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Cuban-Israeli Relations: From the Cuban Revolution to the New World Order

ABSTRACT

Current Cuban-Israeli relations are cool and restrained, although this was not always the case. Initially, relations under Fidel Castro from 1959 to 1967 were rather cordial, but worsened in 1967 and continued to deteriorate until Cuba severed relations with Israel in 1973. From 1973 to the late 1980s, Cuba was one of Israel's most severe critics. From the late 1980s to the present, Castro has toned down his criticism of Israel, and there have even been a few signs of a possible rapprochement between the two countries. International political and economic restraints, however, will likely work against significant improvement in Cuban-Israeli relations for the foreseeable future.

RESUMEN

Las relaciones diplomáticas entre Cuba e Israel en estos momentos se caracterizan por su tibieza y moderación. Estas relaciones fueron cordiales durante los primeros años del gobierno de Castro (1959–1967), pero comenzaron e empeorarse en 1967 culminando en que Cuba rompió relaciones diplomáticas con Israel en 1973. Desde entonces hasta el final de los 1980s, Cuba fue uno de los críticos más severos de Israel A partir del final de los 1980s, Castro ha moderado sus críticas de Israel y hasta ha habido algunas señales de una posible reconciliación entre los dos países. Sin embargo, restricciones políticas y económicas desalientan una mejora significativa en las relaciones Cuba-Israel en el futuro inmediato.

This study traces the course of Cuban-Israeli relations from 1959 to the present, with emphasis on the Cuban position toward Israel under Fidel Castro. These relations were initially cordial, but became increasingly strained following the Six Day War in 1967, reaching a final break just prior to the Yom Kippur war in 1973. Castro wanted to establish his leadership credentials in the Third World by adopting an anti-Israel position and favoring the PLO. Castro was also under considerable Arab and Soviet pressure to follow this anti-Israel line.
By the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, while there have been a few tentative signs of improved relations, more signs point to a continuation of their strained relations, such as Cuba’s urgent need for oil, whose supplies have been sharply reduced and disrupted since mid-1991. With the demise of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Cuba has attempted to make new deals with the former Soviet republics while simultaneously lining up other oil suppliers to help compensate for the shortfall. The Arab nations of the Middle East are a key element in Cuba’s oil strategy, since the region is a major world supplier of petroleum. In turn, the Middle East is an important market for Cuba’s largest export, sugar, and could become an even greater one. If relations between Cuba and Israel were to improve significantly, the former’s image as a Third World leader would be tarnished, since Israel is perceived politically by the nonindustrial nations as part of the West. Of even greater importance is the economic pragmatism exhibited now by Castro, who does not want to alienate his Arab allies by improving relations with Israel. The Cuban leader needs Arab oil and diplomatic goodwill more than ever, and he wants to exploit the region’s potential as an even greater importer of Cuban sugar. These factors do not bode well for a significant improvement in Cuban-Israeli relations in the foreseeable future.

Background

The June 1967 Six-Day War confronted Fidel Castro with a dilemma. While the vanquished Arab bloc was from the Third World, which Cuba promised to support, and the victor, Israel, was a close ally of the United States, Cuba’s sworn enemy, Cuba had generally good relations with Israel before 1967. To terminate diplomatic relations following the war, as the Soviet Union did, would have shown support for the Arab states but would not have reflected Cuba’s independence from the Soviet Union, which was important to Castro at that time. In the short term, he resolved this dilemma by (1) denouncing Israel’s aggression but placing most of the blame on the United States, (2) criticizing the Arab side for political ineptness and failing to fight to the very end, and (3) not breaking relations with Israel. In the longer term, however, Castro joined the anti-Israel Arab-Soviet camp. In early September 1973, a month prior to the Yom Kippur War, Cuba terminated relations with Israel. Cuba soon became one of the major advocates of strident Arab propaganda against Israel and so-called Zionist racism, and it later joined the Arab-Soviet camp that opposed Egyptian-Israeli rapprochement.

Several factors other than practical political considerations guided the
course of relations between Cuba and Israel, including the Jewish community in Cuba and Castro's views toward Jews. Cuba had been a hospitable refuge for Jewish immigrants in the early twentieth century. Well before Castro assumed power, Cuba was largely free of anti-Semitism, in contrast to other Latin American nations like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. Cuba was probably unique in the Christian or Moslem worlds for having no derogatory terms to designate Jews or any other foreigners, including North Americans. Jews from Eastern Europe were commonly referred to as polacos (or Poles) and others as turcos (or Turks), but these were not used in a derogatory sense. Che Guevara, who harbored no racial prejudice, came to adopt the Cuban terminology of referring to Cuban Jews as polacos.

Certain factors unique to Cuba may help to explain Cuba's relative lack of anti-Semitism. Castro's revolutionary movement attached much significance to the notion of human equality and to fighting discrimination toward persecuted minorities. Those few Jews actively involved in Fulgencio Batista's overthrow were advanced for merit, with their Jewishness in no way impeding their progress. For example, a Jewish engineer, Enrique Oltuski, an underground leader against Batista, joined Castro's revolutionary army, was responsible for Havana's civil defense, and organized the 26 July movement in Las Villas Province. Following the Revolution, at age twenty-seven, Oltuski became Castro's first minister of communications, but he was replaced in 1960, after which his career is uncertain. In addition, Jews played a part in founding the trade union movement in the 1920s and the Communist party. Avraham Simchowitz, for instance, settled in Cuba from Poland in 1922 under the name Fabio Grobart, helped establish the Cuban Communist party (three out of the ten founders were Jews), and, following the Revolution, became part of the revolutionary leadership and is still politically active. Although Grobart prefers to distance himself from the Jewish community, his contemporaries recall that he was the most politically involved of the Jewish workers. Another Jew, Manuel (Stolik) Novigrod, was named, at age twenty-two, to the diplomatic corps for his participation in the movement. He had served in Cuba's revolutionary army in the Sierra Maestra. Novigrod's parents who were longtime Jewish communists. Jews also helped Castro, such as by financing the purchase of the ship Granma.

