

Citation for published version:

Tony Shaw, and Giora Goodman, 'Hollywood's Raid on Entebbe: Behind the Scenes of the United States-Israel Alliance', *Diplomatic History*, dhx090, December 2017.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhx090>

Document Version:

This is the Accepted Manuscript version.

The version in the University of Hertfordshire Research Archive may differ from the final published version.

Copyright and Reuse:

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail:

journals.permissions@oup.com

Content in the UH Research Archive is made available for personal research, educational, and non-commercial purposes only. Unless otherwise stated, all content is protected by copyright, and in the absence of an open license, permissions for further re-use should be sought from the publisher, the author, or other copyright holder.

Enquiries

If you believe this document infringes copyright, please contact the Research & Scholarly Communications Team at rsc@herts.ac.uk

Hollywood's Raid on Entebbe: Behind the Scenes of the United States-Israel Alliance

One by one, the camera settles on their frightened faces. At first, the hostages in the cramped, humid airport terminal thought it was just another announcement, something to relieve their boredom almost. But as the hijackers' body language changes and the movie's mournful soundtrack builds, it quickly dawns both on the hostages (and the audience) just what's happening: Thirty years after the Second World War, and in the middle of Africa, the Jews are being *selected*, just like during the Holocaust. "Schnell! Move to the right!" barks the steely-eyed German hijacker, as she calls out the Jewish names through the loudspeaker. When Moshe Meir, a terrified old Belgian gentleman, protests he's not Israeli, a Palestinian hijacker viciously knocks him to the ground then pushes him to the right. The non-Jewish hostages look on with a mixture of horror, relief and shame. After the selection is complete, the Jews are marched into a separate room. The door is closed—as if imprisoning them (and the audience) in the gas chambers—and the screen goes to black.¹

¹ *Victory at Entebbe* (Marvin J. Chomsky, ABC Television, 1976).

² On the role of Jews in Hollywood, including their depiction on the American big screen, see Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own* (New York, 1988); Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington, IN, 1988); Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York, 1982); Omar Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington, IN, 2005), 204–23; Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler* (New York, 2013). On *Exodus* see Michele Mart, *Eye on Israel* (New York, 2006); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters:*

Hollywood's alleged "special relationship" with the State of Israel has been the subject of intense media comment for many years now. To date, most scholars have approached the Hollywood-Israel connection obliquely, that is by centering either on the conspicuous role of Jews in the American film industry, on the representation of Israel's founding in movies such as *Exodus* (1960), or on Hollywood's portrayals of Middle Eastern terrorism over the past three decades.²

Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945 (Berkeley, CA, 2005); M. M. Silver, *Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel's Founding Story* (Detroit, MI, 2010). On Hollywood's portrayals of Middle Eastern terrorism since the 1980s see Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (London, 2006); Stephen Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York, 2009); Helena Vanhala, *The Depiction of Terrorists in Hollywood Blockbuster Films, 1980–2001: An Analytical Study* (Jefferson, NC, 2010); Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, "Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism," *New Political Science* 28, no. 3 (2006): 335–51.

² On the role of Jews in Hollywood, including their depiction on the American big screen, see Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own* (New York, 1988); Patricia Erens, *The Jew in American Cinema* (Bloomington, IN, 1988); Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York, 1982); Omar Bartov, *The "Jew" in Cinema: From The Golem to Don't Touch My Holocaust* (Bloomington, IN, 2005), 204–23; Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler* (New York, 2013). On *Exodus* see Michele Mart, *Eye on Israel* (New York, 2006); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley, CA, 2005); M. M. Silver, *Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel's Founding Story* (Detroit, MI, 2010). On Hollywood's portrayals of Middle Eastern

Building on recent scholarship that has turned “the lens on film and foreign relations,” this article interweaves diplomatic and media history to look directly at the Hollywood-Israel relationship.³ It does so, moreover, by uniquely taking into account the dynamics of that relationship on, behind, and away from the screen. In the process, the article shines important light on the popular cultural dimensions of the U.S.-Israeli alliance; contributes to recent scholarship on the history of Israeli public diplomacy; and both historicizes and widens the debate about the role that America’s pro-Israel community has played in the shaping of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.⁴

terrorism since the 1980s see Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (London, 2006); Stephen Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York, 2009); Helena Vanhala, *The Depiction of Terrorists in Hollywood Blockbuster Films, 1980–2001: An Analytical Study* (Jefferson, NC, 2010); Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, “Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism,” *New Political Science* 28, no. 3 (2006): 335–51.

³ For a brief but excellent summary of the different ways in which scholars have brought together the perspectives of film and international history over the last decade in particular see Laura A. Belmonte, “Introduction: Turning the Lens on Film and Foreign Affairs,” *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 5 (2012): 785–87.

⁴ For analysis of the broader cultural affinity between the United States and Israel, and of the role played in the U.S.-Israeli alliance by “elite” politico-cultural actors such as American journalists, see Jonathan Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2015); J. J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment* (Reading, MA, 1996); Marda Dunsky, *Pens and*

The article concentrates on the relationship between Hollywood and Israel during the 1970s. Its focus is on the three films—two American, one Israeli—that speedily recreated the famous Israeli Entebbe raid of July 4th, 1976. How and why the Israeli military’s dramatic counter-terrorist operation at Entebbe in Uganda captured the attention of the world’s politicians and news media is well understood.⁵ Less well known is the contest that the operation triggered among filmmakers in the United States and Israel to be the first to re-enact it on screen. Drawing on American and Israeli archival sources, the article reveals how more than a dozen film companies competed with one another to be the first to cash in on Israel’s raid, and shows how the Israeli government effectively held an auction among filmmakers as part of a long-running public diplomacy strategy targeting Hollywood. The article examines in detail how the three movies made about Entebbe in 1976–1977 came about, and how each of them—as exemplified by the scene from ABC Television’s *Victory at Entebbe* outlined above—painted the Entebbe crisis in primary political colors. It considers the three movies’ distribution and reception, and shows how both pro-Zionists and anti-Zionists used the films for propaganda purposes. Finally, the article assesses the three movies’ cultural, political, and diplomatic legacy.

Analysis below demonstrates that Hollywood and Israel enjoyed an extraordinarily close relationship in the 1970s, one that reflected, projected, and underpinned the alliance that existed between the U.S. and Israeli governments. At the

Swords: How the Mainstream American Media Report the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (New York, 2008).

⁵ Saul David, *Operation Thunderbolt* (London, 2016); Simon Dunstan, *Israel’s Lightning Strike—The Raid on Entebbe 1976* (London, 2009); Max Hastings, *Yoni—Hero of Entebbe* (New York, 1979); McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 184–87.

same time, it explains how that relationship had limits. On the one hand, in late 1976 the Israeli government fell afoul of Hollywood's commercial instincts and in the process failed to conjure the Entebbe blockbuster it craved. On the other hand, the filmic "race" for Entebbe strengthened the Hollywood-Israel relationship and helped lay the foundations for the American film industry's powerful depiction of Arabs as international terrorists in the decades ahead. In doing so, Hollywood's "Entebbe episode" points to the importance of investigating the role of popular culture and propaganda in the Arab-Israeli conflict and to the value of exploring the hidden complexities of America's pro-Israel community.

Historians and political scientists have long been interested in Israel advocacy in the United States. This largely reflects animated polemics concerning American policies in the Middle East and the image of Israel in American public discourse.⁶ Political scientists John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt generated the most recent public and academic controversy in 2006-2007, when they contended that an "Israel Lobby" with undue domestic power had managed to sway American policy in

⁶ M. S. El Azhary, *Political Cohesion of American Jews in American Politics: A Reappraisal of Their Role in Presidential Elections* (Washington, DC, 1980); Dan Fleshler, *Transforming America's Israel Lobby* (Washington, DC, 2009); David Howard Goldberg, *Foreign Policy and Ethnic Interest Groups: American and Canadian Jews Lobby for Israel* (Westport, CT, 1990); Nancy Jo Nelson, "The Zionist Organizational Structure," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10, no. 1 (1980): 80–93; James Petras, *The Power of Israel in the United States* (Atlanta, GA, 2006); Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1987); Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe: The American Jewish Conflict over Israel* (Princeton, NJ, 2016).

the Middle East in the Jewish state's favor, to the detriment of U.S. national interests.⁷

In their book-length study, Mearsheimer and Walt claimed that far from simply lobbying leaders and politicians, the so-called Israel Lobby has generated American public support for Israel by dominating and pressuring the U.S. mainstream media, with the result that open debate about American policy regarding Israel is stifled. Significantly, in discussing the shaping (or censoring) of American public discourse about Israel they do not mention the role either of Hollywood or of Israeli public diplomacy—the subjects of this article.⁸

Over the decades, Hollywood has played an important role in Israel advocacy on and off the screen: both in projecting pro-Israeli themes and in lobbying the corridors of Washington power. Following the birth of Israel in 1948, numerous Hollywood producers and talent—mostly Jewish—sought to create feature films telling the story of Israel's establishment and promise. The nascent Israeli government did its utmost to promote such pro-Zionist film projects for the sake of “hasbara” (literally: explanation), the common Hebrew term for propaganda and public diplomacy. Well aware of the power of Hollywood to make money and to mold popular opinion about past and present events, Israeli government officials attempted to lure big dollar-spending productions to Israel and especially to project a positive

⁷ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 2007). For a critique of their argument see Robert C. Lieberman, “The ‘Israel Lobby’ and American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 2 (2009): 235–57.

