration of the Middle East. We might have suffered a little more in the meantime, but our overall situation would have been less serious.⁷

On February 28 1955, a major Israeli military attack on Gaza City (also in retaliation for Palestinian *fida'yun* incursions into Israel) killed 38 and wounded 31 (mostly military personnel). The Gaza raid, because of the special humiliation it caused to [Egypt's president Gamal 'Abd al-] Nasser, has often been cited as a major cause of his regime's turn-away from the Western powers and to the Soviet Union, and as the beginning of the breakdown of the armistice and the cycle of events leading to the Sinai/Suez war of October–November 1956.

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I have been asked whether the Sinai campaign was worthwhile. It is obvious that with circumstances as they came to be, there is ample justification for the view that the Sinai campaign saved us from disaster. Yet that is not an accurate summing up of the historical and political issues at stake. First must come a more searching question: did the circumstances that rendered the Sinai campaign inevitable have to come into being? There is a need for a soul-searching analysis in this respect. I shall not pronounce a negative judgment; but on no account will I accept an historical ruling that says these circumstances were inevitable. There is room for thorough study.

What led to the Sinai campaign? The build-up of Egyptian strength in the Sinai Peninsula and the role it fulfilled as a base for *fida'yun* activities. Such is the essential thesis. Nobody denies that this situation had come about. But the question is: What led to the build-up of forces, what led the Egyptians to assume this stance? This was a process, the privilege and the honor of participating in which – in all modesty – I would not deny Israel. We were an active factor in this process, from Gaza [February 1955] and Khan Yunis, to the trial [of Jewish saboteurs] in Egypt.⁸

The Khan Yunis attack came in response to three separate incidents of Egyptian ambush and sabotage on Israel's side of the Gaza border in late August 1955, killing 11 Israelis and wounding nine others. The Israeli retaliation of August 31 left 25 Palestinian *fida'yun*, 10 Egyptian soldiers and 19 civilians dead. This action had the immediate effect of halting Egyptian-sponsored *fida'yun* raids from Gaza (although not from third countries), but also rendered null the secret, eleventh-hour mediation efforts by an American Quaker.

There is, of course, great value in Israel being a strong country, with an international reputation as a small but powerful state, a tough nut to crack.

(I do not present this as my own opinion, but it is one that may exist.) There is undoubtedly great value in Israel gaining glory as a land of heroes. But someone may well ask: Is it to our advantage or disadvantage for Israel to earn a reputation as a country of its word? Is that an asset, or not? It could be argued that it is of no importance, that it is preferable for Israel not to fence herself in behind the prophetic legacy, the vision of justice, righteousness and truth. But if the State of Israel upholds these virtues, she owes something to their observance, even if this means a sacrifice. If not, she is maneuvering herself into an impasse from which there is no exit morally and, in the long run, politically as well.

I utterly reject the approach that it is permissible to ask Israel for any concessions whatsoever for the sake of peace. I refute the thesis that peace can be purchased at the price of concessions. Peace can be bought at the price of mutual advantages. Mutual advantages are not the same as concessions. If we offer Jordan, for instance, which is landlocked at present and has but one sea outlet at Aqaba, a corridor through to the Mediterranean, that is no concession. If I give a right-of-way to people and goods, and set up a free port in Haifa (not the same as transforming Haifa into a free port) and goods are loaded and offloaded through an enclave controlled by the Israel Police, but no customs dues are levied, I do not curtail Israeli sovereignty thereby. I wield Israeli sovereignty in order to establish satisfactory mutual relations with a neighboring country to the advantage of both sides. If a passenger boards a train in Cairo and travels through Israel to Beirut to spend a holiday in Lebanon – does this constitute a concession? A concession implies the renunciation of an area, or of sovereignty. It would be a concession if we curtailed immigration for the sake of peace. Suggestions like that are not open to discussion. They will not bring peace any closer. If we start adopting that course, the Arabs will say: “We were stubborn for 10 years – now they are beginning to falter; let’s be stubborn just a little longer and they will give away more and more.”

This is a question of the political climate surrounding the problem. In a certain political climate, peace is attainable even without concessions. In the climate of the Middle East, we constitute a factor. We are not the sole or the decisive factor – but we are one worthy of consideration. Let us not belittle the climate, and the role we play in creating that climate. [- - -] I do not believe we can clear Israeli policy of all responsibility. We had better not rule ourselves out entirely. What we do counts for something. Even what we say is worth something.

