

# The Narrative of the Czech-Israeli Strategic Relations in the European Context

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This article is a particular case study that analyzes the causes and assumptions of how the Czech political elite looks towards Israel and how this view affects the fact that current Czech-Israeli relations have such a high standard in the European context and that the state of Israel has one of its staunchest allies in the Czech Republic.

*Keywords: Czech-Israeli Relations, The Czech Republic, Czechoslovakia, Israel, Václav Havel, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Strategic partnership, Czechoslovak Jews, Zionism*

On 29 November 2012 at the UN General Assembly, a high-profile vote was held. It was about the advancement of the status of Palestine in the UN to that of a non-member observer state. The Palestinian request was eventually supported by 138 countries, 41 countries abstained from the vote, and 9<sup>1</sup> were against the request. Not only in the European Union, of which the Czech Republic is a member, but also in Europe as a whole and in the neighboring continents of Asia and Africa, you could not find a state that fully supported the position of Israel in this matter – except for the Czech Republic. What is the context of this unprecedented behavior of the Czech Republic towards the state of Israel?

In terms of its quality, the year 2012 was not an anomaly in Czech-Israeli diplomacy. Practically from the very beginning of the independent existence of the Czech Republic it clearly made it known that it is a



Marek Čejka, The Narrative of the Czech-Israeli Strategic Relations In the European Context, *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 11, no. 4: 24-43.

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very strong ally of Israel. This is certainly a continuation of the tradition of Czechoslovakia, which had a friendly approach to Zionism and Israel. The fact that between 1950 and 1989 there was a long ideological rift between the two countries, and that for a long time the relationship was even completely interrupted changed little about Czechoslovakia's support for Israel. During the rule of President Václav Havel (1989–2003), Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic became one of the most prominent supporters of Israel. But even Havel's departure from politics did not mean that this tendency would just freely continue. During some of the following rightist-liberal Czech governments the position of the Czech Republic towards Israel even became one of uncritical support in some ways. In turn, sometimes the EU policy towards Israel, regardless of the Czech membership in the EU, was criticized by the Czech politicians. What are the factors connected to such a strong bond between the two countries in the European and world context? Is it actually a deep historical bond, stemming from the very beginning of the Czech and Israeli statehood? Or is it mainly related to the current political establishment in the Czech Republic and to the position of a group of influential politicians who have – at least for a certain period of time – considered the emphasis on the Czech transatlantic relations more important than the Czech Republic's relations with other members of the EU in some aspects?

The following text aims to identify and define the key points of the narrative which justifies or justified the pro-Israeli positions of the Czech political elites – regardless of whether we are dealing with the narrative in the context of a democratic Czechoslovakia (1918–1938, 1989–1992), the Czech Republic (since 1993) or the dissident counter-elites in communist Czechoslovakia (1948–1989). To conclude, the text specifies why the Czech relations with Israel are so unusual and specific and makes some generalizations in this regard.

The article continues the discussion on Czech-Israeli relations that is currently taking place in the Czech Republic. In most cases, this discussion is not a scientific discussion, but rather a popular discussion set in Czech newspapers, the Czech media and various public discussions in the media, especially those on public television.<sup>2</sup> Publications and monographs on this topic which are more academic are devoted especially to more historical aspects of the Czech-Israeli, or Czech-Jewish and Czech-Zionist, relations – e.g. Dagan, A.; Hirschler, G.; Weiner, L. (1984); Dufek, J., Kaplan, K., Šlosar, V. (1993); Pěkný, T. (1993); Yegar,

M. (1997); Čapková, K. (2005); Zídek, J., Sieber, K. (2009); Kieval, H. L. (2011), and partially also Rucker, L. (2001) and Tureček, B. (2011).

In the introduction let us define the nodal points of history which strongly affected the quality of Czech (Czechoslovak)-Israeli relations and which were so crucial in the shaping of the narrative of the attitudes of Czechoslovak and Czech political elites towards Israel. Based on an analysis of the mentioned works, these points may be divided into six groups:

1. The historically positive relations of the First Republic of Czechoslovakia (1918–1938) to Zionist movement, and the key role of T. G. Masaryk in this respect.
2. The Czechoslovak support of Israel and the arms supplies Czechoslovakia sent to Israel in the years 1948–1951.
3. The reactions of dissident counter-elites to the strong anti-Zionism and sometimes even anti-Semitism of the Czechoslovak communist regime in the years 1950–1989.
4. The strong rise of the Czech-Israeli relations since 1989 and the role of Václav Havel in this respect.
5. The Czech Republic's alliance with Israel as an expression of Czech Atlanticism<sup>3</sup>, or, in some cases, Czech Atlanticism in connection with Islamophobia.
6. A romanticized or biased view of the Middle East, Israel and Palestine on the part of Czechs.

