

Anti-terrorist cooperation as part of Poland's geopolitical shift. "Operation Bridge" and the rise of a strategic partnership with the United States

Tomasz Kozłowski

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2354-2342>

tomekkozowski7@gmail.com

Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Polna 18/20, 00-625, Warsaw, Poland

Abstract

This paper discusses Poland's involvement in "Operation Bridge," which aimed to transport Jewish citizens from the Soviet Union to Israel between 1989 and 1992. The study is based on recently declassified documents from the former intelligence and counterintelligence services, the Foreign Ministry, and the Prime Minister's Office, supplemented by accounts of policymakers, secret service officers, and militia involved in protecting Soviet Jews during transit operations. The author argues that this operation was not just a humanitarian effort but also had significant geopolitical implications. The newly elected non-communist government under Tadeusz Mazowiecki saw this as a critical move to establish stronger ties with the United States and Israel. The author also highlights how the cooperation between Poland and the United States in intelligence sharing, counterterrorism, and security operations paved the way for Poland's strategic partnership with the United States and its eventual entry into NATO. The paper contributes significantly to our understanding of the role played by Poland in the post-Cold War era and sheds new light on the development of US–Polish relations.

Keywords

Cold War, Poland, USA, Israel, counterintelligence, terrorism

Article info:

Received: 3 October 2023

Revised: 19 March 2024

Accepted: 21 March 2024

Available online: 9 May 2024

Citation: Kozłowski, T. (2024) 'Anti-terrorist cooperation as part of Poland's geopolitical shift. "Operation Bridge" and the rise of a strategic partnership with the United States', *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 47(3), doi: [10.35467/sdq/186332](https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/186332).

Introduction

During the Cold War, Poland, along with other socialist countries, supported the Arab states. In 1967, Israel succeeded in the Six-Day War against the Soviet Union-backed armies of Middle Eastern countries. Following this, leaders from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union met in Moscow and condemned Israel's "aggression." They then broke off diplomatic relations with Israel one by one. The deputy minister of the Polish Foreign Ministry, Marian Naszkowski, informed the Israeli ambassador about this and warned that diplomatic relations could only be re-established if Israel withdrew from the territories of the Arab states that it had occupied and stopped its "policy of aggression" (Szaynok, 2012, p. 406). The breakdown of diplomatic relations with Israel led to a resurgence of anti-Semitic feelings and resentment. Some politicians and administrative personnel saw this as an opportunity to accelerate their careers by bringing about a generational change. They initiated anti-Semitic purges in the administration, academic institutions, and the military. Another wave of attacks against Jewish citizens began in March 1968, with more than 13,000 people being forced to emigrate between 1968 and 1972 (Stola, 2006, p. 196).

Rebuilding Polish–Israeli relations seemed an impossible task due to various obstacles. The first challenge was the foreign policy line imposed by Moscow on Warsaw Pact countries. Additionally, many Jews had a deep-seated belief in the inherent anti-Semitism of Poles. They remembered the misguided nationality policies of the Second Polish Republic's authorities and the fact that some Poles participated in the Holocaust. The events of 1968 further reinforced their conviction. Consequently, mutual relations between the two countries remained stagnant for roughly two decades. The situation began to change in the second half of the 1980s when individual socialist countries, including Poland, began establishing diplomatic relations with Israel with the Kremlin's approval.

From 1989 to 1992, Soviet Jews transited through Poland to Israel, which was given the code name "Operation Bridge." This was part of *Aliyah*, a return to the homeland of their fathers, and it was supported by several former communist countries, including Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Their involvement was crucial, since the Soviet Union allowed its citizens to emigrate but declined to establish a direct air connection to Israel.

Between 1968 and 1988, the Kremlin limited Jewish emigration; about 270,000 Jews were permitted to leave, of which 170,000 went to Israel and 100,000 to the United States (Aronson, 1990, p. 31; Kochavi, 2007, pp. 550–572). As part of *Perestroika* and warming relations with the United States, Mikhail Gorbachev guaranteed the opening of borders to citizens of Jewish descent; it was expected that up to one million people could emigrate.

