

THE IMPACT OF ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE CASE OF UZBEKISTAN

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The demise of the Soviet Union, and the emancipation of its Central Asian republics, has led numerous authors and pundits to herald the arrival of a revived “Great Game;” a now global competition for influence and strategic access. The relative merits and advantages of a wide range of actors has heretofore been chronicled: the United States, Russian Federation, People’s Republic of China, Turkey, Islamic Republic of Iran, and even Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and India. To date, however, there has been little attention focused on the role of the State of Israel in the former Soviet South. Curiously, it is the State of Israel that has quietly developed the closest and greatest relations

with the Muslim republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Within the last decade, the State of Israel has established extremely close relations with the newly independent nations of the region. By following Israel’s traditional foreign policy objectives, Tel Aviv has succeeded where other nations have floundered. In a relatively short time, it has achieved very close diplomatic, economic, and security ties with Central Asia, virtually unnoticed by the outside world.

Israel has become a very successful player in Central Asia, influencing everything from pipeline construction to defense spending. Therefore, un-

derstanding the actions and intentions of this little studied actor is rapidly growing in importance as the region continues to evolve. It is the aim of this article to analyze and evaluate the role of Israeli foreign policy in Uzbekistan, and its impact on the region with a special emphasis on regional stability.

In order to deal with the new realities quickly being created on the ground in Central Asia, Israel first needed to create a framework with which to engage the republics. This strategy was primarily to ensure that the republics did not align themselves against Tel Aviv, and to prevent the perceived specter of Khomeinism from taking hold. Broadly speaking, there are nine identifiable Israeli foreign policy objectives in Central Asia. These nine interdependent objectives are as follows:

- To prevent the spread of Iranian influence among the states of the former Soviet Union;
- To remove the emphasis on the Arab world within the Greater Middle East;

- To avert the focus from the Middle East Peace Process;
- To maintain and expand the strategic relationship with the United States;
- To curb the development of hostile regimes, and the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD);
- To foster the creation of “moderate” Muslim states;
- To encourage the development of an economic hinterland;
- To expand and support domestic military preparedness and technologies through the sale of military hardware to foreign states;
- To ensure the protection of local Jewish communities and cultural sites.

For the purposes of this article, these nine Israeli policy objectives have been divided into three components: diplomatic efforts, economic and commercial relations, and military and security cooperation.

Israeli Perceptions of Central Asia

Fresh in the minds of Israel’s leaders were several notions that greatly influenced their perception vis-à-vis the new republics. Primary was the memory of the Soviet Union supporting the Arab and Palestinian cause through both words and deeds; therefore, as successor states to the Soviet Union, the republics of Central Asia were to be viewed with much skepticism by Tel Aviv.¹ As a result, ensuring that these new republics did not follow in the tradition of the Soviet Union became a prime goal for the government in Tel Aviv.

Secondly, the Israeli media was filled with many stories—composed of few facts however—of how the Muslims of Central Asia had been supportive of Saddam Hussein against the allied coalition in the 1991 Gulf War, and therefore against Israel.² A third factor was that at the time Israel did not have much success in dealing with Muslim nations. Fourth and finally, just as Central Asia represented an unknown quantity for many in the West, the consensus in Israel was no exception.

These four pre-existing popular interpretations of Central Asia, when coupled with the black and white terms in which policy is generally created in Israel did not greatly add to the spirit in Tel Aviv. That is to say, Israeli policy makers have tended to view issues relating to national security as questions of national survival, and therefore as a zero sum game in which the State of Israel either wins, or it loses. As losing in this sense means the destruction of the State, Israel must never lose. The formation of its rela-

¹ In his memoirs (*Envoy to Moscow: Memoirs of an Israeli Ambassador 1988-1992*, The Cummings Center Series, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., London, 1996), former Israeli Ambassador to Moscow Aryeh Levin relates an exchange with Deputy Foreign Minister Boris Kolokolov that took place in late March 1992 on the subject of continued arms sales to states hostile to Tel Aviv, in particular, a US\$2 billion sale to Tehran alone. Kolokolov, responsible for the Middle East at the Foreign Ministry, remained quiet according to Levin. Kolokolov’s wife, however, injected that as long as Russians wanted to live, they would need money. This episode indicates that Israeli concerns were not without basis in fact.

