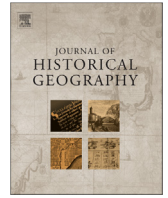




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## The relocation of the Israeli Foreign Ministry in 1953 and the Jerusalem question

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### Abstract

On July 12, 1953, in a 24-hour operation whose exact date very few people knew of in advance, Israel's Foreign Ministry moved from the Kirya in Tel Aviv to the government compound in Jerusalem. This was a secret operation carried out within one day. Theoretically, this act could be considered as a continuation of Israel's policy regarding that city, since it was part of a plan for transferring the government ministries to Jerusalem that had begun in the summer of 1949 and continued over a period of several years. However, Israeli policy regarding Jerusalem as the state's capital city was far more complex. Jerusalem's status was part of an unsolved question that has caused disagreement not only between the Israeli authorities and the international community, but also among Israeli leaders themselves. This conflict affected Israeli policy toward the city as Israel's capital city: on the one hand, officially Israel ministry offices were transferred from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; while on the other hand, some of the ministry's activities were conducted from Tel Aviv. The episode of the relocation of the Israeli foreign ministry in 1953 is illustrative of this dual attitude.

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On July 12, 1953, in a 24-hour operation that very few people were aware of in advance, Israel's Foreign Ministry moved from the Kirya in Tel Aviv to the government compound in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> It was part of a plan for relocating the government ministries that began to take shape in the summer of 1949 and continued over the next few years.<sup>2</sup> Before the 1948 War, the leaders of Israel's government in-the-making agreed to the idea of Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*. During the war, however, they changed their mind. It was decided that all the government offices would be moved to Jerusalem in order to bolster the city's standing. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's announcement on December 13, 1949 that Israel's seat of

power would be moving from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem with the blessing of the Knesset marked a high point in this transition process.<sup>3</sup>

Declaring Jewish Jerusalem the capital of Israel had been the subject of debate since the earliest days of the state. The Israeli public exerted great pressure in this regard. Jerusalem was the site of the holy places most sacred to the Jewish people, and from the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of the city's population was Jewish. After 1948, all Jewish residents of the eastern part of the city were forced to leave and resettle in West Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> During the war, Jerusalem was deemed a 'limited terra nullius.' In effect, Israel and Jordan attained sovereignty over their respective parts of the city by occupation, a state of affairs that was not

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<sup>1</sup> Newsletter to Israeli consulates, 21 June 1953, no. 685, MFA-271/5 Israel State Archives (hereafter ISA); files of legal advisor, Foreign Ministry, on the relocation of the Foreign Ministry, MFA-1817/3, ISA.

<sup>2</sup> Y. Katz and Y. Paz, The transfer of government ministries to Jerusalem, 1948–1949: continuity or change in the Zionist attitude to Jerusalem, *Journal of Israeli History* 23 (2004) 232–259.

<sup>3</sup> M. Brecher, The diplomatic battle for Jerusalem, in: E. Shaltiel (Ed), *Chapters in the History of Jerusalem in the Modern Era: Yitzhak Herzog Memorial Volume*, Jerusalem, 1981, 384–417 (in Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> U. Shemalz, The Jewish population in Jerusalem 1949–1967, in: A. Bareli (Ed), *Divided Jerusalem 1948–1967*, Jerusalem, 1984, 134 (in Hebrew).

challenged by the UN.<sup>5</sup> Ben-Gurion's decision to move the Knesset and government ministries to Jerusalem was thus welcomed by the Israeli public. However this move was not recognized *de jure* by the rest of the world. Israeli sovereignty over West Jerusalem was never formally recognized, and neither was Jordanian or Palestinian sovereignty over East Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> When Israeli leaders spoke about Jerusalem before 1967, they were generally referring to West Jerusalem (Jerusalem within the Green Line), which became the *de facto* border on November 30, 1948, and continued to divide Jerusalem until the Six-Day War in 1967.<sup>7</sup>

