

Václav Havel's Zionism?

The Role of New Political Elites in the Transformation of Czech Policies Towards the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict after the Fall of Communism

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ABSTRACT	This essay analyzes the causes and conditions that led Czech political elites to form a strong bond with the State of Israel after the Velvet Revolution. This bond gradually developed into a strategic alliance. This relationship became increasingly accompanied by the Czech Republic's clearly uncritical stances towards Israel and its policies in the Middle East. In this context, the important role of Czech political elites – initially led by Václav Havel – is examined, while the shifts in their thinking that contributed to today's approaches in Czech diplomacy are illustrated.
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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Czech public discourse, the positive relations between the Czech Republic and Israel are often simplified and reduced to a something “historically given.” In reality, the roots of these political positions are different. The modern history of Czech and Czechoslovak relations with Jews, the Zionist movement, and Israel is marked by both numerous positive moments and instances of an entirely opposite nature. It was primarily the positions of the new political elites after the fall of communism in 1989 that contributed to the shift in the Czech foreign policy toward Israel to its current level. An important part of these new Czech political elites – especially those within the circle of President Václav Havel – had previously been dissident counter-elites. Already during their time in the dissident movement, they held strongly pro-Israeli views, which they later transformed, in their role as new political elites, into a distinctly pro-Israeli political agenda.

When the pre-1989 Czechoslovak counter-elites – those who would later become the post-communist political elites – discussed and imagined Israel, certain symbolic and historical reference points came to be particularly formative. These included the legacy of Czech-Jewish cultural figures, the views of T. G. Masaryk on Jews and Zionism, the perceived parallels between the 1938 Munich Agreement and the international situation of Israel, the post-World War II Czechoslovak military assistance to the nascent State of Israel, the antisemitism of the Eastern Bloc during the late Stalinist period, its Cold War support for Israel's Arab adversaries, and the intellectual responses to the Six-Day War and the Prague Spring (SEE, E.G., WEIN 2015; PITHART 2024), (SEE ALSO TATEROVÁ IN THIS FORUM).

At the same time, official Czechoslovak policies of that period were in line with Soviet Cold War foreign policy, which was focused on maintaining good relations primarily with people's democratic regimes and national liberation movements fighting against pro-Western forces, including the State of Israel. Czechoslovakia thus cooperated with the PLO, for example, and, in contrast, severed diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967 (TATEROVÁ 2022A; ZÍDEK – SIEBER 2009: 143, 242).

The counter-elite imaginary of Israel, rooted in the dissenting cultural memory and political identity of the 1970s and 1980s opposition, came to the forefront after the fall of Communism. Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, a significant diplomatic realignment took place. Relations between Czechoslovakia and Western states, including Israel, improved markedly. This transformation was largely driven by the ascent of these new political elites, whose earlier opposition to communist domestic and foreign policy translated into a fundamentally different orientation in international affairs.

This imaginary can be understood as natural within its historical context, though it was not always well-contextualized or accurately interpreted, as views of it at times even bordered on romanticized mythologizing. Nevertheless, these attitudes significantly influenced the thinking of the Czechoslovak/Czech post-1989 elites and the public on the topic of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Importantly, figures such as Václav Havel exemplify the fluid boundary between the roles of *counter-elite* and *elite*: once positioned in the cultural and political opposition to the communist regime, individuals like Havel became central actors in shaping foreign policy after 1989. This transition did not erase their earlier frameworks of perception, however – it often reinforced them.

NATURAL SYMPATHIES

One of the first steps of the “Havelian”¹ foreign policy was the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel, which occurred on February 9, 1990. Czechoslovakia thus became, after Hungary, the second former Soviet satellite state to renew diplomatic ties with Israel. This led to the mutual opening of embassies in Prague and Tel Aviv and reciprocal visits of heads of state (CZECH EMBASSY IN TEL-AVIV 2019). This development was accompanied by an atmosphere of great optimism stemming from the broader context of the Eastern Bloc’s collapse. At the same time, the Israeli-Palestinian relations were transforming, with early significant signs of the peace process emerging in the 1990s.