*The historically positive relations of the First Republic of Czechoslovakia (1918–1938) to Zionist movement and the key role of T. G. Masaryk in this respect*

The current quality of the Czech-Israeli relationship has its roots, surprisingly, in times long before the emergence of Czechoslovakia and the state of Israel. One of the most frequently remembered facts in this respect is the positive relationships of some Czech intellectuals and politicians to the Jews or to the Zionist movement in the times before the First World War.

The anti-Semitic wave in Europe at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave rise to numerous publicized scandals. The most known of these was the Dreyfus affair in France in 1896. Also in Austria-Hungary between the years 1867 and 1914 twelve lawsuits concerning alleged ritual murders by Jews were filed.<sup>4</sup> However, the case of this sort that received the

most media attention was a case in which there was also a conviction of the accused – the so-called Hilsner Affair (1899).

The well-known Czech professor and politician (and later the first Czechoslovak president) Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937) marked the Hilsner trial as unjust and anti-Semitic. Masaryk then started to be attacked by Czech nationalists and there was even a failed assassination attempt on him in 1907.<sup>5</sup> This engagement brought popularity to Masaryk among Jews throughout the world and also helped him in his later political activities with the establishment of Czechoslovakia, securing the admiration and support of the Czechoslovak Jews.<sup>6</sup> During his presidential term Masaryk was a supporter of Zionism, and his first foreign journey led to Palestine and Egypt in 1927. It was also not a coincidence that the First Czechoslovak Republic held several conferences of the World Zionist Organization.<sup>7</sup>

The former dissident and later president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic Václav Havel was strongly inspired by Masaryk's approach. Havel wrote the following:

As president I appreciate the justice, humanity and impartiality of my great predecessor, T. G. Masaryk, who boldly addressed the Hilsner Affair ... He risked his popularity, his movement and also the publishing of his magazine just for the sake of the truth. In his view, every nation, and especially a small nation, must have a moral idea for which the nation lives and which contributes to a better harmony of mankind. Masaryk wrote: "Anti-Semitism is, in my opinion, our pain, and only our pain. It harms us, disgraces us, makes us coarse ..." As the president of a nation that had just gotten rid of its totalitarian regime, I would like to remind us of Masaryk's words: "A nation which itself is not morally strong cannot be saved just by politics."<sup>8</sup>

The situation of the Jews in Czechoslovakia in the late 1920s and 1930s was actually quite favourable even though there was a deterioration of the situation of Jews in European countries at this time. It was not just about the free and rich cultural and political life that was available to them in Czechoslovakia (which started already during the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), but the Czechoslovak Jews were even allowed to officially register under an 'Israelite religion' and a 'Jewish nationality'. This stemmed not only from a personal initiative of President Masaryk, but also from the attitudes of the Czech intelligentsia, which – based on its experience of fighting for national

recognition – also sympathised with the efforts of Jews to realize their ideals. The Czechoslovak recognition of the Jewish nationality was unprecedented, and the country also acknowledged the Jewish national unity and the right to national self-expression of Jews. But these positive approaches to Jews were not only idealistic, but they also had their pragmatic aspect: the recognition of the Jewish nation also had the purpose of formally “reducing” the number of German and Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia.<sup>9</sup> Many Jews in interwar Czechoslovakia declared their nationality to be German or Hungarian, and their main language was German or Hungarian. However, the greatest sympathy of non-Jewish Czechs/Slovaks towards Jews was aimed primarily toward Jews who spoke the Czech/Slovak language.

The position of T. G. Masaryk in Czechoslovak politics during his presidential term (1920–1935) was almost unshakable. Similarly, today, Masaryk occupies an exceptional position in the modern Czech historiography and is constantly mentioned as a positive role-model. There is no doubt that his relations towards the Jews and later towards the Zionist movement have become an important factor for many non-Jewish Czechs/Slovaks’ positive views of Czechs/Slovaks of Jewish origin as well as the Jews in general, the Zionist movement and, later, Israel in general. An important role in this was also played by the President’s son Jan Masaryk, who was later a very popular Czechoslovak Foreign Minister. T. G. Masaryk’s and general Czech attitudes towards Zionism and Jews were also influenced by the suppression of the influence of Catholicism at least in the Czech part of the First Czechoslovak Republic. For some Czechs, Catholicism itself was an unpopular symbol of the old regime and was also connected with some traditional anti-Semitic prejudices based on Catholic-Christian anti-Judaism. For that matter this kind of anti-Semitism was fully revived after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1938) in the fascist Slovak state, where the bond between the fascist regime and the Catholic clergy was very clear.

### *The Czechoslovak support of Israel and the arms supplies Czechoslovakia sent to Israel in the years 1948–1951*

After World War II, Czechoslovakia very actively and effectively supported the creation of Israel. In 1947 Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk, the son of the first president of Czechoslovakia, was very active in regard to this issue at the United Nations. The Czechoslovak diplomacy was

also represented among the eleven countries in the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), which was created on 28 April 1947, and participated in a discussion concerning the question of Palestine in a special sub-committee for Palestine of the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 1947. On 29 November 1947 the Czechoslovak representative in the General Assembly voted for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state.<sup>10</sup> Less than three months later, on 25 February 1948, the communist coup took place in Czechoslovakia. However, the Soviet Union supported the creation of Israel, and thus the new Czechoslovak government recognized the independence of Israel on 19 May 1948, a mere five days after its birth. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were then established on 3 July 1948.

