

# The Holocaust & Israel's Domestic, Foreign & Security Policy

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## I. Introduction

The [Holocaust](#), its historical interpretations, and its lessons are interwoven into the Israeli identity and manifested in various ways. Here we explore the historical and contemporary impact of the Holocaust on Israel's society, its politics, and the actions that it has taken for its security.

[Hitler](#)'s ascendance in January 1933 and his phased totalitarian takeover, including the various steps of his anti-Jewish policy, elicited a number of responses, controversies and ongoing debates among [Zionists](#) and Jewish leaders at the time and to this day. For the Zionists, even if not for many [German Jews](#), Hitler's rise to power validated their fear that European Jewry faced existential threats. Their practical responses amounted to enhanced efforts to exploit Hitler's forced immigration policy in its various stages between 1933 and 1940, including the negotiation of an agreement between the Jewish Agency for Palestine and the German government.

In the so-called [Ha'avara](#) (Hebrew for "transfer") accord, concluded shortly after Hitler's accession, Jewish property in Germany was converted into financial instruments and vital commodities, which were then transferred or shipped to Palestine and used there by the original owners upon arrival in the country as well as by other recent immigrants. The [Ha'avara](#) arrangement was vehemently rejected by [Vladimir \(Ze'ev\) Jabotinsky](#), the leader of the Zionist nationalist opposition, and by a few radical opponents of the mainstream Zionist leadership who favored an international boycott on German products.

Campaigning in response to the [Nazi regime](#)'s initial anti-Jewish measures, the anti-[Ha'avara](#) forces condemned the arrangement, labeling it an act of collaboration with the enemy. Their resistance appeared to culminate with the assassination of Dr. Chaim Arlosoroff, director of the Jewish Agency Political Department and negotiator of the [Ha'avara](#) agreement, by radical supporters of Jabotinsky. This act portended two political complexes, which were created by the Nazi challenge.

The first concerned the notion of "collaboration" between the [Zionist](#) leadership and the enemy. The leadership itself, responding to its critics, asserted that salvaging Jewish property from the [Nazis](#) for use in absorbing Jewish refugees in Palestine was

morally, politically and economically right. Such arguments and counter-arguments would be heard until [Hitler](#) adopted the “Final Solution” in 1941 and made it his goal to exterminate the Jews of Europe rather than force them to emigrate.

It was then that critics of the Jewish response began to claim that the Zionists in Palestine and the Jewish leadership in the free world should have done more to rescue the Jews from Hitler’s jaws. Although mass rescue was impossible, this “rescue debate” began during the Holocaust, adopted its own version of “collaborators” and even of “traitors” among the leaders of the Yishuv, [\[1\]](#) and was politicized further by various political parties and groupings, culminating in sensational libel trials and a political assassination. [\[2\]](#)

### **Strategic and Political Lessons Learned**

[David Ben-Gurion](#), Israel’s founding father, learned several lessons from the [Holocaust](#). First, Israel and Zionism, as well as the Jews, are unique historical phenomena; Israel could obtain some support from outside powers thanks to the unique achievements of the Yishuv in Palestine before and during the Holocaust, and the quest of the survivors to join the independent Jewish state; but Israel should expect to remain alone for decades to come with the exception of Jewish solidarity, seemingly as much as Jews were left on their own during the Holocaust. The big difference now anchored in the birth and development of an independent Jewish state and its necessary tools of fighting and surviving. Yet the use of power had its limits, and ethical considerations had to be taken into consideration as well, in spite of the fact that Arabs inherited much of the [Nazi propaganda](#) and adopted its anti-Jewish goals as a valid precedent to be followed by them against the Jewish state. In practical terms, Jews should accept the partition of the country and avoid ruling over a large alien population, and be very careful in using its military in order to meet Arab challenges, while concentrating on its own, unprecedented growth and development.

Thus, the [Holocaust](#) made it impossible for the [Zionists](#) to create a Jewish majority in Palestine. The destruction of so many potential immigrants ensured that they would have to accept the partition of the country to avoid ruling over a large number of Arabs, especially in the politically sensitive West Bank. Third, the Arabs will never accept any Israel-initiated war as final; they will recover and prepare for a new round, whereas Israel cannot sustain even one defeat for fear the consequences would be a new Holocaust. Hence, Israel must seek support from abroad, if possible from the United States, France, including from West Germany—even though the Holocaust had occurred so recently. Israel should go it alone, in Ben-Gurion’s thinking, only when some acute emergency necessitates it. Fourth, the longer-range solution to the extreme imbalance between Arabs and Jews in conventional terms, e.g., population,

political and strategic clout, oil, and territory, must be unconventional deterrence—the “never again” doctrine carried to its logical conclusion.