Washington and Tel Aviv were interested in directing this enormous wave of refugees to the Middle East. The United States was reluctant to accept more Soviet emigrants due to the high costs of assimilating such a large group (Beyer, 1991, p. 150). On the other hand, Israel was hoping for an influx of new citizens, potential settlers, soldiers, and scientists. Mass emigration from the Soviet Union was a chance to introduce new blood into the society. Therefore, the governments of both countries appealed to the Kremlin to establish a direct air connection with Israel.

The Soviets were not eager to implement such a solution due to concerns about the deterioration of diplomatic relations with Arab countries. During a discussion with Israeli authorities, the Soviet Union's Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze "ruled out the possibility of introducing direct air links, arguing that there were no security guarantees for

Soviet aircraft.” The Kremlin tried to please both the United States and its Arab partners ([Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990b](#), p. 119; [1990c](#), pp. 26–27; [1990d](#), p. 25).

Washington and Tel Aviv attempted to use Eastern European countries as transit points to overcome the challenges. Emigrants were supposed to travel via air and rail from the Soviet Union to nearby socialist countries, which would then coordinate air bridges to Israel. Poland saw participation in that initiative as crucial for geopolitical reasons. The newly elected non-communist government, led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki, aimed to establish strong ties with the United States and normalise restored diplomatic relations with Israel. Mazowiecki’s government hoped to win the support of the Jewish lobby and the favour of Washington in the face of negotiations aimed at restructuring Poland’s gigantic foreign debt. The transit operation—code-named “The Bridge”—opened a new chapter in Polish–Israeli relations. However, at the same time, it exposed Poland to terrorist attacks by extremist groups pursuing anti-Israel policies. In addition, it strained political and economic ties with Arab allies that had been maintained for years. The Polish government agreed to take these risks to strengthen its relationship with the United States.

This paper aims to demonstrate how “Operation Bridge” played a significant role in building US–Poland relations after the Cold War. It confirms the hypothesis that intelligence and anti-terrorist cooperation were crucial in establishing international relations, eventually paving the way for Poland’s strategic partnership with the United States. Moreover, participating in the operation also helped build diplomatic ties with Israel. This was a remarkable change, considering that Poland, like all Eastern Bloc countries except Romania, had severed diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967. Establishing relations with Tel Aviv was also vital in establishing trust with Washington, where the opinions of American Jewish organisations were considered.

The paper also seeks to answer several questions that emerged during the archival query. Firstly, what political negotiations were involved in Poland’s participation in the operation? Secondly, what was the level of collaboration between the secret services of Poland, the United States, and Israel? Thirdly, did the transit of Soviet Jews pose a threat of terrorist attacks to Polish citizens and institutions? Lastly, it is important to consider the operation’s balance in the context of international relations.

This study is based on limited literature regarding “The Bridge”: [Kozłowski \(2015\)](#) reconstructed the basic factography. Journalist [Wilczak’s \(2015\)](#) book focuses on sensational aspects, such as the protection of the operation and the fate of refugees. Poland’s involvement was kept secret for a long time due to intergovernmental arrangements made in 1990. Recently declassified documents from the former Intelligence and Counterintelligence Services, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Prime Minister’s Office served as the primary source basis, supplemented by accounts from political decision-makers, secret service officers, and militia involved in protecting Soviet Jews during transit operations. These accounts come from the memoirs and press interviews published years later.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section explains how Poland shifted its geopolitical strategy from the East and South towards the West, forging new relationships with the United States and Israel. It also sheds new light on the talks between Poland and these two countries that led to the launch of “Operation Bridge.” The second section delves into the terrorist threats that arose from the transit of Soviet Jews through Polish territory. The last section describes how Poland’s intelligence and counterintelligence collaborated with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Mossad to establish anti-terrorism procedures. It also examines the implementation of transit and the measures taken to protect people from terrorist attacks.