Another factor explaining the lack of anti-Semitism in Cuba is the relatively weak position of the Cuban Catholic church. This can be traced back into history: "Catholicism, historically . . . identified with Spanish domination, . . . never won great influence [among] the Cuban population. Thus religious distinctions did not antagonize the Cubans
against the Jews, and still less so since, by disposition, the Cubans are a friendly and hospitable people." Nevertheless, the number of Jews in Cuba was already in decline when Castro gained power—due in part to a lack of economic opportunities and the parochialism of the Cuban Jewish community. However, toward the end of 1960 when the new regime started to nationalize private commerce and industry, what had been a moderate emigration of Jews from Cuba became a mass exodus, mostly to the United States and Israel. By 1967, the Jewish population had declined to fewer than 2,000. Those Jews who stayed endured the discomforts of other middle-class Cubans, but they generally were not discriminated against and in some ways were accorded positive treatment. For example, the Cuban media depicted Passover as celebrating national liberation, while the Jewish resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was commemorated as a heroic armed struggle.

This empathy for the remaining Jews in Cuba, who in addition had essentially remained neutral toward the Revolution, could not be attributed just to the relative lack of anti-Semitism in Cuba nor to the government’s general tolerance of most religious groups. It was a question of a purposeful policy at the highest governmental level, which leads to a discussion of Castro. As with his opinion toward Israel, the Cuban leader probably wanted to show that Cuba was not subservient to the Soviet Union. From a humanitarian perspective, and considering Cuba’s respect for Marxist doctrine, the great difference between Cuba’s and the Soviet Union’s stance toward Jews was convincing proof of Cuba’s independence. Simultaneously, Castro’s perceptions of Jews reinforced his policies toward Israel.

Castro’s Perceptions of Jews and Israel

“To understand Cuban foreign policy, one must first understand Fidel Castro, . . . [who] remains the architect of foreign policy.” This also holds true for Cuban policy toward Israel. Like many other Cubans of his generation, Castro was greatly influenced by the nineteenth-century humanism of Jose Marti and the antifascist legacy of the Spanish Civil War. By the late 1940s, when Castro’s political career began, revelations of Nazi crimes against Jews generated broad support and sympathy. Castro doubtless shared these views, which reinforced his humanist and antifascist beliefs. Furthermore, Hitler’s deadly anti-Semitism offered stark proof that the treatment of Jews could serve as a gauge of a nation’s general principles and ideals. Following Castro’s ascent to power, as several of his speeches suggest, Nazi crimes could certainly have influenced his position toward Jews. Regarding the nascent state of
Israel, while we have no record of Castro’s response to its establishment, everything, including his subsequent positions, would demonstrate that he viewed it with favor.5

Yet another factor may have influenced Castro’s attitude toward Jews—his conviction that he had some converso ancestry. (Conversos were Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity to avoid persecution by the Inquisition.) Historical evidence demonstrates that Castro is one of several converso-descended family names. The name Castro appeared a number of times in the official records of the Spanish Inquisition. At any rate, when Castro rose to power, “There was nothing in his background to indicate the slightest prejudice against Jews, in either Cuba or Israel, and much to predispose him in their favor.”6

Cuban-Israeli Relations Prior to the 1967 Six-Day War

Almost from the start of the revolution, Castro sought Third World support in his conflict with the United States. In the early 1960s, Cuba’s closest Third World allies (besides China) were Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser and Algeria under Ahmed Ben Bella, Arab nationalist leaders who were staunchly opposed to Israel’s existence. Nonetheless, Castro essentially ignored Israel in his relations with these two Arab countries, which amounted to a stance of benevolent neutrality vis-à-vis Israel. For example, in 1961, as the consequence of an unpublicized (although not secret) policy, Cuban Jews going to Israel were categorized as repatriados, or people returning to their native lands, although just about all originally came from Eastern Europe and had never resided in the Middle East.7 This totally contradicted Arab policy. Hundreds of Jews, with all their possessions, were flown to Israel by Cuba’s national airline in several trips.8 Jews thus were accorded exceptional treatment: all other Cuban leaving the country were viewed as gusanos, antirevolutionary worms.

Cuban-Israeli relations in the early years of the Revolution received scant public notice, since trade and other transactions between the two nations were negligible. There were also political considerations for Cuba’s silence regarding Israel. However, an outward show of Cuba’s friendly attitude toward Israel was its official mourning of the death of Israeli President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi in April 1963, although this was very vexing to Cuba’s Arab allies.9 It was later reported that it caused Ben Bella to cancel a planned official visit by Castro to Algeria.10

Soon following the Ben-Zvi incident, an interview with Israeli journalist Mordejai Nahumi from the Tel Aviv newspaper Al Hamishmar was published in Revolución, in which he made some very positive observa-
tions about his visit to Cuba. Coverage usually would have been greater, but Cuba wished to play down its ties with Israel due to Arab and Third World sensitivities. Likewise, in its relations with Cuba, Israel had to be discreet, considering its heavy reliance on U.S. economic and military aid. At the same time, Israel harbored the hope, later proved to be false, that friendly relations with Cuba would counteract Arab efforts to isolate Israel from other Third World nations. Thus, in March 1964, the Israel-Cuba Friendship Society was formed in Jerusalem, supposedly a private organization which sent technical aid to Cuba without official Israeli involvement. Until the early 1970s, despite the hardening of Cuba's official position on Israel following the Six-Day War, Israeli technical assistance also was supplied to Cuba in irrigation, agriculture, and freshwater fisheries. This assistance, however, was not publicized in either nation, which was indicative of the sensitivity of their relations.

