

# Israel's Role in the UN during the Korean War

*Young Sam Ma*

*Young Sam Ma has been the Korean Ambassador to Israel since 2008. After serving as the first Korean Representative to the Palestinian Authority in 2005–06, he was appointed Director-General of Middle Eastern and African Affairs at the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and held that post until 2008. Ambassador Ma is co-author of The UN, Korea, and the 21st Century: New Challenges and Tasks (2002) and Modern International Law (2000).*

## Introduction

Diplomatic relations between the State of Israel and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) were established in 1962. Most people consider this year the starting point of South Korean–Israeli relations. However, history tells a different story. Although it is not widely known, substantive ties between the two countries began a dozen years earlier. The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 brought about a great change in the direction of Israeli foreign policy. The non-identification policy was abandoned and replaced with a new approach, which located Israel on the side of the US as well as the UN in the midst of the Cold War confrontation.<sup>1</sup>

In the same context, Israel was busy considering what action it could take to support South Korea. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion even suggested that IDF soldiers be dispatched. Instead, the Israeli government ultimately decided to send medical supplies and food items worth some \$100,000. This was very valuable and meaningful help to the South Korean people. It was an enormous burden to the Israeli people as well, because it was only two years after the birth of the state, following an exhausting war for independence, and the country was in a period of austerity.

In the international community, and in the UN in particular, the Israeli delegation was playing an increasingly important role in dealing with Korean War issues. Israeli diplomats brought in new ideas on how to end the conflict. Encouraged by then-UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie, the Israeli delegation played a leading role in formulating and passing a statement of principles<sup>2</sup> and a resolution<sup>3</sup> based on these ideas.<sup>4</sup> They were adopted in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly in January 1951, though Israel had to renounce its authorship and another delegation received the credit for it.<sup>5</sup> In fact, this constituted the first substantial resolution the Israeli delegation initiated in the UN.

The bond that was forged between South Korea and Israel throughout the Korean War would serve as the pillar of future friendship between the two states.

### **The Korean War and the Transformation of Israeli Foreign Policy**

The Korean War erupted on June 25, 1950. It was a dramatic development in the Cold War between the Eastern and Western blocs.<sup>6</sup> Only a week later, on July 2, a special cabinet meeting was held at President Chaim Weizmann's house in Rehovot, in the presence of Weizmann and Ben-Gurion. They discussed the implication of the Korean War on Israel's foreign policy. Until then, the nascent state of Israel had maintained a non-identification policy, carefully maintaining balance between the East and the West.

There were two elements to consider in the process of determining the new policy direction—the role of the UN and the request from the US. Israeli policy makers believed that the UN should keep its role as the guarantor of world peace by protecting any country from foreign aggression. Israel had already experienced such aggression only two years earlier, and understood that this could happen again at any time in the future. If the North Korean attack was not punished by the UN, Israelis worried that it could become a precedent in the case of another attack on Israel.<sup>7</sup> At the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee meeting on July 3, 1950, then-Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett worried about the possibility of other future acts of aggressions against Israel and emphasized the necessity of the UN Security Council intervention.<sup>8</sup>

In his memoir, Gideon Rafael, an Israeli diplomat at the UN Mission, also noted that “Israel, itself still a recent victim of aggression... had good reason to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations, and its most powerful member, the United States, to resist it...”<sup>9</sup> Thus, as long as the UN played its appropriate role in keeping international peace and security, Israeli leaders thought the UN would serve the Israeli national interest.<sup>10</sup> In the same vein, Israel announced its support for the resolutions previously adopted by the UN and continued to support subsequent ones.<sup>11</sup>

As for the second element mentioned above, the US was investing much effort in mobilizing international support to save South Korea. Israel was not immune to these efforts. It seemed almost impossible for the Israeli leaders to avoid heeding the American request.<sup>12</sup> According to some witnesses, Americans utilized all channels in Washington, New York and elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> The American Jewish community was also involved. After lending its utmost support to establishing the Jewish state, American Jews were expecting reciprocal actions from Israel on the