In Israel’s first two decades, Israelis repeatedly observed that their neighbors had inherited and adopted the Nazi attitude toward the Jews, which had been supported during the WWII by the Palestinian leader, [Hajj Amin al Husayni](#), mastermind of the Arab rebellion of 1936–1939 and subsequently Hitler’s intimate ally. This impression was reinforced by Arab enmity, expressed in anti-Semitic terms during the 1950s and 60s by President [Gamal Abd el Nasser](#) of Egypt, Palestinian guerrilla organizations based in Syria, and the radical Syrian regime. Israelis felt further threatened by Soviet military aid to Nasser’s Egypt and acts of terror launched against Israel from the Egyptian-occupied Gaza Strip in the 1950s. Nevertheless, Ben-Gurion saw no justification in an Israel-initiated preventive war at the time, choosing instead to focus on absorbing huge waves of new immigrants which tripled the Jewish population and developing the country. Thus, Israel avoided a simplistic equation between Nazi Germany and Nasser’s Egypt in operative terms even when Nasser blockaded the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran, the passageway from the Red Sea to the southern Israeli port of Eilat. Only when France became Israel’s unofficial ally and negotiations commenced for the acquisition of a French-supplied military nuclear infrastructure did Israel feel it justified to join the French and the British in the ostensibly abortive Suez-Sinai Campaign of 1956. [3] However, the impression was gained—and persists even in the scholarly literature—that the 1956 campaign was a classic case of a conventional preventive war, mired among other things in the go-it-alone, “never again” lessons of the Holocaust.

### **Politicization of the Holocaust at Home: The Kasztner Trial**

Thus, Israel under Ben-Gurion refused to conflate lessons of the past, mainly of the [Holocaust](#), with present challenges and longer-range goals in domestic, foreign and security policy, mainly the creation of a viable sovereign Jewish state in a partitioned Palestine.

This view was also reflected in the national curricula, which uncoupled the teaching of the Holocaust from the general teaching of history and even from Jewish history, which itself was taught separately. Thus, Israeli students were and still are introduced to the Holocaust as a subject detached from general inter-war history and World War II itself. This practice is conducive to the raising of questions about rescue options, the unbelievable magnitudes of the carnage, and the simple wish to commemorate the dead.

Ben-Gurion’s successor, [Levi Eshkol](#), seemed to follow his lead after the “Old Man” was forced to resign both of his portfolios (premiership and defense) in the summer of

1963. The resignation itself, however, was precipitated by a multilevel regime crisis both directly and indirectly related to the Holocaust and its interpretations in the early 1960s.

The Holocaust had been a major source of public debate since the early 1950s, when Israel signed a reparations agreement with West Germany. Ben-Gurion's Government described the pact as a token payment from the Federal Republic of Germany to the Holocaust survivors and their state for property loss—their own and that of Jews who had perished in the Holocaust. The opposition, led by [Menachem Begin](#), termed it a deal with the devil and a form of ongoing collaboration with Hitler's heirs, echoing the Revisionist response to the Ha'avara accord. Begin's followers even tried to impose their will on the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) by demonstrating outside its building and threatening violence. While these tactics reminded most Israelis of Begin's futile—and intrinsically unjustified—"revolt" during the Holocaust, he and his supporters were then attempting to benefit from another event directly related to the reparations debate and the aforementioned "rescue debate."

This event was a legal fracas, first pursued by the Attorney General in a libel suit that he brought against Malkiel Gruenwald, who had accused Dr. Israel Kasztner, representative of Ben-Gurion's [Mapai \(Labor\) Party](#) in Nazi-occupied Hungary, of having collaborated with the Gestapo during the war. Soon enough, the defense transformed the case into the "Kasztner trial," and the sole presiding judge, dismissing the libel allegation, proclaimed Kasztner as a man who had "sold his soul to the [Nazi] devil." The details of the case go beyond the scope of this chapter, but Gruenwald's lawyer, Shmuel Tamir, a politically motivated Begin follower, managed to politicize Mapai's behavior during the Holocaust in Hungary and in Palestine itself by accusing the *Yishuv* leadership of having collaborated with the "Nazo-British" authorities in Palestine in the repression of Begin's "revolt," thereby squandering a major opportunity to rescue Hungarian Jewry. At the same time, he continued, Kasztner became a Nazi tool, betraying to the Nazis the only large Jewish community still surviving in exchange for personal and partisan benefits. This argument joined forces with a real controversy over the behavior of *Judenräte* (Nazi-appointed Jewish councils in the ghettos) during the Holocaust. Israel at this time embraced the legacy of the ghetto fighters as, at least, a demonstration of Jewish courage and honor, in spite of the sad fact that both strategies—that of the ghetto fighters and that of the "collaborationist" [Judenräte](#)—had proved ineffective in the face of the Germans' power and determination to pursue the Holocaust no matter what.

After the war, Dr. Kasztner, who had after all managed to save a number of Hungarian Jews, supposedly spared Nazi war criminals by testifying in their favor at Nuremberg. All of this was the typical stuff of conspiracy theory; supported by the opposition media, it was divorced from the reality in occupied Hungary, Nuremberg, and British

Palestine. But it worked so well that Kasztner was murdered while waiting for the Supreme Court to clear his name him on appeal, as it eventually did by majority ruling.