One of the most often mentioned milestones of the relationship between Czechoslovakia and the emerging Israel is the fact that Czechoslovakia was closely involved in the supply of weapons and combat aircraft to the newly established state and in the training of the Israeli army. This occurred at the time of the strong international isolation of Israel during the first Israeli-Arab war in 1948–1949. This Czechoslovak activity should be judged in the light of the fact that the aid was provided at a time when Czechoslovakia was experiencing the change of its political regime to the openly undemocratic Stalinist regime. Additionally, Czechoslovakia received quite high sums of money for the outdated arms it sold to Israel even when the young State of Israel was in a very critical economic situation. It is also evident that the Czechoslovak aid was granted with the consent of Stalin's Soviet Union, which supported the creation of Israel as a counterweight to the pro-Western Arab regimes. Thus, in this case, Czechoslovakia worked as a kind of proxy-regime of the Soviet Union for the first time.<sup>11</sup> But when in a relatively short period of time it became obvious that Israel was leaning more towards the Western bloc, the USSR and the entire Eastern Bloc (including Czechoslovakia) substantially revised their attitudes toward the Jewish state in the early fifties.<sup>12</sup>

However, aside from the motives behind the arms sales, or the political situation in Czechoslovakia in the late 1940s, it is certain that the weapon supplies to Israel proved a valuable service at a very critical time when other states refused to provide similar assistance to Israel. Israel has many times reminded others of the fact that at the time the delivery of Czechoslovak arms 'saved' Israel.<sup>13</sup> In the contemporary

Czech Republic (however, less so in Israel) the arms supplies are in the minds of many people and are mostly very positively remembered as 'the Czech contribution to the establishment of Israel'. Although there are no sociological surveys in this field, it seems that the arms supplies came to be a part of modern Czech historical mythology. The Czechs often see themselves as 'a small peaceful nation which is – even now – in some jeopardy by German and/or Russian interests'. Israel, for many Czechs, also embodies the 'little nation which is under a constant existential threat from its Arab environment'. The Czechs, who often do not see themselves as great warriors (they rather see themselves as Hašek's satirical soldier character Švejk), at least helped a nation that they befriended by sending military aid to it and thus prevented Israel from facing a similar situation as what happened to them as a result of the Munich Agreement in 1938, when their European allies abandoned them and gave them over to the mercy of the Nazis.<sup>14</sup> In this mythology the Czechs actually had a key influence on the 'rescue' of the Jewish state and laid down the 'historical bond' between the two countries. However, the fact that the context of the weapon supplies was considerably more complex than this simplified scheme is not so well known.

*The reactions of dissident counter-elites to the strong anti-Zionism and sometimes even anti-Semitism of the Czechoslovak communist regime in the years 1950–1989*

In May 1949 the Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett came to Prague, and in March 1950 a mutual economic agreement between Israel and Czechoslovakia was signed. This was the first Israeli trade agreement with a foreign state. But the exact same time was also the beginning of the end of the Czechoslovak-Israeli friendship. Starting in 1950, the mutual relationship significantly cooled, and in 1951 the mentioned agreement was terminated. This change was related to the Czechoslovak vassal attitude towards the Soviet foreign policy. At that time it had become quite clear that Stalin had miscalculated because the expected international political orientation of Israel towards the Soviet bloc would not happen. Thus from February 1951, all of the Czechoslovak weapons deliveries to Israel were stopped. The support for Israel was very quickly replaced by a staunch anti-Zionism and even a strong anti-Semitism, which was embodied especially in the Slánský trials in the early fifties (see below).

Anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism were the new official political line of the communist regime, but among the general public, the situation was less clear. The Czechoslovak Communist régime also had a number of opponents in addition to its followers. Some were members of the new counter-elites – mainly supporters of previously existing non-Communist parties, private entrepreneurs, former members of the ww2 resistance, etc. – but others were simply critics of the regime hidden among the general public. The first group, in particular, soon became the subject of harsh persecution by the regime. Both streams of opponents of the regime, however, retained a generally positive view of Jews and secret sympathies for Israel.

