



Routledge Studies in US Foreign Policy

AMERICAN PRESIDENTS AND ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS SINCE 1967

Michael F. Cairo



The post-1967 Jewish settlement movement which succeeded in transferring Israeli nationals to the Arab West Bank and East Jerusalem has long been identified as a major contributor to the lingering absence of peace in that part of the world. What distinguishes this study from others before it is its emphasis on the policy of each individual American president and his reaction to the egregious dismissal of international law as it applies to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In the process, Professor Cairo also succeeds in clarifying the ways in which American foreign policy decisions are reached.

—**Ghada Hashem Talhami, Lake Forest College, USA**

This is a valuable new book studying an important dimension of U.S.-Israel relations: the attitudes of U.S. presidents and their administrations toward Israeli settlements and Israeli settlement policy, from 1967 through the Biden administration and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The scholarship reflected here is impressive, and students of Israeli politics and Israeli political history will want to own a copy of this book.

—**Gregory Mahler, Earlham College, USA**



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American Presidents and Israeli Settlements Since 1967

Tracing presidential administrations since Lyndon B. Johnson, this book argues that the Trump administration's policy toward Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem is not an aberration but the culmination of over 50 years of American foreign policy.

Under the Johnson administration, the United States rhetorically supported the applicability of international law regarding Israeli settlements. However, throughout the 1970s, administrations did little to reverse the construction and expansion of settlements. Moreover, presidents sent mixed signals regarding Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories. The Israeli settlement movement received support when Reagan argued that settlements were not illegal. Since then, American presidents have been opposing settlement activity to various degrees, but not based on their illegality. Rather, presidents have described them as unwise, unhelpful, or obstacles to peace. Even when presidents have had opportunities to confront Israeli settlements directly, domestic pressure and America's special relationship with Israel have prevented serious action beyond rhetoric and condemnation.

This volume will be of interest to scholars and students of the history and politics of American foreign policy, American relations with Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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American Presidents and Israeli Settlements Since 1967

Michael F. Cairo

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To Carey, Max, and Sophia



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1 Introduction

In March 2017, David Friedman was narrowly confirmed by the U.S. Senate as President Donald J. Trump's ambassador to Israel. Friedman's nomination was controversial from the outset. In fact, the level of opposition to Friedman's nomination was unusual, especially for the American ambassador to Israel. For decades, nominees from both Democratic and Republican presidents had been approved without objection, via unanimous consent or voice votes. However, Friedman was different. In addition to directly investing in Israeli settlements, Friedman favored moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Most significant, Trump's nomination of Friedman raised concerns about the American commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Tens of thousands of liberal American Jews signed a petition opposing his nomination, and major Jewish organizations and hundreds of rabbis also objected. It is rare that an ambassadorial nominee would draw such outrage and criticism, but Friedman was no ordinary nominee. He had no diplomatic experience, was a career bankruptcy lawyer, and was a booster for the far-right Israeli settler movement. He also aimed scathing attacks at President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and the entire U.S. State Department, accusing them of anti-Semitism. Additionally, Friedman referred to American Jews supporting a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as *kapos*, a reference to Jews who were forced to assist the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Some, however, hailed Friedman's confirmation as a sign of improving relations between the United States and Israel. During the Obama administration, relations had been strained. In February 2015, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted that he had a "profound disagreement" with President Barack Obama.¹ The disagreement stemmed from negotiations by the United States and world powers to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. While Netanyahu tried to emphasize that the disagreement was not personal, this was not the first time that the two men had sparred. In May 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu lectured President Obama on Israeli history and rejected any suggestion that the pre-June 1967 borders of Israel be the basis for peace and the creation of a Palestinian state. The tense relationship led Mark Landler to write, "An icy snowstorm was blowing [in Washington]. . . . But the weather was mild compared with the wintry welcome [Netanyahu] got from the White House."²