An additional dictum that surfaced during this sensational trial cemented itself into the public memory: “And what shall I do with a million Jews”? Thus Lord Moyne, the British Minister Resident in the Middle East, supposedly responded to a deal that [Adolf Eichmann](#), the Gestapo Chief, had allegedly offered in the wake of the German occupation of Hungary. The “offer,” purportedly extended to the Zionist Rescue Committee in Budapest, concerned the exchange of the one million Jews of Hungary for strategic goods such as trucks and other commodities that the Western Allies would supply for use against the Soviets. The Yishuv leadership allegedly failed to pursue the deal and behaved so deceitfully as to betray Joel Brand, the Zionist emissary whom Eichmann had sent abroad to follow up on the deal, thus justifying the subsequent assassination of Lord Moyne by members of Lehi (the Jewish Freedom Fighters militia, a breakaway Revisionist group also known as the Sternists after their founder, Avraham Stern). After the fact, Brand himself blamed the Zionist leadership and the Western Allies for the mission’s failure, thus transforming both entities into Nazi accomplices while offering no real evidence about Eichmann’s intentions. Brand eventually joined the Sternists, thus lending retroactive justification to the assassination of Moyne.

Behind this intrigue, which originated in a German ploy to drive a wedge among the Allies without conceding anything of substance on the fate of the Hungarian Jews—most of whom who were being deported to Auschwitz at that very time—stood the argument that the [Zionist leadership](#) in Palestine was guilty of “Palestinocentrism.” The term meant the focusing of Zionist power on the small Yishuv at all costs, including collaboration with the “Nazo-British,” to the neglect of rescuing Jews. Such rescue, the argument went, could have taken place had Begin’s and the Sternists’ “revolt” forced the gates of Palestine open and had the mainstream Zionists’ man in Hungary, Kasztner, alerted the Hungarian Jews to the need to fight or flee instead of collaborating with Eichmann for the rescue of the few, including his own family and various dignitaries of his party. Truth to tell, the British did indeed close the gates of Palestine to Jewish refugees from Hitler's Europe in May 1939, but when Hitler decided to murder them rather than force them out of his domain, including to British Palestine, Hitler closed the gates of Europe to Jewish immigration. "Forcing its gates open" by Begin and the Sternists by fighting the British – whose main concern was to fight Hitler - became pointless and counterproductive when the mainstream Zionists were seeking moral and political support in the West.

At the time this huge conspiracy tale, composed of a string of libels and falsehoods, had not taken root among most Israelis. It lurked in the background, however, waiting

to be preached and rediscovered again and again. The resurrection of the “Palestinocentrism” conspiracy was facilitated by psychosocial circumstances related initially to German–Israeli relations and then to the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel and German (and Austrian) relations with Egypt.

### **The Trial of Adolf Eichmann and Its Critics**

By the early 1960s, most Holocaust survivors in Israel had acculturated and integrated successfully. [4] Precisely then, however, a belated impact of the [Holocaust](#) began to surface among many survivors when the Chief Executive of the “Final Solution” [Adolf Eichmann](#) went on trial in Jerusalem in April 1961. Until then, few survivors had been actively involved in the German reparation controversy or in Kasztner’s trial. They were also not involved politically in the public debate over Ben-Gurion’s policy of forging military relations with West Germany and proclaiming the Bonn republic a “different Germany.” However, a change in public opinion took place when it was revealed that Ben-Gurion had ordered the kidnapping of Adolf Eichmann from his haven in Argentina. After being flown to Israel, [Eichmann was indicted](#) for war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes against the Jewish people. He spent two years in a glass cage before the Jerusalem District Court and then the Supreme Court until his execution on May 31, 1962—the only person ever to be hanged in Israel. The prosecution conceived the proceedings in their broadest historical terms by summoning an endless parade of survivors to recount their experiences in mass death and suffering, thereby allowing the repressed experience of many other survivors to resurface.

Politically, this was not enough to inspire a major shift among Israeli voters to Begin’s party, despite its pretense of being the survivors’ spokesman. Two related phenomena, however, did play a role here. The first was a growing sense of doubt about whether the so-called “new Germany” deserved Ben-Gurion’s exoneration—i.e., that a gap had opened between the Holocaust experience, as described during Eichmann’s lengthy trial, and Israel’s foreign and security praxis. The immediate benefactors of the doubt were the anti-German parties on the Left, who reopened their criticism of the Judenräte as representatives or close colleagues of the ghetto fighters in the context of the belated impact of the Holocaust in Israel and Ben-Gurion’s German relations. Further developments in this context and in connection with Israel’s nuclear program, discussed below, would eventually terminate Ben-Gurion’s long rule and have then-unforeseeable political results. For the time being, Left and Right joined forces in their criticism of Ben-Gurion’s foreign and security policies, with Holocaust allusions figuring prominently. Thus they legitimized Begin’s party and person, which Ben-Gurion had maneuvered into the political wilderness as a result of Begin’s own behavior during the Holocaust and the German reparations debate.

The trial itself attracted criticism from various intellectuals in Israel and elsewhere, in a fashion that would be repeated much later by post-Zionists and other contemporary opponents of a Jewish state in Israel and the Jewish world. The best known critique of this type was delivered by [Hannah Arendt](#), who, in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, accused Ben-Gurion of having staged the trial on behalf of militant Zionism in disregard of the nature of the totalitarian Nazi regime and Eichmann's role as a mere cog in it. An array of major Israeli intellectuals rose up against Arendt, accusing her of sheer ignorance of the facts, an almost inhuman attitude toward the victims, and the spewing of unfounded speculations. Although these intellectuals won the day, Arendt's arguments have been resurrected recently in a post-Zionist context discussed below.

