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## Common Interests and Encounters

Israel, the Middle East, and the Maghreb in the Midst of Inter-Arab Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Keep in mind my advice: Don't attach too much importance to the so-called moderate Arab leaders. It can do more harm than good, especially since we do not yet know what these so-called Moderate Arabs have in store for us.

Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol at the Knesset on 3 June 1965,  
in Merlin, *The Search for Peace in the Middle East*

It should be stated unequivocally from the onset: the various back-channel, open, and other types of relationships between Israel and the Maghreb did not set a precedent for Arab-Israeli contacts. Israel maintained similar direct and indirect contacts with its closest Arab neighbors much earlier than it did with the Maghreb. Israel's behind-the-scenes talks with Jordan, Syria, and Egypt frequently took place even while the fighting among them raged on. The Israelis had also tried to engage the Libyans in contacts. Equally intriguing, if not more so, were the special relationships between Israel and non-Arab Turkey, Iran, and Iraq's Kurdish minority. What made the Israeli-Maghrebi connection significant and exciting, and perhaps unique, were the reasons and objectives behind it as well as the outcome. In order to better understand this relationship, it is useful first to examine Israel's other ties and then place the Maghrebi factor in the proper perspective.

### Common Interests, Encounters, and Contacts: The Arab Middle East and Libya

Until 1967, relations between Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt related mostly, albeit not exclusively, to Arab-Jewish conflict and the broader Arab-Israeli conflict. The earliest contacts long predated the creation of Israel, originating in the final days of the Ottoman Empire. Substantive discussions

were carried out between the Hashemite emir Faisal ibn Husayn and Chaim Weizmann, then president of the World Zionist Organization. Their talks, which followed the signing of the Balfour Declaration, focused on Arab-Jewish coexistence in the Middle East and regional economic development. In the interwar years, when Palestine was under a British mandate, the leaders of the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community of Palestine) met representatives of the Palestinian national movement to discuss issues of mutual interest. Other Yishuv leaders deliberated with Syrian nationalist leaders over similar issues and sought to iron out misunderstandings and raise options for joint Arab-Zionist economic ventures.

An unofficial relationship developed between the pre-1948 Yishuv, which shortly emerged as the State of Israel, and the Lebanese Maronite Christians. Maronite leaders, among them Emile and Pierre Eddé as well as the al-Kata'ib (Phalange) Party, counted on the Yishuv to aid them in consolidating their power base within the precarious Lebanese political system. In return, the Yishuv expected to enlist the large Maronite minority as non-Muslim Arab allies in the Middle East. This relationship occasionally yielded mutual benefits but underwent severe fluctuations.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the latter half of the 1940s, representatives of the Jewish Agency's Political Department entered into secret talks with Jordan's King 'Abdullah ibn al-Husayn to deliberate over the future of Palestine and address regional security problems. The same issues were discussed by Israel and Egypt's King Faruq even at the height of the 1948 war.<sup>2</sup> The Arab-Israeli contacts up to the end of 1948 produced few results. In recent years, the substance of the meetings between King 'Abdullah and the leaders of the Jewish Agency's Political Department has been vigorously debated. Historians tend to concentrate on United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 of 29 November 1947, which recommended the partition of Palestine into Arab Palestinian and Jewish states, and on the events that led to its formulation. Did Golda Meir, the head of the Political Department, and King 'Abdullah agree to divide Palestine between them in order to deprive the Palestinian Arabs of a state? Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim believe that such an agreement was reached. Avraham Sela argues that, though such a scheme was in the making, in the final analysis the parties failed to reach an agreement because it proved impractical once the UN's Resolution 181 received international backing. The historians Shabtai Teveth and Mordechai Gazit, on the other hand, maintain that 'Abdullah and Meir never accomplished anything from the start.<sup>3</sup>

Between January and July 1949, following the creation of Israel and the end of the 1948 war, Israel negotiated and signed armistice agreements with Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The negotiations, under the aegis of the UN, received much publicity due to the direct contacts between Israeli and

Arab negotiators. In Jordan's case, the armistice agreement not only involved military matters but also included clear stipulations granting Israel access to its institutions on Mount Scopus as well as to Jewish holy sites and the ancient cemetery on the Mount of Olives.<sup>4</sup>

