

Romania's Foreign Policy towards the Countries of the Middle East – Commented in the Egyptian Press (1971)

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Abstract: *The article refers to the objective and relevant analysis made by the Egyptian journalist As-Sayed Aliwa on the subject of the diplomatic, political and economic relations between Romania and the countries of the Middle East. It also expounds Romania's position on the Middle East crisis, emphasising that the Romanian government was supporting the following: the cessation of all military operations in the area; the withdrawal of troops from the occupied Arab territories; a solution for the Palestinian population; a political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict; ensuring the right to existence of all states in the region.*

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In January 1971 “The International Politics Journal”, issue no. 23, appearing in Cairo, published an interesting article signed by As-Sayed Aliwa, regarding Romania's position on the Middle East crisis¹. The author of the article succeeded in making an objective and relevant analysis regarding the diplomatic, political and economic relations between: Romania and the eastern bloc countries; Romania and Israel; Romania and the Arab states².

What followed “The Statement of April 1964” – defining the fundamental principles of Romania's foreign policy – may be called a “Decade of Openness”, inaugurated by Gheorghiu-Dej and continued by Nicolae Ceaușescu (an important role being played in that period both by Prime Minister Ion Gheorghe Maurer and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Corneliu Mănescu)³. The objective of Romania's foreign policy was cultivating diplomatic relations with socialist countries as well

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¹ Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe al României, București (hereafter AMAE), fond Israel/1970, problema 220, vol. I, ff. 179-196.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Apud Dinu C. Giurescu (coordonator), *Istoria Românilor*, vol. X, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2013, p. 692.

as other countries and international organisations⁴. In this regard, the Egyptian journalist – quoting Corneliu Mănescu, who had published a relevant study of Romania’s foreign relations in the *International Affairs* magazine (Oxford) in January 1969 – emphasised that Romania’s relations with other states are expanding, “at present managing to entertain diplomatic relations with 86 countries. In addition, its economic, commercial relations and the technical-scientific cooperation with various countries has also been steadily increasing, Romania entertaining at present such relations with more than 100 states”⁵.

In that period, Romania’s international decisions were influenced/governed by the fact that the world was divided in two blocs confronting each other in all areas: *in politics*, the East-West confrontation targeted continental and world domination – one system being based on democracy and political pluralism, the other on the single party rule; *in economy*, the competition was between two social-economic systems – in the West, the market economy, in the East, centralised economy; *in ideology*, it was a competition between the two types of society: capitalism and socialism⁶. In this context – of the “cold war” and a world divided into blocs – one must not forget that Romanian politics and successes depended essentially, but simultaneously, on firstly the government in Bucharest succeeding in following its own policy and making use of a favourable international setting; secondly, it depended on the accelerating decline of the power in Moscow and the rapid ascension of Beijing; on the “opportunities” Bucharest was offered as a result of China’s cooperation; the attitudes or actual support of France, Great Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany, Japan, the USA, and others; in these circumstances it became possible for Romania to express its own attitudes or demand its national sovereignty and independence be respected⁷.

In this international context – governed by the two superpowers, the cold war, ideological, political and economic contradictions, – Romania became involved, especially after 1965, in a versatile and diplomatic way, in solving the

⁴ See Daniela Osiac, *România și conflictul din Orientul Mijlociu. 1948-1989*, Craiova, Editura Aius, 2011, pp. 219-276.

⁵ AMAE, fond Israel/1970, problema 220, vol. I, f. 181.

⁶ See Iulia Motoc, Șerban Filip Cioculescu (eds.), *Manual de analiză a politicii externe*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2010.

⁷ Gh. Buzatu, Marusia Cîrstea, *Europa în balanța forțelor*, vol. III, Iași, Editura Tipo Moldova, 2010, pp. 394-395.

Middle East crisis. Each Romanian intervention was made in accordance with the UN principles and the interests of the peoples in the area. At the same time, Romanian diplomacy always appealed to history in analysing the geopolitical phenomenon in the Middle East, as the history of the Arab and Jewish peoples had over time suffered multiple “adjustments” and “interpretations” at the hands of the great powers.