An additional and less well-known criticism deserves our attention because it involves the resurrection of anti-Zionism among Jews in the context of Eichmann's trial. A booklet by the Jewish-British publisher Victor Gollancz, published in 1961, anticipated a contemporary Israeli critique of the memory of the Holocaust and its quest to abandon this memory in favor of fighting the Zionist idea and the occupation of Palestinian land. [5] Gollancz was one of the few who had actively worked during World War II not only to make the extermination of Jews known in Britain, but also to prompt his government to work for the rescue of the Jews. He argued that Eichmann's crimes, committed within the framework of the latitude given him, were much less serious than those that would be committed by a pilot who would kill many more by dropping a hydrogen bomb simply by pushing a button as ordered. Gollancz's main argument against what he called the "staging" of Eichmann's case was the prosecution's use of the survivor-witnesses. In his view, the court had foisted on the public a protracted experience with Evil, the negative side of humanity, whereas it should have emphasized the Good, the forgiveness, that the victims should be able to demonstrate toward the perpetrators. "We live in the realm of malevolence," he argued, and thus we avoid the presence of the Good. On these grounds, Gollancz alluded to the possibility that the victims might imitate the evildoers and justify more evil due to their own experience. In practical terms, he wrote, we are preoccupied with things that happened and cannot be reversed instead of pledging our immediate attention to the cruelties and mistreatment of people occurring around us right now. In this regard, Gollancz cited his own futile experience in trying to save Jews during the Holocaust. Finally, he argued, contemporary Israeli youth should avoid the intensification of the sense of racial solidarity and, instead, reinforce its instinct of human solidarity at large.

In his rejoinder, the Israeli poet [Nathan Alterman](#) [6] termed Gollancz's moralism totally detached from the rights and the obligations of the victims, as well as their nation, to at least remember and mourn. Furthermore, he continued, human history

itself demands that evil be remembered in order to learn its lessons and avert it in the future. Again, this view triumphed in Israel at the time. Today, however, Gollancz's arguments have been resurrected in connection with criticism of the Zionist endeavor by contemporary Israeli intellectuals such the philosopher Adi Ofir, to whom we shall return.

## **The German Scientists**

While the Israeli Right and Left hoped to use the belated impact of the Holocaust for political purposes, a new Holocaust-related threat emerged: The Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service, purportedly discovered that German and Austrian technicians and scientists were producing unconventional weapons in Egypt, including medium-range missiles capable of reaching Israel. The connection between this German involvement in seemingly existential threats to Israel and the Holocaust was made at once. Begin accused the Bonn Government of using Egypt to circumvent the ban on unconventional weapons that Bonn had accepted in 1955 as a precondition for limited rearmament within the framework of NATO. Bonn refused to recall the scientists, arguing that as private citizens they had the democratic right to move and work wherever they pleased. Ben-Gurion endorsed this position and was immediately criticized by Begin for the same kind of "collaboration with the enemy" that Kasztner had supposedly committed, this time in exchange for German economic aid. In fact, the Bonn Government was secretly providing Israel with vital military assistance at this time.

Still, the left-wing parties and even some of Ben-Gurion's own colleagues in [Mapai Party](#) adopted an anti-West-German posture, some even terming Bonn the successor of the Third Reich. Enraged, Ben-Gurion retorted that West Germany, with all its faults, was a promising democracy that was recognized as such by everyone except Moscow and its East German vassal. In the meantime, Isser Harel, the legendary director of the Mossad, campaigned in the media against Bonn by invoking Holocaust-related arguments.

By now, the Mapai rank-and-file and most of the party's secondary leadership had come around to the view that Israel's military collaboration with Bonn was not worth the political and psychological price of accepting the presence of German personnel in Egypt, given the context of the revival of the Holocaust experience and its political ramifications.

Although Israeli Military Intelligence soon proved that the Egyptian missiles had neither unconventional warheads nor guidance systems, the damage to Ben-Gurion's standing was done. This outcome helped to induce Ben-Gurion again to resign both of his portfolios, the premiership and defense, on June 16, 1963. Behind the scenes, the

resignation was abetted by another factor: heavy pressure from U.S. President John F. Kennedy to force Israel to renounce or at least suspend its nuclear program.

### **The Holocaust, Dimona and the Road to the 1967 Six Day War**

From the early 1960s onward, the Americans had been courting Ben-Gurion's designated successor, Levi Eshkol, hoping to gain his agreement to stop construction at Dimona of a nuclear facility believed to be building bombs in exchange for secret guarantees of Israel's 1949 armistice demarcation lines.<sup>[7]</sup> They also hoped for some Egyptian concessions on Cairo's missile program.<sup>[8]</sup> Eshkol made no concessions.<sup>[9]</sup> At first, but later in 1963, he signed Israel to the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. In early 1964, he issued an official but ambiguous statement to the effect that Israel "[would] not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East." In the 1965 general election campaign, he defeated the *Rafi* party of Ben-Gurion, [Moshe Dayan](#), and [Shimon Peres](#)—known at the time as the “nuclear party.” Then he “civilianized” the Israel Atomic Energy Commission. Finally, he cemented his new governing coalition with the Left-nationalist Ahdut ha-‘Avoda (Labor Unity) party, which promoted a conventional first-strike strategic doctrine and took a rather skeptical if not altogether negative view of the nuclear program due to Arab “irrational behavior” and in light of American—and, possibly, Soviet—opposition to it.<sup>[10]</sup> Ahdut ha-‘Avoda also considered Israel–German relations dangerous in view of the Soviet campaign against Bonn at the time. In domestic political terms, they hoped to marshal the support of Israelis who had been outraged by Ben-Gurion's German policy.