New relations with the United States and Israel

During the autumn of 1989, Poland and Israel exerted considerable effort to restore diplomatic relations that had been interrupted following the Six-Day War. Poland's goal was to normalise relations with Israel and establish closer ties with the West, particularly the United States. Poland hoped that the Jewish community in the United States would back its attempts to renegotiate repayment terms for its substantial loans and create a favourable environment for economic investment negotiations.

Polish officials had been targeting Jewish organisations in the United States, as part of their diplomatic efforts. During a conversation with Kalman Sultanik, vice president of the World Jewish Congress, Jan Majewski, Undersecretary of State at the Foreign Ministry, made it clear that establishing diplomatic relations would require promises of “significant expansion of economic and financial cooperation with Israel and the Jewish financial circles of the world in the form of loans, joint ventures, know-how, investments, as well as support at the IMF, the World Bank and other international financial and economic organisations.” ([Foreign Ministry Archives, 1989](#), p. 13). Sultanik promised to promote economic cooperation with Poland in American financial circles. Representatives of the World Jewish Congress presented themselves as a political force capable of supporting the forging of new relations with the United States, the European Economic Community, and other international financial institutions ([Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990l](#), p. 33). Despite the uncertain influence of these organisations, Polish authorities took their assurances seriously.

Edgar M. Bronfman, then serving as president of the World Jewish Congress, was received in February 1990 by Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, President Wojciech Jaruzelski, Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski, and Lech Walesa, Solidarity leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. During these talks, Bronfman declared that Poland could count on his political support in Washington—the White House and Congress—and financial circles. The Polish foreign ministry was delighted: “On the eve of full normalisation between Poland and Israel [the visit—note T.K.] was evidence of an improvement in Polish–Jewish relations, which should also bring a better atmosphere around Polish affairs in international financial, economic and opinion-making circles” ([Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990a](#), p. 33).

At the same time, Polish diplomacy increased efforts to restore diplomatic relations with Israel. The first normalisation stage occurred in February 1990 during a visit by Foreign Minister Moshe Arens. He discussed with President Jaruzelski, Prime Minister Mazowiecki, and Minister Skubiszewski about involving Poland in the operation for the transit of Soviet Jews. Arens hoped that Warsaw, along with Bucharest and Budapest, could become an important staging point for resettlement ([Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990k](#), p. 57). Minister Skubiszewski suggested to the president and prime minister that they consider this possibility, which they both accepted ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990l](#), p. 293). They did this even though the administration had only begun assessing the gains, losses, and potential risks of participating in the operation. The institutions concerned—such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, intelligence and counterintelligence, and the Polish Airlines “LOT”—were trying to determine whether it was logistically possible to carry out such commitments.

Despite the lack of arrangements, Prime Minister Mazowiecki embarked on his inaugural trip to the United States. During his visit, he met President George Bush twice, the vice president, the secretary of defense, and the head of the CIA. One of the most notable

events of the trip was his meeting with the American Jewish Congress in New York, where he announced Poland's commitment to assisting in the transportation of Soviet Jews to Israel ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990c](#), pp. 56–58). This declaration not only held significant symbolic value but also served as a practical measure.

Mazowiecki later explained: “If I started to speak in ambiguities or evade answers, the effect of the whole meeting would be derailed” ([Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, 1990c](#), p. 13). He decided not only to ensure Poland's participation in the transit but did so *de facto* publicly. This came as a surprise even to close associates of the prime minister. Ryszard Wojtkowski, chief of cabinet, was surprised—years later, he recalled that he was not the only one. The statement provoked astonishment from the American hosts and an immediate decision to raise security standards. However, the timing was perfectly chosen—at the same time, Hungarian airlines were becoming increasingly vocal about abandoning transit in the face of further threats of terrorist attacks. In this situation, Poland appeared as a country that was willing to take risks when others were backing down.