Under Václav Havel, Czechoslovak foreign policy quickly became very friendly towards Israel. For instance, Havel was among the world leaders who pushed for the repeal of UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 from

1975, which equated Zionism with racism (RUBY 1990). However, Havel's foreign policy of the 1990s was not reflexively one-sided. For example, since the second half of the 1970s, the PLO has maintained a representation in Czechoslovakia, which gained the status of the Embassy of the State of Palestine in 1988 (TATEROVÁ 2022B). Havel's diplomacy, and later Czech diplomacy, respected the original recognition of the State of Palestine.

Havel also sought to understand the deeper complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (hereafter referred to as "the conflict") and was critical of certain aspects of Israeli policy. For example, such criticism concerned the Israeli government of Yitzhak Shamir, which, according to his views, was not active enough in peace efforts (CZECH RADIO 1990). He met with Yasser Arafat several times, including during Arafat's 1990 visit to Czechoslovakia, which had been planned under the Communist regime. Havel even considered mediating the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, but this proposal soon proved unrealistic, as Czechoslovakia began facing growing internal tensions, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the federation into two independent states in 1992 (VÁCLAV HAVEL LIBRARY 2015). Havel also began inviting not only Israeli but also Palestinian intellectuals to the international human rights conference Forum 2000, which he founded to promote dialogue. For example, the Palestinian journalist and diplomat Leila Shahid was invited already to the first of these conferences (FORUM 2000 2021).

FROM CULTURAL AFFINITIES TO PREJUDICES

Havel's sympathies towards Israel drew upon many sources, not just the dissident counter-cultural positions. Throughout his life, Havel was inspired by the cultural aspects of Judaism and Jewish Prague (including the works of Franz Kafka, which influenced Havel's writing), and he formed friendships with numerous figures in Czech Jewish life, many of whom were signatories of Charter 77. He was also inspired by the legacy of T. G. Masaryk and his fight against anti-Semitism (POJAR 2016). To some extent, Havel linked his sympathies towards Judaism with support for Zionism, helping to create an attractive but somewhat romanticized and thus inaccurate blend of Judaism and Zionism.

Havel sometimes, for example, compared the position of dissidents in communist Czechoslovakia to that of Jews in ghettos or likened the Czech

and Jewish nations to each other by referring to their “*eternal struggle for survival*” (HAVEL 2012). Such comparisons, however, due to their generality, can hardly be considered anything more than loose metaphors. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, during his presidency, Havel showed considerable empathy towards the Palestinian cause within the context of his support for a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Havel’s cultural sympathies can thus be seen as strongly influenced by his perception of Judaism/Jewishness, which also extended to his support for Israel. At times, he tended towards simplifications or stereotypes. For example, he occasionally depicted Israeli society as an idealized embodiment of democratic resilience and moral clarity in contrast to its Arab neighbors, which he often portrayed in more abstract or essentialist terms as victims of authoritarianism or radicalism (SEE E.G. CZECH RADIO 1990). It is generally possible to summarize that in the public discourse of the 1990s, Havel and other Czech elites sometimes reduced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to a scheme that could approximate a struggle between the “civilized West and the backwards East” or between “democracy and autocracy” without sufficient nuance.

While Havel’s attitudes may have influenced others, the more significant stereotyping and outright misleading positions regarding Israel and Palestine were more characteristic of the generation of politicians who rose to power after his departure from the presidency (as will be expanded upon in the next subsection).

THE SHIFT TOWARD IMBALANCE

Havel’s views on Israel were not rigid; they evolved over time. To some extent, they illustrate the shifts in the thinking of Czech politicians, intellectuals, and other opinion-makers during the first decade of the 21st century. This was not a random phenomenon but was influenced by two crucial events at the start of the new century. The first was global in nature: September 11, 2001. The second was specific to Israel: the intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the late summer of 2000 with the outbreak of the Second Intifada, which essentially buried any continuation of the peace process. These events shifted many liberal intellectuals in the West towards a convergence with right-wing, particularly neo-conservative,

positions, stronger support for U.S. interventionism and security policies in the Middle East, and the drawing of new parallels between Islam/Islamism and totalitarian ideologies (SEE, E.G., BERMAN 2003; PODHORETZ 2008).