How did Washington view all of this? “Israel regards maintenance of an independent military deterrent as vital to its survival,” the State Department noted.<sup>[11]</sup> Neither Eshkol nor Ben-Gurion had ever ruled out Israel's developing a nuclear weapon if the Middle East situation so warranted, and there was evidence that a French firm was developing missiles for Israel that could carry either a high explosive or nuclear payload.<sup>[12]</sup> Lower-level Israeli officials spoke frankly about Israel's strategy toward Egypt: (a) surface-to-surface missiles targeting the Nile Delta and (b) the capacity to bomb and release the waters behind the Aswan High Dam.

Thus, Israel would avert the possibility of a new Holocaust in two ways. The first focused on the ability to deal the enemy a blow too great for the enemy to risk. The second was more subtle: Given the official undertaking of the combined Arab nations to destroy Israel, Israel would respond by creating a psycho-political counter-threat that might not only justify its unusual behavior but also to allow the Arabs to climb down from the perilous branch that they had ascended. As long as they enjoyed overwhelming conventional superiority, they could, or must, strive for Israel's utter destruction. A nuclear Israel, in contrast, would have to be tolerated.

The United States hoped to arrange a deal whereby Egypt would limit its acquisition of offensive missiles in exchange for Israel renouncing its nuclear ambitions. On July 26, 1964, [President Nasser](#) wrote to President Lyndon Johnson, “The UAR (Egypt) will not introduce or develop weapons of total destruction.” [\[13\]](#) If the Egyptian President wanted the Americans to stop the Israeli nuclear program, they had to offer this assurance in the face of Israeli accusations that the German scientists in Egypt were developing radiation and biological and chemical warheads for Nasser’s missiles, an ominous combination in the eyes of the Israeli man-in-the-street, sensitized to Holocaust remembrance by the Eichmann trial.

The Egyptian tactic worked. The Egyptian missiles were useless as practical weapons, but Nasser successfully used the danger they posed, and the threat of attacking Dimona to prevent Israel from getting the bomb, to persuade the United States to pressure Israel to give up the one weapon that was viewed as shielding it from another Holocaust. Continuing his efforts to prevent Jerusalem from adopting a nuclear deterrent, President Lyndon B. Johnson agreed for the first time to directly supply Israel with conventional arms. [\[14\]](#)

The lessons of the Holocaust, however, remained so ingrained that Israel was unwilling to gamble its security on the new relationship. Indeed, Washington remained concerned about Israel’s intentions and managed to obtain an agreement to carry out inspections in Dimona (although the Americans never believed that they were shown the sensitive parts). The Arabs, meanwhile, were concerned that Israel was developing a capability that would allow it to expand their territory and at least make an ultimate Arab victory impossible. Jerusalem, fearing that the Arabs might preempt the unveiling of this capacity by launching a limited strike on Dimona—possibly legitimized by the Soviet Union and, perhaps, even the United States—agreed to delay the deployment of French missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

This was the background of the events of May 1967. In that month, [Nasser](#) marched his troops into the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, ordered out the UN buffer force that prevented action against Israel on both fronts, closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping to Eilat again, and threatened to destroy the Jewish state.

Amid these actions, other Arab states emitted rhetoric containing threats/prophecies of Israel’s imminent destruction. Ordinarily one does not hear such talk in foreign relations, however hostile, and when aimed at Israel it inevitably evoked Holocaust metaphors. Israel had a choice of waiting to see if the Arabs meant what they were saying or taking preemptive action to prevent them from having the chance to attack. If Israel did strike first, however, [Nasser](#) could respond by attacking Israel’s most vital target (Dimona), occupying Eilat, and allowing Palestinian guerrillas to operate from

Gaza. This explains better than any previous explanation the Eshkol cabinet's lengthy deliberations after the May 1967 crisis began. What the cabinet really wanted was not to play Nasser's game at all, and instead to ask Washington to remove the obviously illegal Egyptian blockade of the Straits. Thus Israel would avoid having to fight while placing Nasser in confrontation with the United States. [\[15\]](#) But this was exactly what the Johnson Administration was trying to avoid, in order to maintain its position in the Arab World, prevent a possible confrontation with their Soviet supporters, or at least refrain from enhancing Soviet influence among the Arabs in spite of Washington's commitments to keep the Straits open.

Eshkol's buying-time strategy in hopes of a remedy from Washington made him look dithering and irresolute, thereby destroying his public standing in a mobilized and economically idled Israel. Holocaust-related rhetoric in Israel mounted: the world was prepared to abandon the Jews again. The public's demand for action forced Eshkol to yield the defense portfolio and establish a national emergency coalition including [Menachem Begin](#) as minister without portfolio and Moshe Dayan as Minister of Defense. Soon enough, Dayan opted for an all-out preemptive war against Egypt and, later, Dayan and Eshkol ordered the occupation of the entire [West Bank](#) after [King Hussein of Jordan](#) succumbed to Nasser's persuasion and intervened in the Israel–Egypt war. Israel also seized the Syrian Golan Heights.