The declaration received strong positive reactions from Tel Aviv and Jewish organisations in the United States. It was also greatly appreciated by the White House, which aligned with Mazowiecki's intentions. John Davis, the Ambassador Extraordinary, and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to Poland, conveyed Washington's message of appreciation for Poland's constructive response in facilitating the emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel ([Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, 1990d](#), p. 311). The state department also publicly praised Poland's position ([Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990e](#), p. 50). A dozen members of the House of Representatives sent a letter to Mazowiecki, commending him for his courageous stance and decisive action in the face of terrorist threats ([Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, 1990b](#), p. 5). Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger expressed his approval:

We understand that Poland and Israel have concluded an agreement under which Warsaw can be used as a contingency transit point for Jews leaving the Soviet Union. We also understand that Israel is now in touch with the Polish Government to activate this agreement. We hope the Polish Government will be prepared to move ahead and permit Warsaw to be used as a transit point (...). If the Hungarians are unwilling to permit Budapest to be used as a transit point, we hope you will respond to this humanitarian need and facilitate Jewish travel through Warsaw. ([Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990g](#), p. 5)

Eagleburger's words highlighted the significance of Mazowiecki's declaration as Hungary's participation hung in the balance. Malev, the Hungarian airline, had suspended its flights to Tel Aviv, prompting Israeli and American ambassadors to intervene. They argued that if one country gave in to the threats, it could jeopardize the whole operation in Central and Eastern Europe. In response, the Polish prime minister made an unequivocal promise that provided Tel Aviv and Washington with another argument to convince the Hungarian government to continue the operation. Prime Minister Miklós Németh subsequently dismissed the director of Malev and declared that the air bridge across Hungary would continue to operate ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990f](#), pp. 9–10).

Threat

At the New York meeting, Prime Minister Mazowiecki confidently declared that Poland would not succumb to terrorist intimidation when questioned by journalists

(Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, 1990a, p. 308). However, there was a genuine threat, which Washington acknowledged by offering assistance to improve airport and airplane security and provide counterterrorism support to Poland. The Israeli side also expressed a similar sentiment (Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, 1990d, p. 311).

Establishing diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv and participating in transit operations cost Poland politically and in terms of national security. Arab states protested, claiming that emigration from the Soviet Union would strengthen Israel's military and potentially lead to a revision of the status quo in the Middle East. Egypt's foreign ministry was among the first to express their displeasure to Minister Skubiszewski, followed by a delegation that visited Lech Walesa. A group of Arab ambassadors unofficially let it be known that the new policy had "shocked the Arab world" (Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990i, pp. 13–15). In the following weeks, they almost openly expressed their disapproval of the Polish government's actions.

Ambassadors did not limit themselves to expressing their displeasure; diplomatic missions began to gather information. Polish counterintelligence observed that "intelligence residences of some Arab countries were taking steps to recognise preparations for transit (...) agents of these residences were given the task of observing the Okęcie airport and reporting on the security measures being taken there" (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990h, p. 30). According to Major Jerzy Dzięwulski, who oversaw security at Okęcie airport, there were attempts to bribe his subordinates for information. Syrian intelligence pulled various stunts, such as having embassy representatives drive up to the airport in cars marked "diplomatic corps" and film the airport from under the fence with the window lowered. However, this activity was not considered a significant threat (Dzięwulski, 2019). What caused greater concern was the potential for extremist organisations to plan a terrorist attack.

Since the early 1990s, intelligence reports informed Poland of planned assassination attempts. The targets were individuals or sites associated with socialist countries that had established diplomatic relations with Israel and aided in the transit of Soviet Jews. The KGB sources reported a threat of attacks on various transportation and communication networks in European countries that supported Israel's policies (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990i, pp. 104–105). In late March 1990, bombs were planted in Athens under cars belonging to the embassies of the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, among others. According to the information obtained, cars belonging to the Polish outpost were also potential targets (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990a, pp. 9–12). Minister Skubiszewski personally received threatening letters (Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990h, p. 123). Terrorists threatened to blow up LOT offices, airports, airplanes, and embassy buildings and carry out attacks on ambassadors and diplomatic staff. Such threats were issued by several organisations, including the "Islamic Liberation Army of Palestine," affiliated with a Hamas faction (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990d, p. 65; 1990e, pp. 63–64; 1990k, p. 96).