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A major contention of the Netanyahu–Obama disagreement focused on Israeli settlements and settlement building in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The tensions reached their height following the election of Donald J. Trump. In a December 2016 United Nations Security Council vote condemning Israel for its settlement activity, the United States abstained. Trump had called on the Obama administration to veto the resolution placing the newly elected president directly at odds with the current president. Trump argued that the resolution put “Israel in a very poor negotiating position and is extremely unfair to all Israelis.”³

The nomination and confirmation of Friedman as the U.S. ambassador to Israel were meant, therefore, to send a signal to Israel that the Trump administration would strongly support the Israeli agenda in the Middle East. According to sources within Israel, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu was “pleased” with the nomination and the potential shift in the relationship with the United States.⁴ Netanyahu was so emboldened by the new administration’s posture that in the first two weeks of Trump’s presidency the Israeli government announced the construction of thousands of new settler homes in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. President Trump did not condemn the Israeli government for its actions but instead suggested that increased settlement activity does not advance peace.⁵ Ironically, in that moment, it appeared that the Obama and Trump administrations had reached similar conclusions.

The Trump administration quickly aligned itself with Israel signaling the culmination of over 50 years of American foreign policy. In December 2017, the United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and in May 2018, it relocated the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Then, in January 2020, Trump unveiled his peace plan. The plan stated that Israel and the United States “do not believe the State of Israel is legally bound to provide the Palestinians with 100 percent of pre-1967 territory”⁶ and that Israel “will not have to uproot any settlements, and will incorporate the vast majority of Israeli settlements into contiguous Israeli territory.” The plan allocated “[a]pproximately 97% of Israelis in the West Bank . . . into contiguous Israeli territory.”⁷ Ambassador Friedman declared that Israel “does not have to wait” to annex Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Friedman argued:

The waiting period would be the time it takes for them to obtain internal approvals and to obviously create the documentation, the calibration, the mapping. . . . If they wish to apply Israeli law to those areas allocated to Israel, we will recognize it.⁸

The Trump Plan essentially incorporated the narrative and political position of Israel’s political leadership.

Since 1967, all American presidents had to grapple with the challenge of Israeli territorial acquisition and settlements. According to the Population Registry of Israel’s Interior Ministry, there were just over 400,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank by December 2016; this did not include the Jewish residents of East Jerusalem, approximately 360,000. This represented nearly a 24% growth in settlement

Table 1.1 Israeli settlements (West Bank and Gaza Strip)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Israeli Settlers</i>	<i>Construction Starts*</i>
1970	—	—
1972	1,500	—
1975	3,200	520
1980	12,500	1,790
1985	46,100	1,660
1990	81,900	1,870
1995	134,300	2,854
2000	198,300	4,958
2005	247,300	2,028
2010	311,100	741
2015	385,900	1,963
2019/2020	463,353 (2019)**	1,285 (2020)

* Data before 2005 includes construction starts of housing units in settlements in the Gaza Strip.

** 2019 Settler data is from AP and TOI Staff, “West Bank settlements report rapid growth in 2019,” *The Times of Israel* (28 January 2020), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/west-bank-settlements-report-rapid-growth-in-2019/>.

Source: Data is from PeaceNow.org. <https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data>.