Korean War issue. American Ambassador to Israel James McDonald received the message from Sharett that Israel would stand with the US.<sup>14</sup>

The Israelis realized that a change of policy was also determined by cold facts: Israel desperately needed capital and material assistance in absorbing new immigrants. These could only come from the US and from American Jewry. Ben-Gurion attributed the new policy to Israel's "sympathy for America" and President Harry S. Truman's wishes.<sup>15</sup>

The economic aspect was also considered in Israel's mulling over a new foreign policy in other areas as well. At that time, Israel was pursuing a deal to purchase petroleum from Western oil fields and also sought a loan from an American financial institution.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Israel needed to give attention to the position of China. According to Gabriel Sheffer's biography of Moshe Sharett, just before the Korean War, the Chinese government asked the Israeli government to open a mission in China. Sheffer maintained that "this Chinese approach... was intended to preempt Israeli support for the West in this conflict."<sup>17</sup> Yet, the Israeli government finally decided to side with the US and the UN. In his personal letter to the editor of the *Haaretz* daily, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion wrote that since the foundation of the State of Israel, he had been against the principle of neutrality. In the same context, he reiterated his opposition to neutrality in the case of the Korean War as well.<sup>18</sup> The proposal to support the UN and its actions after the outbreak of the Korean War was adopted in a meeting of the Israeli cabinet. By this, Israel's non-identification policy was transformed into its policy of alignment with the Western bloc.<sup>19</sup> Since then, this new policy has become the most powerful driving force in Israel's foreign policy.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned above, during the Korean War, the Cold War required that Israel choose a side. It was not an easy task.<sup>21</sup> There was bitter criticism of the new foreign policy decision. This issue was hotly debated in the Knesset on July 4, 1950. Two left-wing parties, Mapam and the Communist Maki, were opposed to the new policy direction, claiming it as a "contradiction to the principle of independence of Israel."<sup>22</sup> They believed that neutrality should be maintained—that Israel should not take sides. Some radicals even called for Israel to support North Korea. These opposition views stemmed from the characteristics of those two political parties as well as Israel's appreciation for the Soviet role in bringing an end to Nazi Germany and in so doing, rescuing the remnants of European Jewry during World War II.<sup>23</sup> The Ben-Gurion government faced a series of no-confidence motions following its abandonment of the neutrality principle, but ultimately the government was able to survive.<sup>24</sup>

## **Israel's Support for South Korea through the UN**

Israel's decision to align with the UN and the US was followed by concrete actions. On the very day the Korean War began, June 25, 1950, the UN Security Council was convened at the request of the US. A resolution was adopted that called for "the immediate cessation of hostilities and calls upon North Korea to withdraw their armed forces to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel."<sup>25</sup>

On June 27, 1950, in another resolution, the UN Security Council called upon member states to provide South Korea with assistance to counter the North Korean attack.<sup>26</sup> Based on that resolution, on June 29, 1950, Secretary-General Lie asked member states to inform him of their intentions regarding assistance.<sup>27</sup> On July 14, 1950, he again called for assistance to South Korea from member governments.<sup>28</sup>

The Israeli government sought to respond to the UN initiatives. At the cabinet meeting at President Weizmann's home on July 2, 1950, Ben-Gurion suggested sending Israeli soldiers to South Korea to join the UN forces. Ben-Gurion explained the logic behind his suggestion as follows: "If we are really serious in saying this is aggression, we should send troops."<sup>29</sup> However, strong opposition to this idea was expressed. The majority of cabinet members believed that military assistance might be too much for the newborn Israeli IDF, as well as contrary to Israel's new foreign policy direction.<sup>30</sup> There was also an ongoing debate on the issue within the IDF itself. Finally, on August 3, 1950, instead of sending soldiers, the Israeli government decided to send medical supplies worth \$63,000 to South Korea through the UN.<sup>31</sup>

However, during the course of the Korean War, the US continuously asked Israel to send troops. Pinhas Eliav, second secretary at the Israeli embassy in Washington, sent a report to Jerusalem after his meeting with Mr. Hickerson, assistant to the US secretary of state. According to this report, the US requested that Israel send troops, and even indicated the scope of the expected Israeli participation as a "battalion" rather than a "regiment."<sup>32</sup>