At the January 1966 Havana Tricontinental Conference, Cuba approved of the harsh anti-Israel and anti-Zionist resolutions and expressed support for the PLO. The Cuban delegation, however, was not actively involved in formulating these resolutions, unlike the staunchly pro-Arab position of the radical pro-Cuban Latin American delegates. Cuba’s explanation for its conduct was that the conference vote was nonbinding because the delegates represented parties and organizations, not governments. In this regard, it was significant, as noted by a pro-Israel source, that “the texts of the Conference in Cuban publications distributed in Mexico and other Latin American countries systematically omitted the resolutions adopted against Zionism and the state of Israel.” As this source concluded: “Cuban-Israeli relations continue to be satisfactory.” In short, Cuba resisted the 1966 Tricontinental Conference's call to break relations with Israel and for a total boycott against the Jewish state. Castro in 1967 defended this position, declaring:

Cuba’s position in this painful problem is a position of principle, an intransigent position, a firm position. Except that we do not like fig leaves. What is Israel? An instrument of Yankee imperialism, the instigator, the protector of that state. And that is why I ask those of you of the ‘mafia’ who try to libel Cuba with such arguments: why don’t you break relations with the government of the United States of America?

It was surprising that the Cuban-Israeli relationship basically remained satisfactory in spite of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, although Israel must have wondered how much longer it could have remained so. As war approached, Arab and other Third World nations sided with Egypt, compelling Cuba to define its stance. President Dorticós on May 30 sent
a note to Nasser relating Cuba’s staunch support for the Arabs against U.S. Middle East policy. It was a prime example of evasiveness: Israel was not even mentioned. On June 7, two days after the war started, the Cuban press published an official Cuban government statement on the war, condemning Israeli “aggression . . . instigated and supported by imperialism.” This was the sole reference to Israel. Imperialism was the villain, and almost all attention was given to imperialist misdeeds around the world, including the Middle East. Cuba displayed a distinct reluctance to single out Israel.

Cuban public opinion toward the war, as much as could be determined, largely favored Israel. Cubans tended to empathize with a small struggling nation like Israel greatly outnumbered by its enemies, yet victorious. Even before the 1967 war, Castro saw a similarity between Israel’s struggle to exist and Cuba’s. Moreover, state propaganda had not aroused Cuban public opinion against Israel. These factors then made it all the more difficult for Castro when, shortly following the Arab military defeat, he could no longer delay joining other Third World nations in unequivocally condemning Israel.

On June 23, at a special UN General Assembly session, Cuba’s ambassador to the United Nations, Ricardo Alarcón, charged Israel with “armed aggression against the Arab peoples . . . by a most treacherous . . . surprise attack, in the Nazi manner” and then condemned Israel’s brutal “proposal to annex the territory occupied by force of arms.” This language thus satisfied the basic requirements for demonstrating support for the Arabs, including drawing a noxious parallel between Israeli and Nazi conduct, and also represented the first instance of Cuba’s making any statement at the UN explicitly condemning Israel. Cuba’s customary response to the Arab-Israeli conflict is exemplified by a statement made by foreign minister Raúl Roa on October 15, 1965, at the twentieth UN General Assembly that Cuba “supports the position of the Arab States in the pathetic case of Palestine.” Nonetheless, the Arabs were still not totally satisfied with Cuba’s statement. The effect of the condemnation of Israel was diminished by opening remarks made by the Cuban representative. Alarcón declared,

[Cuba] as a matter of principle, [is] opposed to every manifestation of religious, national, or racial prejudice, from whatever source, and also objects to any political proclamation which advocates the destruction of any people or State. This principle is applicable to the Palestinian people . . . unjustly deprived of its territory, as well as the Jewish people, which for two thousand years have suffered racial prejudice and persecution, and during the recent Nazi period, one of the most cruel attempts at mass extermination.
The Soviet Union’s position, while very hostile toward Israel, also acknowledged its right to exist, but Cuba’s recognition of the historic framework that justified Israel’s existence was unique.

Cuba also had its own international agenda that absolved the Jewish state of all, or even major, blame for taking over Arab land. “Our position with respect to the State of Israel,” Alarcón stated, “is determined by [its] aggressive conduct . . . as an instrument of imperialism against the Arab world . . . . It is in the context of the global strategy of imperialism that the true meaning . . . of the aggression . . . is revealed.”21 This statement not only reflected Castro’s obsession with the United States, but also revealed something more. Indirectly, the focus on U.S. blame helped to justify his refusal to end relations with Israel. More directly, Castro was delivering a message to the Soviet Union, which had ended diplomatic ties with Israel and had pressured its satellites, with the exception of Romania, to follow suit. Yet it maintained a position of peaceful coexistence with the United States, which Cuba held accountable for armed aggression throughout the world, including the Middle East. Coincidentally, a flagrant and (for Castro) a patently offensive illustration of Soviet-American cooperation took place around the time of Alarcón’s UN speech—that is, when Prime Minister Kosygin and President Johnson met in Glassboro, New Jersey. To Castro’s dismay, Kosygin traveled directly from Glassboro to Cuba, beginning a short visit on June 27. Cuban sources leaked the story that Kosygin had pressured Castro to sever relations with Israel, to which Castro replied that he would comply when the Soviet Union severed its relations with the United States.