These shifts toward greater support for the then U.S. administration of G. W. Bush were also noticeable in the thinking of Havel and other former Eastern European dissidents. For Havel, this was particularly true during the last phase of his presidency and afterwards when he played a role of an important public intellectual. In the context of the strengthening of right-wing positions on Israel, Havel was significantly influenced by the former Soviet dissident of Jewish origin and later right-wing Israeli politician Natan Sharansky. For example, in June 2007, Havel co-organized, together with Sharansky and the former right-wing Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, a conference in Prague on democracy and security which was supported by several neo-conservative think tanks (DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY 2007). In 2010, Havel, together with several neo-conservatives, endorsed Aznar's "Friends of Israel" initiative, which aimed to *"counter attempts to delegitimize Israel and its right to live in peace and defensible borders"* (JERUSALEM POST 2010).

Havel's positions in this regard intertwined with the Atlanticist views of Czech right-wing politicians who sought to strengthen Atlantic ties, particularly partnerships with the U.S. and the Czech membership in NATO. It is also essential to note that the U.S. Republican right had at that time become more pro-Israel than in the past. In another example of this broader trend, other Czech politicians also shifted in a similar direction – many of them originally associated with Havel's dissident circle, such as Alexander Vondra, Michael Žantovský, and Petr Pithart (PITHART 2024). This also included a younger generation of right-wing and/or conservative politicians and diplomats like Petr Nečas, Mirek Topolánek, Tomáš Pojar, and Miroslav Kalousek, who reached top political positions mostly after the Havel era.

This extension beyond Havel helps to illustrate that while his positions were formative, the transformation of the Czech policy towards Israel became a broader and more systemic phenomenon. The one-sided support for Israel did not become exclusive to the Czech right but began to enjoy a broad consensus across the entire political spectrum. One of the most prominent and least balanced advocates of it was the Prime Minister

(1998–2002) and President (2013–2023) Miloš Zeman, originally a Social Democrat. His comments during a visit to Israel in 2002, where he compared Yasser Arafat to Adolf Hitler (KROUPA 2012), and his later strong support for the move of the Czech embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which has yet to happen (CZECH RADIO 2013), were highly publicized. In many ways, Zeman could also be defined as an Atlanticist, but his views on Israel and the Middle East were also strongly influenced by cultural prejudices linked to Islamophobia (NOVÁK 2013). Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (2017–2021) also repeatedly expressed pro-Israel stances, although they were less ideological and more pragmatic, which was in line with his center-right populism.

The pronounced Czech pro-Israeli stance – and, to a large extent, its shifts – are well illustrated by the personal nominations for the post of ambassador to Israel. Based on the author's own interviews, while in the 1990s this post was filled by open and consensual personalities, such as Miloš Pojar or Jiří Schneider, later it was filled by personalities with a harder pro-Israeli stance, such as Tomáš Pojar or Michael Žantovský. Recently, this trend has continued with the diplomat Veronika Kuchyňová-Šmigolová, whose publicly expressed statements have leaned in a strongly pro-Israeli direction.

In particular, the aforementioned Michael Žantovský, who describes himself as a follower of Havel's tradition and has long referred to his personal connection with Václav Havel, was one of the main proponents of a strongly pro-Israeli line of the Czech foreign policy. Although his positions follow the cultural and moral framework formulated by Havel, their specific political content has often demonstrated a more one-sided character.

A CULMINATION OF ONE-SIDEDNESS?

The unbalanced pro-Israel stances reached their high-water mark during the tenures of two center-right governments: those of Nečas (2010–2013) and Fiala (from 2021 onwards), who in their own right represented both a rejection and a continuation of Havelian foreign policy values.

Under Nečas's government, the intensity and quality of the Czech-Israeli relations were evident both in the rhetoric used and practically, as seen in the strategic partnership established with Israel in 2012. Values shared by both the Czech Republic and Israel were mentioned by Prime

Minister Nečas – for example, in parliamentary interpellations (PARLIAMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2011). The strengthened cooperation included joint Czech-Israeli government meetings and the deepening of the countries' bilateral cooperation, especially in areas of trade, innovation, research, shared political goals, and security cooperation.

Establishing a strong bilateral cooperation and maintaining historical partnerships is not unusual or controversial. There are many foundations for strong Czech-Israeli ties, but what is controversial about Nečas's stances is the almost complete lack of criticism from the Czech side regarding Israel's long-standing controversial approaches to Palestinians. This absence of criticism sometimes bordered on sycophancy. For example, in 2012, the Czech Republic was the only EU country to vote against Palestine's admission as a non-member observer state at the UN (CZECH RADIO 2012). In subsequent votes at the UN General Assembly, the Czech Republic generally acted in a similar manner.