On December 1, 1950, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for the establishment the UN Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA) in order to conduct relief and rehabilitation programs in South Korea.<sup>33</sup> Once again, the Israeli government responded positively to the new resolution. It decided to provide South Korea with food supplies worth \$36,000 as part of UNKRA program.<sup>34</sup>

The Israeli assistance was greatly valued by the South Koreans, who were suffering from injury and hunger. The total aid package of about \$100,000 was quite a

considerable sum in today's values. Taking into account Israel's difficult situation at home, and its rehabilitation needs after its own war, the amount was enormous. However, even the medical and food assistance was not accepted by consensus at the beginning of discussions. Extra efforts were needed in Israeli domestic politics to persuade Mapam and Maki to agree to the humanitarian program.<sup>35</sup>

### **Israel's Role in the UN**

Israeli diplomats were able to play an active role in the international arena by virtue of their superior education and qualifications. The Korean War also presented Israel with many opportunities to display this acuity.<sup>36</sup> This was demonstrated in the following cases: The permanent members of the Security Council recognized a serious defect in the mechanism of veto power. Even threats to international security and breach of peace could not be fairly addressed if five permanent members did not agree on a course of action. To overcome this problem, member states of the UN began discussing the possibility of dealing with security crises within the General Assembly. A resolution called "Uniting for Peace" was floated at the UN General Assembly in late 1950.<sup>37</sup> However, the resolution was controversial because of the potential for differing interpretations of the relevant clauses of the UN Charter. This is where Ambassador Abba Eban made a valuable contribution to the completion of the resolution by providing a legal basis and a political rationale.<sup>38</sup> The resolution provided for the establishment of a Peace Observation Commission with fourteen member states, including Israel.<sup>39</sup> Gideon Rafael was nominated as the Commission's rapporteur.<sup>40</sup>

An opportunity for the Israeli delegation to play a greater role in the discussions on the Korean War came unexpectedly. In December 1950, Sharett was visiting UN headquarters. He was invited to a dinner hosted by Lie in honor of the Chinese (PRC) delegation. It should be noted that Israel was among the first non-Communist nations that recognized the People's Republic of China (as early as January 1950), and talks were underway in Moscow to explore possibilities of diplomatic relations between Israel and China.

Over dinner, Sharett spoke with a Chinese delegate and outlined a seven-point plan<sup>41</sup> on how to end the Korean War:

- an immediate ceasefire;
- withdrawal of foreign troops;
- elections under the UN's supervision;
- China's participation in UN activities;
- rehabilitation programs;

- independence of Korea guaranteed by the UN and China; and
- UN–China discussions on outstanding issues.

These ideas were met with interest by the Chinese delegation. The secretary-general was excited by the Chinese response. He asked the Israeli delegation to “discuss it with... like-minded delegates and then circulate it in the form of a draft resolution.”<sup>42</sup> With his encouragement, the Israeli delegation assisted the Ceasefire Committee in drafting a Statement of Principles based on Israel’s original seven-point plan. With a draft resolution of his own,<sup>43</sup> Ambassador Eban proposed these ideas to the First Committee, which initially received positive reactions from many other delegations.<sup>44</sup> However, according to witnesses, some delegations, which were at odds with Israel, challenged Israel’s authorship of the resolution. The diary of then-Canadian Foreign Minister Lester B. Pearson contained the following observation: “The difficulty arose over the fact that the resolution sponsoring the statement and referring it to Peking ‘for their observations’ has been sponsored by Israel. This was enough to arouse the ire and opposition....”<sup>45</sup>

In the face of such hurdles, some core members of the resolution sought a creative way out.<sup>46</sup> They finally agreed that the Statement of Principles<sup>47</sup> would be initially put to a vote at the First Committee. Then the Norwegian delegation would present a resolution<sup>48</sup> calling on the UN secretary-general to convey the Statement of Principles to the Chinese government. As agreed, these procedures were carried out,<sup>49</sup> and the Israeli delegation gave up its authorship of the resolution.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, its substance remained intact. The original version of the Israeli resolution was composed of two parts. The first was designed to “approve” the Statement of Principles (UN Document A/C.1/645). The other part was a call to “transmit these principles to the Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China and invite it to send its observations....”<sup>51</sup>