By mid-1953, all the government ministries had moved to Jerusalem with the exception of the Defense Ministry and the Foreign Ministry.<sup>8</sup> Transferring the Defense Ministry to Jerusalem was never part of the plan or even discussed due to the political implications and security risks of such a move.<sup>9</sup> Yet relocating the Foreign Ministry did become the subject of cabinet and Knesset debate despite having the same broad, symbolic and diplomatic significance.<sup>10</sup> Civil servants, each with their own views and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, joined the debate.<sup>11</sup> This administrative intervention in a political-diplomatic decision, which went on before and after the ministry's formal move, ultimately influenced the actions of the political echelon.<sup>12</sup> Some objections to the move apparently stemmed from personal inconvenience: members of the civil service were openly reluctant to give up cosmopolitan Tel Aviv for Jerusalem, which was seen as a backwater.<sup>13</sup>

The location of capital cities has long been a source of interest to geographers and political scientists.<sup>14</sup> Capital cities are privileged cities. They represent the larger political entities around them, mediating between urban space, society, the nation-state and the outside world.<sup>15</sup> Capital cities are shaped by those in power.<sup>16</sup> The visual impact of a city is influenced by the evolution of its cityscape, the symbols of state power and national identity as understood by different audiences, and the imprint of the cityscape on the city's political and public life.<sup>17</sup>

As a capital city, Jerusalem is a special case. While Rome is characterized by constant tension between the papal statelet and Italian nationalism, which is symbolized by government buildings, the situation in Jerusalem is even more complex. At one and the same time, it is a sacred center for three monotheistic religions, home to residents of multiple nationalities and religions, and a hub of government. Restructuring west Jerusalem as the capital city in the 1950s altered the cityscape through the construction of government institutions, which further increased this tension.

Israel's policy on Jerusalem was complicated by international resolutions that formed the basis for global recognition of Israeli statehood. Israel regarded these resolutions as crucial for establishing the legitimacy of the state.<sup>18</sup> In its bid for legitimacy, Israel strove to maintain a policy of neutrality in international relations until the end of 1949 and refrained from taking sides in the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> However, maneuvering between the blocs became more difficult as time went on, mainly for economic reasons. Israel was dependent on the West, and especially the United States, for financial aid. In early 1950, a pro-western stance was deemed in Israel's best interest.<sup>20</sup> However, the prime minister and foreign minister disagreed on tactics. Moshe Sharett was in favor of combining an official façade of neutrality with a pro-western orientation in practice. His goal was to recruit as much aid as possible with minimal commitment.<sup>21</sup> Ben-Gurion, on the other hand, sought assistance based on total commitment, with all that this entailed. The different foreign policy approaches of these two leaders and the fact that they did not see eye to eye had repercussions for the relocation of Israel's Foreign Ministry.

This article analyzes the sequence of factors that delayed the Foreign Ministry's move to Jerusalem from the Israeli perspective. Aside from technical and bureaucratic hitches that slowed down the process, other important components were involved, such as the attitude of the Americans and the Soviets, Israel's understanding of their attitude, and what transpired as a result. Scholars have studied the Jerusalem issue from many angles,<sup>22</sup> but the significance of relocating the Foreign Ministry has

<sup>5</sup> M.I. Gruhin, Jerusalem: legal and political dimensions in a search for peace, 12 cases, *Western Journal of International Law* 169 (1980) 205–207.

<sup>6</sup> N. Hirsh and D. Housen Couriel, *The Jerusalem Question – Proposal for its Resolution*, The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1994; A. Cassese, Legal considerations on the international status of Jerusalem, *The Palestine Yearbook of International Law*, Vol. 3, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Brecher, The diplomatic battle (note 3).

<sup>8</sup> On the latter, see N. Mann, *The Historical Development of the Kirya in Tel Aviv, 1948–1955*, doctoral dissertation, Bar Ilan University, 2008, 184–193 (in Hebrew). Why the Defense Ministry has remained in Tel Aviv is a subject worthy of separate study.

<sup>9</sup> Brecher, The diplomatic battle (note 3).