The first consequence – and a very extreme one at that – of the worsening Czech-Israeli relations was the Slánský trials in 1952, which came to be the first openly anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist trials in the countries of the Communist bloc. Out of all the political trials that took place in the Soviet Union in the thirties and in the Communist satellite states at the beginning of the 1950s, the Prague Slánský trials were the worst case of anti-Semitism.<sup>15</sup> During the Slánský trials the first Czechoslovak ambassador to Israel, Eduard Goldstücker, was convicted. There were also the subsequent trials of the Israeli citizens Mordechai Oren and Simon Orenstein, which not only had a strongly anti-Zionist character, but also involved attempts to fabricate a link between Zionism and Titoism.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the emigration of Jews to Israel was banned in Czechoslovakia in 1950. In Israel the Slánský process had a specific response: besides the official protests of the Israeli government against the persecution of Czechoslovak Jews and Israeli citizens, there was also a terrorist attack on the Czechoslovak embassy by a radical nationalist group called ‘The Kingdom of Israel’.<sup>17</sup>

Another aspect of the change of policy of the Soviet bloc toward Israel in the early fifties was the emphasis on the Arab national and anticolonialist movements, and the Palestinian national movement in particular. Some of the Arab states escaped from the former British and French influence on them, and in their foreign policies they started to be sympathetic to the Soviet line. One of these countries was Egypt under President Nasser, which became increasingly anti-Israeli. The creation of Israel and the defeat of the Arab armies in the Israeli war of independence (with the help of the Czechoslovak weapons) had been, in general, reflected upon very negatively in the Arab world. Earlier Czechoslovak arms sales to Israel were condemned by Arab countries,

and the Czechoslovak government was very interested in making the whole thing fall into oblivion. It was one of the reasons why Czechoslovak anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism were so strong in the beginning of the fifties and why the new Czechoslovak arms contracts with Arab countries, mainly with Egypt, started to grow in scale.

In the context of the above-mentioned anti-regime attitudes of some Czechoslovak citizens, logically, Palestinian and Arab national movements supported by the Soviet bloc lost much of their popularity among these critics as well. This happened despite the fact that the Arab states and the Palestinians themselves never became open allies or satellites of the Soviet Union. From the early fifties to the mid-sixties, relations between Israel and Czechoslovakia remained very cold. However, diplomatic relations were suspended formally only on 10 June 1967 after the outbreak of the Six Day War. This was because under instruction of the Soviet Union, most of the satellite states followed the Soviet example at this time. Paradoxically, some cautious displays of public sympathy for Israel were possible in Czechoslovakia a year later – in the short period of the so-called ‘Prague Spring’ in 1968. This was allowed primarily in relation to the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union, where some alternative views on the establishment of the Czechoslovak anti-Israeli position after the Six Day War were publicly presented.<sup>18</sup> After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which was launched on 21 August 1968, however, such views were again silenced. In the years after the suppression of the Prague Spring (the so-called period of ‘normalization’ of the years 1968–1989) the power in Czechoslovakia was again seized by the Communist comrades loyal to Moscow, and Czechoslovak foreign policy returned once again to a strongly pro-Soviet track. During most of the Cold War the Soviet Union and its satellites politically, militarily and propagandistically supported the anti-Israeli struggle of the Arabs, including the PLO. In the years 1959–1989 hundreds of people from countries of the Arab world passed through a special training program for guerrilla warfare in Czechoslovakia. In 1976, the PLO established a direct diplomatic representation in Czechoslovakia, and in 1988, after a meeting of the Palestinian National Council in Algiers, Czechoslovakia even recognized the ‘Palestinian state’ which was proclaimed there. It led to a paradoxical situation in which the actually existing State of Israel did not have its diplomatic representation in Czechoslovakia, but the non-existent Palestinian state did. During the

years of “normalization”, Czechoslovakia was one of the few countries of the Soviet bloc which did not permit Israeli citizens to enter their territory.<sup>19</sup> The governmental campaign to discredit the dissident informal civic initiative called Charter 77 mentioned that it was founded on the instructions of ‘anti-Communist and Zionist foreign centrals.’<sup>20</sup> These attitudes also affected the main camp of the Czech dissidents in the seventies and eighties and had an impact on their attitudes and sympathies towards Israel. Charter 77 itself mentioned the question of Jews and Israel in one of its main documents.<sup>21</sup>

After the Czechoslovak communist regime fell, many of the former dissidents became influential Czechoslovak (and, later, Czech) politicians and their political views on Israel remained similar. In this context, in addition to Václav Havel and Jiří Dienstbier, one could mention other names of former dissidents (and future politicians) such as Michael Žantovský or Alexandr Vondra as examples of this tendency.

Only in 1988 did the first serious changes in Czechoslovakia’s political relation to Israel appear. During a plenary session of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 1988, a meeting of the foreign ministers of both countries took place. The Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs announced here the intention to send a delegation of consular officials and economists to Israel, as this delegation was to explore the possibilities of development of mutual relations between the two countries. In February 1988 a Czechoslovak government trade delegation visited Israel. Also, at this time, the first trade agreements between companies from both countries were signed, and Israeli tourist groups were given permission to visit Czechoslovakia.<sup>22</sup> But the final breakthrough was the fall of the Czechoslovak Communist regime in November and December 1989.

*The strong rise of the Czech-Israeli relations since 1989 and the role of Václav Havel in this respect.*

Relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel went through an almost meteoric rise after the fall of the Communist regime on 17 November 1989. This turnover was associated with the general unpopularity of the communist regime among the broader Czechoslovak public at the end of the eighties, and also with the Czechs’ sympathy for its opponents and their admiration for the Western world, the USA and its allies. The newly acquired freedom of speech gave the Czechs and Slo-

vaks the opportunity to publicly discuss themes and opinions that had been publicly suppressed for decades, whether by official censorship or by self-censorship. Positive pieces of information about the USA and Israel were among the main formerly suppressed themes.