“No change in substance,” encouraged Abba Eban to show his flexibility. At the session in the First Committee of the UN General Assembly on January 13, 1951, at which this issue was hotly debated, Eban said: “The first part of the Israeli draft resolution (A/C.1/647) did not have to be voted upon because its purpose had been fulfilled.”<sup>52</sup> After the Norwegian delegation made a counter-proposal to replace the Israeli resolution, Eban “supported the Norwegian proposal, which he thought did not differ substantially from his own.”<sup>53</sup> Although Israel’s name did not appear in the final resolution, the whole process, as mentioned above, was initiated and orchestrated by the Israeli delegation. The Israeli initiative became the basis for the ensuing negotiation for an Armistice Agreement of the Korean War.

## Conclusion

The Korean War brought the newly born governments of Israel and South Korea closer. At the outbreak of the Korean War, Israel's foreign policy of non-identification was transformed into a policy of alignment with the US and the UN. Israel's precious assistance in the form of medical supplies and food helped relieve the Korean people's pain and suffering. The relationship began during a most difficult time for South Korea and also during a very tough period for Israel, which was recovering from the aftermath of its own war of independence.

As has been noted, Israeli diplomats made constructive and creative contributions to the discussion on how to end the Korean War. Israel's seven-point initiative and the Israeli resolution served as the valuable basis for the Korean War armistice negotiations. This early engagement between Korea and Israel should not be forgotten and can only enhance the relations between the two peoples.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gideon Rafael, *Destination Peace, Three Decades of Israeli Foreign Policy: A Personal Memoir* (London, 1981), p. 25.
- <sup>2</sup> UN, A/C.1/645, *Supplementary report of the Group on Cease-Fire in Korea*, January 11, 1951.
- <sup>3</sup> UN, A/C.1/651, *Intervention of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China in Korea*, January 13, 1951.
- <sup>4</sup> Trygve Lie, *In the Cause of Peace* (New York, 1954), p. 353.
- <sup>5</sup> UN, GAOR, *Fifth Session, First Committee, 425th Meeting*, January 13, 1951, pp. 495–500.
- <sup>6</sup> Michael Brecher, *Decision in Israel's Foreign Policy* (New Haven, 1975), p. 113.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- <sup>8</sup> Protocol of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee meeting (meeting No. 43/2) July 3, 1950. (Archives of the Ben-Gurion Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, henceforth BGA).
- <sup>9</sup> Rafael *op. cit.*, p. 27.
- <sup>10</sup> James G. McDonald, *My Mission in Israel 1948–1951* (New York, 1951), pp. 225–226.
- <sup>11</sup> Brecher, *op. cit.*, pp. 115, 132–133, 157–158.
- <sup>12</sup> Jacob Abadi, *Israel's Quest for Recognition and Acceptance in Asia: Garrison State Diplomacy* (London, 2004), p. 123.