Another aspect of Alarcón’s UN speech indirectly alluded to Arab cowardice regarding its quick surrender in contrast to Cuban heroism, were it ever to be involved in a war. Several months later, Castro was highly critical of the Arabs on another point. In an interview given to a French newspaper, Castro declared: “True revolutionaries never threaten to exterminate a whole country . . . . This kind of propaganda . . . helped the Israeli leadership to mobilize the patriotism of their people.”22 This served to justify Cuba’s stance toward Israel’s existence. Later, however, it would not prevent Cuba’s firm support for Arabs who were bent on Israel’s destruction. At any rate, this was Castro’s last public criticism of the Arabs, who received increasing support in official government and Cuban media reports. Meanwhile, Castro continued to resist both public and private pressure to sever links with Israel. The Cubans argued that its socialist critics should first end ties with the United States before Cuba would do so with Israel, and to other critics he argued that his country would never break off relations
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with any nation that did not initiate such a break with Cuba. Simultaneously, Castro also maintained his policy of tolerance for Cuban Jews.23

Post-1973 Cuban-Israeli Relations

Castro severed relations with Israel under improbable circumstances. His main concern at the Fourth Conference of the Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries held in Algiers in September 1973 was to portray himself as a major spokesperson for the Third World and to defend the Soviet Union—a reversal of his previous criticism of that nation. Thus, Israel was not a major consideration for Fidel Castro when the conference convened on September 7, 1973. In his speech, Castro accused the United States of being the major culprit in promoting imperialist aggression throughout the world. He defined as lesser offenders Portugal, South Africa, Brazil, and Bolivia and sharply censured them. Yet he took a rather moderate position toward Israel, which he mentioned only once, and with measured restraint: “Israel mocks the United Nations resolutions and refuses to return the territory it occupied by force.” This did not suffice for the many Arab delegates at the conference, who disagreed over several issues but were united in their opposition to Israel. Castro received blistering criticism, especially from Moammar Quadaffi, who accused Castro of being aligned with the Soviet Union, and thus not truly a nonaligned country. The Cuban-Libyan rift sharply divided the conference. However, just before its close, Castro declared that the Arabs had convinced him to break off relations with Israel, whereupon the Quadaffi-Castro rift was patched up and the conference saved from embarrassing acrimony.24 Granma related that Castro’s declaration was “greeted with a standing ovation that seemed to last forever. . . . Yasser Arafat . . . ran across [the hall] to embrace Fidel, and the applause lasted for minutes.”25

Israel ironically saved the conference from falling into complete disunity, since it served as a convenient target to unite all the delegates. Castro had been under great pressure from the Arabs prior to and during the conference. Israel “became the scapegoat and main bargaining chip in a crucial political poker game.” By severing relations with Israel, Castro gained Arab support for Moscow’s policy vis-à-vis the Third World and protected his new role as the major so-called nonaligned champion of the Kremlin. Of course, the Soviet Union welcomed this shift in Cuban foreign policy, since it had severed relations with Israel in 1967. The announcement, however, caught both Cuban and Israeli diplomats off guard since they had no advance notice of this shift in position.26 An official belated statement announced that the
Revolutionary Government of Cuba had decided to break diplomatic and consular relations with the State of Israel. And it was clear that the Revolutionary Government of Cuba really meant Castro.

Soon thereafter, with the start of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, it became obvious that the severance of Cuban-Israeli relations was more than just empty words. For example, the Cuban press, through its main mouthpiece Granma, became increasingly strident in its treatment of Israel. This symbolized the shift in Castro's policy toward Israel. Cuba shortly became one of the major proponents, in addition to the Arab bloc, of rigid belligerence toward Israel. Exemplifying this hostility was Cuba's promotion, in a large lobbying effort, of the notorious UN resolution of November 10, 1975, equating Zionism with racism, at the thirtieth UN General Assembly. Granma described the "Zionism-is-racism" resolution as a "forward step by the peoples of the world" and noted that it "left no doubt about the . . . imperialist origins and racist structure of the Israeli Zionist regime that is occupying Palestine." And Cuba was quick to encourage African animosity toward Israel, even going so far as to join the Arab-African bloc on the UN Security Council in July 1976, which denounced Israel's Entebbe raid as an offensive violation of Ugandan sovereignty, consistent with Zionist racism. This was in sharp contrast to Cuba's acknowledgement at the United Nations in June 1967 of the history of Jewish persecution and of Israel's right to exist.

And Castro's anti-Israeli line continued. For example, Castro sent Cuban troops to the Syrian-Israeli border, which Castro himself confirmed in December 1975. In November 1974, Yasser Arafat was accorded an enthusiastic reception in Havana, equivalent to that of a head of state, and he also received a special award, Cuba's highest decoration, the Order of Playa Girón (Bay of Pigs). When Arafat departed, a joint Cuban-PLO communique was released. In 1975, in his opening report to the First Congress of the Communist party of Cuba, Castro again attacked Israel as being a tool of U.S. imperialism, but in this instance within the framework of Cuba's complete identification with the Soviet Union's Middle Eastern strategic interests. The Cuban leader declared that the United States, "through the Zionist State of Israel, is seeking . . . to threaten the southern flank of the Soviet Union." The meeting's resolution on foreign policy reinforced the denunciation of Israel and backing for the PLO, which was leading the Palestinians in their quest for their national rights, as stated in a resolution adopted on December 21, 1975.