<sup>10</sup> *Divrei Haknesset* (Protocol of the Israeli Parliament-Hebrew), Session 220, 30 January 1951, 925; *Protocol of the Israeli Government*, Session 39/311, 5 April 1951, Section 309, 10–13, ISA; *Protocol of the Israeli Government*, Session 34/312, 5 May 1952, ISA.

<sup>11</sup> Files-P-714/7, G-9038/13, MFA-1817/3, ISA; diaries and correspondence. Ben-Gurion Archives (hereafter BGA).

<sup>12</sup> W. Eytan, *The First Ten Years: A Diplomatic History of Israel*, New York, 1958, 73–86.

<sup>13</sup> These sentiments come up in the memoirs of various civil servants. For example, in: Yesh Sakhar, *The Memoirs of an Israeli Diplomat*, Jerusalem, 2000, 76 (in Hebrew).

<sup>14</sup> H. van der Wusten, Public authority in European capitals: a map of governance, an album with symbols, *European Review* 12 (2004) 143–158; G. Dijkink, European capital cities as political frontiers, *GeoJournal* 51 (2000) 65–71; M. Wagenaar, Townscapes of power, *GeoJournal* 51 (2000) 3–13; J. Winter and J.-L. Robert, *Capital Cities at War Paris, London, Berlin 1914–1919*, Cambridge, 1997; A.W. Daum and C. Mauch (Eds), *Berlin–Washington 1800–2000*, Cambridge, 2005; R. Robin, *Enclaves of America: The Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad 1900–1965*, Princeton, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> A.W. Daum, Capitals in modern history. Inventing urban spaces for the nation, in: A.W. Daum, C. Mauch (Eds), *Berlin–Washington 1800–2000. Capital cities, Cultural Representation and National Identities*, Cambridge, 2005, 3–28.

<sup>16</sup> Wagenaar, Townscapes of power (note 14).

<sup>17</sup> H. van der Wusten, The cityscape of European capital cities, *GeoJournal* 51 (2000) 129–133.

<sup>18</sup> U. Bialer, Jerusalem 1949: transition to capital city status, *Cathedra* 35 (1985) 163–191 (in Hebrew).

<sup>19</sup> U. Bialer, Ben-Gurion and Israel's international orientation, 1948–1956, *Cathedra* 43 (1987) 145–172 (in Hebrew).

<sup>20</sup> B. Pinkus, *From Ambivalence to an Unwritten Alliance: Israel, France and French Jewry, 1947–1957*, 2006, 269–294 (in Hebrew).

<sup>21</sup> Pinkus, *From Ambivalence* (note 20), 285–292.

<sup>22</sup> Brecher, The diplomatic battle (note 3); Bialer, Jerusalem 1949 (note 18); N. Lorch, Ben-Gurion and the establishment of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, in: H. Lavsky (Ed), *Jerusalem in Zionist Thinking and Action*, Jerusalem, 1989, 377–403 (in Hebrew); H. Cohen, The status of Jerusalem in Israeli law, in: Y. Praver, A. Ahimeir (Eds), *Twenty Years in Jerusalem, 1967–1987*, Tel Aviv, 1988, 246–267 (in Hebrew); M. Golani, Zionism without Zion: the position of the pre-state and national leadership of Israel on the Jerusalem question, 1947–1949, in: A. Bareli (Ed), *Divided Jerusalem, 1948–1967*, Jerusalem, 1995, 30–52 (in Hebrew); S. Slonim, *Jerusalem in America's Foreign Policy, 1947–1997*, The Hague, 1998; Y. Katz, *Jerusalem: From Neighborhoods to a Divided City, Studies on the History of Jewish Jerusalem in Modern Times*, Ramat Gan, 2002 (in Hebrew); Katz and Paz, The transfer of government (note 2); U. Bialer, *A Cross in the Star of David: The Christian World in Israeli Foreign Policy, 1948–1967*, Jerusalem, 2006; T. Mayer, Jerusalem in and out of focus: the city in Zionist ideology, in: T. Mayer, S. Ali-Mourad (Eds), *Jerusalem: Idea and Reality*, New York, 2008, 224–244.

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