² See either *The Jerusalem Post* or *Ha’aretz* for such stories. Also based on private conversations with the author.

tionship with Central Asia was no different. Current thinking at the time held that developing positive relations with the new republics was paramount to the survival of the state. Then Army Chief of Staff General Ehud Barak stated at the time that the “new Muslim republics in Asia don’t seem ... something that will add to our health, at least in the long term.”³

Fear of Iranian Influence: The Specter of Khomeinism

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 dramatically altered the geopolitical landscape throughout the world. In Tel Aviv, the unfolding events in Central Asia were being watched with particular interest. Israel’s greatest fear at the time was that the new republics would fall under the sway of Iran’s fiery brand of revolutionary Islam and adopt Tehran’s fierce opposition to the very existence of the Jewish State. The fact that Kazakhstan gained independence as a virtual nuclear power certainly raised additional concerns throughout Israel’s foreign policy community.

Just how predominantly Shi’a, Persian-speaking Iran was to make inroads in Sunni, predominantly Turkic-speaking Central Asia—with Tajikistan being the notable exception—was evidently not much examined at the time in Tel Aviv, nor in London or Washington for that matter. However, both Tel Aviv and Washington had deemed Iran a threat to the security of Central Asia,⁴ and by extension a threat to Israel itself. Rather, if Tehran was given free reign in Central Asia, the security of the State of Israel would suffer.

Diplomatic Efforts

Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, one of its primary goals has been to guarantee its survival through the achievement of legitimacy in the eyes of its detractors. Tel Aviv has pursued a variety of strategies in order to accomplish this goal, most notably its famed “periphery policy” and the Middle East Peace Process. Both of these have held that normalizing relations with potential adversaries is essential to survival of the state.

Diplomatic precedents

In its periphery policy, Israel sought to create close relations with those non-Arab states at the “peripheries” of the Middle East “that, as David Ben-Gurion put it, lay beyond the ‘Arab fence.’”⁵ Most notably, these states included pre-Revolutionary Iran and secular Turkey. By anchoring itself to these strong states which also viewed the Arab world with some suspicion, Tel Aviv attempted to protect itself by aligning with similarly minded nations. For some Israeli leaders, this relatively short-lived policy provided an important benefit which they saw as being of help in gaining recognition for their state. That is, the shifting of the focus of the Middle East from being simply Arab, but to also include Persian, Turkish, Berber, and Israeli. The logic held that if the focus was removed from the Arab-Israeli conflict, more nations would seek to establish relations with Tel Aviv.

³ D. Pipes, “The Event of Our Era: Former Soviet Muslim Republics Change the Middle East,” in: *Central Asia and the World: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan*, ed. by M. Mandelbaum, New York, 1994, p. 48. Quoted from: Israeli Television, 11 September, 1991.

⁴ See: A. O’Sullivan, “US, Israel Conclude Strategic Dialogue,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 6 June, 1997, p. 3.

⁵ Ph. Robins, “The Middle East and Central Asia,” in: *The New Central Asia and Its Neighbors*, ed. by P. Ferdinand, London, 1994, p. 66.

The current Middle East Peace Process can also be interpreted as a means to solidify the State of Israel. Through negotiating peace with its primarily Arab neighbors, Israel stands to not only secure the safety of its citizens, but also gain the international recognition that it has long sought. For example, Israel's position in the United Nations would be finally established as either an Asian, Middle Eastern, or even European member.

Therefore, it is not surprising that during the previous lull in the peace talks, Israel's relationship with the Central Asian republics truly began to emerge. At the time, this fact was widely written about in the Arab and Persian press. Many Arab commentators saw linkages between the Netanyahu government's intransigence in negotiations and the development of ties with Central Asia. Israel and Netanyahu were charged with avoiding the "consequences of economic cooperation"⁶ and "sidestepping the Arab world."⁷ Likewise, for engaging Israel while the peace process withered the republics also were subjected to a wide range of criticisms, ranging from authoritarianism to renouncing Islam.⁸ When looking back at the recent history of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, one can now discern trends regarding the status of Israeli-Central Asian relations in which during "lulls" in the negotiating process, Tel Aviv would ramp up its engagement with the former Soviet republics.

Diplomatic Overtures: Relations with the Muslim World

It is important to note that at the time of the independence of the Central Asian republics, the State of Israel had only secured a peace treaty with Egypt, the Camp David Accords of 1978.⁹ Israel was still technically in a state of war with the remainder of the Arab world, originating from the 1948 War of Independence. The peace with Cairo was at best a cold peace, ambassadors had been exchanged, and relations normalized, but there was little more. Relations with Turkey were still several years away from blossoming into their current state. At the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey was the only other Muslim nation to recognize Israel, a precondition for Ankara's admission to NATO.¹⁰ Likewise, other peace deals were still yet to come. The Oslo Accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization (September 1993) and the Jordanian-Israeli Peace Treaty (26 October, 1994) were still approximately two, and three, years away, respectively.¹¹ For this reason, Tel Aviv was quick to act; "In addition to the usual reasons for seeking good relations, they [the Israelis] particularly welcomed warm ties with predominantly Muslim states."¹² This was essential to undercut Israel's so-called "anti-Muslim" image, as well as the *perception* of Israel abroad as being anti-Muslim.