Jordanian-Israeli contacts resumed after the signing of the armistice agreement and continued until King 'Abdullah's assassination two years later. For the next twelve years, back-channel relations were practically nonexistent. They were reestablished with Jordan's King Hussein in 1963 and gained momentum in the ensuing years, to include discussions on mutual security arrangements, terrorism, the apportionment of the waters of the Jordan River, regional development, and tourism. Until the June 1967 war, the ongoing talks yielded only partial results at best.<sup>5</sup>

Israeli-Syrian relations were more problematic. Before 1948, the Syrian government did not enter into the sort of elaborate high-level secret deliberations with the Jewish Agency's Political Department that Jordan engaged in. In December 1948, limited talks in Paris between former Syrian prime minister Jamil Mardam and two low-ranking Israeli army officers were held to probe ways to end the Syrian-Israeli conflict. During that time, Israel also maintained contact with Zayd al-Atrash, the Druze leader who challenged the Syrian government over Druze rights. The Israelis hoped that Atrash's fighting forces could be enlisted in the effort to pressure the Syrian government to end the fighting and recognize Israel's existence.<sup>6</sup> None of these efforts proved effective. It was only after the overthrow of the Syrian government by Colonel Husni al-Za'im on 30 March 1949 that Syria engaged Israel in open negotiations in the context of the armistice agreement and even sought a separate, back-channel initiative.

The Syrian-Israeli armistice talks took place between April and July 1949. On 20 July, upon the signing of the armistice, Syria withdrew its forces to the international border from most of the territories it had conquered in northern Israel during the war. These areas now became demilitarized zones, although, in reality, Israel managed to exercise control over them and settled new Jewish immigrants on the land. In stark contrast to the Jordanian-Israeli agreement, the Syrian-Israeli armistice negotiations contained only military stipulations.

Za'im's proposals for a back-channel initiative that would also encompass nonmilitary components never got off the ground. In spring 1949, during the armistice talks, the new Syrian leader signaled to Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion that he would consider resettling 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria's al-Jazira province and establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel. What he expected in return was for Israel to concede to him half the Sea of Galilee and for the United States to provide

Syria with economic aid. Israel rejected Za'im's propositions outright, despite pressures from Washington to give them serious consideration.<sup>7</sup>

In light of the archival information that has become available in the past decade, the Syrian-Israel connection has provoked a debate among the historians as to whether Israel missed an important opportunity for Syrian-Israeli peace. Few historians deny that Za'im considered the possibility of reaching a separate Syrian agreement with Israel. Avi Shlaim, for instance, believes that the Syrians had a legitimate right to demand that Israel give up half the Sea of Galilee in return for a peace agreement. Shlaim argues that, in spite of Za'im's questionable character, the Syrian leader gave some consideration to social and economic reforms in Syria. Za'im assumed that peace with Israel and the resettlement of Palestinian refugees would lead to economic growth and mark the beginning of coexistence. By scornfully rejecting the Syrian offer, even refusing to accept Za'im's plea to meet with him, Ben-Gurion demonstrated shortsightedness. Benny Morris, on the other hand, concludes that the hardening of positions on both sides was what prevented the pursuance of peace.<sup>8</sup>

Other historians, among them Moshe Ma'oz, tend to justify Israel's tough stance on Syria by saying that Ben-Gurion's refusal to negotiate with military dictators was based on the doubt that Za'im would endure in power long enough to implement the peace. Ben-Gurion also suspected that Za'im sought an agreement with Israel because of his strained relations with Iraq and other Arab states.<sup>9</sup> In early August 1949, there were certain vague contacts through correspondence between Eliyahu Sasson, a senior Israeli diplomat, and a Syrian official. The Syrians continued to insist that half the Sea of Galilee be turned over to them in return for Syria's resettlement of numerous Palestinian refugees.<sup>10</sup> Soon thereafter, on 14 August, Za'im was overthrown and executed.

Why did Za'im pursue the course of peace? Moshe Ma'oz and Shaul Zeitune suggest that he had little affinity with Arab causes, being a Kurd by origin, and he enjoyed closer ties with non-Arab Turkey and France than with the Arab world. As he had no predilection for pan-Arab tendencies, Za'im seemed more prone than other Arab leaders to reach a separate peace settlement with Israel. Secondly, Za'im desperately wanted to secure U.S. aid for Syrian domestic projects; he assumed that conciliatory overtures toward Israel would help him achieve this objective, possibly with Israel's intervention with the Truman administration.<sup>11</sup> Chapters 4, 5, and 7 indicate that similarly moderate attitudes were adopted in Tunisia and Morocco because their leaders believed that Israel and American Jewry exercised great influence in U.S. government circles.