Castro's speech to the United Nations on October 12, 1979, marked the final stage in Cuba's denunciation of Israel. Castro asserted that the Jewish state practiced genocide against the Palestinians, analogous to
the "genocide that the Nazis once visited on the Jews." He added that the Palestinian people were "living symbols of the most terrible crime of our era." In this speech, Castro also condemned the Camp David accords and the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty of March 1979, viewing them "not only as a complete abandonment of the cause of the Arab countries, but also as an act of complicity with the continuing occupation of Arab territories."34

If Castro's sharp change in his Israeli policy weighed on his conscience, it likely was short-lived. Principle may have had nothing to do with the abrupt change in Cuban policy toward Israel. In this respect, he was no different from others who wielded arbitrary power. At any rate, the main reason for Castro's shift in his policy toward Israel was pure and simple opportunism. And once he embarked on this new policy, he sought to gain as much benefit as possible. Castro proved to be very successful because he bolstered his ambition of portraying himself as a Third World leader while simultaneously gaining the appreciation of the Soviet Union.35

Thus, Cuba's Middle East policy had two major tenets—hostility to imperialism and to aggression.36 These two guiding principles allowed Cuba to justify relations with Israel (because the island viewed the U.S. as the culprit of Israeli violence against the Arabs). This posture, at the same time, allowed for criticism against the Israeli government and support for the Arab countries. Although the revolutionary government was initially sympathetic to Israel, this policy would be discarded for it stood in the way of Castro's Third World leadership aspirations. Cuba's desire to court the friendship of the powerful OPEC and Arab forces and to toe the Soviet line in the region also acted as inducements to break with Israel. In 1973, after the Yom Kippur War, Cuba, for the first time, makes Israel responsible for its own actions and equates Zionism with imperialism. Until then, Israel was but a puppet of the U.S. (Israel's policy in the Middle East had served as an additional motive to denounce U.S. imperialism). The end of relations with Israel in 1973 . . . however, did not alter fundamentally Havana's policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. After the October 1973 War, Cuba continued to call for Israeli withdrawal from occupied Arab territories and for the establishment of a Palestinian homeland.37

Other instances of Cuba's continued opposition to Israel as one of its most serious critics from 1973 into the early 1990s were: the closing in 1978 of the Unión Sionista de Cuba and transferring ownership of the building to the PLO; vociferous attacks on Israel in the Cuban media, especially during the Menachem Begin administration; Havana's hosting of the Eighth Pan-American Arab Congress held September 20-21, 1988;38 Cuba's joint sponsorship in December 1990 of a UN draft resolu-
tion expressing concern over Israel’s continued occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; regarding the Gulf War, Cuba’s condemnation of what it viewed as the United States’ double standard of ignoring Israeli violations in the occupied territories while enforcing the resolutions against Iraq; and on December 16, 1991, Cuba’s vote against rescinding UN Resolution 3379, which equated Zionism with racism.

There have been other recent indications of Cuban ambivalence toward Israel. For example, in February 1992, José Ramón Fernández, vice-president of the Cuban Council of Ministers, noted that Cuba and the Arab countries were in full agreement on many issues. This observation was based on a trip Fernández and a Cuban delegation made to the Middle East to further Cuba’s historic and economic links with that region, thereby reaffirming Cuba’s solidarity with Arab nations by meeting with the leaders of Syria, Iran, Libya, Tunisia, and “the Palestine State.” All these countries concurred with Cuba’s positions regarding “the current threat of imperialism and the necessity of coordinating efforts among Third World countries in order to confront the adverse conditions of a unipolar world and a North” increasingly intent on dominating smaller countries. Fernández noted the great respect exhibited by these Arab leaders for Cuba and its leader as well as “what the Cuban Revolution and its leadership have and continue to represent.”

In addition to the leaders and dignitaries from the nations with whom he met, Fernández boasted that such was the Cuban Revolution’s prestige that when the Cuban delegation was in Syria, representatives from the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, and Jordan also met with the visiting Cubans. The Cuban delegation, on behalf of Castro, also took this occasion to reiterate Cuba’s solidarity “with the struggle for the restoration of the rights of the Palestinian people and the demand for the return of the territories arbitrarily occupied by Israel.” Fernández also pointed out that prospects were favorable for an increase in commerce and trade through consolidating and developing ties between Cuba and these Arab nations, which formed part of a larger effort to promote and enhance “South-South collaboration.” Fernández also noted that Iranian and Syrian officials expressed “support to the policy of the Cuban government and solidarity with the Cuban people, who are now experiencing serious difficulties,” such as the oil shortfall. However, months following the Cuban trip, the Washington Post reported that while Cuba was seeking oil from Middle Eastern countries, no agreements had yet been finalized. And shortly after this trip, commentaries in Granma International criticized Israeli incursions into Lebanon in 1992 and intransigence during the Arab-Israeli peace talks. While these editorials were more balanced and subdued compared to the
highly negative portrayals of Israel from 1973 through the 1980s, they still were critical of Israel and very supportive of the Palestinians and Arabs.

Signs of Future Cuban-Israeli Rapprochement

Recently, however, there also have been some indications of a possible Cuban-Israeli rapprochement. For example, in 1988 Castro was reported to have said that “Cuba has a lot to learn from Israel,” but that a resumption of Cuban-Israeli relations was not feasible due to the possible harm such an action would have on Cuba’s “position in the Third World.” Castro made these comments during a visit of Jewish Venezuelan leaders to Cuba. In early 1988, Cuba’s foreign ministry official, Jose Raúl Viera, stated in the January issue of the Austrian magazine Wochenpresse that informal Israeli and Cuban diplomatic contacts did not foreshadow any kind of diplomatic or consular links with Israel. Viera also stated that the controversial Austrian prime minister, Kurt Waldheim, would be welcomed in Cuba, which “will not allow itself to be influenced by a propaganda campaign.” However, contacts between the two countries continued. Latin American Report noted that for the first time since 1973, an official economic delegation from Cuba was to visit Israel. Led by the directors of the Center for Scientific Research in Havana, the delegation was to observe Israeli water preservation and irrigation techniques. It was also reported that Dov Avital, who headed Mapam’s Latin American Department, had just returned from Cuba and that he was the first politician from Israel to be on an official trip to Cuba since the severance of relations.