Relations with the Republics

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel officially established its embassies in Uzbekistan in February 1992, Kyrgyzstan in March 1992, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in April of 1992, and over a

⁶ "Netanyahu Seen Trying to Sidestep the Arabs by Forging Ties with Central Asian States," *Mideast Mirror*, 1 July, 1998, p. 19. Quoted from: Atef al-Gomhari, *al-Ahram* (Cairo), 1 July, 1998.

⁷ Ibidem. For similar articles in the Persian press, see either the *Salam*, *Hamshahri*, or *Ettela'at* newspapers (all Tehran).

⁸ See, for example: "Uzbekistan's 'Unholy Alliance' with Israel," *Mideast Mirror*, 21 October, 1998, p. 12. Quoted from: Mohammad al-Sammak, *al-Ahram* (Cairo), 21 October, 1998.

⁹ See: Dr. David Menashri, conversation with the author, 7 July, 1999.

¹⁰ Based on private conversations with the author, in London and Israel.

¹¹ See: Sh. Hunter, "Central Asia Since Independence," *The Washington Papers*, ed. by Walter Laqueur, No. 168, London, 1996, p. 143.

¹² D. Pipes, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

year later in Turkmenistan in October 1993.¹³ For the leadership of the republics, “ties with Israel symbolized an antifundamentalist orientation. A pro-Israel outlook was understood to enhance one’s standing in the West.”¹⁴ Relations with Tel Aviv were also being sought because Israel was also seen as a conduit to Western aid dollars. This notion should not be overlooked. With little advance warning, the Central Asian republics were transformed from subsidized and protected components of a global superpower to third world states with no experience of independent governance.

Israel was also viewed by the republics as very much an example to emulate. It is only one of a handful of states that has both successfully industrialized and been able to maintain a strong defense posture.¹⁵ “Israel’s powerful image promises much to these countries, which perceive it as a model state: small but politically and economically strong, and both democratic and secular.”¹⁶ As Raphael Israeli has written, Israel demonstrated that through modern technology, scientific means, and “certain sociopolitical” values, small nations can be powerful and advanced countries.¹⁷ Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the relations between Israel and the republics were not purely a one-way avenue of exchange: simply put, Israel was—and is—a very attractive partner for these new states.

The Russian newspaper *Rossiyskaya gazeta* ran a noteworthy article on 20 January, 1992. Entitled “U.S.A. Encourages Muslim Republics to Follow Turkey: Israel Makes Inroads,” it stated that officials of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs “recommended that diplomatic missions be opened”¹⁸ in the republics “and that they be offered the services of experts in all spheres – from agriculture to defense.”¹⁹ This article appeared several weeks before Tel Aviv actually began its diplomatic efforts in the region, and demonstrates very clearly that the State of Israel had a well-defined plan of action to secure its influence in the republics. The article concludes by quoting “a high-ranking Israeli spokesman”²⁰ as stating that “until they have decided what route to follow, we have an opportunity to penetrate them and influence events.”²¹ As this chapter shall illustrate, this goal was very successfully accomplished.

Central Asia and the Peace Process

Most of the states in the Middle East sought relations with the Central Asian republics. A host of actors in the region attempted to recruit the new states to their perspective of Middle Eastern issues, such as the status of Jerusalem, the state of the Peace Process, as well as general questions of the role of religion in society.

Israel was particularly concerned that the republics would side with the PLO. The potential entry of five more Muslim nations into the “rejectionist front” of nations opposed to the State of Israel drew the attention of both the Israelis and the PLO, however none more so than a nuclear-armed Kazakhstan. For Tel Aviv this issue raised serious concern, and diplomatic activity by both the Israelis and the Palestinians quickly followed.

¹³ See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Israel’s Diplomatic Missions Abroad.” Available at [<http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il>].

¹⁴ D. Pipes, op. cit.

¹⁵ See: J.R. Adelman, *Torrents of Spring: Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics*, London, 1995, pp. 64-65.

¹⁶ B. Aras, “Post-Cold War Realities: Israel’s Strategy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 4, January 1998, p. 69.

¹⁷ See: R. Israeli, “Return to the Source: The Republics of Central Asia and the Middle East,” *Central Asian Survey*, No. 13 (1), 1994, p. 29.

¹⁸ “U.S.A. Encourages Muslim Republics to Follow Turkey: Israel Makes Inroads” (excerpts), Moscow *Rossiyskaya gazeta* in Russian (20 January, 1992). Translation by *British Broadcasting Corporation, Summary of World Broadcast*, 23 January, 1992, SU/1285 A4/2[3].