The new Syrian leader, an army general and staunch Syrian nationalist named Sami Hinnawi, did not adhere to his predecessor's policies. His ten-

ure was equally brief. On 19 December 1949, Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, one of Za‘im’s original fellow conspirators, overthrew Hinnawi, ostensibly to save Syria from a union with Iraq but in reality to fulfill his own political ambitions. Despite military tensions between Syria and Israel during his four years in power (December 1949–February 1954), Shishakli was to continue some of Za‘im’s policies.<sup>12</sup>

In 1951, fighting broke out with Israel on the malarial, sparsely settled banks of the Jordan River, below Lake Hula, which the Syrian-Israeli armistice agreement had made into a demilitarized zone. The Israelis started drainage works in the Hula basin, claiming that the whole area had been awarded to them by the 1947 UN partition plan. They planned to settle thousands of immigrants in this strategic area. Syria resisted. During the fighting, Shishakli seized some of the territory of the demilitarized zone that the Syrians had conceded to Israel in 1949 and gained control over the northeastern shores of the Sea of Galilee—a position they held until the 1967 war.

In 1952–53, direct secret negotiations were held between Israel and Syria. The meetings took place in Rosh Pina in northern Israel and at the central customs station in Syria. Army officers composed both delegations, and UN observers participated in some of the meetings. The emphasis in these talks was on the disputed demilitarized territories and Israel’s operations at Lake Hula. Shishakli wanted the border to be drawn through the middle of the Sea of Galilee, as did Za‘im before him. In May 1953, the deliberations, which had no protocols prepared, reached an impasse after ten meetings. They failed because neither Syria nor Israel was prepared to make real sacrifices. In the end, Shishakli showed no disposition to grant Israel official recognition and normal relations and merely opted for “ending the state of war” as his greatest concession. Furthermore, key Syrian officials, among them national economy minister Ma‘aruf al-Dawalibi, were completely opposed to any concessions to Israel and regarded peace overtures as an authorization to “Judaize the Arabs.”<sup>13</sup> As Ma‘oz observed:

Despite Shishakli’s pragmatic approach toward Israel and Ben-Gurion’s declared wish to reach a peace accord with Syria [at the time], it was impossible to obtain a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement in the early 1950s. The traumatic experience of the 1948 war was still strongly felt among both Israelis and Syrians. [It] was fed by fear, lack of confidence, and narrow-minded outlooks. Whereas the Jews of Israel felt threatened by Syrian (and inter-Arab) motivation for war and Syria’s declared intentions to eliminate Israel, Syria’s Arabs worried about Israel’s military aggression and its territorial expansion.<sup>14</sup>

With secret negotiations with Jordan at a standstill beginning in 1951 and

ties with Syria in fluctuation up to 1953, the Israeli government also turned to Egypt. Israelis widely believed that easing the tensions with Cairo would reduce Israel's isolation in parts of Asia and Africa, given Egyptian influence there. They also hoped that improved relations with Cairo would lead to improved relations with other Arab countries and the lifting of the economic embargo imposed by the Arab League.<sup>15</sup>

In the latter half of 1951, Egypt moderated its position on Israel, partly because of its deteriorating relations with Britain, whose military personnel remained in the Suez Canal area. Local nationalists, including members of the popular nationalist Wafd Party, then in power, viewed Israel's ambivalent relations with London as something with which to identify. The Egyptians compared their own struggle against Britain to the Yishuv's earlier resistance to the British mandate over Palestine. Moreover, Israel was no longer described in the Egyptian press as a tool of British imperialism or as an ally of communism. Articles appeared indicating that Egypt's neighbor now opted for a compromise and supported the Arab struggle against colonialism.<sup>16</sup>

In October 1951, tensions in Egypt ran high and—with the tacit approval of the Wafdist government—escalated into violent confrontations between British troops and guerrilla squads composed of radical elements, students, and workers. Between November 1951 and the end of January 1952, army clashes between these squads and British army units culminated in the battle of Isma‘iliya. The Egyptian resistance suffered temporary setbacks, but Britain's victory did not end the acts of sabotage against British interests by nationalists and the Muslim Brotherhood religious fundamentalist movement. On 26 January 1952, the unrest erupted into full-scale rioting and arson in Cairo. Many business establishments belonging to Europeans and non-Muslim minorities—but also to affluent Egyptian Muslims—were burned to the ground along with major sections of the city. That day, which is referred to as “Black Saturday,” was a crucial turning point in Egyptian history: it marked the beginning of the end for Britain's influence in Egypt. Within six months, the monarchy and the old regime were overthrown by the Free Officer movement led by Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser.