⁸ The only Hollywood “mogul” that Mearsheimer and Walt mention, Haim Saban, is discussed in relation to a political think-tank he finances. See Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby*, 176–77.

image of Israel's founding and Israeli life. Most of these projects were thwarted due to the high costs of production in an entertainment industry operating according to exacting market forces. However, the eventual result of Hollywood affection and Israeli public diplomacy was *Exodus*—the book by Leon Uris (1958) and the film by Otto Preminger (1960)—which became a cultural "phenomenon" that shaped favorable international perceptions of Israel for a generation, especially in the United States.⁹

Hollywood Jewish magnates were also involved in direct political lobbying of Washington. In the 1950s, Barney Balaban, president of Paramount Pictures, helped set up what would soon become the leading pro-Israel lobbying organization in the United States, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).¹⁰ In the 1960s, Arthur Krim, president of United Artists, was a major Democratic Party fundraiser and a close confidant and personal friend of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Krim and his wife Mathilde (an Italian-born scientist who had smuggled guns for the pre-state

⁹ Giora Goodman, "'Operation Exodus': Israeli Government Involvement in the Production of Otto Preminger's Film *Exodus* (1960)," *Journal of Israeli History* 33, no. 2 (2014): 209–29. For a study of Israeli government hasbara in the decade before the Entebbe raid see Jonathan Cummings, *Israel's Public Diplomacy: The Problems of Hasbara, 1966–1975* (Lanham, MD, 2016).

¹⁰ I. L. Kenen, *Israel's Defense Line: Her Friends and Foes in Washington* (Buffalo, NY, 1981), 69. Balaban was also involved with AIPAC's forerunner, the American Zionist Council.

Zionist underground organization, Irgun) played an important part in the pro-Israel lobbying of President Johnson, including during the June 1967 war.¹¹

For all the political and cultural power of Israel advocacy, the U.S. and Israeli governments often clashed. One serious falling-out came in March 1975, following the failure of President Gerald Ford's administration to induce Israeli land concessions in the Sinai, despite intensive shuttle diplomacy by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. When the frustrated administration announced as a result that it was carrying out a "reassessment" of Middle East policy—in effect suspending annual talks of military aid to Israel—the American Jewish community immediately sprang into action. Lobbying by AIPAC resulted in a letter to Ford signed by no less than seventy-six senators and made public in the *New York Times*; the letter expressed support for Israel's insistence on "defensible" boundaries and urged the administration to be responsive to Israel's "urgent military and economic needs."¹² This sort of domestic political pressure naturally displeased the administration in private, and was publicly attacked by long-time critic Senator William J. Fulbright, who argued that the "extraordinary power" of the "Israeli lobby" to "mobilize large majorities in Congress" was to blame for hobbling "any efforts to achieve peace" in the Middle

¹¹ Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle-East* (New York, 2007), 116–19, 301–2, 347, 383; Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, June 7, 1967, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Vol. XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967*, doc. 195, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v19/d195>, last accessed May 22, 2017.

¹² Bernard Gwertzman, "75 Senators Back Israel's Aid Bids," *New York Times*, May 22, 1975, 1.

East.¹³ Some prominent Jews also privately worried about uncritical American Jewish support for Israel. Lew Wasserman, owner of Universal Studios, and a man with strong political connections to both Republicans and Democrats, told Henry Kissinger that "the present course in Israel" could lead "to massive anti-Semitism here," adding that "the power of the institutional Jews must be broken." Wasserman was one of the most prolific donors to Israel in Hollywood.¹⁴

An important Sinai II disengagement agreement was finally achieved thanks to American diplomacy and pressure in September 1975, but when Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin arrived for talks in early 1976, the mood in Washington was still skeptical: the American leadership was frustrated with Israel's stalling of further

¹³ Arlene Lazarowitz, "American Jewish Leaders and President Gerald R. Ford: Disagreement over the Middle East Reassessment Plan," *American Jewish History* 98, no. 3 (2014), 195; Arlene Lazarowitz, "A Southern Senator and Israel: Senator William Fulbright's Accusations of Undue Influence over American Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *Southern Jewish History* 14 (2011), 119–54.

¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation [between President Gerald Ford and Dr. Henry Kissinger], January 27, 1976, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. XXVI, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974–1976, doc. 255, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v26/d255>, last accessed May 22, 2017; Dennis McDougal, *The Last Mogul: Lew Wasserman, MCA and the Hidden History of Hollywood* (Boston, MA, 2001), 344, 402; Michael Aushenker, "Eulogies: Lew Wasserman", *Jewish Journal*, June 6, 2002, http://jewishjournal.com/old_stories/6089/, last accessed May 22, 2017.

conflict-resolution negotiations with Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians.¹⁵ After four days of Washington discussions—during which Rabin became the first Israeli leader to address a joint session of Congress (though not matching Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's full house a year earlier)—the Israeli premier left for a week-long tour of public engagements and fund-raising with Jewish communities across the United States.¹⁶ The pinnacle of Rabin's tour was a Hollywood gala in his honor. The United States Information Service official news report boasted that the gala "included almeiy major motion picture star and entertainment executive in the industry, and was of the same magnitude as an Academy Awards presentation."¹⁷ Frank Sinatra hosted the event, with performances by John Denver and Diana Ross, who sang "Reach Out and Touch" with Rabin; an anonymous group of Hollywood executives paid for the gala and Ted Ashley, CEO of Warner Bros., chaired it. Henry Kissinger, whose own close friends in Hollywood included big Israel-supporters Kirk Douglas and Gregory Peck, joined Rabin as a special guest to help put aside some of the bad blood of the past year.¹⁸ . The Secretary of State's uncharacteristic reference to his Jewish roots and his warm and witty words concerning Israel went down very well with the Israeli

¹⁵ See record of the Washington talks in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. XXVI, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974–1976, 900–19.

¹⁶ Bernard Gwertzman. "Rabin Rules Out Any Negotiation With P.L.O. Heads", *New York Times*, January 29, 1976, 1.

¹⁷ United States Information Service official news report, February 5, 1976, A/112/15, Israel Sate Archives (ISA).

¹⁸ On Kissinger and Hollywood see Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York, 2005), 361–65.

media.¹⁹ Even more than Capitol Hill, Hollywood proved not only a bastion of support for Israel, but also the perfect place for a public display of unity.

Hollywood, however, derived its power primarily from making dramatically successful films. And five months later, the Israeli military's triumphant mission at Entebbe contained, as one Hollywood critic later put it, just about everything an adventure movie producer could wish for: a mix of characters thrown together by fate, a plot that put an upbeat twist on the then fashionable airline disaster theme, and the sort of last-minute rescue seen in countless Hollywood westerns.²⁰ One high-powered Hollywood executive, Universal Studios' president Sidney Sheinberg, put it more succinctly: "The mission reads like a movie script."²¹

The real-life drama that climaxed at Entebbe in early July 1976 had opened a week earlier in the skies above Europe. On June 27, 1976, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the German group Revolutionary Cells hijacked an Air France Airbus en route from Tel Aviv to Paris shortly after leaving Athens Airport. After diverting first to Libya, the plane landed at Entebbe Airport, near the Ugandan capital Kampala, on June 28. At Entebbe, the hijackers, who were supported by the forces of Ugandan president Idi Amin, transferred the passengers into an old airport terminal building. They then issued demands for the release of 40 Palestinians held in Israel and threatened to start killing the hostages on July 1 if their

¹⁹ "1200 Hollywood Stars made a Tribute Night to Israel", *Yediot Achronot*, January 4, 1976, 1; See also *Maariv*, January 4, 1976; *Davar*, January 5, 1976.

²⁰ J. T., "Operation Thunderbolt," *Independent Film Journal*, January 20, 1978, 30.