Dimona survived the war unscathed. The Nixon-[Kissinger](#) Administration subsequently gave up their predecessors' efforts to curb Israel's nuclear ambitions and agreed to look the other way so long as Israel did not publicly acknowledge its arsenal. This allowed Israel to keep the bomb hidden in the basement. The bomb remained visible enough, however, to inhibit the combined Egyptian–Syrian offensive in 1973, contribute its share toward the Israeli–Egyptian peace treaty in 1979, and, possibly, check Iran's nuclear ambitions in the future. The bomb was not meant to prevent limited, conventional attacks such as the [Yom Kippur War](#) of 1973, which was a limited challenge as a result – among other reasons – of Israel's nuclear option, or terrorist attacks requiring conventional response.

### **The Age of Uncertainty and Its Remedies: Right and Left Invoke the Holocaust**

Israel's tremendous victory in June 1967 over Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and an Iraqi expeditionary force was expressed, among other things, in Holocaust terms: *this time* the Jewish ghetto had fought and won on its own against the Soviet-backed Arabs and the neutral Americans. Zionism and its from-destruction-to-redemption doctrine were vindicated.

Another byproduct of the war was the rehabilitation of Menachem Begin, whose refusal to accept the partition of the country in 1948 was connected to his lessons of

the Holocaust and to his party's legacy of rebelling against the British during the Holocaust. This syndrome viewed current politics in Holocaust related terms, in regard to Israeli territorial claims and eventual concessions. Begin joined ministers from the nationalist Left, Israel Galili and [Yigal Allon](#), who shared his interest in controlling at least parts of the West Bank for ideological and political-strategy reasons as an indispensable security space and as a Zionist entitlement. A Greater Israel Movement, favoring the maintenance and settlement of an unpartitioned western Palestine, took root among many Mapai activists and intellectuals. Eshkol himself, at first rather skeptical about the possibility of retaining most of the West Bank, endorsed his Government's decision to unify Jerusalem under Israeli rule, extend its city limits, and create Jewish neighborhoods in the formerly Jordanian-controlled sector. Soon enough, a national-religious movement called Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) actively pursued its own settlement efforts, first near Hebron with the support of Yigal Allon, Eshkol's coalition ally, and later on its own and with backing from Begin's secular Right. The settlement enterprise was abetted by the Arab rejection (the "three nos" of the 1967 Arab Summit in Khartoum) of Eshkol's offers to negotiate peace in exchange for the territories Israel had captured.

The shock-and-awe blow that Israel sustained in October 1973 shattered many Israelis' self-confidence and reinstated the sense that no measure of military strength assured survival. This feeling of insecurity precipitated the decline of the Labor Party and the elevation of Menachem Begin, with his passionate never-again rhetoric, to power.

In the meantime, [Gush Emunim](#) intensified the settlement of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and its leaders ascended to leadership of the National Religious Party, a key coalition member. After the 1973 war, Gush Emunim perceived itself, and was widely perceived in the Israeli street, as the true vanguard of pioneering Zionism and of Judaism itself after the seeming military disaster that the old and tired secular Labor elite had allowed. Gush Emunim's religious doctrine addressed the overwhelming mystery of the Holocaust for the Orthodox: the question of theodicy (the righteous who suffer). The Holocaust, various orthodox doctrines explained, traced to the Jewish Enlightenment and, more generally, willing Jewish secularization in the Diaspora. Where anti-Zionist religious thinkers viewed the Holocaust as a Divine punishment for this wanton abandonment of God's covenant, some Religious Zionists thinkers interpreted the Holocaust and the birth of Israel as the outcomes of a composite divine program entailing the transformation of the Jewish religious hubs in the European exile into an Orthodox religious Jewish entity in Israel, especially in the occupied territories, ruled by *halakha* ([rabbinical law](#)). By extension, Gush Emunim considered its settlement project—focusing on the largely Jew-free West Bank and

Gaza Strip—a part of a divine program seemingly justified by the spiritual and psychological decline of the secular syndrome following the Yom Kippur War.

An especially extreme manifestation of this thinking was propagated by [Rabbi Meir Kahane](#), founder of the Jewish Defense League in North America, and his followers, some of whom wore yellow stars with the inscription “Never Again” as they preached the deportation of the Arabs from Israel and the occupied territories and the instigation of a militantly anti-secular regime in Israel. Kahane’s legacy persists among radical youngsters active in the West Bank and inside Israel.

Begin’s electoral victory in 1977 and its aftermath, a Right/religious coalition, [\[16\]](#) made settlement in the West Bank and Gaza an official policy that the Government justified by citing a mixture of Holocaust-related political arguments. Mr. Begin justified his bombing of the Osiraq nuclear reactor near Baghdad in 1981 as the obliteration of a Holocaust-like threat to Israel’s survival. He later expanded this into the “Begin Doctrine,” enjoining Israel’s enemies against launching military nuclear projects.

The first Palestinian uprising ([Intifada](#)), instigated in late 1987 on Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir’s watch, set in motion a number of Israeli responses that include Holocaust imagery. Israeli responses to Palestinian violence were likened to the Nazi treatment of Jews, though they bore no resemblance. This would become an ongoing theme of Israel’s detractors as they have sought to isolate and delegitimize Israel.