This approach is paradoxical for several reasons: The Czech Republic is one of the few countries in the world that *de iure* recognizes the State of Palestine. Since the 1990s, the Czech Republic has also officially declared its support for a two-state solution to the conflict. However, its voting behavior at the UN General Assembly effectively contradicts the spirit of a two-state solution, rendering the official Czech declarations mere meaningless clichés and manifesting the one-sidedness of the Czech position. Shortly after the 2012 vote, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the Czech Republic personally to express his gratitude, having already visited the country previously, and brought along a part of the Israeli cabinet for a joint meeting with the Czech government.

The pro-Israel policies continued, though less ideologically and without overt references to Havel's ideas, under the subsequent center-left governments of Bohuslav Sobotka and Andrej Babiš². It wasn't until 2020 that the Czech foreign minister Tomáš Petříček, and two former Czech foreign ministers – Lubomír Zaorálek and Karel Schwarzenberg – co-authored an article that, in a very diplomatic manner, criticized some actions of Israeli governments (DANIEL – ZÁHORA 2020). However, the article was not well-received by the political establishment and was criticized by President Zeman, Prime Minister Babiš, and several right-wing opposition politicians.

The most recent point of culmination in the pro-Israel bias came under Petr Fiala's government when the joint Czech-Israeli meetings were resumed, after a long pause, in Prague in June 2022. Paradoxically, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lipavský as well as, occasionally, Fiala himself openly referred to a re-establishment of Havelian values in foreign policy. Following the Hamas terrorist attack on October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent military operation in Gaza, the Czech government adopted a firmly pro-Israel stance, which has not fundamentally changed since, essentially reflecting only official Israeli positions.

CONCLUSION

The current state of the Czech-Israeli relations and their tendency toward one-sidedness is a fairly complex matter. However, they can be interpreted in the context of the transformation of foreign policy, as it was shaped by political regime changes, shifts in foreign policy, and the rise of new elites in Czechoslovakia – and later the Czech Republic – after 1989.

The direction of the Czech foreign policy towards Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is closely tied to the political stances and roles of the former dissidents who became key figures and opinion-makers in Czechoslovak/Czech politics and public opinion after 1989. Among these, the influence of President Václav Havel stands out, though there was a notable shift in his positions – from a relative balance during the 1990s, in the time of the Middle East peace process, to a more pronounced pro-Israeli bias at the end of his political career. The growing pro-Israeli stance of Havel and his circle – as well as the emerging next generation of Czech political elites – was linked to two international events at the turn of the 21st century. This period saw the outbreak of the Second Intifada in summer 2000, which effectively ended the peace process, and the 9/11 attacks a year later. The interplay of these two events played a crucial role in shaping the thinking of Czech political elites, contributing to the shift from a more balanced pro-Israeli stance to a distinctly one-sided position.

The increasingly pro-Israeli positions aligned with the neoconservative thinking of the U.S. administration at the time, influenced Czech Atlanticist politicians, including Havel and other prominent figures across the spectrum of Czech political and public life. The increasing one-sidedness

of Czech politics and public opinion was, therefore, a natural progression within this framework, and was further intensified around 2015 by the rise of Islamophobic prejudices associated with the refugee crisis in Europe.

From the perspective of the main line of interpretation of this text, the key factor in the unilateral shift in the Czech policy towards Israel can be considered a combination of several international events – in particular the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. These events led to a change in the thinking of a part of the Czech elite, who began to perceive the Middle East through the prism of security threats and cultural clashes. This development was amplified by the influence of neoconservative thinking and Atlanticism, with which both some former dissidents and the then new conservative politicians identified. The gradual dominance of these positions led to the institutionalization of the pro-Israel orientation as a political mainstream.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The term “Havelian” is used somewhat loosely in the Czech public debate and refers to both a wider ideological current and Havel’s foreign policy practice. The primary responsibility for formulating the Czech foreign policy lies with the government. However, the president’s role in foreign policy is important in terms of its symbolism and Havel enjoyed exceptional prestige and influence on the international stage. Moreover, many of the foreign ministers and other government officials during the “Havelian” years were either Havel’s friends from the dissident movement or people close to him who shared a similar ideational orientation.
- 2 During this period, two joint meetings between the Czech and Israeli governments took place on November 25, 2014, and May 22, 2016. Both were held in Jerusalem.

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