²¹ "Show Business. Entebbe Derby," *Time*, July 26, 1976,

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914418,00.html>, last accessed May 22, 2017.

demands were not met. Almost all of the non-Israeli hostages were then freed. When the July 1 deadline passed and negotiations broke down, the Israeli cabinet gave the go-ahead for a military rescue. On July 4, following a 2,500-mile flight from Israel, a 100-strong Israeli special forces unit landed in darkness and stormed the old Entebbe Airport terminal building. In less than an hour, the unit killed all the hijackers and rescued all but four of the remaining 106 hostages. One Israeli soldier died, the unit's leader Yonatan Netanyahu. One hostage, 74-year-old Dora Bloch, who had been taken to a hospital in Kampala before the rescue operation, was subsequently murdered by Idi Amin's security forces.²²

Coming in the wake of a series of bungled anti-terrorist operations (including at the Munich Olympics in 1972), many international commentators immediately saw the Israelis' success at Entebbe as ground-breaking. Many Americans greeted Israel's counter-terrorist strike so enthusiastically because the raid had coincided with the United States' Bicentennial. As Melani McAlister has noted, neither U.S. public officials nor journalists were above making grandiose statements implying that the Israelis and the hijackers had orchestrated their crisis with the United States in mind. "The Israelis gave us a very special birthday present this July 4th," one State Department official effused. President Ford congratulated the Israelis on their mission and later thanked Israel publicly for enhancing the Bicentennial celebrations through its feat of "bravery": "That action of liberation freed our own hearts to fuller

²² David, *Operation Thunderbolt*; Ze'ev Drory, *Dan Shomron: Subtle Leadership* (Tel Aviv, 2016), 173–206.

understanding of the universal meaning of independence—and the courageous action sometimes required to preserve it.”²³

Hollywood's own “raid” on Entebbe started within hours of the Israeli raid. To a large extent this can be attributed to commercial exploitation of an incident that had dominated U.S. and international headlines. Yet Hollywood’s interest in Entebbe also reflected the close ties that had developed between the American film community and Israel since the 1940s. On the morning after the Entebbe raid, Warner Bros.’ boss Ted Ashley telephoned the Israeli ambassador to the United States, Simcha Dinitz, to congratulate him excitedly on the “wonderful operation.” Ashley proposed making a major movie about the “historic” event and suggested immediately sending several of Warner Bros.’ top filmmakers to meet Israeli ministers. Israeli government cooperation would be essential to deter “cheap” versions by other studios, Ashley stated. The value of the “respectable” and “impressive” movie that Warner Bros. had in mind—which “of course” would partly be filmed in Israel, Ashley said—would be to assure “first rate public relations” for Israel on a par with “a new Exodus if not more than that.” In his report to the heads of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Jerusalem, Dinitz described Ashley—born in Brooklyn as Theodore Assofsky—as a

²³ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 183–84; Gerald Ford, "Remarks at the B'nai B'rith Biennial Convention, 1976," The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6317&st=entebbe&st1=>, last accessed May 22, 2017.

“devoted” supporter of Israel, and asked that the government consider his suggestion.²⁴

Ashley was not the only Hollywood chief with close contacts with the Israeli establishment however. In the first week of July, Universal Studios' Lew Wasserman dispatched an urgent cable to Yitzhak Rabin and signaled his serious interest in an Entebbe project by sending two senior executives to Israel.²⁵ Having started to develop a story about Entebbe before the crisis had even concluded, Universal was not surprisingly the first major Hollywood company to announce that it was going to make a film about the raid. George Roy Hill, who had won an Academy Award for *The Sting* in 1974, had agreed to direct, and Paul Newman, the star of Otto Preminger's *Exodus* back in 1960, had, according to Universal's pitch to the Israeli government, expressed “unsolicited interest” in their project.²⁶

Determined not to be outdone, on July 10 Ted Ashley flew to Israel to champion his project personally and to argue the case for an exclusive deal.²⁷ Ashley met Premier Rabin, Defense Minister Shimon Peres and Minister for Commerce and Industry Haim Bar-Lev, a former chief-of-staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)

²⁴ Simcha Dinitz to Director General (MFA), Telegram no. 79, July 5, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

²⁵ Washington Embassy to MFA (Jerusalem), Telegram no. 201, July 9, 1976; Simcha Dinitz to MFA (Jerusalem), Telegram no. 95, July 6, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

²⁶ "Israeli Raid In Uganda Spawns Two Pic Projects", *Variety*, July 7, 1976, 1; Undated and untitled table of companies interested in production, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

²⁷ Ted Ashley to Zohar Bar-Am, July 12, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

whose ministry was responsible for all state support for film production.²⁸ A few days later, Barry Diller, the chairman of Paramount, telephoned Israel's United Nations ambassador, Chaim Herzog, with news that he had just signed contracts for an Entebbe project with the acclaimed director Sidney Lumet and celebrated scriptwriter Paddy Chayefsky (a well-known supporter of Israel); Diller also expressed concerns about Ted Ashley's attempts to get exclusivity.²⁹ Paramount's president, David Picker, was soon also on his way to meet with Bar-Lev.³⁰ Otto Preminger visited Israel to promote his own Entebbe project, which United Artists would distribute.³¹

Yet another company pleading its case to the Israeli authorities was the independent studio First Artists, which was co-owned by a number of Hollywood stars, including the prominent pro-Zionists Paul Newman and Barbra Streisand. On July 7, the Israeli cultural attaché in Los Angeles, Haim Hefer, met with First Artists' president Philip Feldman. In his report to his superiors at the MFA afterwards, Hefer described Feldman as "a sensitive and enthusiastic Jew" who felt "this was the big chance for him to do a film for Israel." Hefer added that both Feldman and his stars

²⁸ Hanan Bar-On to Director General (MFA), telegram no. 176, July 8, 1976, HZ/1659/11; Ezra Sassoon to the Minister (Bar-Lev), July 3, 1976, GL/21187/17, ISA. A picture of Ashley discussing his project in Bar-Lev's office appeared prominently in the Israeli press. See *Davar*, July 14, 1976, 2.

²⁹ New York to MFA, telegram no. 460, July 13, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

³⁰ Army Archerd, "Just for Variety", *Variety*, August 10, 1976, 2; Undated and untitled table of companies interested in production, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

³¹ *Maariv*, August 4, 1976, 25; Undated and untitled table of companies interested in production, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

were prepared to forget all “commercial considerations” and to make an “ideological” film without unnecessary “fireworks” that “would show our moral and human side in the correct light.” In Hefer's presence, Feldman telephoned Paul Newman, who agreed “on the spot” to appear in his film. Barbra Streisand could also be relied on to take part if a proper script was produced, Feldman claimed, and he was awaiting answers from another two A-list actors, Dustin Hoffman and Steve McQueen.³²

Not every Hollywood Entebbe project seems to have crossed the Israeli government's radar during this period. For example, one of the then rising stars of Hollywood, actor and producer Michael Douglas (a keen Israeli supporter like his father, Kirk), commissioned an Entebbe script from the novelist Don Carpenter. The script contained fictitious scenes showing the hijackers torturing their captives and an American hostage who, after being released in late July, plays a vital role in helping the Israeli commandos plan their raid.³³ Even the veteran director Lewis Milestone, who had won an Academy Award for the classic anti-war drama *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1930, got in on the Entebbe act. Milestone's short treatment depicted Idi Amin as the terrorists' crazed, “syphilitic” mastermind—“a cross

³² Haim Hefer (Los Angeles) to MFA, telegram no. 17, July 7, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

³³ Don Carpenter, “From These Lions,” August 1976, f. 5-6, box 4, Michael Douglas Papers, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, Madison, WI. See also outline for a two-hour TV movie by James E. Colaneri, “Revenge for Entebbe,” January 14, 1977, f. 14, box 27, Michael Douglas Papers.

between Herman Goering and Henry VIII”—and revealed in the technicalities of the Israelis’ rescue operation.³⁴

Altogether, remarkably, upwards of seventeen American companies made efforts to produce an Entebbe movie in the summer of 1976. Almost all of the companies were owned or run by Jews; some collaborated with Israeli writers and filmmakers. All companies promised the cooperation of the preeminent film crews and stars in the business. One particular company, Merv Griffin Productions, assumed it had the inside track on the race for Entebbe—and for good reason: its president, Murray Schwartz, had actually been one of the hostages at Entebbe.³⁵

The Israeli authorities were determined to turn Entebbe into a filmic propaganda coup and therefore eager to take maximum political advantage of the interest that Hollywood, the world’s entertainment capital, was taking in the raid. However, officials were so spoiled for choice that at first a dispute arose over which Hollywood studio to back. On Ambassador Dinitz’s recommendation, the MFA’s heads had given an early nod of approval to Ted Ashley’s Warner Bros. Immediately after learning of Universal’s approach and of Haim Hefer’s dealings with First Artists, however, the MFA asked Dinitz to intervene “urgently” to prevent “entanglements and embarrassments.”³⁶ Dinitz reacted to this by pulling rank and telling his cultural attaché in Los Angeles that the government had given Ashley’s project a “green light.” Hefer was infuriated by this, complained about the Washington embassy’s

³⁴ “The Entebbe Incident,” 15-page treatment, dated 1976, f. 188, box 18, Lewis Milestone Collection, MHL.

