Concept
Political Activism

Introduction

The concept ‘Political Activism’ refers to a foreign policy approach championed by Moshe Sharett during the 1950's which preached military restraint and emphasized the importance of political and diplomatic moves to ensure Israel's national security.

Background

Israel’s difficult geo-strategic position in the early years of the state\(^1\) led to the evolution of two divergent schools of thought which revolved around Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, and the country’s second Prime Minister and first Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett.

Their contrasting policies were heavily influenced by their differing attitudes towards the Arab states, the role of the international community and the correct balance between defense and diplomatic issues.

Political Activism was inspired by Chaim Weizmann and counted members of Mapai, Mapam, the National Religious Party and the General Zionists\(^2\) as well as several Israeli newspapers among its supporters.\(^3\) Despite this, Political Activism is generally considered to have been overshadowed by Ben Gurion’s Military Activism which primarily perceived military means to be the most effective tool in ensuring Israel's national security and therefore stressed disproportionate military retaliation and deterrence. (See Concept: Military Activism).

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\(^1\) Israel experienced Arab intransigence and international ambivalence. The country suffered from approximately 10,000-15,000 instances of infiltration. Along the Jordanian border alone 200-250 Israeli civilians (out of a population of 1.3 million) were killed and approximately 500-1,000 injured. Moreover, the rise of Pan Arabist ideological antagonism in the region made a political resolution to formalize the armistice lines as permanent borders much harder. At the same time, Israel became increasingly isolated from Eisenhower’s ‘new look’ American policy, which had begun to focus on strengthening American influence in the Arab world while the Soviet Union had abandoned its support for Israel in 1953. In addition, the UN’s Mixed Armistice Commission (MAC) offered no effective solution to Arab infiltration. Benny Morris, *Israel’s Border Wars 1949-56, Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford 1993) Ernest Stock, *Israel on the Road to Sinai 1949-56* (Cornell University Press)


\(^3\) The moderate line was also supported by the Israeli communist party and the weekly Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh newspaper as well as Ner, Kol Ha’am, New Outlook and Al Hamishmar which incessantly inveighed against the government’s belligerent policy. Sheffer, op cit.
The Ideological Underpinnings of Political Activism

Political Activism was characterized by several components:

◼ **Conflict Management**: The Political Activist School as characterized by Sharett was skeptical regarding the possibility of a quick comprehensive settlement to the Israeli-Arab conflict and thus sought to find ways to contain the conflict and lower its profile.\(^4\)

◼ **International Legitimacy**: Due to the need to ‘manage’ the conflict, Political Activism promoted the importance of international support as the prism through which Israel could ensure its vital interests. Disregarding international opinion would cause the country damage.\(^5\)

Political Activism thus pushed for exhausting all the economic, political and diplomatic benefits of organizations like the UN, promoted outside mediation in the conflict, and viewed the Jewish Diaspora as a source of indispensable moral, political, diplomatic and economic support.

◼ **Military Restraint**: In order to maintain Israel’s international legitimacy, Political Activism supported the initiation of moves to reduce tension\(^6\) and preached restraint in responding to Arab infiltration.\(^7\) While not denying that military force was sometimes necessary, it argued that it often made the situation worse\(^8\) - whether by rekindling the flame of hatred\(^9\) or creating an atmosphere in which Arab countries no longer saw any benefit in taking measures to contain infiltration.\(^10\)

Political Activism thus argued that force should be used as a last resort when national goals could not be achieved by diplomatic means.\(^11\)

◼ **Integrating Defense and Diplomacy**: Sharett believed that the Foreign Ministry should take an active part in shaping Israeli policy (rather than just ‘explaining’ the actions of the army to the international community). Political Activism therefore advocated integrating defense and diplomatic issues as well as balancing Israeli policy between the extreme of relying on its own strength on the one hand and yielding to international sensitivities on the other.\(^12\)

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\(^4\) Gabriel Sheffer, *Resolution vs. Management of the Middle East Conflict; a reexamination of the Conflict between Moshe Sharett and David Ben Gurion*, (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, Hebrew University 1980).

\(^5\) Sharett in Mapai Central Committee 12/5/54 Mapai Archive 26/54 p205

\(^6\) Such as preemptive moves to resolve issues like refugees, land ownership and abandoned property.

\(^7\) Sharett speech at Bet Berl, October 1957, published in *Jerusalem Post* 18/10/1966.

\(^8\) Sharett once remarked that “The question is what is the lesser of two evils – to try to ease the tension while running the risk of further incidents in which we shall be the injured party, or to launch a large scale vigorous military operation aimed at putting an end to the problem [of terrorist raids], an operation which will cause grave damage to the [international] standing of the country and will not achieve its direct objective…For the present – and I lay great stress on the words ‘for the present’ the former course of action is the lesser of the two evils.” Sheffer, op cited.

\(^9\) *Jerusalem Post* ibid.


\(^11\) Sharett argued that “there is a world of difference between seeing force as something to be used when it is the lesser of the two evils and a policy of military intervention for its own sake with the aim of bringing matters to a head.” Sheffer op cited.

\(^12\) Sharett Personal Diary, 16/3/54 p401.