The Israeli effort to negotiate peace with the Palestinians, pursued by the Labor Party under [Yitzhak Rabin](#) and Shimon Peres, and culminating in the conclusion of the two “[Oslo accords](#),” [\[17\]](#) entailed the withdrawal of Israeli forces from most of the Gaza Strip and densely Arab-populated areas in the West Bank, the introduction of armed Palestinian police in the newly created Palestinian Authority, and Palestinian obligations to recognize Israel and desist from terrorism against her. The ultra-nationalist Orthodox and some Likud activists likened the accords to the Munich deal that preceded World War II, compared government ministers to Judenräte who ostensibly sold out the Jews during the Holocaust, and termed Rabin an SS henchman by word and picture. Rabin’s assassin drew direct inspiration from this manner of thinking. As implementation of the Oslo accords moved ahead, despite the Palestinian Authority’s failure to fulfill its commitment to prevent terrorism, Jewish religious fanatics, and some other extremists, depicted the withdrawal of Israeli forces from of the West Bank and Gaza and other concessions to the Palestinians as acts of unacceptable betrayal—comparable to negotiating the Ha’avara agreements with the Nazis, *Judenrat* collaboration with the Gestapo, and the pre-Israel Zionist leadership’s alleged collaboration with the “Nazo-British.”

Oslo also led to the novelty of mobilization of the Holocaust by some on the Israeli Left. To them, Oslo signified such a decline of Jewish nationalism that the old Zionist ideology itself should yield to radical change in the region. The targets of their criticism are the Zionist ethos and state as such, rather than the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Examples of such thinkers are Orientalists such as Ilan Pappé, the sociologist Uri Ram of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, the psycholinguist Yosef Grudzinsky, the film historian Shlomo Sand of Tel Aviv University, the journalist Tom Segev of *Ha'aretz*, the poet Yitzhak Laor, the cultural historian Idith Zertal, and the philosopher Adi Ofir of Tel Aviv University. [18] A common argument of these writers and academics is that Zionism failed to meet the challenge of the Holocaust because its “Palestinocentrism” rendered it unable and unwilling to engage in serious rescue efforts. Instead, the parochial, nationalistic, narrow-minded Zionists allegedly exploited the Holocaust and used the survivors for their own particularistic purposes at the expense of the real victims, the Palestinian Arabs. For these intellectuals, no peace—even a peace treaty as an outgrowth of the [Oslo process](#)—is possible unless the initial evil, the *nakba* (Palestinian-Arab disaster of 1948), is cleansed, meaning the return of the Palestinian refugees, i.e., those who left in 1948 and all their descendants. This may, and should, transform Israel to a post-colonial, non-Zionist entity of the sort that a variety of left-wing intellectuals has advocated at least since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

By so behaving, many of these academicians seem to be collaborating, as a result of their view of the Holocaust, with those who seek the delegitimation of Zionism and the State of Israel. This has brought them into an unholy alliance with the anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox and the legacy of Sir Victor Gollancz, as in Adi Ofir’s claim the centrality of Holocaust remembrance in Israel is a sort of immersion in an irreversible malevolence. Stop remembering the Holocaust, Ofir counsels, and pursue the cause that counts: active resistance against the occupation of Arab lands, to begin with.

This group, sometimes termed “[post-Zionists](#)” or “new historians,” has influenced mainstream Israel only by negation, helping to drive many Israelis toward the Right and explaining intermittent Right-wing electoral triumphs amid skepticism about the intentions of the center-Left forces that are elevated to power in between.

The “Second” or “Al-Aqsa” Intifada, launched in late 2000 with Palestinian leader [Yasser Arafat](#)’s support in spite of his previous signature of the Oslo Accords, and aimed at Israel’s heartland and presence in the West Bank, further delegitimized the Oslo accords in many Israeli eyes. As Prime Minister Ehud Barak (Labor) continued to pursue negotiations amid the violence, some cited the “Munich” precedent. Having lost his parliamentary support, Labor PM Ehud Barak was roundly defeated in 2001 by Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu’s successor as leader of the Likud. Sharon’s response to the Intifada—reoccupation of the Oslo-evacuated

Palestinian territory in the West Bank—elicited a new interpretation of the Holocaust: the equation of Israel with Nazi Germany on the grounds of alleged violations of human rights and crimes against humanity. Behind these charges and the resulting efforts to instigate various anti-Israel boycotts are various NGOs, including UN-affiliated bodies controlled by Arab and Muslim states and Palestinian interests supported by expatriate Israelis and radical Jews abroad.

Thus, to Israel's immense frustration, the Holocaust and its lessons, which brought about the adoption of human-rights and anti-racist norms by the international community, are being diverted by Palestinians and their supporters to use against the state of the Holocaust survivors. Palestinians' involvement with Hitler, their role in preventing rescue during the Holocaust, and rampant Holocaust denial today, are forgotten in favor of anti-Israeli arguments disseminated by human-rights deniers (Sudan and Libya come to mind), while human-rights violations in various parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, Tibet, and the Muslim world are largely ignored.