Polish intelligence and counterintelligence were most worried about two possible scenarios. The first one involved an attack directly on expatriates at the airport. The attackers could have been from any of the seven Arab countries that have strong ties with Poland—Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, Syria, and Algeria. There could have been several thousand citizens from these countries in Poland, including around 3,500 students and other individuals visiting as tourists or for work (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990q, p. 112). These concerns were also fueled by the fact that Poland, as a member of the Soviet bloc, had a history of involvement in supporting extremist organisations. As intelligence officer Sławomir Petelicki recalled: "In the 1980s, Abu Nidal and Abu Daud

frequently visited Warsaw (...) they had contacts, probably not only at the institutional level. They were creating some kind of base for themselves. They probably found people willing to cooperate” (Komar and Petelicki, 2010, pp. 72–74). Indeed, recent research has confirmed that there was cooperation between the intelligence services of the People’s Republic of Poland and Abu Nidal and other terrorists, especially in the field of arms trafficking (Gasztold, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). Another possible scenario, besides an attack on Polish soil, was an attack on Polish diplomatic missions and companies in the Middle East.

In mid-March 1990, the Beirut-based newspaper, *As Safir*, published a threatening letter sent by the “Revolutionary Action Organisation, Arab Resistance Front, Group named after Suleiman Halabi.” These threats were met with a limited response. The chargé d’affaires of the Polish diplomatic mission reported that

despite promises made by official Lebanese authorities, the provision of security to Polish institutions and citizens on their part is a fiction under Beirut conditions. The outpost’s semblance of external protection is still limited to one policeman (...) The precautions we are taking, even the maximum precautions, also provide no guarantee of security.

In this situation, an attack took place, the victims of which were a married couple, Ewa and Bogdan Serkis, who were in the Lebanese capital as part of Animex’s representative office work. The two were shot at and wounded on 30 March 1990, just days after Prime Minister Mazowiecki made a public declaration on the operation for the transit of Soviet Jews to Israel—the dynamically developing situation called for the urgent implementation of preventive measures.

Anti-terrorism cooperation

In early April 1990, the chargé d’affaires of the US embassy in Warsaw announced that an anti-terrorist group would be coming to Poland and Hungary to discuss securing the emigration of Soviet Jews (Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990j, p. 81). Arriving in Poland were Earl A. Wayne (Director of Regional Affairs, Office of Counterterrorism, Department of State), Dominick R. Gannon (Office of Counterterrorism, Department of State), David R. Epstein (Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Department of State), Col. Loren A. Rodway (United States Air Force [USAF]), and Claude Manno (Federal Aviation Administration). The meeting from the Polish side was attended, among others, by Major Jerzy Pawlik from the National Police Headquarters (which had a special unit dedicated to fighting terrorist threats) and Lieutenant Colonel Sławomir Petelicki, Head of the Department for the Protection of Polish Posts Abroad of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—a long-time intelligence officer (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990m, pp. 107–109; Jałoszyński, 2016; Pawlik and Żywczyk, 1989).

The agenda to be addressed by the Americans was aviation security, with the United States prepared to offer assessments of: (A) the physical plant; (B) selecting and screening airport security personnel; (C) secondary screening by airlines; (D) coordination between aviation security officials and the national-level intelligence community; (E) hijack crisis-management organisation and capabilities; and (F) capability to detect bombs and manage bomb threats (Foreign Ministry Archives, 1990f, p. 128). Washington officials committed to offer training, organizational support, and resources once Congress approved the findings. There were also discussions about establishing a new assault unit to carry out

counterterrorism operations. Lieutenant Colonel Petelicki, who was involved in the talks, suggested this idea to the head of the interior ministry.