During the turbulent times in the months immediately preceding the Egyptian Revolution of 23 July 1952, two of Israel's pioneering diplomats, Shmuel Divon and Gide‘on Rafael, met with Mahmud ‘Azmi, a member of Egypt's mission to the UN, and Yassin Serraj al-Din, a prominent member of the Wafd Party. Several of the meetings, especially those with ‘Azmi, were given tacit approval by the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. The Israeli diplomats were told that, while an Anglo-Egyptian crisis was inevitable, Egyptian-Israeli relations could improve.<sup>17</sup> Further indications of the changing Eryp-

tian attitude became evident in March 1952. Four months before the Egyptian Revolution, the Israeli embassy at Washington reported that Egyptian officials were becoming more seriously occupied with the need to reach some kind of settlement with Israel. This conclusion was drawn from the aforementioned informal meetings and careful studies of the Egyptian press. In early February 1952, Prime Minister ‘Ali Mahir stated that, while Egypt could not reach an immediate settlement with Israel—he did not elaborate whether he meant recognition of its sovereignty or just ending the state of war—without consulting the other Arab states, negotiations were possible sometime in the future.<sup>18</sup>

Prince ‘Abbas Halim, a labor leader and King Faruq’s cousin, was a prominent Egyptian notable who actually advocated the necessity of full normalization of relations with Israel. Already before 1952, Halim had contacted diplomats at the Israeli legation in Berne to set up meetings with them and to discuss an Egyptian-Israeli settlement. Despite his pessimism and reservations about Halim’s degree of influence in Egyptian political circles, Israeli foreign minister Moshe Sharett approved the meetings but asked that Divon be present at some of the deliberations. Halim tried to convince his Israeli interlocutors of his ability to lobby for an Egyptian-Israeli peace at the highest echelons of the Egyptian government. He believed that Israel’s economic potentials could be emulated by Egypt, including the transformation of the Sinai into an oasis, and called for joint Egyptian-Israeli ventures in the areas of agriculture, the marketing of Egyptian cotton and rice, and in the military domain. An accord with Israel, he said, would enable Egypt to commit a large part of its military forces to the Suez Canal Zone instead of the borders with Israel and thus effectively substitute for the British troops.<sup>19</sup>

The primary sources on Maghrebi-Israeli relations abound with contacts such as ‘Abbas Halim. Chapter 2 illustrates how the pro-French puppet-sultan Moulay Ben ‘Arafa and his son courted Israel and sought its support to regain control over the monarchy, while chapter 6 refers to ‘Abd al-Raziq ‘Abd al-Qadir, an Algerian Muslim, who briefly lived in Israel, preached Arab-Israeli peace, and opposed pan-Arab ideologies. Yet none of these righteous advocates of Arab-Israeli compromise wielded any degree of authority, and all eventually faded from political life or were exiled.

With the seizure of power by the Free Officers and Egypt’s transformation into a republic, Israel’s initial impression of the new regime was that it chose to immerse itself in domestic problems, leaving little room for involvement in a renewed conflict or in regional Arab politics. Re’uven Shiloah, founder of the Mossad—Israel’s secret service apparatus—and its first director, impressed upon the Israeli government the need to explain to the new regime

the benefits Cairo would reap by improving ties with Israel, particularly the upgrading of the standard of living among Egyptians. He also recommended that, as a gesture to the Free Officers, Israel should lobby Washington to grant Cairo generous economic assistance.<sup>20</sup>

Shiloah's recommendations were embraced to some extent. During the period from the end of 1952 to mid-1955, Divon met secretly on several occasions in Europe with 'Abd al-Rahman Saddiq, a confidant of Nasser. Both men raised a host of issues that could be mutually advantageous, including modes of coexistence and economic cooperation. Recent research findings by the historian Wolfgang Schwanz disclose that, on his own initiative, Nasser engaged to arrive at a settlement—one that was detached from the Divon-Saddiq back-channel diplomacy. In April or May 1953, Nasser contacted the West German ambassador in Cairo to ask whether Germany would assist him in mediating discreet peace contacts with the Israelis.<sup>21</sup> While we do not yet have sufficient details on Nasser's move, we do know that the various diplomatic efforts were outweighed by conflicting outlooks and came to naught.