A key role in the significant turnover in the Czechoslovak-Israeli (and later in the Czech-Israeli) relations was played primarily by the former Czechoslovak dissidents led by Václav Havel. At the end of 1989 he was elected as the first non-Communist president of Czechoslovakia since 1948. One of the first things which Havel advocated in foreign policy was the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel. They were thus reestablished on 9 February 1990 during the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens in Prague. Czechoslovakia thus became, after Hungary, the second former Soviet satellite that resumed diplomatic relations with Israel. In practice, the whole event was surrounded by great expectations and a mood of euphoria. At a meeting with President Havel, Arens thanked Czechoslovakia for the supply of arms and the training of Israeli pilots in 1948. President Havel also suggested that Czechoslovakia could be a mediator between Israel and the PLO at the time. This proposal, however, soon proved to be unrealistic because very soon the Czech-Slovak federation became mired in ever deeper problems that eventually led to its disintegration into two independent states in 1992. The role of the mediator in the peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians was in the meantime quite effectively taken up by Norway.

The turbulent rise of the Czechoslovak-Israeli relations was also accompanied by the restoration of Israel's diplomatic mission in Prague on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August, 1990, this time at the level of embassy. Also at this time, the Czechoslovak embassy was reopened in Israel.<sup>23</sup> Due to the Czechoslovak respect for the special international status of Jerusalem it was reopened in Tel Aviv. During the first official journey of Václav Havel to Israel (he was the first of the top leaders of the former Soviet satellites in Central Europe to visit Israel) in 1990, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Then in October 1991, a reciprocal visit to Czechoslovakia from the Israeli President Chaim Herzog took place.

President Havel's relationship to Israel and Judaism was very complex, and its description could be divided into several points:

1. During his life, Václav Havel was inspired by Jewish culture and by Jewish Prague and its culture (including works by Franz Kafka,

who influenced Havel's literary work) and was friend with many Czech Jewish personalities, many of whom were also dissidents and signatories of Charter 77. In one of his texts from 1990, Václav Havel stated the following:

As a dissident, I lived in a so-called ghetto and I myself learned about the kind of irrational injustice which can not be tackled in any other way than by a sense of personal freedom which can not be destroyed by any external oppression. The state in which we lived until the fall of 1989 was not able, from the beginning of the dominion of communism, to express itself in regard to the Jewish question, and it was only a certain Charter 77 document that attempted to address this issue in the Communist era.<sup>24</sup> The Communist state supported anti-Semitism in the fifties after some major anti-Semitic trials, and the regime was involved in the Palestinian conflict in the sixties, seventies and eighties. By doing these things, the regime was liquidating the Jewish problem from a position of strength rather than helping in the process of solving it. I often think about what the Czechs and the Jews had in common in their respective histories. We were both small nations whose continuing existence was not a given. The eternal struggle for survival and a sense of uncertainty were reflected in the cultures of both nations and in their behavior. Writers and philosophers took on the roles of politicians in both nations, and both nations have traditionally cultivated their respect for a book which kept their language and traditions alive. In particular, they both had respect for the book of books, the Bible. Czechs and Jews have always turned to the past; they looked to it for their strength and comfort, and they often mythologized it. They ran to the family for privacy, and from that stemmed their skepticism, distrust of nobility, and low concern for the general interest, but also their sense for making fun of themselves and not taking themselves too seriously. Masaryk's ideal of humanity as a religious thought is perhaps as close to Judaism as to Christianity; it is also an expression of the people's nationality, because for centuries, nothing else was allowed.<sup>25</sup>

The text above gives a quite accurate picture of Havel's thinking about the relationship between Czech (and more specifically the Czech counter-elites in Communist times) and Jews. Václav Havel identifies

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the position of dissidents in Communist Czechoslovakia to a certain extent with the position of the Jews in the ghetto in general. He criticizes the communist regime not only for its anti-Israeli approach, but also for its support of the Arabs. Finally, he also identifies what he believes to be the main link between Czechoslovakia and Israel – they are two small states in a dangerous international environment. Although Havel also mentions a certain ‘mythologization’, he himself introduces a certain romanticization of the two nations by referring to their relationships to the Bible (eg. in reality, the Czechs are one of the most secular nations in the world, and Zionism was a revolution against traditional Jewish religiosity) and automatically combining Jewish and Israeli issues together.