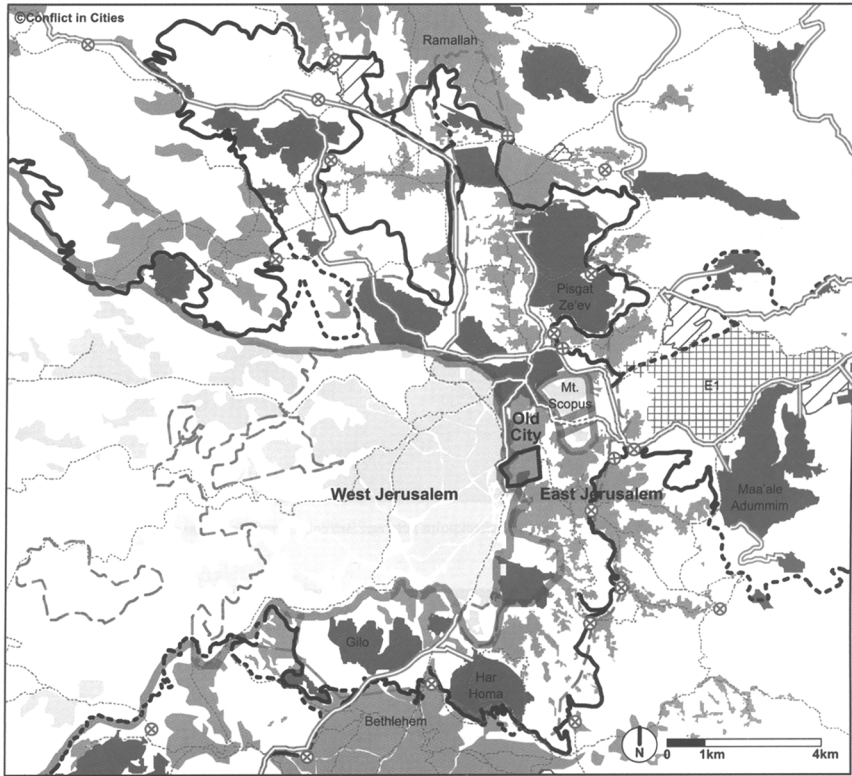
activity since 2010.⁹ And in 2019, the population of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank rose to 463,353, an increase of 3% from the previous year.¹⁰ (See Table 1.1 and Figure 1.1.)

More important, the expansion of a Jewish presence throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem renders change more difficult, establishing “facts on the ground.” As United Nations Peace Process Envoy Robert Serry explained in 2015:

[T]he Two State Solution (TSS) is slipping away and . . . instead, Israelis and Palestinians are heading towards . . . a “One State reality”. . . . [Construction in settlements] has fundamentally (and should we add: irreversibly?) changed realities on the ground with more than 500,000 settlers living nowadays across the 67-lines in what is for them “Judea and Samaria”—the heartland of previous ancient Jewish kingdoms.¹¹

1967 and the Beginning of the Israeli Settlement Project

The challenge of Israeli settlements began following the June or Six-Day War of 1967. As a consequence of the war, Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights, and took control of the Western Wall, leveling the Mughrabi, or Moroccan, Quarter of Jerusalem. In September 1967, the



Greater Jerusalem

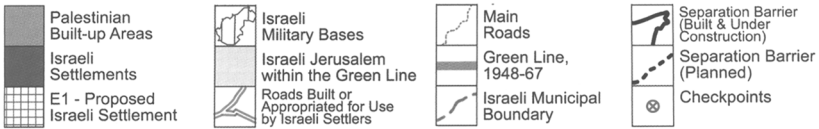


Figure 1.1 Israeli settlements in Greater Jerusalem

first settlement arose. Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol unofficially authorized the settlement at Kfar Etzion south of Jerusalem without consultation when he gave permission to Hanan Porat and his followers to spend Rosh Hashanah in the area but encouraged them to stay after the Holy Days.¹² Kfar Etzion, thus, became the beginnings of Eretz Ysrael (Greater Israel).

In addition to authorizing the creation of settlements, the Israeli government annexed East Jerusalem and much of the surrounding area in the West Bank, forming one undivided city. One dozen Jewish settlements were constructed in the

annexed areas. According to the international community, international law, and United Nations Security Council resolutions, including Resolutions 446 (1979), 452 (1979), 465 (1980), and 1515 (2003), all Israeli settlements lack legal validity under the Fourth Geneva Convention. But the settlement movement has always looked to a higher law for its guidance.