One of the obstacles preventing an understanding was Nasser's request that Israel cede to Egypt parts of the southern Negev region. Aside from the fact that the Egyptians never clarified what they meant by coexistence, the Israelis were deeply reluctant to make such a territorial concession. From the end of 1953 until early 1955, when Ben-Gurion took a brief respite from politics and Moshe Sharett, the foreign minister, replaced him, the Israeli government nevertheless continued to weigh all the options presented by the Egyptians. With Ben-Gurion's return to government, first as minister of defense and then as prime minister, he toughened his position.<sup>22</sup> Envisioning large-scale Jewish settlement in the Negev by Jewish immigrants from the Maghreb, and having established his own home there, Ben-Gurion would not hear of any demands pertaining to Egyptian territorial demands, just as he refused to concede half the Sea of Galilee to Za'im or Shishakli.

Other impediments to peace included the Israeli raids on Egyptian-occupied Gaza. Throughout 1954 and 1955, Palestinian fighters (*fida'iyyun*) infiltrated into Israel and carried out acts of murder and sabotage among civilian populations. Israel's reaction to these acts, but at the same time its desire to provoke the Egyptians militarily, consisted of retaliatory operations across the border, the most extensive one being carried out on 28 February 1955. According to Avi Shlaim, despite the various secret Egyptian-Israeli contacts, the February 1955 event and Ben-Gurion's return to power brought relations between the two countries to the boiling point. This raid exposed the weakness of Egypt's military and, in September 1955, forced the Egyptian leadership to enter into an arms deal with the Soviet bloc.<sup>23</sup>

The historian Shimon Shamir dismisses both the blunt arguments and the milder inferences that suggest that Israel should be held responsible for missing an opportunity for peace with Egypt. Indeed, he downplays the importance of the contacts and doubts there were any missed opportunities toward peace before the late 1960s. Shamir believes that Nasser's readiness to quietly deal with the Israelis was part of a strategy to secure, via Israel and American Jewry, financial assistance and support from the Eisenhower administration for his future negotiations with Britain over the Suez Canal.<sup>24</sup>

Shamir's observations are probably correct for the 1950s. It is highly unlikely that Nasser could have afforded to reach an understanding of ending the state of war, let alone a genuine Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, without facing adverse reactions throughout the Arab world. Could he have reached an agreement with Israel that excluded the Palestinian refugees and their request to return to their homes in Israel? Could Nasser have circumvented Syria? Would he not have risked a political crisis with Iraq, which was in any case hostile to his leadership? Though Nasser was then uninvolved in regional affairs, in retrospect it is obvious that he intended to build up his image as a pan-Arab leader.<sup>25</sup> Committed to Arab and African unity after 1955, Nasser would certainly have encountered great difficulties in preserving peace with Israel, while the latter would have been fearful and suspicious of his hegemonic proclivities.

What is more, at the moment of deciding whether or not to sign an agreement with Israel, Nasser may well have had to grapple with questions about his physical well-being. King 'Abdullah's assassination would surely have been a point to remember. Nasser confided this much to individuals he trusted, for example, Maurice Orbach, a member of the British Parliament and the Labor Party who was also affiliated with the London-based Political Bureau of the World Jewish Congress. Orbach disclosed that, during their meeting in Cairo on 23 November 1954, Nasser related his "every desire to conclude a peaceful settlement with Israel" but added that the opportune moment to pursue it had not arrived. The deep-seated hatred manifested by his radical opponents, who never missed an opportunity to discredit his government and who would surely accuse it of treason, deterred him from pursuing daring policies.<sup>26</sup>

It was not until the mid-1960s that the Israeli Mossad initiated fresh secret contacts with the Egyptians. This was accomplished in Europe through third parties who helped place the Mossad in direct communication with one of Nasser's closest confidants, General 'Azam al-Din Mahmud Khalil. In the latter half of 1965, as meetings were taking place between a Mossad representative and Khalil, the Egyptian raised two central issues: first, Cairo needed Israel's lobbying influence before Western governments to obtain

economic assistance and loans; and second, he asked that Israel's Foreign Ministry discontinue its diplomatic sabotage campaign conducted against Egyptian interests in Washington. Israel, on the other hand, laid out its own requests, including a direct pipeline between Nasser and Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol and the right of passage for Israeli ships through the Suez Canal.<sup>27</sup> Nothing was mentioned about the pursuance of peace or recognition of Israel.