³⁵ “Show Business,” *Time*, July 26, 1976; David, *Operation Thunderbolt*, 181.

³⁶ Shlomo Argov to the Ambassador, Washington, July 8, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

constant meddling in his Hollywood territory, and threatened to resign.³⁷ Hefer was himself a famous songwriter and his protest was sent directly to Foreign Minister Yigal Alon, an old friend, who instructed officials to put film matters back into his lap.³⁸ At this early stage, the MFA told Israeli officials in the United States, Britain, France, and Canada to treat all filmmakers' Entebbe proposals seriously but not to promise anything except that their details would be forwarded to the government in Jerusalem.³⁹

After this initial confusion, matters effectively passed into the hands of the Film Centre in the Israeli Ministry of Commerce and Industry.⁴⁰ After deliberation, the MCI decided it would support one major Entebbe production that promised to be realized as soon as possible, and issued a letter of auction to those companies expressing interest, with an end of July deadline. The MCI's letter stated that the Israeli authorities would only provide one project with "authentic information within security limits," as well as the use of "military equipment and personnel" and other institutional assistance. Interested companies had to supply details of their production (including how much of it would be filmed in Israel), a general outline of the script, and, "considering the political and military aspects of the event," their "consent for

³⁷ Haim Hefer to Foreign Minister, telegram no. 25, July 8, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

³⁸ Shlomo Argov to the Ambassador, Washington, telegram no. 227, July 9, 1976; Yigal Alon to Haim Hefer, telegram no. 420, July 11, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

³⁹ Shlomo Argov and Zohar Baram to Washington et al., telegram no. 349, July 9, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

⁴⁰ Ezra Sassoon to the Minister (Bar-Lev), July 11, 1976, GL/21187/17, ISA.

approval, by the proper authorities, of the final script and film.”⁴¹ In internal debates, the Israeli Defense Forces, whose cooperation all big Hollywood applicants sought for creative and commercial reasons, had already stipulated that the main criterion for its backing would be “how much the script helped to present the subject in accordance with the interests of the state of Israel.”⁴² According to press reports, Israel’s cabinet also briefly discussed the Entebbe film issue, with Prime Minister Rabin seeing merit in supporting a good film and hoping it might prove to be even more beneficial to Israeli national interests than Preminger’s *Exodus*. Haim Bar-Lev stipulated that the condition for government backing was that “we agree to the script.”⁴³

For their part, Israeli representatives in the United States made it abundantly clear to Hollywood bidders that Israeli co-operation depended on “a story that is not offensive to Israel or its population.”⁴⁴ There seemed to be little danger of that, though, judging by the film treatments submitted by Hollywood’s heavy-hitters. Universal Studios’ Entebbe “concept,” for instance, which was based on director George Roy Hill and scriptwriter Loring Mandel’s own research in Israel, stated that for all their movie’s “high drama, adventure and suspense,” nothing was more important than its “moral content,” which would show that Israel was a “nation totally defined” by “each man’s responsibility to his brother.” This was why Israel alone in

⁴¹ Ezra Sassoon to “Dear Sirs,” “Re: Operation Entebbe,” July 15, 1976, GL/21187/17, ISA.

⁴² Joel Ben-Porat (IDF Spokesperson) to the director of promoting Israeli films, July 11, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

⁴³ *Maariv*, August 9, 1976, 2.

⁴⁴ “Stampede Of Uganda-Rescue Pic Projects A Problem For Israel,” *Variety*, July 22, 1976, 1, 7.

the world would not “capitulate to terrorism,” Hill and Mandel wrote, and why all hostages “must always” be brought home: including the dead embodiment of the Israeli ideal, Yoni Netanyahu, “American by birth, Israeli by choice.”⁴⁵

Warner Bros. submitted a concept which was equally high-minded. It vowed to “stress the parallel with earlier and deeply anguished moments in Jewish history,” epitomized in “the terrible Nazi-like ‘separation’ of the Israelis and Jews from the other hostages” at Entebbe. Israel's leaders and soldiers would be “portrayed as human beings, not killers” and “a clear contrast” established “between the character and goals of the Israelis and the vicious violation of international law by the terrorists.” Ted Ashley wrote personally of “our hope and intention that this film will cause people to better understand Israel's position in the world; its sense of restraint and yet its willingness and ability to fight for human values and for the integrity of its own country and people wherever the need exists.” Ashley summed up with the promise that these points would be made “totally clear even to the person sitting in the last row of the balcony of every theater in the world.”⁴⁶

Though more than a dozen companies had demonstrated an active interest in Entebbe throughout July, only five tendered fully-formed film “concepts” to the Israeli authorities by the end of the month.⁴⁷ Asked by the government to review the proposals, the internationally-acclaimed Israeli film director Ephraim Kishon found no significant difference between them: all were basically “pro-Israeli.” Kishon saw

⁴⁵ George Roy Hill and Loring Mandel “Concept” [undated], HZ/1659/11, ISA.

⁴⁶ Warner Bros., “Concept of the Film” [Undated], HZ/1659/11, ISA.

⁴⁷ Zohar Bar-Am to Shmuel Bunim and Efraim Kishon, August 1, 1976, GL/21187/17, ISA.

great political value in recruiting Universal or Warner Bros., but opted for the latter dependent on its promise to give the leading part of Brigadier Dan Shomron, commander of the Israeli raid, to Steve McQueen, one of Hollywood's best-known tough guys and "a hero to hundreds of millions of cinema viewers around the world."⁴⁸ From Los Angeles, Haim Hefer and other Israeli representatives reported that all of the professionals whose advice they had sought recommended Universal's team of Hill and Mandel.⁴⁹ However, Ted Ashley's personal involvement in Warner Bros.' proposal—he even agreed to fly back to Israel at Bar-Lev's request to hammer out last-minute details in late July—seems ultimately to have swayed the Israeli government's final decision.⁵⁰

In mid-August 1976, five weeks after the Entebbe raid, the Israeli government announced that it had chosen Warner Bros. The government assured Warner Bros. exclusive assistance for one year, including provision of official information on the operation, the use of army units, and permission to rent military aircraft and vehicles. In return, Warner Bros. undertook to complete the film by the summer of 1977 with a budget of around \$10 million. This was a mighty sum for the mid-1970s, higher, for instance, than Steven Spielberg's 1975 blockbuster *Jaws*. Moreover, Warner Bros. promised to spend most of the \$10 million in Israel itself and, significantly, to produce another six films in Israel over the next three years. The Israelis had earlier

⁴⁸ Israeli Film Center, "The opinion of Ephraim Kishon concerning the concepts and capabilities of the companies suggesting to produce a film about Operation Jonathan," August 2, 1976, GL/21187/17, ISA.

⁴⁹ Judy Solomon, Haim Hefer and Yoram Rozenfeld to Zohar Bar-Am, July 29, 1976, GL/21187/17, ISA.

⁵⁰ Haim Bar-Lev to Ted Ashley, July 26, 1976, GL/21187/17, ISA.

tried to negotiate a share of the film's profits too, but settled for Warner Bros. agreeing to donate an unspecified portion of the revenues to an Israeli soldiers' welfare fund.⁵¹ Warner Bros.' film was to be directed by Franklin Schaffner, who several years earlier had made the multi-award-winning World War II movie *Patton*. The writer was to be Ken Ross, whose work included *The Odessa File* (1974), a thriller about neo-Nazis in West Germany, and the soon-to-be released *Black Sunday* (1977), in which an Israeli agent thwarts plans for mass murder at the U.S. Super Bowl by the Palestinian group Black September.⁵² Press reports stated that the IDF would appoint a brigadier-general as adviser to Warner Bros. and that the studio would also employ the services of Ilan Hartuv, one of the hostages at Entebbe and the son of Dora Bloch. Years earlier, Hartuv had been Israeli government liaison on both Leon Uris' and Otto Preminger's *Exodus* projects.⁵³

Warner Bros. might have worked hard to “win” the Entebbe auction but its agreement with the Israeli government began to unravel almost as soon as it had been signed. First, Israeli hopes that Steve McQueen would star as the Entebbe operation's commander were quickly dashed. This was due to Ted Ashley's unwillingness to meet the actor's financial demands and McQueen's principal commitment to First

⁵¹ *Yediot Achronot*, August 13, 1976.

⁵² *Black Sunday*, directed by John Frankenheimer, was the first prominent Hollywood disaster spectacle that was also explicitly and emphatically about terrorism. It was also the first feature film to display Palestinian terrorists on American soil. Prince, *Firestorm*, 25; Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York, 2009), 115.

⁵³ *Yediot Achronot*, August 23, 1976; Goodman, “Operation Exodus,” 213, 216–21.