Krzysztof Kozłowski, the Minister of Internal Affairs, was convinced that professionals from the United Kingdom and the United States wanted to assess whether Poland could undertake dangerous missions like “Operation Bridge.” They observed our police anti-terrorist units and concluded that they were well trained but could only handle minor incidents of a criminal nature. Military-style operations are sometimes necessary in the fight against international terrorism, and the police are not equipped for this. Faced with this situation, he issued an order on 13 July 1990 to form a new anti-terrorist unit using the code GROM (Komar and Petelicki, 2010, pp. 72–74). The American trainers played a crucial role in the formation of this unit. Thomas W. Simons Jr., who served as the American ambassador to Warsaw from 1990 to 1993, noted that this collaboration signified a unique bond between the United States and Poland: “We were training the Interior Ministry’s Special Forces. CIA people were coming in to train them; they had a special kind of Delta Force” (The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (ADST), 2004). Nevertheless, building this elite unit from the ground up was both lengthy and challenging. Consequently, GROM could not acquire combat readiness in time for participation in “Operation Bridge.”

In addition to the Americans, specialists from Israel also began cooperating in counterterrorism protection. David Koren, an attaché at the Israeli embassy in Warsaw, was identified by Polish counterintelligence as “probably a Mossad colonel, head of the network for Europe” (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990b, p. 6). Koren reported to the interior ministry on 20 April 1990. He stated that there was a real threat of assassination in connection with the transit operation being prepared. He stressed the importance of establishing close cooperation between the services of Israel and Poland to counter threats to citizens, diplomatic missions, and other facilities. Koren also emphasised the need to exchange information on terrorist organisations, including their methods of operation and equipment (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990p, pp. 7–8).

As in the case of the Americans, Israeli specialists—mainly Mossad officers—also sent their delegation, which appeared in Poland in May 1990. The group consisted of Eli Asif (representative of the minister of interior, head of Mossad’s International Terrorism Combat Department), Ilan Mendik (operations specialist), Rachel Jasur (specialist in Arab terrorism in Europe), and David Koren (security attaché of the Israeli embassy in Warsaw). From the Polish side, the talks included the head of the delegation, Colonel Zbigniew Kluczynski (Director of the newly created department for the protection of the constitutional order of the state), Lt. Col. Gromosław Czempinski (head of the intelligence cell dealing with foreign counterintelligence), and Maj. Jerzy Pawlik.

Mossad experts noted their limited communication with the KGB and sought the assistance of Polish intelligence as a possible intermediary. Despite the Kremlin’s attempt to distance itself from the matter of Jewish emigration, the KGB cooperated with Polish intelligence and counterintelligence. Minister Kozłowski acknowledged the valuable support of the KGB’s resident in Warsaw, who provided crucial information and warnings on potential terrorist threats, including those from Hezbollah (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990n, p. 106; Kozłowski and Komar, 2009, p. 291).

During their visit, Mossad specialists emphasised the importance of intelligence sharing and cooperation in combatting international terrorism. They also stressed the need for

exchanging information about Middle Eastern terrorist organisations and the Arab community in Poland. However, they declined to discuss the technical security of “Operation Bridge.” Their mission was reconnaissance, possibly to assess the level of cooperation and information sharing with Polish services regarding terrorists ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990r](#), pp. 15–23).

However, the technical security issue of the infrastructure used for “Operation Bridge” was addressed by other Israeli specialists, including Itzhaki Dror, coordinator of the transit operation for all of Europe. He discussed the issue with, amongst others, the director of the bureau of prevention and public order of the national police headquarters ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990t](#), pp. 66–67). The Israelis focused mainly on training and cooperation with officers who were directly in charge of “Operation Bridge.” The entire team of officers responsible for the security of Okęcie airport made a study visit to the Ben-Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. This delegation included Jerzy Dziejulski, commander of the special unit protecting Okęcie airport ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990u](#), pp. 71–78). He was also sent for accelerated anti-terrorist training in Israel. During the preparation and execution of the operation, Dziejulski worked closely with David Koren, who enjoyed special freedom at Warsaw airport. He had free rein to move amongst the police without asking for permission.