- <sup>13</sup> Brecher, op. cit., p. 157.
- <sup>14</sup> McDonald, op. cit., p. 226.
- <sup>15</sup> Brecher, op. cit., pp. 122, 157.
- <sup>16</sup> Gabriel Sheffer, *Moshe Sharett, Biography of a Political Moderate* (Oxford, 1996), p. 545.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 542.
- <sup>18</sup> Letter by David Ben-Gurion to Gershom Schocken, Chief Editor of *Haaretz*, January 15, 1951 (BGA).
- <sup>19</sup> Rafael, op. cit., p. 25; Brecher, op. cit., pp. 111, 115–116.
- <sup>20</sup> Brecher, op. cit., p. 135.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- <sup>22</sup> Yitzhak Ben-Aaron (“Mapam”), Protocol of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee meeting, July 3, 1950. Op. cit.
- <sup>23</sup> Brecher, op. cit., p. 114.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.; Protocol of Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee meeting, July 3, 1950, op. cit.
- <sup>25</sup> UNSC resolution 82, June 25, 1950; Lie, op. cit., p. 331.
- <sup>26</sup> UNSC resolution 83, June 27, 1950; Lie, op. cit., p. 332.
- <sup>27</sup> Lie, op. cit., p. 333; Brecher, op. cit., pp. 130, 157.
- <sup>28</sup> Lie, op. cit., p. 337.
- <sup>29</sup> Quoted from Brecher, op. cit., p. 130.
- <sup>30</sup> Sheffer, op. cit., pp. 546–550; Abadi, op. cit., p. 124.
- <sup>31</sup> Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), Document No. 722.2 IS, Registration No. 629, “Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with Israel,” April 10, 1962, p. 30 and Annexed Document “Issue on exchanges of diplomatic missions with the State of Israel,” June 9, 1961.
- <sup>32</sup> Report written by Pinhas Eliav, second secretary at the Israeli embassy in Washington DC, to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 5, 1952 (BGA).
- <sup>33</sup> UNGA Resolution 410 (V), “Relief and rehabilitation of Korea,” December 1, 1950.
- <sup>34</sup> IFANS, op. cit. p. 30; Brecher, op. cit., p. 131.
- <sup>35</sup> Brecher, op. cit., p. 115.
- <sup>36</sup> John A. Munro and Alex I. Inglis, Mike, *The Memoirs of the Right Honorable Lester B. Pearson, Volume 2, 1948–1959*, Appendix—Pearson’s diary, p. 306.; Rafael, op. cit., p. 25.; Sheffer, op. cit., pp. 562–563.
- <sup>37</sup> UNGA Resolution 377(v), “Uniting for peace,” November 2, 1950; Lie, op. cit., p. 346.
- <sup>38</sup> Rafael, op. cit., p. 27.
- <sup>39</sup> Sheffer, op. cit., pp. 557–558.
- <sup>40</sup> Rafael, op. cit., p. 27.
- <sup>41</sup> Brecher, op. cit., p. 134; Rafael, op. cit., p. 28.
- <sup>42</sup> Rafael, op. cit., p. 28.
- <sup>43</sup> UN A/C.1/647, Israel: Draft Resolution, January 12, 1951.
- <sup>44</sup> A.M. Rosenthal, “Cease-Fire Move Wins Favor in UN,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 1951.



<sup>45</sup> Munro and Inglis, op. cit., Appendix, pp. 296–297.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 168; Appendix pp. 295–298.

<sup>47</sup> UN A/C.1/645, op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> UN GAOR, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Abba Eban, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1977), pp. 161–164; Munro and Inglis, op. cit., pp. 296–299; Rafael, op. cit., pp. 27–29.

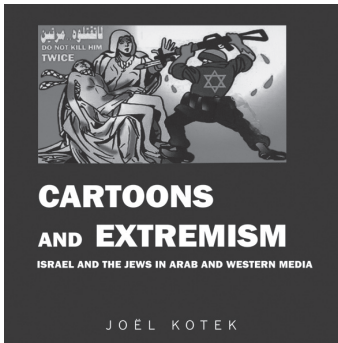
<sup>51</sup> UN A/C.1/647, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> UN GAOR, op. cit., p. 498.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 499.

## Joël Kotek **Cartoons and Extremism** Israel and the Jews in Arab and Western Media

Foreword by Alan Dershowitz, Introduction by Anthony Julius



978 0 85303 752 1 paper £15.50

Antisemitic cartoons have long been rife in the Arab-Muslim media. The September 2001 Durban Conference against Racism, intended to denounce and combat racism in all its forms, also featured the distribution of antisemitic cartoons by an Arab organisation, yet this elicited no reaction from Western NGOs at the conference. This event set the author on a trail that revealed thousands of such drawings. By reproducing more than 400 of these cartoons, taken from both Arab and Western media, this book exposes the use of hatred in the media and hopes to raise the alarm.



**Vallentine Mitchell** |

Tel: +44 (0)20 8952 9526 Fax: +44 (0)20 8952 9242  
www.vmbbooks.com toby.harris@vmbbooks.com