Artists' Entebbe project.⁵⁴ Following this, news spread that an American television company was close to completing its own Entebbe movie. In mid-July, NBC Television, Twentieth Century Fox and producer Edgar J. Scherick jointly announced their intention of making a three-hour dramatized reconstruction of the Entebbe raid that would be ready for airing on American television in December. Later in July, Scherick presented this project to the Israeli consulate in New York, promising a film that would convey the global threat of terrorism and asking for Israeli technical support, but also stressing that his production—to be filmed mostly in California—would go ahead even without Israeli assistance.⁵⁵ In early October, Scherick's production, titled *Raid on Entebbe*, commenced shooting under the direction of Irwin Kershner. Its stars included Peter Finch as Yitzhak Rabin and the popular action-man Charles Bronson as Brigadier Dan Shomron. The \$5 million budget, including \$1 million for Bronson, was exceptionally large for a television drama.⁵⁶ Twentieth Century Fox agreed to distribute *Raid on Entebbe* in cinemas overseas.⁵⁷

The prospect of getting spiked by a small-screen rival that was saving time and money by filming in California, combined with the spiraling costs of Warner

⁵⁴ Gregg Kilday, "Warners-Israeli Pact on 'Entebbe'," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1976, B7.

⁵⁵ "NBC-TV Joins Entebbe Rescue Project Derby," *Variety*, July 27, 4; "NBC Joins the Crowd With Its Entebbe Project", *Variety*, August 3, 1976, 1. Azaria Rapoport to Shlomo Argov, Telegram no. 767, July 22, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

⁵⁶ Army Archerd, "Just for Variety," *Variety*, October 18, 1976, 2.

⁵⁷ *Variety*, August 19, 1976, 1; September 17, 1976, 14; September 22, 1976, 3; October 8, 1976, 16; October 12, 1976, 18; October 14, 1976, 1; October 20, 1976, 43; October 22, 1976, 1.

Bros.' Entebbe production, seems to have knocked the wind out of Ted Ashley's sails.⁵⁸ The upshot is that in mid-October, following a round of difficult meetings in Israel with Haim Bar-Lev, Ashley announced that Warner Bros. was abandoning its Entebbe project on the grounds that the Israeli government had failed to provide all the agreed information on the raid and the cheap-to-hire material. Many working in Israeli public diplomacy and the Israeli film industry immediately saw this cancellation - after so much promise - as a major blow. Local Israeli critics had argued all along that it was a mistake for the government to have given exclusivity to one Hollywood company. Others claimed Israel's cumbersome bureaucracy had been to blame. When the matter was discussed in an Israeli Cabinet meeting, Bar-Lev refuted Warner Bros.' charges of Israeli foot-dragging over secret details of the Entebbe raid and argued that Ashley had reneged on the deal for purely financial reasons.⁵⁹

A few weeks later, Bar-Lev's claims were largely vindicated, after Warner Bros. surprisingly announced that it had acquired the overseas cinematic distribution rights to *Victory at Entebbe*, another telemovie about Entebbe being made by David Wolper Productions for ABC Television. Marvin J. Chomsky was directing *Victory at Entebbe* and the project boasted an even bigger cast of stars than *Raid on Entebbe*, including Anthony Hopkins as Yitzhak Rabin and Elizabeth Taylor and Kirk Douglas as the distraught parents of a teenage Israeli hostage. Crucially, *Victory at Entebbe* was not being made on film but on videotape, which allowed for swift editing and

⁵⁸ Dial Torgerson, "Under Way: LA Shoots Slated by Israeli Film Company," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1976, F1. Warner Bros.' production had reportedly risen to some \$16 million.

⁵⁹ *Davar*, October 17, 1976, 2; October 26, 1976, 11; *Maariv*, October 25, 1976, 2.

meant that Wolper's movie would in all likelihood be the first Entebbe production to appear on screen.⁶⁰

Back in July, David Wolper - who had made a pro-Israeli documentary in the mid-1960s - had in fact informed the Israeli government of his plans for an Entebbe telemovie and of his "abiding interest to continue his commitment to the Israeli cause."⁶¹ Defense Minister Shimon Peres helped his scriptwriter, Ernest Kinoy, on a research trip to Israel in August, furnishing him with official publicity documents, such as an IDF history of Palestinian hijackings, and facilitating access to a dozen hostages, including Ilan Hartuv. (Separately, Kinoy also spoke with a number of young leftist Arabs in order to get a profile of the hijackers.)⁶² On ABC's instructions, Wolper's production had subsequently been shrouded in secrecy, but Ted Ashley had known about it since July and behind the scenes, in September, Warner Bros. had

⁶⁰ Charles Fox interview, "Archive of American Television," undated, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/victory-at-entebbe>, last accessed May 22, 2017.

⁶¹ Robert Guenette to "Ezra Sason", July 28, 1976; Irwin Russell to Ezra Sassoon, July 27, 1976, GL/21187/14, ISA.

⁶² See *Victory at Entebbe*: Publicity (General), f.24, box 214; Story Notes, f. 4, box 214; Press Conferences, f. 22, box 214; Israeli Prime Minister (Historical Consulting), f. 19, box 214 all found at the Wolper Collection, USC.

actually bought Wolper Productions.⁶³ Naturally, when news of Ashley's new Entebbe deal finally broke, the Israeli government felt it had been tricked.⁶⁴

As a direct result of the breakdown of the Israeli-Warner Bros. agreement, in November 1976, the two-horse American race to the screen between NBC and ABC was joined by Israel's leading producer Menachem Golan.⁶⁵ Golan announced that he would make *Operation Thunderbolt*—named after the code word for the Israeli raid—with the full cooperation of the Israeli government on a \$1.3 million budget. This was an exceptional sum for an Israeli film, about a third of which came from Irving Levin and Samuel Schulman, two Jewish-American businessmen with film and sporting portfolios whose own Entebbe project had earlier been rejected by the Israeli Ministry

⁶³ Ted Ashley to Chaim Bar-Lev, July 21, 1976, GL/5666/16, ISA; *Variety*, October 23, 1976, 1; Lee Margulies, "ABC's Taped Drama Beats NBC in 'Race'", *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1976, F1.

⁶⁴ *Davar*, November 3, 1976, 2. The *Los Angeles Times* commented that Ashley's joint-announcement with Wolper sounded "more like a legal deposition than a press release." Ashley claimed that he had not seen Wolper for more than a year before late October 1976 and had only become aware of the progress of ABC's and Wolper's plans for an Entebbe film after Warner Bros. had canceled its deal with the Israeli government. See Gregg Kilday, "Yesterday's Headlines," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1976, F9.

⁶⁵ Golan first approached the IDF three days after the Entebbe raid but backed off after learning that the government was only interested in a Hollywood production. Golan claimed that within 48 hours of hearing that the Warner Bros. deal was off he had managed to raise \$1 million for his own project. See Menachem Golan to Haim Bar-Lev, November 5, 1976, GL/21187/15, ISA.

of Commerce and Industry.⁶⁶ Golan, an intense patriot who compared filmmaking with going to war and who believed only an Israeli film company could do justice to the Entebbe story, did everything he could to steal a march on the Americans, including putting all of his company's other projects on hold and setting himself a 90-day deadline.⁶⁷ He enlisted Israel's leading film and theatre actors as well as a Hollywood screenwriter, Clarke Reynolds, who, like the rest of the cast and crew, worked around the clock to get the film ready for distribution by mid-January 1977. Golan knew he was a late entry; he and his cousin-partner Yoram Globus launched an audaciously publicity blitz in Hollywood: "The Israelis did it" and the Israelis would "tell it best." *Operation Thunderbolt* would be a full-fledged motion picture—not a "TV show" or "videotape." Israeli ministers, elite troops, and around a dozen hostages portraying themselves on screen would reinforce the film's realism.⁶⁸

As anticipated, *Victory at Entebbe* eventually won the race to screen an Entebbe film. The film aired during primetime in the United States on ABC Television on the evening of December 13, 1976, watched by some 41 million viewers. As arranged, Warner Bros. then began distributing *Victory* in cinema theatres outside the United States. NBC's *Raid on Entebbe* aired on the evening of January 9,

⁶⁶ Hezi Carmel to Ezra Sassoon, July 29, 1976; Ezra Sassoon to Hezi Carmel, August 20, 1976, GL/21187/17, ISA.

⁶⁷ Menachem Golan, email correspondence with Tony Shaw, July 10, 2011.

⁶⁸ *Variety*, November 19, 1976, 10; *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 1976, E14; *Operation Thunderbolt* shooting script, November 1976, Script Collection, MHL; *Operation Thunderbolt* script by Clarke Reynolds, undated, Script Collection, British Film Institute Library, London; Robert Rosenberg, "Israel Raid Film Nears Finish", *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1977, E8.