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

This race for the republics was not between Israel and the Palestinians alone. Shortly after Israel began its diplomatic blitz in Central Asia, Syria also made the rounds in the region, “the ensuing competition had political, strategic, economic, ideological, and cultural dimensions.”²² Within this same time, other states, most notably Iran, also joined the fray.

Diplomatic Ties with Uzbekistan

Tashkent was first to officially establish diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, and “in its first year of independence, Uzbekistan cooperated closely with Israel.”²³ At the time, the state-owned media trumpeted this development as an event “not only in the interests of Uzbekistan and Israel, but ... of great importance to the countries of Central Asia and also Kazakhstan.”²⁴ On 24 February, 1992, the Israeli Ambassador to Moscow, Aryeh Levin, was in Tashkent to mark the occasion.²⁵ Aside from allocating a building for the embassy, Ambassador Levin met with the “leadership of the republic”²⁶ and also held talks with Foreign Minister Ubaidullah Abdurazzakov. According to Uzbek Radio, which reported the meeting, “discussions also took place on the development of direct contacts in the economic, scientific and cultural spheres, and in activities serving the interests of both countries.”²⁷ The report added, “Currently this type of cooperation in agriculture, public health, and ecology has illustrated results,”²⁸ indicating Israeli involvement prior to the establishment of relations.

Ambassador Levin adds in his memoirs the concerns that both he and his government had over the position of Islam in newly independent Uzbekistan, and its relation to the security of the State of Israel. In the conversation with Foreign Minister Abdurazzakov mentioned above, the minister indicated that “the government had not yet decided if the country would go over to the Arabic script.”²⁹ This was a response to the Ambassador’s direct question. As Levin states, usage of the Arabic script “was seen as a very strong vehicle for Muslim fundamentalism.”³⁰ The very fact that these remarks took place during Israel’s first diplomatic conversation with Tashkent illustrates the primacy that Islamic fundamentalism held for Tel Aviv. Coupled with the perception of events in the Ferghana valley (Levin makes mention of these concerns in his memoirs³¹), this again demonstrates Israel’s early concerns over the fate of Islam in Uzbekistan. For Tel Aviv, the role and position of Islam in Uzbekistan was an immediate concern, and one that could adversely affect Israeli national security. Therefore, Israel would need to do all it could to ensure that political Islam would not have a role in Uzbekistan.

In July of 1994, both *Tehran Radio* and the *Tehran Times* were highly critical of then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres’ visit to Tashkent. As the *Central Asia Monitor* reported, “Remarkably, the criticism focused as much on Uzbekistan’s leadership as on Peres; the *Tehran Times* said that Uzbek President Islam Karimov had been reinforcing dictatorial rule through a ‘brutal repression of democratic and Islamic forces.’ The Iranian comments apparently mark a rapid deterioration of relations between the two countries, which

²² D Pipes, op. cit., p. 48.

²³ H. Hale, “Islam, State-building and Uzbekistan’s Foreign Policy,” in: *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and its Borderlands*, ed. by Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, Bloomington, 1994, p. 136.

²⁴ “Israel Establishes Diplomatic Relations with Uzbekistan” (excerpt). Tashkent *Uzbek Radio* in Uzbek (03:00GMT, 24 February, 1992). Translation by *British Broadcasting Corporation, Summary of World Broadcast*, 26 February, 1992, SU/1314 A4/1[2].

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Levin A. op. cit.*, p. 351.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

had seemed close to a rapprochement when Iranian president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani visited Tashkent in October 1993.³²

This shift is perhaps one of the greatest indicators that Tel Aviv was succeeding in its aims to prevent Iran from gaining influence in Central Asia.

A final note about Uzbek-Israeli relations vis-à-vis Iran occurred in May 1996. President Karimov threatened to “withdraw” from the Economic Cooperation Organization for “Iran’s ‘politicization’ of the ECO by criticism of Israel.”³³ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan all supported the move by Karimov, which further serves to demonstrate the victories Tel Aviv was achieving in Central Asia.

Economic and Commercial Relations

Israel has fared better than any other nation when it comes to doing business in Central Asia. In this regard, “Israel has been more successful in developing economic ties than have Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other rich Muslim Gulf states,”³⁴ and, in fact, it is the “Middle Eastern state with the largest number of joint ventures”³⁵ in Central Asia.