Regardless of the assistance provided by the US and Israeli special services, it was clear that the main burden of carrying out the operation rested with the Polish intelligence, counter-intelligence, and police. After the attempted assassination of the Serkis couple in Lebanon, the minister of internal affairs established an anti-terrorist operations coordination team on 10 April 1990. It was led by Gen. Zdzisław Sarewicz, Head of the Intelligence and Counterintelligence Service. The team consisted of officers from intelligence, counterintelligence, border protection forces, and the police. Their responsibility was to coordinate “the activities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs cells whose scope of activity included the disclosure and counteraction of terrorist acts, to recognise and neutralise activities of a terrorist nature” and “providing effective security for Polish diplomatic representations and their personnel, domestic facilities of international passenger traffic and other facilities about which information has been obtained about the threat of terrorist attacks” ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990g](#), pp. 9–12). The ministry of internal affairs often created teams to coordinate the activities of multiple institutions. These typically included representatives from various bodies under the ministry of internal affairs. In rare cases, such as during a terrorist threat, more prominent groups were established, including representatives from the ministry of internal affairs, the ministry of foreign affairs, the ministry of defense, the ministry of justice, and the general prosecutor’s office ([Foreign Ministry Archives, 1982](#), pp. 11–14).

Cooperation was required due to the need for multi-level threat prevention. Intelligence was responsible for gathering all information regarding planned terrorist attacks that could be organized abroad. It protected diplomatic missions, air bureau expatriates, and other institutions. Intelligence officers obtained information using Human Intelligence (HUMINT) and received support from representatives of friendly foreign agencies. On the other hand, the department for the protection of the constitutional order of the interior ministry operated in the country to monitor radical groups (anarchist, nationalist, and anti-Semitic) that could disrupt operations ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990j](#), pp. 89–90). However, the main burden of ensuring security rested with counterintelligence.

Counterintelligence carried out several tasks. The top priority was to detect any signs of a potential threat to the transit operation. Special attention was paid to selected diplomatic

missions of Middle Eastern countries (especially Palestine, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Iran); foreigners suspected of having ties with terrorist groups (the Abu Nidal Organisation and Hezbollah); other foreigners, especially students and doctoral students from Warsaw, Łódź, Gdańsk, Szczecin, and Katowice ([Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance, 1990s](#), pp. 12–14). The US and Israeli intelligence services collaborated on counterintelligence protection. Krzysztof Kozłowski recalled:

We received the first list of Arab terrorists who were in Poland, thanks to cooperation with western intelligence. This does not mean that we were immediately capable of appropriate action. In 1990, a gentleman on this list was tracked down at the border, but it took so long to send a message from the border post to headquarters that the delinquent (...) managed to leave for the West. ([Kozłowski and Komar, 2009](#), pp. 288–289)

A dedicated militia group maintained the airport's security under the leadership of Major Jerzy Dziewulski, the Deputy Commander of the Warsaw Okęcie Port Commissariat. They were assisted by Israeli personnel and had been safeguarding the emigrants since June 1990. As Dziewulski recalled years later, each day of work looked similar:

Two hours prior to arrival, airport security measures are heightened as armoured personnel carriers and police cars with Polish–Israeli crews patrol the airport apron, while anti-terrorist units monitor the area. Jeeps and a Mi-2 helicopter remain on standby. Upon the Israeli airplane's landing, we take control of the main landing strip and ensure that our jeeps drive alongside and behind the plane to prevent any incidents that may cause air disasters. We make sure the machine is in a safe location that could help our ability to respond to any potential threats. Once the plane is safely parked, we fence it in using ropes, posts, and tape to prevent unauthorised access. The plane's security officers from the Sajjeret Matkal unit then exit the aircraft to guard it. One officer stands at the front of the plane while the other guards the tail. The plane is considered extraterritorial, and no one is allowed to approach it. ([Dziewulski, 2019](#))

The operation lasted for many months, and no terrorist threats were encountered.