1977, immediately after live coverage of that year's Super Bowl game, and was watched by sixty million viewers (46% of the available audience).⁶⁹ Having already been distributed by Twentieth Century Fox in Britain and France, *Raid* then travelled further afield. Golan and Globus' *Operation Thunderbolt* was first screened commercially in South Africa in February 1977. In the following month, special gala "guest-screenings" at the Israeli Consulate in New York and in Tel Aviv attracted numerous American and Israeli politicians, dignitaries and celebrities, with Yitzhak Rabin present at both events. *Operation Thunderbolt* predictably did well on Israeli cinema screens in the spring of 1977. Golan's company then distributed it quite successfully overseas.⁷⁰

Israeli officials may have been angered by Ted Ashley's machinations and disappointed not to have a bone-fide Hollywood blockbuster about Entebbe on the big screen. The experience taught them an important lesson: that for all their pro-Israeli sympathies, Hollywood executives like Ashley thought above all of the bottom line. What is equally important, however, is that in many ways this falling-out probably did not matter. Such was the close, informal nature of the Hollywood-Israel relationship that Hollywood's on-screen contribution to the Entebbe story fit the Israeli government's requirements just about perfectly.

Production records show that many of those involved in making all three Entebbe films were committed pro-Zionists determined to present Israel as a leader in the West's fight against Arab-cum-international terrorism: an early promotion of the

⁶⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1977, F12; *Christian Science Monitor*, July 6, 1977, 20.

⁷⁰ *Variety*, November 2, 1977, 43.

theme of "partners against terror," which, as Mearsheimer and Walt point out, became a backbone of the pro-Israel rationale in the United States.⁷¹ *Raid on Entebbe* might have been directed by Irvin Kershner, who would go on to make the *Star Wars* sequel *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980, but it was his fellow Jewish American, producer Edgar J. Scherick, who played the more creative role in the Entebbe film. Working on *Raid on Entebbe* energized Scherick's support for Israel and he later spoke of it as being one of the most emotional, gratifying moments of his illustrious career.⁷² Peter Finch, whose role as Yitzhak Rabin in *Raid* earned him an Emmy nomination and was his last screen performance, had been an admirer of Israel since playing a Jewish paramilitary commander in the Palestine Mandate in Paramount's *Judith* in 1966. In one of his last interviews, a few days before he died in January 1977, the English-born, Australian Finch described Israel as "a real short-sleeve democracy, an aggressive one. There's comradeship and no saluting. Somehow the leaders haven't the facade our politicians have."⁷³

Both the chief financier of *Victory at Entebbe*, ABC's president Leonard Goldenson, and its creative overseer, David Wolper, were long-time friends of Israel.

⁷¹ Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby*, 60–70.

⁷² Edgar J. Scherick, interviewed by Luke Ford, February 2002, http://www.lukeford.net/profiles/profiles/edgar_scherick.htm, last accessed May 22, 2017; Edgar J. Scherick interview, "Archive of American Television," undated, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/raid-on-entebbe>, last accessed May 22, 2017.

⁷³ Paul Rosenfeld, "Peter Finch—Michelin Guide to Show Biz Comes to Rest in Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1977, R29.

Goldenson's business and political mentor had been the aforementioned Barney Balaban.⁷⁴ Wolper had made the seminal pro-Zionist TV documentary *Let My People Go: The Story of Israel* in 1965.⁷⁵ Elizabeth Taylor had been a public advocate of Israeli causes since marrying the actor Eddie Fisher and converting to Judaism in 1959.⁷⁶ Praising her commitment to Israel some months after Entebbe, Simcha Dinitz told a Los Angeles fund-raising audience that during the crisis Taylor had offered to take the place of the Israeli hostages.⁷⁷ Kirk Douglas, her on-screen husband, virtually begged David Wolper for the part of Yitzhak Rabin (whom he knew) so he could best build on his other pro-Israeli films *The Juggler* (1953) and *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1965); Douglas also offered Wolper copious advice on the script.⁷⁸ Not all

⁷⁴ Leonard Goldenson, *Beating the Odds* (New York, 1991), 39, 225–26, 406.

⁷⁵ On *Let My People Go* see Boxes 082-009, 237-029 and 237-030, Wolper Collection, USC. The film can be seen at Archive.org, https://archive.org/details/letmypeoplego_20150825 (last accessed May 22, 2017)

⁷⁶ See Elizabeth Taylor file, Max Nussbaum archive, Temple Israel of Hollywood, Los Angeles.

⁷⁷ “Elizabeth Taylor Offered To Be Hostage, Dinitz Discloses,” *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, June 16, 1977, <http://www.jta.org/2011/03/23/news-opinion/the-telegraph/in-the-jta-archive-liz-taylor-says-trade-me-for-entebbe-hostages>, last accessed May 22, 2017.

⁷⁸ *Victory at Entebbe*, Final Script by Ernest Kinoy, November 6, 1976, f. 13–14, Box 62, Kirk Douglas Papers, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, Madison, WI; Kirk Douglas to David L. Wolper, October 28, 1976, f. 5, box 215, Wolper Collection, USC. On *The Juggler* and *Cast a Giant Shadow* see Bartov, *The “Jew” in Cinema*, 199–204 and Mart, *Eye on Israel*, 25–27.

Hollywood's Jewish talent had such ideological devotion. One of Hollywood's leading young film stars, Richard Dreyfuss, who played Yonatan Netanyahu in *Victory at Entebbe*, was paid \$250,000 for five days' work. "I have no excuses," he candidly told the press a few months later, "I did it for the money."⁷⁹

There are some significant differences between the three Entebbe films. *Operation Thunderbolt*, for instance, pays much greater attention to the logistics of the Israeli military's raid than the two American movies. In doing so, *Operation Thunderbolt* offers a more compelling, insider's account of Israeli ingenuity and ruthlessness. As its title indicates, *Victory at Entebbe* is more overtly propagandistic than *Raid*—"its chronic Zionist overlay may be too strong for some stomachs," one critic wrote—and the film is marred by unstable colors and hygienic sets.⁸⁰ *Raid* appears more authentic than *Victory* owing to its use of film (rather than videotape) and outdoor locations. *Victory* is the most glamorous and melodramatic of the three movies and, to the chagrin of some reviewers, even introduces a tale of young love between two of the hostages.⁸¹ *Raid* and *Operation Thunderbolt* never bother to penetrate the real motives of the hijackers, but, unlike *Victory*, they do at least allow them a range of attitudes towards their hostages. Finally, *Victory* is the only film to criticize U.S. policy towards Israel, suggesting in a fractious Israeli cabinet scene that Washington has been denying its ally arms and trade deals owing to its opposition to Jewish settlements on the West Bank.

⁷⁹ Fiona Lewish, "Richard Dreyfus: Persona Grata," *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1977.

⁸⁰ Derek Elley, "Raid on Entebbe," *Films and Filming*, March 1977, 42.

⁸¹ Louise Sweet, 'Victory at Entebbe', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Jan 1, 1977, 32–33.

Fundamentally, however, all three films are remarkably similar in terms of plot, viewpoint, style, political message, and even dialogue. Each purports to tell the truth, to give audiences a detailed but easily comprehensible, documentary-like outline of the Entebbe crisis. Each looks at the Entebbe crisis from the Israeli standpoint. Like most action/combat movies, each film focuses solely on the crisis itself (the hijacking and subsequent rescue mission) rather than on its background or causes. Each film gives ample screen time to violence: justified and heroic when perpetrated by the Israelis, unwarranted and cowardly when committed by the hijackers. And each tends of course to frame the Arab-Israeli conflict as a binary struggle between good and evil. Put together, the three films are highly complementary, underlining the way the American and Israeli news media had framed the Entebbe crisis in June–July 1976.⁸²

Much of what the three Entebbe films depicted, sometimes in fine detail, was factually correct. For instance, the Palestinian and German hijackers really had taken advantage of lax security at Athens Airport to smuggle weapons aboard Air France Flight 139 in boxes of candy. But the Entebbe films also incorporated elements of

⁸² John Shelton Lawrence and Bernard Timberg, “News and Mythic Selectivity: Mayaguez, Entebbe, Mogadishu,” *Journal of American Culture* 2, no. 2 (1979): 321–30; Hemda Ben-Yehuda, Chanan Naveh and Luba Levin Banchik, “Crises Press Coverage: Local and Foreign Reporting on the Arab-Israel Conflict,” *Studies in Media and Communication* 1, no. 2 (2013): 35–46; Melani McAlister, “The Good Fight: Israel after Vietnam, 1972–80,” in Janice A. Radway, Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank and Penny Von Eschen, eds., *American Studies: An Anthology* (Oxford, 2009), 253–55.