Joint ventures and business investments are a means by which Tel Aviv can influence events in Central Asia, as well as bolster its own domestic economy. The development of an “economic hinterland,” as it has been called, has long been a goal of Israeli policy makers. Deals with Israeli businesses, especially arms and technology firms, may also be viewed as a form of state subsidy. An example of which can be seen in Israel’s state-owned aircraft industries; for years a failing business, it has been kept alive in part through foreign deals.³⁶ In short, “Israel sees in Central Asia a potentially vast export market”³⁷ with which to fuel its economy.

Private sector commercial relations between Israeli businesses and Central Asia are included in this study for several reasons. First, because of the government’s active participation in promoting trade and economic cooperation. The second reason is because Israeli policy has been to gain influence in Central Asia in large part through technology transfers and investment, much the same way it has utilized development assistance.

In terms of commercial relations with Central Asia, several Israeli firms and individuals have done quite well in the republics; these include the Merhav Group, businessman Saul Eisenberg, Netafim, Beta Shita, and Ben Shanar Associates, to name a few.

Generally speaking, there have been several reasons why Israeli firms have done so well in Central Asia. First among these has been the active participation of the Israeli government. Tel Aviv has lobbied the governments of the republics on behalf of industry sectors, as well as specific firms. Commercial relations have also benefited from the state’s decision to extend export credits and insurance vis-à-vis Central Asia. An important second point has been the perception of Israeli firms in the republics. The reputation of the technology that has made the kibbutzim bloom has preceded itself.

A third factor has been the number of Russian-speaking Israelis, the largest Russian-speaking population outside the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, many immigrants from the former Soviet Union also speak a region language³⁸ such as Uzbek. This factor should not be overlooked because it greatly

³² *Central Asia Monitor*, No. 4, 1994, p. 3.

³³ *Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan: Country Studies*, ed. by G.E. Curtis, Washington, DC, 1997, p. xxv.

³⁴ Sh. Islam, “Capitalism on the Silk Route?” in: *Central Asia and the World: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan*, p. 174.

³⁵ Ph. Robins, op. cit., p. 72.

³⁶ Based on private conversations with the author, in London and Israel.

³⁷ G. Yuldasheva, “Modern Uzbekistan: Problems of Development,” *Labyrinth: Central Asia Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1996, p. 40.

³⁸ Personal observation of the author.

facilitates business transactions. Also those Israelis that can trace their roots back to Central Asia have for the most part been actively doing business in the republics. From a Central Asian standpoint, this was a commonly held belief: "Jewish immigrants from the Southern Tier were expected to invest in their countries of origin."³⁹

Natan Sharansky, Minister of Industry and Trade under the Netanyahu government, is a very interesting combination of these factors. During his tenure, Sharansky made many visits to the region, and served as the de facto "Netanyahu government coordinator in dealing with Russia."⁴⁰ It is also believed that the former Soviet dissident and native Russian speaker was active in promoting Israeli business in Central Asia due to personal interest.⁴¹

Economic Ties with Uzbekistan

Shortly after independence, Uzbekistan had been granted Most Favored Nation status with Israel.⁴² Irrigation and soil conservation technology continue to be one of the main fields of commercial business between Israel and Uzbekistan. "Uzbekistan is also pursuing close economic cooperation with Israel, and is particularly interested in its irrigation technology."⁴³

Uzbekistan's *Organization for Maintenance of Agricultural Equipment* utilizes sprinklers produced by the Israeli firm Netafim.⁴⁴ Originally supplied in 1992, Netafim's technology was developed on kibbutzim, and has found a similar environment on the Malek state farm in Syr Darya province.⁴⁵ Netafim's sprinklers have allowed water consumption rates in cotton production to be reduced by over 50%.⁴⁶

This cooperation has been very successful so far for both Israel and Uzbekistan. While "Israel has assisted Uzbekistan in improving its irrigation system,"⁴⁷ it has also slowed the rate of environmental damage that cotton production has traditionally generated. Another investor in the agricultural sector has been Israeli entrepreneur Saul Eisenberg, who has also simultaneously cutting irrigation rates and boosting productivity.⁴⁸

Israel has also been active in establishing dairy farms in Uzbekistan.⁴⁹ The firm Einav has supplied 800 Holstein dairy cows to the Lenin Mining and Metal Combine in Almalyk.⁵⁰ Einav was also reported to have begun establishing a second dairy farm at Karshi.⁵¹ Israeli businesses have also been involved in the process of creating chicken farms in Uzbekistan.⁵²

While in Israel, speaking to over 100 Israeli businessmen, Karimov has stated that "the most important part of our cooperation is economic. We are very impressed by the Israeli technologies we have seen."⁵³ Karimov also "signed a series of agreements on expanding bilateral trade and cooperation in agriculture"⁵⁴ during his visit to Israel. He added that "the trade agreements would pave the way to scientific and technological cooperation particularly in the field of agriculture."⁵⁵

³⁹ D. Pipes, op. cit., p. 83.