Romania’s interest in solving the problems in the Middle East area found justification in:

- our country’s geopolitical importance, being situated between Europe, the Soviet Union, the Balkans and the Middle East;
- active involvement in all international organisations;
- president Nicolae Ceaușescu’s desire that Romania pursue a “foreign policy aimed at defending peace, easing international tension and promoting cooperation between peoples”⁸,
- Romanian-Israeli relations, which, from various points of view, represented an exception in the two blocs’ diplomacy. During “the six-day war” (1967), Romania was the only country in the socialist bloc to maintain relations with Israel⁹;
- old consular relations: in 1921, I.G. Duca, Minister of Foreign Affairs, establishes the first Romanian consulate in Jerusalem; in 1948 Romania recognises Israel¹⁰, and on 19th August 1969 the Romanian representation in Tel Aviv becomes an embassy;
- the migration wave of Romanian Jews to Israel. Relations between Bucharest and Tel Aviv had traditionally been good ever since the establishment of the state of Israel, Romania being unopposed to Jews migrating to Israel; in the 70’s it was estimated that approximately 400 000 Jews in the population of Israel came from Romania;
- Romania’s ambition to solve the “Palestinian problem”, which Romanian leaders considered truly decisive in ensuring an enduring peace in the Middle East.

⁸ Ion Calafeteanu (ed), *Istoria politicii externe românești în date*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2003, p. 391.

⁹ Mircea Malița, *Tablouri din Războiul Rece. Memorii ale unui diplomat român*, București, Editura C.H. Beck, 2007, p. 162.

¹⁰ Alfred Hârlăoanu, *Istoria universală a poporului evreu*, București, Editura Zarkony Ltd., 1992, pp. 14-21.

Thus, after the Yom Kippur war (1973) the envoys of the two sides – Arab and Israeli – carried out a series of negotiations (until 1977) on Romanian territory¹¹.

Maintaining and intensifying open dialogue with both the state of Israel and the Arab states, Romania managed to help make important steps in the peace process in a neighbouring region – that of the Middle East – to which it is connected through old spiritual traditions, and also displaying interest and respect for all peoples in the area.

Speaking about the main objectives of Israel's foreign policy, the author of the article maintained that "Israel's foreign policy in relation with the communist world was limited to only two requests: 1. Establishing relations with Jewish colonies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and securing approval for the emigration of the Jews in this area [...] 2. Establishing political and economic relations with countries in this area, which, on the whole, represent an important support for the Arab point of view. For Israel, infiltration in this area represents an important achievement in the back areas of the war against the Arabs"¹².

Romanian-Israeli relations in the second half of the 20th century developed both on the basis of traditions retained through the Romanian principalities' connections with the Holy Lands, and also the fact that Romania recognised the newly formed state from the beginning and never interrupted diplomatic relations, not even during the Arab-Israeli armed confrontations: 1948-1949, 1956, 1967, 1973¹³. Ever since the first diplomatic contacts, the state of Israel openly placed *the matter of immigration*¹⁴ in the centre of its relations with Romania. Speaking about "the situation of the Jewish colony in Romania", the Egyptian journalist As-Sayed Aliwa emphasised that "The importance of the Jewish colony in Romania doesn't reside only in numbers (approx. 120 000 members in 1967), but it is also dependent on other factors, the most important of which probably being the Jews' educational level, their influence and the degree to which they are assimilated in

¹¹ Cristina Păiușan-Nuică, *Istoria relațiilor internaționale și a diplomației (1945-2008)*, București, Editura Fundației România de Măine, 2008, p. 114.

¹² AMAE, fond Israel/1970, problema 220, vol. I, f. 182.

¹³ See Cristina Păiușan-Nuică, *Relațiile româno-israeliene. 1948-1978*, București, Editura Universitară, 2008; Raluca Rus, *Conflictul din Orientul Apropiat în perioada 1948-2000*, Iași, Editura Lumen, 2006.

¹⁴ See Radu Ioanid, *Răscumpărarea evreilor. Istoria acordurilor secrete dintre România și Israel*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2005.

the Romanian society”¹⁵. At the same time, the above-mentioned article also emphasised that “The role of the Jewish colony was to hoist sail in the direction of the wind, the wind being Romania’s international relations with the East and the West”¹⁶.

International relations between Romania and Israel underwent several strained moments, but (*nota bene*) they did not lead to a break in diplomatic relations because there was a common interest in maintain them. Thus, “starting with 1967 – the article showed – relations between Romania and Israel entered a new phase, characterised by multilateral economic cooperation, which led to stronger relations of political cooperation”¹⁷. Citing Pinhas Sapir*, the Israeli minister of economy, the journalist As-Sayed Aliwa pointed that the latest Romanian-Israeli negotiations “turn a new page in Israel’s relations with Romania”¹⁸.