artistic license, several of which either painted the Israelis in a more heroic light or served to further demonize the hijackers. Three stand out in particular. First, though each of the three films contains scenes in which the Israeli cabinet debates whether it should negotiate with the hijackers, *Victory* and *Raid* gloss over the fact that at a critical stage in the Entebbe crisis, when a military option appeared impossible, Israeli ministers had agreed to exchange the hostages for Palestinians held in Israeli jails. At the time, Yitzhak Rabin stated explicitly that this was not meant as a tactical ruse to gain time but based on his and others' strong belief that, faced with such ultimatums, the cabinet would make a trade. Even the ultra-hawkish Menachem Begin, leader of the Opposition, acceded to this decision. Showing this willingness to trade would undoubtedly have weakened the movies' tone of belligerence. It would also have contradicted the Israeli (and U.S.) governments' public axiom that they would not negotiate with terrorists.⁸³

Second, all of the films focus significantly on Yonatan Netanyahu, portraying him as a flawless, tragic hero and the charismatic leader of a group of citizen-soldiers whose perfectionism makes them a lethal anti-terrorist force. In *Raid* and *Victory* especially, "Yoni" comes across as a flagbearer for Western humanistic tradition: a democratically-minded, poetry-reading reluctant warrior. In contrast, his foes, the sad or sadistic hijackers, suffer from misplaced idealism. *Raid* in particular highlights Netanyahu's real-life American connections - his Harvard University education, for instance, and his father's job as a professor at Cornell University. *Raid* and *Victory* also emphasize Netanyahu's Jewish background; for example, Edgar Scherick chose

⁸³ David, *Operation Thunderbolt*, 110, 165, 168, 171.

Stephen Macht to play Yoni in *Raid* partly because he did not look “too Goyish.”⁸⁴ Here, Hollywood lent weight to others in US media and political circles who had quickly adopted Netanyahu as a model for modern-day, post-Vietnam War soldiering and who, like his younger brother and future Israeli premier Benjamin, saw him as a powerful symbol around which the cause of western counter-terrorism could be mobilized. In June 1977, former US president Gerald Ford was the first recipient of the annual Yoni Netanyahu Memorial Award from the American Friends of the University of Jerusalem for his friendship to Israel and his work in the “advancement of human values.”⁸⁵

Third, and perhaps most importantly, all of the films reinforce Israel’s moral right to use whatever means it deems necessary to combat its enemies. Each of the movies does this principally via a lengthy, moving scene showing the hijackers at Entebbe putting the Jewish hostages in a smaller, separate room from the others. This reminds many of the hostages, especially those who were Holocaust survivors, of the notorious *selektzia* process that had doomed Jews to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. We see the hijackers pushing children and the elderly into their cramped new quarters; hear violins play sorrowfully; and look into the eyes of the terrified, lined up hostages. In reality, at Entebbe the hijackers had created an “Israeli room” for the

⁸⁴ Azaria Rapoport to Shlomo Argov, telegram no. 767, July 22, 1976, HZ/1659/11, ISA.

⁸⁵ https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/staff_favorites/EntebbePlaque.asp, last accessed May 22, 2017; David, *Operation Thunderbolt*, 353. On the Jonathan Institute, founded by Benjamin Netanyahu in 1979, see Benjamin Netanyahu, ed., *International Terrorism: Challenge and Response* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1981).

holders of Israeli passports. Though a few non-Israeli Jews ended up in the smaller room, many non-Israeli Jews remained in the original, larger room and most of the hostages released early had also been Jewish. (These included Hollywood producer Murray Schwartz). Immediately after the crisis, Israeli politicians and the Western media treated reports of the Nazi-style anti-Semitic selection at Entebbe as fact. Some West European left-wing radicals cut their ties with the Palestinian movement as a result.⁸⁶

Given the international news media's saturation coverage of the real-life Entebbe crisis in June–July 1976, it seems safe to assume that many people simply were not interested in watching a rehashed, dramatized version of it many months later. Equally, so rare was it for three films to compete for viewers' attention in this way, many people not normally taken with action movies must have been drawn to them. Either way, it is apparent from the viewing figures of *Victory at Entebbe* and *Raid on Entebbe* how wide an impact the three films had. It is also clear from other sources how deep an impact the films potentially had on viewers.

David Wolper received several letters from American Jews congratulating and thanking him for his “excellent” work on *Victory at Entebbe*. One of these came from Harry Levin, the Dean of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University, where Yonatan Netanyahu's father worked. Levin told Wolper that Cornell had just set up the Colonel Yonatan Netanyahu Memorial Fund for Jewish Studies, and invited the producer and cast of *Victory* to become members of the national committee responsible for nurturing the fund. In contrast, Wolper heard from other American Jews dismayed by what they saw as his film's failure to spell out just how inventive

⁸⁶ David, *Operation Thunderbolt*, 106–9, 133, 342–3, 364.

and courageous the Israeli raid had been. A property manager at Los Angeles real estate firm J. K. Eichenbaum Associates went further, arguing that by having Anthony Hopkins' Yitzhak Rabin admit to Israel having been "lucky," *Victory* encouraged rather than deterred further acts of terrorism. "All we can hope for now," the property manager complained in a letter to Wolper, "is that the next picture will do a better job for Israel than yours." This was an important reminder (for filmmakers and public diplomacy practitioners alike) of viewers' ability to interpret movies in a variety of ways.⁸⁷

From a critical perspective, *Victory at Entebbe* was the clear loser. Many journalists thought *Victory* was long-winded, cliché-ridden, and cheap-looking ("the airport looks like papier-maché," wrote Kay Gardella in the *New York Daily News*). Some felt that its stellar cast was more of a handicap than an asset, weighing the whole film down. One British commentator, Richard Combs, disliked how *Victory* "played unashamedly on the specter of the concentration camps."⁸⁸ *Raid on Entebbe* attracted plaudits for having a better script, for being more understated and for being more accurate than *Victory*—for showing the female terrorist's acne scars, for instance. *Raid* was nominated for a total of ten Emmy Awards (winning two) and won a Golden Globe, an accolade bestowed by Hollywood's powerful Foreign Press

⁸⁷ Harry Levin to Wolper Productions, January 11, 1977, and J. K. Eichenbaum Associates to Wolper Productions, December 14, 1976, f 26, box 214, Wolper Collection, USC.

⁸⁸ Kay Gardella, *New York Daily News*, undated press clipping, folder 26, box 214, Wolper Collection, USC; Richard Combs, 'Raid on Entebbe', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1, 1977, 29–30.

Association, for best telefilm.⁸⁹ Commentators in the United States, Israel, and elsewhere generally found *Operation Thunderbolt* to be the most convincing and realistic of the three Entebbe films, partly because it was less polished but mainly because it was a more “poignant” Israeli production. The *Los Angeles Times* called *Thunderbolt* “a stirring display of triumphant heroism at a time when people everywhere are overcome with a sense of futility at the escalating terrorism in today’s world.” Some audiences in France reportedly cheered when the hijackers were killed at the film’s climax.⁹⁰

Israeli public diplomacy officials and pro-Zionist groups in the United States sometimes worked in unison to promote *Operation Thunderbolt*. Immediately after one gala showing in Los Angeles in June 1977, for instance, organizers of an event sponsored by the State of Israel Bonds invited paying guests to a supper party with General Dan Shomron. At the party, Irving Levin and Samuel Schulman, who had helped finance *Thunderbolt*’s production costs, received a specially minted Entebbe Medal.⁹¹ *Thunderbolt* toured U.S. cities, including New York where it received powerful backing from the Israeli delegation to the United Nations and where it

⁸⁹ Elley, ‘Raid on Entebbe’, *Films and Filming*;

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076594/awards>, last accessed May 22, 2017.

⁹⁰ Undated reviews by WCBS-TV, WABC-TV and *Detroit News* in *Operation Thunderbolt* Press Book, Core Clippings, MHL; ‘Operation Thunderbolt’, *Box Office*, January 2, 1978; Kevin Thomas, “Israeli Film of Raid on Entebbe,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1978, IV, 18; Tony Crawley, “A Special Report on the Third Entebbe Movie,” *Photoplay*, December 1, 1977, 22–3.