The Israeli settlement movement is driven by divine providence; the only law that applies is God's law. The settlement movement is redemptionist, visionary, and territory-centered. Hanan Porat, the charismatic leader of the settlement movement, described their activities as the Zionism of Redemption.¹³ The primary focus of the movement was the settlement of the West Bank heartland, Biblical Judea and Samaria. Its vision is that of a Jewish state, not within its internationally recognized borders but within all of Palestine embracing an absolute devotion to rabbinical laws. Thus, the settlement movement sees its path as righteous.

The movement found an early benefactor in Ariel Sharon. From 1977 to 1981, Sharon served in the Ministry of Agriculture and created the Civil Administration to oversee the administration of the occupied territories. Sharon's legacy can largely be tied to the growth in Israeli settlements; he personally selected areas for settlements, which were intended to alter facts on the ground, making a two-state solution virtually impossible.¹⁴ Most governments regard this policy as a violation of international law. In 2004, the International Court of Justice confirmed this in an advisory opinion.¹⁵

The Argument

While the American-Israeli relationship may have been created in the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II, the relationship was cemented during the Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) administration. Prior to 1967, presidents took considerable care to avoid the appearance of favoritism toward Israel. Notwithstanding his recognition of the State of Israel, President Harry S. Truman signed the Tripartite Declaration of 1950. The Declaration committed the United States, France, and the United Kingdom to take action within and outside the United Nations to prevent violations of the frontiers or armistice lines; it also outlined their commitment to peace and stability in the area and their opposition to the use or threat of force, and reiterated their opposition to the development of an arms race in the region. President Dwight Eisenhower also exercised an even-handed approach during the 1956 Suez crisis. During the crisis, the United States, with support from Soviet Union at the United Nations intervened on behalf of Egypt to force a British, French, and Israeli withdrawal. Furthermore, despite the initiation of arms sales to Israel during the John F. Kennedy administration, the United States continued to be viewed as impartial in the region.

Beginning with the LBJ administration and continuing throughout the 1970s, the United States publicly continued to appear impartial. In particular, presidents rhetorically supported the applicability of international law and the unlawful character of settlements. However, the Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations did little to reverse the construction and expansion of Israeli settlements.

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Furthermore, the Johnson, Nixon, and Ford administrations, in particular, sent mixed signals regarding Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories. Moreover, while the Carter administration declared Israeli settlements illegal, it did little else to stop the settlement enterprise. By the end of Carter's administration, the United States found itself reversing Carter's forceful condemnation of settlements.

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the Israeli settler movement received further support. Reagan reversed Carter's declaration and argued that the settlements were not illegal.¹⁶ Since the Reagan administration, American presidents have publicly opposed settlement activity to various degrees, but not on the basis of their illegality. Rather, presidents have described them as unwise, unhelpful, or obstacles to peace. Most notably, even when presidents have had opportunities to confront Israel on Israeli settlements directly, domestic pressure and the reality of Israel as a reliable ally in the region have prevented serious presidential action beyond rhetoric and condemnation. The Trump administration's acknowledgment and support of Israeli settlements reflect the reality of American policy. Far from being an aberration, the Trump policy toward Israeli settlements is the unfortunate culmination of over 50 years of American foreign policy.

This book tells the story of American presidents, their administrations, and Israeli settlement activity. It focuses on presidents and their administrations because they have a decisive role in articulating and crafting American policy with regard to Israeli settlements and settlement activity. Since the United States and Israel embraced the idea of a "common fate," American policymakers elevated Israel to an important position in American foreign policy, sometimes equating the interests of Israel with those of the United States. Israeli leaders often understood this and used it to their advantage. Following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, for example, Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon generated a sense of shared threat by referring to Yasser Arafat as Israel's Osama bin Laden.¹⁷ In addition, American leaders ignored the significance of Israel at their own peril. American presidents and presidential candidates have, thus, emphasized the specialness of the relationship with great veracity. Moreover, American presidents' associations with Israel have impacted the course of the American-Israeli relationship and American perceptions of settlement activity. These associations and perceptions produced stereotypes of and assumptions about America's allies and enemies in the Middle East, and, in turn, these stereotypes and assumptions impacted American decision-making in its relationship with Israel. While American policy has often been rhetorically consistent with regard to settlement activity, policy is impacted by presidential images of the Middle East and its place in the world. A president's view of and pressures from Congress, media, the public, and advisors influence policy and can significantly influence the American-Israeli relationship.