2. For most of his presidential term, Havel’s sympathy for Israel was not made evident only by his uncritical adoration of it. Havel was trying to understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in its complexity, and he was aware and critical of various aspects of Israeli policy. This was reflected in his (unrealised) proposal to mediate the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, his several meetings with Yasser Arafat (including Arafat’s visit to Czechoslovakia in 1990, which had been planned already during the communist regime) and the fact that he invited not only Israeli but also Palestinian intellectuals to Forum 2000 conferences<sup>26</sup>.
3. Havel’s sympathy for Israel was based on the political attitudes of the counter-elite in the Communist regime and was thus – like the sympathies of a number of other dissidents from the communist bloc – a natural sympathy. An example of his attitude is the fact that he was one of the world politicians who fought for the abolishment of the UN General Assembly Resolution 3379 (1975), which compared Zionism with racism.<sup>27</sup> This resolution was also supported by Communist Czechoslovakia. In this context, Havel’s sympathy for Israel greatly influenced the former Soviet dissident of Jewish origin and later the Israeli politician Nathan Sharansky. There was apparent mutual respect and inspiration between the two men. Sharansky and Havel were connected not just by the parallels of their dissident periods, but also by their political careers – Sharansky and Havel became influential politicians in their respective countries during roughly the same period of time, so the two men had also opportunities to meet at various international forums. During Sharansky’s political career his views

crystallized in the context of the influence of the Israeli right and American neo-conservatism. As for Havel, his views shifted in a similar direction mostly after the end of his presidential term in 2003. In June 2007, for example, Václav Havel organized, jointly with Nathan Sharansky and former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, the Conference on Democracy and Security in Prague, which had the support of several neo-conservative think-tanks. In 2010, along with several other neoconservatives Havel supported Aznar's initiative called The Friends of Israel, which aimed to 'create a counterweight to attempts to de-legitimize Israel and its right to live in peace and defensible borders'.<sup>28</sup>

In summary, Havel's attitudes towards Israel were developing both during his presidency and after it. They ranged from very positive but balanced positions to the rather one-sided and uncritical views he held after the end of his presidential term. The shift in his attitudes could be related to the period after the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada (after 2000) and also to the overlapping period after 9/11, when a number of right-wing and liberal intellectuals in Israel and in the West shifted their views more to the right.<sup>29</sup>

*The Czech alliance with Israel as an expression of Czech Atlanticism, or, in some cases, Czech Atlanticism in connection with Islamophobia*

Even if we looked at the Czech-Israeli relations with references to *only* the legacies of T. G. Masaryk and Václav Havel, it would be probable that the present attitudes of the Czech Republic towards Israel would be positive. But it is also possible that their quality would be comparable, for example, with the quality of the relations of other Central and East European countries to Israel. They would therefore be probably good, but not elevated to the level of strategic partnership as they actually are today. Such a high standard in the relations would probably never have been reached without a certain group of Czech politicians and officials, some of whom are former dissidents. Many of them – such as the mentioned Alexandr Vondra, Vladimír Žantovský, former Prime Minister Petr Nečas, former Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg and the diplomats Tomáš Pojar and Miloš Pojar – could be seen as being a part of the Czech liberal-right on the basis of their political views. In this

case their pro-Israeli stance is mingled with their strong support for trans-Atlantic ties, especially the Czech Republic's partnership with the USA and the Czech Republic's membership in NATO. But pro-Israeli views are also present in other parts of political spectrum – most notably by populist president Miloš Zeman where is his one-sided pro-Israeli sympathy mingled with Islamophobic aspects.

### *A romantic or biased view of the Middle East, Israel and Palestine*

Czech public opinion also plays an important role in the general Czech public view on Israel. It could be said that in the Czech Republic there is a relatively strong interest in topics related to Judaism and Israel. This influences the sympathies of many Czechs towards Israel. There is, for example, a great interest in books and other publications related to Jewish and Israeli themes (both fictional and scientific texts), an interest in various cultural events and lectures related to Judaism and/or Israel, etc. These topics are also generally known through various Czech-born cultural personalities of Jewish origin (eg. Rabbi Löw, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud), as well as through a variety of romanticising literature and stories (eg. by Ivan Olbracht).

This knowledge, in combination with the not very high standards of Czech news-reporting about the Middle East events (see below), causes the minds of Czechs to mix various concepts together. Many Czechs have, for example, a quite good knowledge of the history of the Czech (and, followingly, the Ashkenazi) Jewry and Judaism. In the Czech mind Judaism is also almost automatically associated with Western culture. This is supported by various European discussions on the 'Judeo-Christian' roots of European civilization. From a point of view that considers the very long tradition of the European anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust, however, it seems to be a quite purposeful concept. On the other hand, the Czechs generally have a very low awareness of things like the Jewish Sephardic culture or the Jewish Middle Eastern (Mizrachi) culture, without which it is very difficult to understand current Israeli politics, for example.

The Czech view of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is influenced by the poor quality of the Czech mainstream news discourse. The news discourse is based mostly on a recycling of various news items from news agencies, focusing almost purely on issues related to conflicts (wars, terrorism, and political violence) and lacking commen-

taries with deeper insights. Generally, the Czech mainstream news sources also rather lean towards the Israeli view of Middle Eastern affairs.