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Notes

- 1 Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel: Setting, Images, Process* (London/Toronto/Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1972), ch.12 (“Ben-Gurion and Sharett: Contrasting Views of the World”); Avi Shlaim, “Conflicting Approaches to Israel’s Relations with the Arabs: Ben Gurion and Sharett, 1953–1956”, *Middle East Journal* 37:2 (Spring 1983), 180–201; Gabriel Sheffer, “The Confrontation Between Moshe Sharett and David Ben-Gurion”, in Shmuel Almog (ed.), *Zionism and the Arabs: Essays* (Jerusalem: Historical Society of Israel/Zalman Shazar Center, 1983), 95–147; Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, “Ben-Gurion and Sharett: Conflict Management and Great Power Constraints in Israeli Foreign Policy,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 24 (1988), 330–56.
- 2 In *The Foreign Policy System of Israel* (pp. 285–88) Michael Brecher draws heavily on this speech for his early 1970s analysis of Sharett’s political philosophy: “The most incisive comparison of the Ben Gurion and Sharett images of ‘the Arabs’,” writes Brecher, “was provided by Sharett himself in a brilliant lecture one year after the Sinai Campaign As always, his analysis was lucid and intellectually honest.” (p. 285).
- 3 For illustrations of how these arguments were advanced by Ben-Gurion and others in the pre-state period, see Neil Caplan, *Palestine Jewry and the Arab Question, 1917–1925* (London: Frank Cass, 1978), 26–27 and ch. 9; David Ben-Gurion, *My Talks with Arab Leaders* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 15–62, 80, 83, 124; Neil Caplan, *Futile Diplomacy, volume 2: Arab-Zionist Negotiations and the End of the Mandate* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 8, 189–92.
- 4 Responding in his diary to a post-war Israeli editorial a year earlier, Sharett had written in a similar vein: “The problem of peace between us and the Arabs is not simply a matter of submission to force and making compromises with dishonor, but rather a complex psychological process, a fundamental change of heart, a changed atmosphere, a different view of the future. It might well be that we had no alternative but to initiate [military] actions for our security, but we should be aware of the fact that these will not bring us any closer to peace. On the contrary, they will distance us from it even more. And, knowing this in advance, we must consider the advantages and disadvantages of a military operation. But we should not cherish any illusions that peace is achieved by war – our peace will be achieved only by peaceful means. This is neither naivete nor devoutness nor an exhibition of morality. This is the sober and practical view of matters as they really stand” *Yoman Ishi* VII: 1892–93 (December 2, 1956).
- 5 Despite his dovish reputation in some circles, Sharett was one of the original hardliners on the questions of the creation the Palestinian refugees and the responsibility for a solution to their predicament. As early as July 1948, Sharett (then Shertok) replied to UN mediator Count Bernadotte’s plea on behalf of an early return of an estimated 300,000 Arab refugees by insisting that full peace had to precede any consideration of the question, which was in any case, he argued, one of relief more than one of return. In a subsequent letter to Bernadotte, the new Israeli foreign minister focused on the responsibility of the Arab states for launching their war against Israel and declared that the

Israel government was “not in a position . . . to readmit the Arabs who fled from their homes on any substantial scale. The Palestinian Arab exodus of 1948”, he added, “is one of those cataclysmic phenomena which, according to the experience of other countries, changed the course of history. . . . When the Arab States are ready to conclude a peace treaty with Israel, this question will come up for constructive solution as part of the general settlement . . . ” Shertok to Bernadotte, August 1, 1948, *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel*, vol.1: May 14–September 30 1948, ed. by Yehoshua Freundlich (Jerusalem: Israel State Archives, 1981), 443–44. Cf. *ibid.*, 412.

- 6 On numerous occasions during his time in office Sharett made it clear that he was not opposed to reprisal raids *in principle* and was prepared, if necessary, to risk the disapproval of the UN and the powers. But he regarded resort to military force as acceptable only when it appeared to be the lesser of two evils, and he favored a measured response over excessive retaliation that would only lead, in his view, to a thirst for revenge and an escalation of violence. In comparison to his own restrained approach, Sharett referred to Ben-Gurion’s “system of angry reactions designed to bring matters to a crisis point, as though redemption will thereby come about as a result.” *Yoman Ishi* IV: 920 (11 Apr. 1955). Cf. *Yoman Ishi* II: 455 (12 Apr. 1954); Sheffer, “The Confrontation”, 127, 133.
- 7 In October 1953, a special commando unit of the IDF led by Ariel Sharon attacked the Jordanian village of Qibya in retaliation for a terrorist attack that had murdered an Israeli mother and two children in the town of Yahud. The “Unit 101” assault killed 69 Jordanian civilians, including many women and children who were buried under the rubble of the 45 houses that were blown up. While this raid (at first disingenuously attributed by Ben-Gurion to unauthorized border vigilantes) may have temporarily reduced cross-border attacks on Israel, in the medium and long term it resulted in Jordan and other Arab states adopting more aggressive stances against Israel and against any peace initiatives.
- 8 The latter reference is to the notorious “Lavon affair”, in which Israeli agents (including Egyptian Jews) detonated explosives against British and American targets in Cairo and Alexandria on orders from Israeli intelligence in the summer of 1954. The aim was to discredit the Nasser regime in Western eyes. But Egyptian police exposed the espionage and sabotage ring, and a number of conspirators were tried in December 1954 and January 1955. One Jew died under interrogation, another committed suicide and two were executed following trial, contributing, among other things, to a stop of secret peace feelers between Nasser’s and Sharett’s emissaries in Paris. The responsibility for this fiasco remained a source of political intrigue and instability in Israel for decades.