⁴⁰ D. Makovsky, "Uzbekistan May Buy Arms from Israel," *Ha'aretz* (English Edition), 2 July, 1998.

⁴¹ Based on conversations held with the author in Israel, summer 1999.

⁴² See: R. Boris, S. Zhukov, *Central Asia: The Challenges of Independence*, M.E. Sharpe, London, 1998, p. 228.

⁴³ H. Hale, op. cit., p. 163.

⁴⁴ See: "Sprinklers Catch On," *Labyrinth: Central Asia Quarterly*, Winter 1995, pp. 30-31.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Sh. Islam, op. cit., p. 174.

⁴⁸ See: "Israel: Entrepreneur Seeks Cooperation on Tajik Cotton" (text). *TASS World Service in English* (12:15GMT, 9 January, 1992). *British Broadcasting Corporation, Summary of World Broadcast*, 17 January, 1992, SU/W0213 A/3[13].

⁴⁹ See: Y. Hadar, Israeli Ministry of Industry and Trade, conversation with the author, 30 June, 1999.

⁵⁰ See: "Israeli Know-how," *Labyrinth: Central Asia Quarterly*, Summer 1994, p. 35.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² See: Y. Hadar, Israeli Ministry of Industry and Trade, conversation with the author, 30 June, 1999.

⁵³ D. Makovsky, "Israel, Uzbekistan to Join Forces on Iran," *Ha'aretz*, 16 September, 1998.

⁵⁴ "Uzbek President in Israel," *Central Asia Monitor*, No. 5, 1998, p. 35.

⁵⁵ D. Makovsky, "Israel, Uzbekistan to Join Forces on Iran."

As business ties have flourished, Israel and the republics have been drawn closer and closer together. By providing much needed capital investments and technology transfers, Israel has insured that the republics become firmly attached to Israel and its concerns.

Military-Security Cooperation

Of nearly all of the types of relations that the State of Israel can engage in with the Central Asian republics, perhaps it is in the area of military and security cooperation that it has the most cachet. Israel has both earned *and cultivated* a powerful reputation of a small strong and secure state. It is known the world over as a state that has the capability and proven track record to defend itself, often against overwhelming odds, across the globe. There is little doubt then, given Israel's reputation in military-security matters, that the republics would view Tel Aviv as a potential benefactor in this regard. When the perceptions of the Israeli state to exert its will through the use of force—both overt *and covert*—are held to be among the world's best, it stands to reason that Israeli assistance would be welcomed and sought after.

Military and Security Ties with Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan enjoys perhaps the greatest cooperation with Israel of all the Central Asian republics when it comes to military and security matters. It has also been called the “most strategic state in the region”⁵⁶ for Israel. During Minister of Industry and Trade Sharansky's visit to Tashkent in July of 1998, President Karimov informed him that “Uzbekistan is willing to purchase military technology from Israel.”⁵⁷ Karimov has also claimed that Uzbekistan faces similar threats to those that Israel confronts. Leaders in Israel and Uzbekistan agree they both face terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, stemming from Iran and Afghanistan. Certainly both Israel and Uzbekistan have been fiercely anti-fundamentalist, a point which helps account for the closeness and coziness between Tel Aviv and Tashkent. On numerous occasions both Israeli and Uzbek leaders have claimed that they “were united by the need to combat Islamic fundamentalism.”⁵⁸

In the late summer of 1998, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai stopped briefly in Tashkent. President Karimov has said that it was during Mordechai's visit to Uzbekistan that defense cooperation was agreed.⁵⁹ Only a few weeks later, during September of 1998, President Karimov paid a visit to Israel. While in Israel, Karimov “agreed on the need to exchange information about the common threat perceived to be emerging from Iran.”⁶⁰ While President Karimov denied that Israel and Uzbekistan had signed a “security protocol,”⁶¹ both Karimov and then Prime Minister Netanyahu “discussed the possibility of cooperating in fighting regional security threats.”⁶² The two also affirmed that “they intend to work together to fight growing fundamentalism and arms proliferation in the region.”⁶³ Vividly illustrating his point, Karimov spoke about his country's relations with Israel at a reception held in his honor; he stated

⁵⁶ D. Hiro, “Uzbekistan: Karimov's Visit to Israel Cements Ties,” *IPS News Reports*, s. 1., s. a.

⁵⁷ D. Makovsky, “Uzbekistan May Buy Arms from Israel.”

⁵⁸ “Simon Peres in Tashkent and Ashgabat,” *Labyrinth: Central Asia Quarterly*, Fall 1994, p. 13.

⁵⁹ See: S. Rodan, “Uzbekistan Sees Israel as Defense Partner,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 17 September, 1998, p. 5.