Conclusions

The operation took place between June 1990 and mid-1992 and it is believed that around 40,000 individuals used this route to travel to Israel, based on residual flight information. However, due to the lack of declassified documentation on the matter, this figure cannot be confirmed at present. Poland's involvement in "Operation Bridge" boosted the credibility of the new government in Warsaw as a political partner in the view of Washington and Tel Aviv, with whom diplomatic ties were severed in 1967 and was also reconnected, which was in part due to efforts to engage with the White House. The reorientation of the Polish government's policy was due to several elements. One of these was the end of the Cold War. The other was the democratic opposition's long-standing relationship with the Americans. During the 1980s, the underground Solidarity movement in Poland received significant political and financial backing from the White House, the state department, and the CIA ([Jones, 2018](#)). Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a key advisor to Lech Wałęsa for many years, was aware of this support. Mazowiecki and his colleagues frequently visited the American ambassador's office in Warsaw to exchange information

and seek advice. As Solidarity leaders rose to important positions in the government and parliament, they sought to maintain their political alliance with the United States. They hoped that the White House would continue to support their interests, particularly in two areas. Firstly, they wanted to influence West Germany to guarantee Poland's western border, which had been changed after World War II. Secondly, they sought financial support, including partial debt forgiveness and funding for a recovery programme to improve Poland's economy.

On this second issue in particular, the Polish government found itself in an uncommon situation in which moral considerations interacted with pragmatic goals: an attempt was made to redeem the anti-Semitic policies of the communist authorities, but at the same time, it hoped to gain the support of the Jewish lobby in the United States. This is illustrated by an exchange that took place during a meeting of the foreign affairs committee of the Polish Sejm between Jan Dowgiałło and Jan Krzysztof Bielecki. The former was about to take up the post of Polish ambassador to Israel, while the latter was to succeed Tadeusz Mazowiecki as prime minister in 4 months. When Dowgiałło said that good relations with the large Jewish diaspora were important because "the road to Washington leads through Tel Aviv," Bielecki replied, "I don't know if the road to Washington leads through Tel Aviv, but undoubtedly the road to Wall Street leads through Tal Aviv." ([Archives of the Polish Parliament, 1990](#), pp. 17–20). The Polish government had a crucial objective to reduce its foreign debt. They believed that to accomplish this, they needed to work together with Israel and the United States.

During the Mazowiecki government's geopolitical turnaround, Polish institutions focused on establishing intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation with the US state department, CIA, Israeli foreign ministry, and Mossad. The goal was to become a reliable partner in international security policy and match the high standards set by its partners. This involved creating conditions for cooperation between the best domestic and foreign specialists and gaining know-how. The Polish authorities took on risky actions to establish themselves as a trustworthy partner. Despite the threat of terrorist attacks, the prime minister agreed to participate in "Operation Bridge." During the first Gulf War, Polish intelligence provided valuable plans and information on Iraqi infrastructure. They also evacuated US intelligence officers who were stranded in Iraq. The British, French, and Germans had refused to help the Americans due to the high risk involved. However, Poland was determined to become a potential new ally and succeeded in establishing themselves as such. These efforts resulted in Poland obtaining cancellation of half of its foreign debt and support during negotiations with international debtor groups. By joining "Operation Bridge," the Polish government has proven itself as a reliable partner for the White House. Over the next few months, the two parties collaborated on security, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism efforts, laying the groundwork for a strong partnership and Poland's eventual path to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership.

Funding

Polish National Science Center grant "Coalition government in Poland in 1989-2001" (UMO-2019/35/B/HS3/02406), led by Prof. Antoni Dudek.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author. The author read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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