Other contacts took place, most notably by Mike Harari, a former Israeli commando from the mid-to-late 1980s, and Latif Dori, an Israeli leftist politician, in June 1990. Moreover, according to a Bush administration analyst, both Israeli and Cuban military advisers were aiding the rebel Sudanese People’s Liberation Army. Also, U.S. military intelligence in Panama, on the basis of documents from the Noriega regime, believed that the Panamanian government arranged a number of meetings between Castro and Mike Harari. Moreover, Cuban officials have privately confirmed that they were seeking Israeli assistance in developing Cuba’s citrus and fishing industries.

These developments ran counter to previous Cuban policy toward Israel, because following the passage of the Zionism-is-racism resolution in 1975, whose goal was to isolate Israel internationally, Cuba had avoided Israel and favored the PLO and radical Arab regimes. In June 1990, however, Cuba opened discreet communications with Israel.
Mapam's Latif Dori was allegedly invited for a visit by the Cuban government. Dori's trip was of political and diplomatic significance; it represented one of the first occasions when Cuba served as host to a representative of a Zionist party in Israel since 1973.

Dori also stated that Cuban representatives indicated a desire to improve relations with Israel, since they wished to get a better assessment of current conditions in Israel. Dori's responsibilities in his party could provide the rationale for the timing and framework of Cuba's new interest in Israel. In charge of a Mapam committee for dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, Dori actively encouraged Israeli-Palestinian contacts in the occupied territories. In a related development, a PLO policy shift regarding the recognition of Israel's right to exist allowed its allies like Cuba to reassess relations toward Israel, Dori stated.

Even prior to the Dori visit, another Israeli, though with a very different background from Dori's and in a different context, served as a link between Israel and Cuba. Mike Harari, a retired Israeli military officer who acted as a top-level adviser to former Panamanian strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega, went to Cuba a number of times to initiate commercial and diplomatic links between Israel and Cuba. (This was according to Panamanian military officials who had been questioned by U.S. interrogators following the December 20, 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama.) The Israeli Foreign Ministry refused to comment on Harari's meetings with Castro. Besides a possible restoration of diplomatic ties between Cuba and Israel, Harari stated he was also pursuing the matter of reopening Jewish synagogues in Cuba and seeking the help of Cuban intelligence in finding an unnamed Nazi war criminal believed to be in Paraguay. In sum, Mike Harari, one of the major figures in the Panama documents, traveled to Cuba on a number of occasions to discuss the renewal of diplomatic and commercial relations. Robert M. Levine also confirmed Cuba's growing interest in Israel, noting that in 1989 Cuba renewed economic contacts with Israel through the exchange of commercial and technical experts, resulting in reduced hostility between the two countries.

What do these signs of tentative cooperation (that is, the Harari and Dori visits) between Cuba and Israel mean? According to Israeli Foreign Affairs, it is unclear whether Cuba encouraged or welcomed such contacts. Moreover, there was no confirmation from the Cuban government that it officially had invited Dori, as he claimed, nor that he had met with any of the Cuban officials he had mentioned. IFA also noted that Dori's prior visa applications had been refused or ignored, giving "the impression that Dori, not Cuba, took the initiative for the visit."
also could not confirm Dori's claims with the Cuban Interest Section in Washington, for no official there had any information about his visit. IfA then speculated:

It would not be surprising to find that Cuba was exploring the possibility that Israel might intercede for it with the Bush administration. Now, more than ever, Cuba could benefit from an end to the U.S. economic blockade and a normalization of relations with Washington. The Soviet Union is drastically reducing its aid and Cuba's Eastern European trading partners are moving from barter to hard currency.52

It should be reiterated that Cuba's strong anti-Zionist, anti-Israel position has not been translated into domestic anti-Semitism. Isolated instances of anti-Semitic activity have been characterized in Cuba as exceptions to the norm of not confusing "information or propaganda against Israel with negative hints against the Jewish People, its religion, culture or history."53 While this distinction has not yet been translated into improved Cuban-Israeli relations, it could in the future. Margalit Bejarano, a close observer of the Cuban Jewish community, has noted that "the Cuban public is not necessarily affected by the hostile propaganda against Zionism, and . . . traditional sympathies towards Israel and the Jewish people have not disappeared and might come to the surface should Cuba change its Middle Eastern policy."54

Cuba and Oil

These positive tentative signs of better relations between Cuba and Israel, however, have been overshadowed by Cuba's deteriorating economic situation, underscored by its need for oil. This need constitutes an essential factor in Cuban foreign policy because disruptions in the flow of energy products has a significant impact on Cuba's national security and its effectiveness in conducting an independent foreign policy.55

Since the end of the cold war, however, Cuban ties with the Soviet Union have, for all practical purposes, been greatly curtailed under Russian leader Boris Yeltsin. This change has been especially acute regarding oil, which had been supplied by the Soviet Union. At the outset of the 1990s, almost 75 percent of Cuban imports came from the Soviet Union, especially Russia, the Ukraine, Byelorussia, and Kazakhstan. Oil constituted the most significant import. Until mid-1991, the Soviet Union supplied practically all of (and frequently more than) the approximately 10 million tons of oil Cuba consumed annually. In exchange, Cuba sent to the Soviet Union sugar, citrus, tobacco, and nickel.56
The focus here will be the implications of oil for Cuba-Middle Eastern and Israeli relations. Damián Fernández observed in 1988 that Cuba might have to turn to its Arab allies in the event of a Soviet cutback in oil supplies. Indeed, Cuba has been scrambling to find alternative suppliers. These activities have resulted in controversy. A comment made by a Cuban official in Mexico that Cuba would seek oil imports under special agreements from Mexico and Venezuela related to the San José Pact was quickly refuted by the Cuban ambassador to Mexico. In November 1990, the Castro government expelled a journalist from Hungary who reported from Cuba that Iraq had made an oil delivery to Havana, which violated UN sanctions against Iraq. And despite agreements regarding petroleum between Cuba and Russia and other former Soviet republics, and despite Cuban attempts to develop its own offshore oil industry, the island still faces a significant petroleum shortfall.