⁹¹ Full page advertisement for “world premiere” of *Operation Thunderbolt*, *Variety*, June 14, 1977, 5.

helped raise funds for American Zionist organizations. In late 1977, *Operation Thunderbolt* became the fifth Israeli film (starting with *Sallah Shabati* in 1964) to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. The film was commercially released in the United States in 1978, and was still doing well in cities like Miami at the end of that year.⁹²

The more acclaim (or opprobrium) the Entebbe films received, the greater political attention and controversy they often generated. Owing to the growing belief in the 1970s that international terrorism exploited the mass media's appetite for spectacular violence, terrorist-centered movies inevitably came under the political spotlight. Films about the Arab-Israeli conflict attracted particular interest, not least because of that conflict's global ramifications.⁹³ *Raid on Entebbe* and *Operation Thunderbolt* were banned by the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Philippines on the grounds that their content was "inimical to the interests of the Arab countries."⁹⁴ In West Germany, where the Entebbe crisis had been a major political issue due to the part played by the two Revolutionary Cells members, left-wing groups branded

⁹² "Broadway Ballyhoo," *Hollywood Reporter*, January 23, 1978, Core Clippings, MHL; "Thunderbolt' Bow," *Hollywood Reporter*, January 13, 1978, Core Clippings, MHL; "Operation Thunderbolt (Israeli-Color)," *Variety*, January 18, 1978, 19; "'Tomatoes' Chipper 28G, Miami; 'Thunderbolt' OK \$13,409; 'Lake' Quet 7G," *Variety*, December 20, 1978, 19.

⁹³ Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism* (London, 1977); Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War* (Basingstoke, 2000), 157–72; Gerard Chaliand, *Terrorism: From Popular Struggle to Media Spectacle* (London, 1987); Robert Cettl, *Terrorism in American Cinema* (Jefferson, NC, 2009).

⁹⁴ "Philippines Shelve 3 'Anti-Arab' Films," *Variety*, March 29, 1978.

Victory at Entebbe “pro-Zionist propaganda” and denounced its “openly pro-Zionist Hollywood actors” for stirring up hatred against the Palestinian people. Revolutionary Cells members attempted to firebomb two cinemas showing *Victory* in Dusseldorf and Aachen, and excoriated the film for connecting Entebbe to the Holocaust via its emphasis on the hijackers being German and the Jewish passengers having been “selected.” Scholar Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann argues that this reaction to *Victory at Entebbe* signaled the first time that the question of left-wing anti-Semitism entered public discourse in West Germany and that when, famously, the seminal NBC television series *Holocaust* (directed, too, by Marvin J. Chomsky) aired in West Germany in 1979, leftists linked that series to *Victory at Entebbe*.⁹⁵

The Israeli MFA closely monitored the international distribution and screening of all three Entebbe films. In early 1977, Israeli embassies and consulates reported that Arab governments had lobbied successfully for the banning of the Hollywood films in places as far and wide as Thailand and Malta.⁹⁶ The MFA followed the bombing and arson of cinemas by pro-Palestinian supporters, not just in West Germany but also in Italy, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Argentina, Columbia, and Trinidad. The Israeli consulate in New York turned this violence to its advantage by stimulating American media editorials that presented the attacks as threats to “freedom of expression” and as evidence of the spreading of “extortion and terrorism”

⁹⁵ Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, “The Missing Scene: Entebbe, *Holocaust*, and Echoes from the German Past,” in *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* (Bristol, CT, 2015): 243–63. On the impact of *Holocaust* generally see Bartov, *The ‘Jew’ in Cinema*, 204–23.

⁹⁶ Rafael Migdal (Malta) to Europe department (MFA), April 13, 1977; Gabi Levi (Kingston) to W. Reshef (MFA), February 8, 1977, HZ/1659/10, ISA.

into the arts.⁹⁷ The consulate conveyed this theme and information to the New York correspondent of the entertainment trade journal *Variety*, who soon penned an article on the subject headlined "censorship by terror".⁹⁸

By themselves, the three Entebbe films that emerged in 1976-1977 did not of course change the shape or direction of U.S.-Israeli relations. Neither did the films, alone, alter the contours of the relationship between Hollywood and Israel. A wide range of people, institutions and forces had slowly but surely sculpted these contours over three decades. Collectively, the Entebbe movies probably did not even come close to Otto Preminger's *Exodus* in "selling" Israel in the United States either, for all Yitzhak Rabin's hopes. Nonetheless, the films added real flesh to Israel's image in the United States as both a heroic underdog and Washington's key strategic partner in the Middle East. They helped convert powerful Hollywood producers like Edgar J. Scherick into firm friends of the Israeli state. They strengthened links between some senior American and Israeli film producers, and, in the shape of *Operation Thunderbolt*, they demonstrated that Israelis could create impressive, money-making movies.

Operation Thunderbolt turned out, in fact, to be a landmark film. It brought Israeli cinema to international commercial regard and it also led Menachem Golan to move to Hollywood. From this new, more powerful base, Golan helped lead the

⁹⁷ Azaria Rapoport to MFA (Jerusalem), Telegram no. 268, February 9, 1977; Telegram no. 487, February 20, 1977, HZ/1659/10; MFA to New York, Telegram no. 604, February 22, 1977, ISA.

⁹⁸ Robert J. Landry, "Mild & Rabid Protests Against 'Entebbe': Instance of 'Censorship by Terror'," *Variety*, 2 March 1976, 7.

American film industry's full-frontal assault on "Arab terrorism" in the 1980s and 1990s. Several of his movies showed Israelis and Americans ruthlessly teaming up to defeat their common enemy. The most successful, *The Delta Force* (1986), in effect re-booted Entebbe for a new audience by celebrating U.S. commandos rescuing Jewish-American aircraft hostages held by crazed, anti-Semitic Islamists in Beirut. "You guys have done it before," an excited American colonel in the movie (played by Lee Marvin) tells his Israeli colleagues when planning the mission, "Now it's our turn."⁹⁹

What is the wider importance for historians of American foreign affairs of this case study of Hollywood-Israeli relations set around the famous Entebbe raid of July 1976? First, it provides a clear illustration of the value of marrying diplomatic and media history sources. In doing so, we have learned that throughout Hollywood's history, contrary to what some might believe, the American government has not been alone in recruiting U.S. filmmakers for public diplomacy purposes.¹⁰⁰ The article shows that

⁹⁹ Tony Shaw, *Cinematic Terrorism: A Global History of Terrorism on Film* (New York, 2015), 137–43; Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 173–75, 580; Vanhala, *Depiction of Terrorists*.

¹⁰⁰ On the U.S. government, film and public diplomacy see, for instance, Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency* (Cambridge, 2008); Tony, Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst, MA, 2007); Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, PA, 2003); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994). On

during the 1970s senior Israeli ministers and officials not only considered Hollywood to be a powerful image-builder but an Israeli asset due to friends in high places. We have also learned that, as a player in international affairs, Hollywood's potential influence extends far beyond that which appears on screen. This points to the need to look further at Hollywood "actor-vism" during the Arab-Israeli conflict and to extend the recent work that scholars have done on the impact of celebrity activism generally on global politics.¹⁰¹

Second, this case study underlines the importance of factoring Hollywood into the history of the propaganda war fought over the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rather than focusing on the news media's role in this war (important though that is), scholars need to take into account how the U.S. entertainment industry has framed Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict over the past seventy years and how that framing might relate to the views on the conflict adopted by the American public and U.S. policymakers. By screening *Entebbe* in the way that it did, Hollywood powerfully demonstrated its ability to entertain and persuade by reducing complex political and diplomatic issues to black-and-white narratives. In many ways, the Entebbe raid was tailor-made for this crude formulation because it fitted the mold of the conventional Hollywood adventure movie, but it would be interesting to investigate (via the sorts of sources

other governments using Hollywood for public diplomacy purposes see, for example, Neal Rosendorf, *Franco Sells Spain to America: Hollywood, Tourism, and Public Relations as Postwar Spanish Soft Power* (New York, 2014).

¹⁰¹ See, for instance, Liza Tsaliki, Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos, and Asteris Huliaras, eds., *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics: Changing the World?* (Chicago, 2011).

used in this article) whether Hollywood has always tended to depict the Arab-Israeli conflict in these terms and what commercial, diplomatic, and political forces explain American popular culture's approach to the conflict generally. Given that culture's worldwide reach, the findings naturally have implications internationally as well as in the United States.

Finally, the case study tells us that we need to broaden the debate about the role that America's pro-Israel community has played in the shaping of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. To date largely confined to formal lobbying in Washington, since the 1990s, this debate needs to be extended historically and to incorporate groups and individuals that have used their political, economic, or cultural weight to promote U.S.-Israeli relations unofficially and outside the Beltway. Hollywood, America's entertainment as opposed to political capital, is a prime example of this. Having started cautiously in the late 1940s lest it faced charges of dual loyalty, the Jewish community in Hollywood had risen by the 1970s to be one of Israel's strongest supporters. It had links in Washington and colleagues and friends in Jerusalem; it worked in assorted ways on and off screen to promote the U.S.-Israeli alliance. When Entebbe came along it allowed Hollywood's pro-Israel community to crystalize its campaigning efforts, and to present Israelis as many of those within the community believed them to be—surrogate Americans. To studio heads like Ted Ashley, producers like David Wolper, and actors like Kirk Douglas, Hollywood played a uniquely powerful role within the U.S.-Israeli alliance. Given Hollywood's formidable powers of persuasion, this in many ways made perfect sense.