The meetings in Europe were soon upgraded to include discussions between Khalil and Mossad director Meir 'Amit. The Egyptians even considered obtaining a financial loan from Israel in the amount of \$30 million at low interest. At one point, in February 1966, the Egyptians invited 'Amit to Cairo in order to resume and deepen the talks. The plans came to naught. The Israeli government's closest political consultants and intelligence experts strongly advised against 'Amit's visit to Cairo. They suspected that the Egyptian invitation was no more than a deceptive maneuver to capture the head of the Mossad—a potentially major boost for Nasser, whose prestige was then at a low ebb—and to “squeeze” him for data about Israel's conventional and nonconventional military capabilities.<sup>28</sup> Prime Minister Eshkol concurred with the experts and prevented 'Amit from visiting Egypt. Dismayed by his superiors' attitude, 'Amit remarked bitterly:

I was frustrated. I felt that we were on the verge of losing an historic opportunity. The lack of confidence [in the Egyptians] would bring us to an impasse. The approach [of the Israeli leadership] was that one should only look for distortions [on the other side], that it was inconceivable for anyone else to have good intentions, and that the world was full of mischief.<sup>29</sup>

During summer 1966 'Amit attempted to revive his connections with Khalil, but in vain. A representative of the Mossad's French bureau reported that Khalil would be prepared to meet 'Amit only in Cairo.<sup>30</sup>

Did Israel miss an opportunity this time? Were there justifications and information to substantiate the claim that 'Amit's visit to Cairo would become a security risk? Could the June 1967 war have been avoided by the continuance of the meetings in Cairo and elsewhere? We have no ready answers.

In December 1967, Nasser secretly turned to the Johnson administration and proposed a peace plan, of which even his closest advisers, including Foreign Minister Mahmud Riyad, were completely unaware. The proposal stressed the necessity of ending the state of war with Israel and exchanging ambassadors. Israel was expected to accommodate Egypt by withdrawing its military forces from all Arab territories occupied during the June 1967

war and granting financial indemnities to the Palestinian refugees. We cannot determine conclusively if Nasser acted the way he did in order to implement UN Resolution 242 of 22 November 1967, which called for the exchange of occupied land for peace, or merely to improve his relations with the United States, which had been severed as a result of the war. It is certain, however, that President Johnson, who expressed skepticism about its feasibility and prospects, ignored the offer.<sup>31</sup>

Libya was another Arab country that Israel tried to engage in back- and open-channel dialogues, during the Libyan transition from British military domination to national independence. In 1949, once deliberations commenced at the UN over the future of Libya, members of the Israeli delegation stood out as active supporters of Libyan independence. Some of them met openly or secretly with Libyan nationalists to publicize Israel's backing of their cause. In December 1951, Israel's vote at the UN General Assembly constituted one of the deciding votes that brought to an end the British Military Administration (BMA) and led to the creation of an independent government in Tripoli under the aegis of King Idris al-Sanusi I. The Israeli diplomatic measures on Libya's behalf were geared to nurture discreet or semiofficial ties with the future Libyan leaders. It was easy for Israel to support the Libyans and not fear the consequences of British disapprobation. Britain was hardly an ally or an avid supporter of Israel in the Middle East. Besides, the British already planned to end their military administration in Libya and acted favorably toward recognizing that country's sovereignty. This situation was in sharp contrast to the rest of the Maghreb, where France and its colonial administrators became allies of Israel and sought the support of the Israeli government for the tightening of their political grip over Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria.

There were multiple objectives behind Israel's vote at the UN in favor of Libyan independence, two of which are noteworthy. Under the BMA, the Jewish Agency maintained an important *'aliyah* (Jewish emigration to Israel) office in Tripoli that processed the paperwork for emigration to Israel; in 1949–51, as many as 29,704 Libyan Jews left Libya through this office.<sup>32</sup> The politics of *'aliyah* became a central issue in Israel's quest for ties with the Maghrebi states on the eve of their independence from colonial domination and afterward. As we shall see in chapters 2 and 3, as long as the French were in charge in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, Israeli-Maghrebi links were either sporadic or nonexistent. On the other hand, in 1955–56, when it appeared that these French colonial strongholds were on the brink of independence, the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the Jewish Agency took emergency steps to contact future nationalist leaders with the aim of safeguarding the *'aliyah* and ensuring its continued flow.