While Latin American nations like Mexico and Colombia could potentially pick up the slack, they are reluctant to enter into such a relationship with Cuba because of certain U.S. disapproval and continued hostility toward Cuba. The Economist Intelligence Unit speculated that if Cuba could persuade Mexico and Venezuela that it was instituting reforms, then these nations could be willing to satisfy Cuba’s most urgent need—oil. But the EIU pointed out that Mexico’s willingness to assist Cuba was tempered by its negotiations with the United States and Canada for a North American Free Trade Agreement. In late October 1991, at a meeting of the presidents of Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia (which also included an unscheduled appearance by Castro) held in Cozumel, Mexico, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari stated after the meeting that there was to be no special relationship regarding Mexican or Venezuelan oil exports to Cuba. With the decline of oil imports from the former Soviet Union and the requirement that deliveries were to be paid for in convertible currency beginning in January 1992, the Cuban government was eager to maximize domestic production, if necessary with the assistance of foreign firms. (For 1990, Cuba only produced around 6 percent of its domestic petroleum requirements.) Thus, Cuba, by fall 1991, was negotiating oil refining deals with Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., Total, and Cie.-Européenne of France, and Petroleos Brasileiros S.A. Unfortunately from Cuba’s perspective, it seems that projected yields from oil fields searched by Total fell considerably short of expectations as a means to compensate for the sharp decrease in former Soviet oil supplies. Cuban vice-minister of basic industries, Rodrigo Ortiz, indicated that if there were further cuts in oil exports from the Soviet Union, then Cuba would have to seek oil from nations that import sugar. The vice-
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minister indicated that the Middle East would be a probable source.\textsuperscript{65} This reflects a Cuban economic policy toward petroleum in which joint projects with foreign oil companies would be encouraged. Thus, pragmatic economic considerations take precedence while the Communist political system is maintained. The Cuban government declared that it has already located new foreign trading partners, including oil companies, that would to some extent counterbalance Cuba’s trade loses with the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{66} It is doubtful, however, whether such efforts will cover this shortfall. Oil exploration will not bring immediate results, if ever.\textsuperscript{67} It takes at least five to six years, on average, to reap the benefits from a successful oil field. A larger field requires even a longer period to produce results, and foreign enterprises exploring for offshore oil no doubt are looking for fields big enough to supply more than just Cuba. And the U.S. embargo prevents U.S. companies from oil exploration, which means that foreign enterprises can dictate more favorable terms with Cuba, thereby diminishing the latter’s potential profits. This also applies to trade accords that Cuba might make on other commodities with trading partners like Western Europe, which Cuba is relying on.\textsuperscript{68}

Regarding the Middle East, Cuba proposed to Iran on December 25, 1991, to exchange oil for sugar, according to Tehran Radio. Cuba’s Sugar Industry Minister Juan Herrera Machado made this barter request at a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati in Tehran. While Tehran Radio did not state whether Velayati had accepted the barter proposal, it did quote him: “We have no problems in expanding ties with Cuba.”\textsuperscript{69} There have been reports, however, about contracts providing for Iran’s refining and sale of oil to Cuba.\textsuperscript{70} In short, Castro is experimenting with what some observers term the “Chinese model, in which capitalism is fostered within hard-line socialism. Castro... recognize[s] that Cuba has no alternative but to associate with foreign firms to gain capital, technology and markets.”\textsuperscript{71} And this observation also pertains to Cuban efforts to secure other oil suppliers. The Arab world generally is favorably disposed to Cuba, and if the latter has any chance of making up the petroleum shortfall, it is with the West’s major oil suppliers, the oil-producing Arab nations. If Cuba were to suddenly improve its relations with Israel, however, Cuba could lose its crucial Arab support, which it has been actively cultivating, especially since 1973, and diminish its image as a Third World leader. Since oil is such an important factor for the Cuban economy and in its foreign policy considerations, it is unlikely that Cuba would take any action that could jeopardize its longtime cultivation of ties with the Arab world and its perception as a Third World leader.
Conclusion

From 1959 to 1967, Cuban-Israeli relations were fairly cordial, with Castro only mildly critical of Israel. For example, even at the 1966 Tricontinental Conference, Castro refused to issue an outright condemnation of Israel. From 1967 to 1973, however, Cuban-Israeli relations progressively deteriorated, culminating with Cuba's break with Israel in 1973. This reflected Castro's desire to be perceived as a Third World leader and to follow the Soviet position on Israel. From 1973 to the late 1980s, Cuba was in the forefront regarding condemnations of Israel, the most notorious being Cuba's joint sponsorship of the controversial 1975 UN resolution equating Zionism with racism.

Beginning in the late 1980s, and continuing to the present, however, there have been a few tentative signs of some improvement in Cuban-Israeli relations, although these initiatives mostly were undertaken by two Israelis—Latif Dori and Mike Harari. The Dori visit probably had the tacit approval of the Israeli and Cuban governments, although there is no independent confirmation of what was discussed during this trip. Regarding Mike Harari, Israel has sought to distance itself, claiming that the former Israeli commando acted on his own.