Czechs generally have only very limited experience with a multi-cultural society – and in light of the current wave of Middle Eastern violence and fundamentalism – Islam and Arabs are viewed as especially suspicious by many of them. In the minds of Czechs, Israel plays a much more positive role and is culturally closer to their way of thinking. Followingly, there is quite a high level of Islamophobia in the Czech society, even if there is only a very small Muslim community in the Czech territory.

The opinions of Czechs are also affected by various public figures (eg. by the openly Islamophobic views of the Czech president Miloš Zeman). It is also interesting that in the Czech Republic there is a growing impact of various one-sided organisations and lobby groups that support Israel, and in some cases, also the Palestinians, for religious or ideological reasons.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Due to the facts mentioned in the text, we can understand that the current quality of the Czech-Israeli relationship is not entirely clearly generalisable. On the contrary, it is based on various complex causes and historical events that are related to the six issues defined above. But still, it is possible to observe a certain guiding line that connects the history of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938), and even the period of roughly the two decades before its founding, with the current Czech politics and the current high standard of the Czech-Israeli relations. There is a clear link between Václav Havel and his colleagues from the dissident movement – who, together with him, became prominent personalities of Czech and Czechoslovak politics after 1989 – and the positions of President T. G. Masaryk toward Jews and the Zionist movement. The Czech Republic's sympathy for the oppressed nation and, later, the threatened state is to some extent a reflection of its own historical experience, and to a certain extent also a Czech national myth. The Czech elites and a part of the Czechs in general historically see themselves as *'a small peaceful nation which was (and, for many, still is) subject to the interests of great powers (mainly Russia and Germany) and in this respect suffered the betrayal of its Euro-*

*pean and democratic allies (the Munich Agreement of 1938).’ The Czechs have, in this mythology, ‘a unique experience from modern history ... and they perceive a certain parallel of themselves in modern Israel’. In their imagination Israel is ‘also under a permanent threat from its hostile environment, and is also threatened by its Western allies – especially by some European Union countries and their appeasement politics. While so many EU states are creating a new Munich appeasement through their policies, the United States and its help are something that the Czechs and Israelis can always rely on.’*

Such parallels offer at first glance a certain logic (albeit a very simplified one), but if we compare the position of Czechoslovakia in the international environment before World War II with the development and positions of Israel after 1948, the common similarities would be only very superficial. In the 1930s, Czechoslovakia eventually became the only democratic state in Central Europe. Nazi Germany made increasing demands in regard to its border areas. In 1938 Czechoslovakia was abandoned by its main ally as France signed the Munich Agreement. This situation meant for Czechoslovakia the loss of its strategic border areas populated by German nationals. This meant a de facto loss of any defense against Nazi Germany, which used this situation in a very short period of time to occupy the rest of Czechoslovakia.

In year 1948 Israel was in a very different situation than pre-ww2 Czechoslovakia. It was a completely newly established state, and for quite a long time before its creation it was clear that such a creation would provoke adverse reactions from the surrounding Arab countries. The ambitions for its creation were perceived by the Arabs primarily as a continuation of the European imperialism in the region of the Middle East, where a tumultuous decolonization was just taking place. After the establishment of Israel the expected war broke out, but Israel – with the help of the Soviet Union, which for this purpose used the new Czechoslovak communist regime’s armament supplies – was able to win the war and stabilize its situation.

After its victory Israel was still in a hostile international environment, but its army increasingly exceeded those of all of its hostile neighbors, partially because it was the only country in the region which developed nuclear weapons. Although Israel quickly lost the support of the Soviet Union, soon afterwards it acquired a strategic ally in France and subsequently it gained another powerful strategic partner in the United States. A few decades after its founding, Israel also managed to con-

clude peace agreements with some of its enemies and thus stabilize its position even more.

The hostility towards contemporary Israel is related especially to the unsolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the changes that occurred in this case since 1967. Thus, even at a first glance, some significant differences between the geopolitical position of Czechoslovakia before 1948 and that of Israel after 1948 can be seen.

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Nowadays the mutual bond between the Czech Republic and Israel is mythologized and distorted mainly by some Czech politicians. They see Israel as 'a pillar of Western civilization and Euro-Atlantic relations', or more specifically, they see Israel as 'a defender of Western civilization against the threat of terrorism and Islam'. Overall, a constellation of diverse influences created a unique combination that brought about one of the strongest bilateral partnerships between two countries in contemporary international relations. There is no doubt that this alliance brings with it a lot of positives in the mutual relations at various levels. Although the Czech Republic is not a particularly geopolitically important player, on the other hand, to have such an ally in the European Union, one which will almost literally interpret Israeli political positions, is very advantageous for Israel. The question is what will be the future development of the Czech-Israeli bond; however, this is not a question that falls within the scope of this article.