William Quandt has suggested that the policy perspective of the president and his advisors is the most important factor in understanding the American approach

to the Arab-Israeli peace process.¹⁸ More significant, according to noted political scientist Stanley Renshon:

There is no more important determinant to a president's approach to issues of war and peace than his strategic worldview. Facts may speak volumes and advice will be plentiful. Yet when the president considers his options, it will be his primary premises regarding how the world works, his views regarding calculating risk and danger, and his willingness and ability to make tough choices when necessary that shape his choices.¹⁹

Yaacov Vertzberger agrees, arguing, "[T]he individual's belief set represents all the hypotheses and theories that he is convinced are valid at a given moment."²⁰

Most scholarly work on the American-Israeli relationship, however, emphasizes the systemic or domestic political levels of analysis, underemphasizing the importance of the president and the president's advisors. At the systemic level, scholars emphasize strategic relations and the national interest. A clear understanding of the national interest, however, requires agreement on foreign policy objectives and assumes that leaders behave rationally. Since decision makers are often under pressure to act, possess inadequate information, and must make decisions under uncertain circumstances, the idea that leaders are rational decision makers is, at best, questionable. Ideally, decisions may be a consequence of cost-benefit analysis of alternative courses of action with comprehensive information. This is rarely the case; in general, foreign policy decision makers act based on their predisposed perceptions and cognitive constructs.

At the domestic political level, scholars have focused on the role of the Jewish and Evangelical Christian communities in America's commitment to and support for Israel. In *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue that foreign policy should be directed by the national interest, but the overall thrust of American foreign policy in the Middle East has primarily been impacted by domestic politics, especially the activities of the "Israel lobby."²¹ Mearsheimer and Walt argue:

Other special-interest groups have managed to skew U.S. foreign policy in directions they favored, but no lobby has managed to divert U.S. foreign policy as far from what the American national interest would otherwise suggest, while simultaneously convincing Americans that U.S. and Israeli interests are essentially identical.²²

Stephen Spector²³ and Timothy Weber²⁴ have examined Christian support for Israel, the Christian Zionist movement, and its impact on the domestic political system. They argue Christian Zionists have provided political support and financial assistance to Israel and were particularly influential during the George W. Bush administration. Michael Thomas concludes, "American policy toward Israel is unusually, perhaps uniquely, subject to constraints reflecting broad public

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affinity with the Jewish state and enforced by an energized and effective network of advocates.”²⁵

But, the domestic political explanations are also lacking. To simply suggest American foreign policy in the Middle East has been controlled by pressures from the Israel lobby ignores much of the story. For one, it completely ignores the role of the pro-Arab lobby, “funded in significant measure by foreign oil money.”²⁶ In addition, it denies agency in policy-making. Domestic political explanations assume, for example, that the Israel lobby acted as Israel’s proxy and drove the United States into war against Iraq in 2003. This perspective denies the fact that President George W. Bush and his advisors were predisposed to view Saddam Hussein as evil and Iraq as a menacing state that required a military solution. Moreover, presidential perceptions of domestic interest groups impact the power of these interest groups. While every president is aware of the domestic pressures affecting America’s policy toward Israel and the Middle East, how each president deals with these pressures is different. Most significant, however, is that the domestic political explanation absolves policymakers of authority and accountability, and denies the fact that the Israel lobby often plays a foil to administrations, choosing to defy American foreign policy decisions.