It is difficult to decipher the incentives on either side for improved relations, although it may be speculated that one motivation for Cuba would be to ask Israel to intercede on its behalf in pressing for a lifting, or at least an easing, of the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba—certainly a major goal of Cuban foreign policy. Given, however, the recent strain in U.S.-Israeli relations, it is difficult to determine what leverage, if any, Israel might have on the United States for the latter's intransigence regarding the embargo is analogous to Israel's vis-à-vis Jewish settlements in the occupied territories during the Yitzhak Shamir administration. However, with the likelihood of the Labor government being a more willing player in the Middle East peace process, then Israel could have more influence with the United States regarding the embargo, should Cuba wish to continue to make such overtures to Israel. A Cuban effort, however, to persuade the United Nations to declare the embargo illegal failed, in part, due to complications arising from the Arab-Israeli conflict. It would have been difficult for the UN to give reasons, if trade embargoes were illegal, for not having denounced the Arab embargo of Israel. Anticipating this complication, the Cuban delegation decided against allowing their resolution to be put to a vote for had this vote taken place, it would have constituted an embarrassing reminder of the Arab embargo of Israel. This, in turn, would have greatly antagonized the Arab world, whose support Cuba needs.
Regarding any Israeli motivations for an improvement in relations, it is difficult to determine what they may be, for there does not seem to be any discussion of this topic. Israel, as a result of the Labor victory, now has an opportunity to improve relations with the United States, and it secured a promise of American loan guarantees in August 1992. It may be speculated that Israel would have little to gain by improving relations with Cuba since such a move would antagonize the United States. And while some leftist members of the Labor government might be more inclined to improve relations with Cuba for ideological reasons, pragmatic considerations, such as improved relations with and loans from the United States, would greatly outweigh any rapprochement in Israeli-Cuban relations.

Thus, instead of an improved relationship, recent signs point to a continuation of restrained, though less hostile, relations between the two countries in the foreseeable future. For example, in December 1991, Cuba was one of the few UN members to vote against rescinding the resolution equating Zionism with racism—Cuba having sponsored the original resolution. Another instance was a trip to the Middle East in February 1992 by a Cuban delegation, which reaffirmed the historical and economic ties between Cuba and the Arab nations of the region and called once again for Israel’s unconditional withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories. Also, if Cuba were to significantly improve its relations with Israel, this would jeopardize Cuba’s claim as a Third World leader and antagonize its Arab allies, whose friendship it has so carefully attempted to cultivate over the last twenty-five years. Transcending such Third World ideological considerations were pragmatic economic ones. Previously,

[Cuba had used its links with] the Soviet bloc and a number of radical and nationalist Arab states to sell them sugar. But the demise of the Soviet Union and Comecon, along with the assertion of U.S. primacy through the Gulf war, means that an increasing number of such states are no longer relying on Cuba to meet their needs. Cuban construction firms, like Unión de Empresas Constructoras Caribe, which previously won building contracts in Algeria, Syria and Yemen, are also losing the leverage they once had. The fear of losing Arab export markets, rather than ideological considerations, was the main reason for Cuba’s opposition to annulling UN Resolution 3379 [equating Zionism with racism] in December 1991.73

The survival of Castro’s regime is at stake. This is epitomized by the dramatic decline in dependable oil supplies from Cuba’s former communist allies and Cuba’s subsequent scramble to line up other oil suppliers around the world. Castro has described the oil shortfall as Cuba’s great-
est challenge, reflecting his perception that Cuba has no close allies.74
Even before the dramatic political events in Eastern Europe and the
former Soviet Union, Cuba had anticipated relying on the Arab nations
as more essential trading partners in case of a trade disruption with the
communist bloc countries, which did take place. The Middle East has
what Cuba so critically needs—oil—and, in turn, the region could be a
major importer of what Cuba produces the most—sugar. Given these
pragmatic economic considerations, there is little prospect of Cuba alien-
ating its Arab allies by markedly improving its relations with Israel.
While Cuba has toned down its anti-Israeli rhetoric of the 1970s and
1980s, Castro still firmly supports Palestinian and Arab aspirations in
the region, and so is squarely in the Arab camp. Thus, Cuban-Israeli
relations will have a long way to go even to approach the relative cordial-
ity that characterized this relationship from the first years of the Cuban
Revolution to the 1967 war.

NOTES
1. Maurice Halperin, The Taming of Fidel Castro (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univer-
under Democratic, Military and Revolutionary Regimes, 1944–63,” Patterns of Prejudice
2. Bejarano, “Antisemitism in Cuba,” p. 40; Margalit Bejarano, “The Jewish Commu-
nity of Cuba: Between Continuity and Extinction,” Jewish Political Studies Review 3
(Spring 1991): 122; and anonymous referee’s comments.
3. Boris Sapid, The Jewish Community of Cuba: Settlement and Growth (New York:
238, n. 2.
5. This information is based largely on Halperin, The Taming of Fidel Castro, pp.
237–41. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations in the first half of this essay are from this
source.
6. Ibid., p. 241, n. 10, pp. 241–42; Georgie Anne Geyer, Guerilla Prince: The Untold
10. Latin American Jewish Congress, Information Bulletin (Buenos Aires) no. 186
11. Mordejai Nahumi is the Spanish spelling of the journalist’s name. See Revolución,
13. Israel: un tema para la izquierda (Montevideo, Uruguay: Ediciones Mordejai
16. Ibid., p. 299.
21. Ibid., pp. 246–47.
37. Fernández, Cuba's Foreign Policy in the Middle East, pp. 39–40.
41. Miami Herald, December 17, 1991, p. 1A.
45. “Cuba-Israel Diplomatic Relations May Resume,” Cuba Update, Fall 1990, p. 36.
54. Ibid., 135.
57. Fernández, *Cuba’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, p. 58.