⁶⁰ D. Makovsky, “Israel, Uzbekistan to Join Forces on Iran.”

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ D. Hartman, “Uzbek Leader, Netanyahu Pledge to Fight Fundamentalism,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 16 September, 1998,

that “Islamists deserve to have their heads cut off, and I am prepared personally to do that,”⁶⁴ to very warm applause.

During his September visit to Israel, Karimov “pledged” to bring Israel and Uzbekistan closer in a “wide-ranging defense relationship,”⁶⁵ and praised the reputation of Israel’s defense industry. At a visit to Israel Aircraft Industries, Ltd., Karimov expressed his interest in “cooperation with IAI in a variety of fields.”⁶⁶ Among the weapons systems at IAI in which Karimov expressed interest were the Hunter unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the Arrow antimissile missile, ground and control systems, as well as satellites.⁶⁷

Hezbollah and Uzbekistan: A Request for Assistance

After the February 1999 bomb attacks in Tashkent, there were unsubstantiated rumors that Israeli government agencies had informed the Uzbeks that the Lebanese organization *Hezbollah* were responsible. *The Jerusalem Post* reported two days after the bombing that Uzbekistan had asked for “Israel’s help against Hezbollah.”⁶⁸ According to the report, Karimov requested the assistance in the form of a telephone conversation with Natan Sharansky, the Netanyahu government’s point man on Central Asia.⁶⁹ While the fact that Hezbollah would attempt to target the Uzbek president seems dubious at best, the rumor is noteworthy only because it nearly takes for granted that Tel Aviv and Tashkent cooperate in areas of intelligence and security. If there was not any cooperation between the two states prior to the bombing attack, then most likely the situation has changed following the “attempted assassination.” It seems quite unlikely that Israel would turn down an offer of this sort, whether Hezbollah was active in Uzbekistan or not.

The cooperation between Israel and the republics of Central Asia has been quite close. As a result, Tel Aviv has been able to influence the republics’ perception of security threats, as well as the appropriate steps to counter those threats. Additionally, this cooperation has allowed Israel virtually unimpeded access to the republics in order to guarantee what Tel Aviv views as *its own* security.

C o n c l u s i o n

This article has demonstrated the extent of Israeli penetration and influence in Uzbekistan. Through diplomatic, economic, and military cooperation in the region, Israel has been able to achieve its main foreign policy objectives. First and foremost, Tel Aviv has eliminated Iran from being a competing power in the region. The governments of the republics have not fallen under the sway of the mullahs in Tehran, and anti-Israeli Islamic fundamentalism has not taken root among the populace.

Tel Aviv has also succeeded in maintaining the status quo vis-à-vis the Middle East Peace Process. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not herald the entrance of its successor states into the rejectionist front. Nor has the Palestinian or Arab negotiating position—primarily Syrian and Lebanese tracks, and most recently with respect to the Palestinian Authority—been strengthened as a result of the creation of five more Muslim nations.

⁶⁴ “Uzbekistan’s ‘Unholy Alliance’ with Israel.”

⁶⁵ S. Rodan, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁸ D. Hartman, “Uzbekistan Asks Israel’s Help against Hezbollah,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 February, 1998, p. 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem.*

An equally notable fact is that the event that precipitated the independence of the Central Asian republics, the end of the Cold War, did not result in Israel being made redundant to its primary sponsor, the United States. Through a very well orchestrated campaign, Israel has been able to redefine itself as a bulwark against fundamentalism, Iranian Shi'a extremism, now that the war against communism has been won. By replacing the Green peril with the Red menace, Israel has played to the concerns of its benefactors, and will continue to receive the nearly \$5 billion in combined annual assistance from Washington. This is not to say that Israel is not in a dangerous neighborhood, it is faced daily with very real threats of its own. The violent al-Aqsa Intifadah, now in its third year, is proof positive of Israel's very precarious security situation. However, the threats that Tel Aviv confronts do not originate in Central Asia. Nonetheless, the threat of a resurgent Central Asian Islam in large part continues to allow Israel to maintain its qualitative military edge courtesy of the United States.

By developing relations with the republics of Central Asia, Israel has also succeeded in establishing working relations with Muslim nations. As mentioned above, Tel Aviv has achieved its goal of preventing any hostile regimes from seizing power in the region. This has simultaneously resulted in Israel effectively undercutting its anti-Muslim reputation. This fact has been immensely important for Tel Aviv's quest to gain recognition amongst both Arab and non-Arab states alike.