During this period, Israel was interested in maintaining relations with Romania for the following reasons: to maintain contact with the Jewish population and secure the Romanian Jews’ migration to Israel; to maintain and possibly enhance the volume of commercial exchanges; finally, to strengthen Israel’s international positioning towards Arab countries by promoting good relations with socialist countries as well. Comparing Israel’s political, diplomatic and economic relations with Romania to those of the Arab countries, journalist As-Sayed Aliwa concluded thus: “It is worth remarking that Israeli diplomacy was able to take full advantage of all circumstances, while the Arab attitude was at times characterised by reckless reactions. Arab diplomacy could only react to the promotion of the diplomatic representation between Romania and Israel to the level of embassy by becoming enraged, Syria, Iraq, Sudan broke relations with Romania, while the U.A.R. did nothing more than recall its ambassador in Bucharest”¹⁹. Criticising the Arab states’ policy in this matter, As-Sayed Aliwa highlighted in the article: “We must understand very clearly that relations between us and any other partner in the

¹⁵ AMAE, fond Israel/1970, problema 220, vol. I, f. 185.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 186.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 188.

* Pinhas Sapir, minister of Finance and Foreign Trade in Israel (apud Dumitru Preda, Victor Boștinăru (eds.), *România-Israel: 50 de ani de relații diplomatice*, vol. I (1948-1969), București, Editura Sylvi, 2000, p. 268.

¹⁸ AMAE, fond Israel/1970, problema 220, vol. I, f. 188.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, f. 194.

international community do not represent the reverse side of this partner's relations to Israel and neither is it true that if its relations fall back, then ours gain ground and vice versa, if its relations (Israel's) extend, then ours lose ground"²⁰.

The Egyptian journalist As-Sayed Aliwa also makes an interesting analysis of Romania's position regarding the Middle East: the article emphasised that "The events in the Middle East in 1967 allowed a clarification of Romania's positioning. Once the Israeli threats against Arab states escalate in May 1967 and the situation deteriorates, reaching the brink of war, there are new signs of Romania's official affinity for Israel. At the time, it took the form of an apparent «neutrality» towards the warring sides, which was a completely different position compared to the other countries in the socialist bloc"²¹. On these lines, it is true that during the entire 1967-1970 period, Romanian diplomacy tried to counterbalance the incompatible positions of the two sides, relying on the fact that Romania had earned an independent standing in international relations and also counting on the support of certain western countries. Moreover, by refusing to declare Israel the aggressor in 1967 and maintaining diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv, Romanian diplomacy was able to act as a moderator and channel of communication between the two sides with a view to identifying partial solutions that would freeze military actions temporarily and "respect the rights of each country in the area to existence and independent development"²². These principles upheld by Romanian diplomacy were familiar to the central press. Thus, in their 14th June 1967 issue, all central newspapers printed the news of the Romanian minister of Foreign Affairs, Corneliu Mănescu, receiving the Egyptian ambassador to Romania and the Israeli minister to Bucharest; the two diplomats were handed the Declaration of the Romanian Communist Party Central Committee and the government, which summarised Romania's equidistant standpoint in the matter of the six-day conflict²³.

In fact, Romania – through Nicolae Ceaușescu's voice – was always outspokenly in favour of solving "litigious matters" in the Middle East through agreements between parties and the signing of "sensible and equitable" treaties that

²⁰ *Ibidem*, f. 195.

²¹ *Ibidem*, f. 188.

²² AMAE, fond Israel/1970, problema 224, vol. II, f. 25.

²³ Apud Petre Otu, "Presă română despre războiul de șase zile", in vol. *Pace și război în spațiul românesc. Secolul al XX-lea*, București, Editura Militară, 2010, p. 411.

would take into consideration “the legitimate rights of the peoples in question” – among which Israel’s legitimate right to existence²⁴.

Referring to Romania’s attitude in the Middle East matter, Egyptian journalist As-Sayed Aliwa summarised it thus: Romania’s government wants “Israeli armed forces to withdraw from occupied territories and a solution must be found to the problem of Arab refugees in Palestine in order to ensure a free existence and unencumbered development for all the states in this region”²⁵.

An evaluation of the political complexity in the Middle East can explain the Romanian diplomacy’s interest in organizing summit meetings with both Israel’s and the Arab states’ representatives. During these meetings, the main components of Romania’s position in the Middle East matter were the following: withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied Arab territories; a guarantee of the right to existence for all states in the region and their territorial integrity; finding a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, in accordance with the Security Council resolution of 22nd November 1967; a settlement for the Palestinian population, consistent with their legitimate interests, including the establishment of an independent national state, if this is what they desire²⁶.

²⁴ Ion Calafeteanu, Alexandru Cornescu-Coren, *România și criza din Orientul Mijlociu (1965-1971)*, București, Editura SEMPRE, 2002, p. 35.

²⁵ AMAE, fond Israel/1970, problema 220, vol. I, f. 190.

²⁶ Idem, problema 224, vol. III, ff. 26-29.