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## Notes

- 1 Israel, USA, Canada, the Czech Republic, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau and Panama.
- 2 e.g. Fingerland, Jan (2009). 'Proč Češi straní Izraeli', In *Lidové noviny*, 17. 1. 2009.
- 3 Atlanticism is a belief in or support for a close relationship between Europe and the USA, or particularly for NATO.
- 4 Pěkný, Tomáš (1993), *Historie Židů v Čechách a na Moravě*, Sefer: Praha, p. 185.
- 5 Pěkný (1993), p. 187.
- 6 Čapková, Kateřina (2005), *Češi, Němci a Židé? – Národní identita Židů v*

- Čechách, 1918–1938, Paseka: Praha, p. 34.
- 7 Specifically, these were held in Karlovy Vary in 1921 and 1923, and in Prague in 1933.
- 8 Havel, Václav (2012), 'Dva malé národy', In *Roš Chodeš*, No. 2, Vol. 74.
- 9 Yegar, Moshe (1997) *Československo, sionismus, Izrael*, Victoria Publishing and East Publishing: Praha., p. 25.
- 10 Zídek, Petr; Sieber, Karel (2009), *Československo a Blízký východ v letech 1948–1989, Ústav mezinárodních vztahů*: Praha, p. 128.
- 11 Zídek, Sieber (2009), p. 129.
- 12 Dufek, Jiří; Kaplan, Karel; Šlosar, Vladimír (1993), *Československo a Izrael 1947–1953, Doplněk*: Brno, p. 5.
- 13 See, e.g., Strašíková, Lucie (2008). Hugo Marom: Izrael přežil hlavně díky československým zbraním, II. 12. 2008, ČT24.
- 14 For a wider picture of Munich in the Czech discourse see Slačálek, Ondřej (2010), 'Boj o národ. Obrazy Mnichova ve sporech o českou zahraniční politiku', In *Mezinárodní vztahy*, Vol. 45, No. 4.
- 15 Yegar (1997), p. 136.
- 16 Rucker, Laurent (2001). *Stalin, Izrael a Židé*, Rybka Publishers: Praha, p. 207.
- 17 Pedhazur, Ami; Perliger, Arie (2009). *Jewish Terrorism in Israel*, Columbia University Press, New-York, p. 176.
- 18 Cysařová, Jarmila: Sjezd spisovatelů 1967, available at: [http://www.totalita.cz/60/60\\_09\\_01\\_01.php](http://www.totalita.cz/60/60_09_01_01.php) (accessed 10. 10. 2013).
- 19 Even in this era of the normalization there were some bizarre exceptions to this policy – despite the ban on Israelis entering the territory of Czechoslovakia some Israeli communists and representatives of the PLO were allowed to hold talks in Prague (Rudé Právo 1977). Also, during the normalization the Soviet Union allowed the immigration of some Jews from the Soviet Union to Israel several times. The Jews then traveled by special trains through the territory of Czechoslovakia to Austria.
- 20 ÚSTR: Antologie ideologických textů, available at: <http://www.ustrcr.cz/cs/anticharta-ukazka-textu-1> (accessed 10. 10. 2013).
- 21 e.g. Prečan, Vilém (ed.): *Charta 77 (1977–1989), Od morální k demokratické revoluci (dokumentace)*, Dokumentationszentrum a Ústav pro soudobé dějiny ČSAV, Bratislava 1990, p. 363.
- 22 Yegar (1997), p. 185.
- 23 Izenberg, David (1990). 'Prague Embassy Open', In *The Jerusalem Post*, 19. 8. 1990.
- 24 Havel was apparently referring to the Charter 77 document from 1989 entitled "Criticism of the devastation of the Jewish cultural heritage in Czechoslovakia and the suppression of the role of Jews in Czechoslovak history" (April 5, 1989; 28/89).
- 25 Havel, Václav (2012) 'Dva malé národy', In *Roš Chodeš*, No. 2, Vol. 74.
- 26 Forum 2000 is an annual international conference of the Forum 2000 Foundation which pursues the legacy of Václav Havel by supporting the values of democracy and respect for human rights, assisting the development of civil society, and encouraging religious, cultural and ethnic tolerance. It provides a platform for global leaders, as well as thinkers and

- courageous individuals from every field of endeavor, to openly debate and share their views on these critical issues (see <http://www.forum2000.cz/en/about-us/>).
- 27 Ruby, Walter: 'Havel Speaks Against Anti-Zionism Resolution', In *The Jerusalem Post*, 19. 8. 1990.
- 28 Izenberg (2010).
- 29 See, e.g., Sitaru, Laura: Stereotypes about Islam and media-intellectuals: representative trends in "talking" about Islam after 9/11, available at: [http://acmcu.georgetown.edu/spotlight/Sitaru%20-%20Stereotypes%20about%20Islam%20and%20media%20intellectual.pdf\\_\(accessed: 10. 10. 2013\)](http://acmcu.georgetown.edu/spotlight/Sitaru%20-%20Stereotypes%20about%20Islam%20and%20media%20intellectual.pdf_(accessed: 10. 10. 2013)).
- 30 It is possible to mention here the activities of the Evangelical groups ICEJ and the Zion Christian Centre. In the case of Palestine, one pro-Palestine group that is very active in the Czech Republic is the International Solidarity Movement (ISM).