The development of further economic areas has been the last of Israel's policy objectives explored in this study. Israel businesses and industry have found a vast new market in the republics of Central Asia. However, serious questions remain over how well these contracts will develop. True, billions of dollars have been done *on the books*, yet it seems as though little money has changed hands. Important questions remain unanswered, and the very fact that no one seems to be addressing them raises even further concern. For instance, where will these nations come up with the millions of dollars owed Israeli firms? What if the great hydrocarbon resource boom doesn't materialize, what then for Israeli businesses? And perhaps most troubling of all, how will any future instability translate for the republics, and their Israeli business partners?

Impact on Regional Security

The role of Israel in Central Asia raises some very serious concerns for questions of regional security. First and foremost one wonders how the other regional powers—Russia, Iran, and China—will perceive Israel's increasing activity in an area that each views as strategically their own? That is to say, Israel has identified certain policy objectives that it has deemed vital to its security, while at the same time Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing have also done the same. The potential for Iran in this case to feel threatened by Israeli activity so close to its borders seems especially high. One wonders, then, in the long term, is Tel Aviv's continued and increasing involvement in Central Asia improving its security situation, or increasing the likelihood of conflict?

A related issue of concern is based upon the relations between the State of Israel and current ruling elites in the republics. Nearly all of Israel's inroads in Central Asia are guaranteed through the continued existence of those elites. Just as relations with Israel signify a regime's anti-extremist stance and pro-Western orientation, it also has the potential to develop into a lightning rod of discontent. While currently the opposition groups in the region have very limited room to maneuver, if any organization wanted to express its discontent with the ruling power's orientation, all it would need to do is strike against any of the regime's Israeli friends operating in the country. This last fact should be of particular concern to the regime in Tashkent, which seems to be battling its own home-grown opposition.

The scenario illustrated above becomes even darker when one considers the possibility that any of the region's Islamic groups might choose Central Asia as the venue for an attack against Israeli in-

terests. The permutations of possibilities become nearly mind-boggling when one considers that such a strike could come from nearly anywhere: disenfranchised Uzbek groups, Afghan-based *jihadis*, or Iranian supported groups, not to mention Israel's longtime enemies, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Palestinian groups have struck at Israeli targets outside of Israel and the Territories before (Buenos Aires, London, and South East Asia). In light of the ongoing Global War on Terror and the continuing al-Aqsa Intifadah, the wellspring of new Israeli targets, less guarded than those in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, may be too tempting for some to resist. The November 2002 attacks in Mombasa, Kenya may be indicative of future attacks to come.

A third and final consequence to regional security as a result of Israeli involvement in Central Asia, is that of altering regional balances. Rather what has Israeli interest in the region done to the pre-existing, or natural balance in the region? Anytime a foreign actor becomes extremely active in a specific region, consequences are bound to arise. In the case of Central Asia, the consequences have the potential to effect the development of the region. For example, to deny either Russia or China a strong role in the region is to court conflict, as these nations are natural powers in the region. Israel, thousands of miles away, is not.

As the region has been independent for just over a decade, it has already attracted significant foreign attention. For regional security to become a reality, *regional stability* will have to first take hold. The ongoing U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan and the American military occupation of Iraq does not bode well for the emergence of regional stability. For that to occur, the region will need real sustainable development, not business that leads to resource flight. Instead of over-ambitious pipeline plans and arms to fight unseen enemies, the region needs investments that will lower defense spending, and raise the education, income, and standard of living of the population. That would do more to prevent the growth of the Islamist opposition that Tel Aviv fears than all of the security arrangements it currently has in place. In real terms, for example, this means that as Uzbekistan continues to build its arsenal, the likelihood of conflict becomes greater, as this raises the question, who is Uzbekistan arming itself against?

In the political arena, this means that the governments in power need to liberalize their media, and involve more political actors. Democracy and institution building need to come first to avert future crises. Rather than pointing the finger at hidden conspiracies, as Israel has been alleged to have done by implicating Hezbollah in the 1999 Tashkent bombings, Israel would further its own security by educating those in power about Tel Aviv's own democracy.

These criticisms are not directed at Israel alone. All foreign actors in Central Asia are responsible for altering the regional balance. However, as Israel is leading the outside involvement, it bears the brunt of these criticisms.

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Israel is a very unique actor when it comes to Central Asia. At first glance, it would not seem to share anything with the region, nor does it seem that it could be able to influence the republics. As this article has sought to demonstrate, this is by far the truth. Israel has developed the closest relations with the states of the region, much of it seemingly unnoticed by the outside world.

It is exactly because of these reasons that Israel's involvement in Central Asia needs to be highlighted. As the region's geopolitical importance continues to increase, so does the need to fully assess Israel's impact on questions of security and stability. Likewise, as long as Israeli involvement continues to develop and expand, so will the potential for conflict.