### **Today: From Munich to Gaza to Tehran**

It is in this context that Israelis judge their country's withdrawal from the [Gaza Strip](#) and parts of the northern West Bank in 2005. The Holocaust metaphors in reference to the architects of the withdrawal were manifested again. Despite this campaign and the real pain of uprooting Jews from their homes, the disengagement had the overwhelming support of the Israeli public and was carried out with remarkable ease. The Palestinians' subsequent conduct, including eight -year bombardment of southern Israel with more than 10,000 rockets and mortar shells, backed by an anti-Semitic drumbeat invoking Nazi allusions, provided motivation to oppose initiatives by [Sharon](#)'s successor, [Ehud Olmert](#), to carry out further withdrawals in the West Bank on behalf of the "two-state solution."

The elephant in the room today is revolutionary Iran. When Teheran adopted a policy of Holocaust denial and apparent pursuit of nuclear weapons, the focus of Israeli opinion turned to a seeming Iranian existential threat.

Are the 1940s about to recur? In fact, there is an enormous difference between Jews during the Holocaust and those in Israel today. The former were utterly helpless against Hitler's existential threat and the Allies' bystander approach; the latter have the independent ability, due to the bomb, to obliterate Iran and any other enemy, and the Ayatollahs know it.

Any transferring of feasible material by Iran to terrorist organizations would not prevent Israel from retaliating against Iran itself. Should the Iranian bomb prompt a nuclear race in the region, all the Arab targets are known and marked. Yet we may

hope that proper sanctions or these very developments may prevent Iran from adopting an overt, offensive, strategic nuclear posture, opening the way for the Iranian people to reform their government in due course.

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[1] The organized modern Jewish community in Palestine.

[2] See Shlomo Aronson, *Hitler, the Allies, and the Jews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, paper edition, 2006).

[3] See Benjamin Pinkus, *From Ambivalence to Tacit Alliance, Israel, France, and French Jewry 1947–1957* (Sede Boqer: Ben-Gurion Research Institute, 2005, in Hebrew).

[4] See Hanna Yablonka, *Foreign Brethren, Holocaust Survivors in the State of Israel 1948–1952* (Jerusalem and Beersheva: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Press and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1994, in Hebrew).

[5] See Elhanan Yakira, *Post Holocaust Post Zionism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[6] Nathan Alterman, *Works*, Vol. III, (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1972), pp. 528–530.

[7] See Mordechai Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy toward the Arab States and Israel* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984). Gazit served at the Israeli Embassy in Washington at the time of the events and, later, was Director General of the Prime Minister Office under Golda Meir.

[8] This refers to the visit by the Presidential envoy John J. McCloy to Egypt and Israel in the summer of 1963, aimed at concluding a package deal linking Israel's nuclear program with Nasser's missiles. See John F. Kennedy Memorial Library, Boston, NSF (National Security Files), Box 119.

[9] Yitzhak Greenberg, "Creation of the Foundation for the R&D and Defense Production Aspects of Policy and Budgeting," in *Iyyunim bi-tequmat Yisrael, Studies in Zionism, the Yishuv and the State of Israel, a Research Annual*, Vol. 9 (Sede Boqer: Ben-Gurion Research Center, 1999), pp. 167–187.

[10] See Shlomo Aronson, *Conflict and Bargaining in the Middle East, an Israeli Perspective* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 52–53. The analysis *ad loc* of this set of circumstances remains valid.

[11] Background Paper on Factors Which Could Influence National Decisions Concerning Acquisition of Nuclear Weapons, Lyndon B. Johnson Memorial Library, Austin, Texas, NSF, Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, containers 1-2, problem 2, item 1.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Archival source: LBJ Library, NSF, UAR, Containers 159–161, Cables, Vol. 2, Item 99a.

[14] See Yitzhak Rabin, *A Service Record*, Vol. I (Tel Aviv: Ma'ariv, 1979), pp. 129–130. Cf. Report on Ambassador Harriman's meeting with PM Eshkol, UPA/Library of Congress, February 25, 1965, in which Harriman told Eshkol that "For one thing, the late President Kennedy had cured Khrushchev and Company of using the threat of nuclear war," as the USSR had done during the Suez crisis of 1956.

Finally, cf. report to Amembassy Cairo on the results of the Harriman/Komer visit: "Harriman/Komer talks have eased situation, but *basic problems remain and are still a potential cause of war* [. . .]. *USG will keep up pressure on Israel not to go nuclear. As Nasser undoubtedly aware fact of recent American visit to Dimona has been revealed by US press*" [Italics added].

[15] See Arie Baron, *Moshe Dayan and the Six-Day War* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1997, in Hebrew). General Baron was Dayan's aide after the Six-Day War and had access to the IDF's studies on the war and its origins.

[16] Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the leader of subsequently formed religious party, Shas, has repeatedly maintained that those who perished in the Holocaust were "sinners," having accumulated in their souls all transgressions committed by Jews during their 2,000 years of exile. Although based on a specific way of interpreting Jewish sources, this rather bizarre justification of the Holocaust seems to have had little influence even among his followers, whose exposure to the Holocaust is less encompassing and grave than that of European or even Iraqi Jews.

[17] Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (1993) and [Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip](#) (1995).

[18] See Shlomo Aronson, "On 'Post-Zionism' and the Anti-Semitic Tradition in the West," in Pinchas Ginosar and Avi Bareli (eds.), *Zionism: a Contemporary Controversy*, in *Iyunim bi-tequmat Yisrael* (Tel Aviv and Sede Boqer: 1996, in Hebrew).