This book takes account of the significant role of each president in policy making toward Israel. In particular, it considers how their views of Israel and Israeli occupation of the territories it controlled after 1967 impacted policy choices. After 1967, the United States and Israel embraced the idea of a “common fate.” American policymakers elevated Israel to an important position in American foreign policy, sometimes equating the interests of Israel with those of the United States. As noted, Israeli leaders often understood this and used it to their advantage. The close relationships between LBJ and Levi Eshkol, Bill Clinton and Yitzhak Rabin, and George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon, for example, enhanced Israel’s ability to expand settlements and increase settlement construction. As a result, Israeli settlement activity offers a good case of the interaction between the United States and Israel, and presidents and prime ministers, noting the special role that presidents have played in the American-Israeli relationship.

The remainder of this book examines American foreign policy toward Israeli occupation and Israeli settlement activity since 1967. Throughout, the book demonstrates the ways in which the United States has accommodated, acquiesced, and often capitulated to Israeli policies in the occupied territories, particularly Israeli settlement policy. Subsequent chapters examine each president and their administration since 1967. Each chapter begins with a brief analysis of the president’s perceptions and attitudes about Israel and American foreign policy in the Middle East. Then, the chapters focus on American relations with Israel, specifically emphasizing American policy toward Israeli settlements and occupation. The book concludes by demonstrating how American accommodation, acquiescence, and capitulation to Israeli settlements have “settled” the issue. It illustrates that the Trump administration’s near-total support of Israel, and specifically Israeli settlements, was hardly new. Rather, the Trump policy was merely the acknowledgment of 50 years of American foreign policy.

Notes

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2 Lyndon B. Johnson

The Problem of Territorial Integrity

We're in a heck of a jam on territorial integrity.

—Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense¹

Lyndon B. Johnson's foreign policy is most notable for America's involvement in Vietnam, which overshadowed his presidency, producing adverse reactions abroad and divisive politics at home. The Johnson administration also faced a major crisis in the Middle East. The Arab-Israeli War of 1967, known as the June or Six-Day War, complicated America's position in the region, marking a turning point in American-Israeli and American-Arab relations. From 1948 to 1967, the United States had maintained a reputation as a fair and impartial power in the region. The Eisenhower administration's opposition to the British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt during the Arab-Israeli Suez crisis of 1956 had demonstrated a balanced approach to the region, taking account of both Israeli and moderate Arab interests to prevent Soviet influence in the area. This view of fairness and impartiality still prevailed during John F. Kennedy's presidency, but Johnson's response to the 1967 war resulted in a decisive turn toward Israel. From 1967, American policy was complicated by its closeness to Israel. Johnson staunchly stood by Israel during the 1967 war, which resulted in Israel gaining territory from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, including the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem.

While the United States was the first to recognize the newly created State of Israel in 1948, American policy throughout the early Cold War supported the territorial integrity and political independence of all states in the region. This commitment was rooted in the 1950 Tripartite Declaration in which the United States, the United Kingdom, and France promised to oppose any alteration of borders by force in the Middle East. The Tripartite Declaration was the basis of American intervention in Lebanon and Jordan in 1958, and provided a foundation for American influence in the region. The Soviet Union, too, aimed for increased influence in the Middle East. Throughout the mid-1950s and the 1960s, the Soviet Union courted more "radical" Arab states like Egypt and Syria, and attempted to expand its power in the area by influencing moderate Arab states like Jordan. The Soviets

also manipulated Arab hostility toward Israel. Thus, the region was faced with the danger of not only a regional war but also a great power war.

Johnson's turn toward Israel reflected a realistic view of the situation, but it also led to mixed signals and American acquiescence in the face of Israel's refusal to withdraw from the territories conquered during the 1967 war. LBJ's preoccupation with Cold War strategic issues, particularly the potential for an arms race and increasing Soviet influence, resulted in a pragmatic approach to peace following the crisis. While emphasizing territorial integrity and political independence, the Johnson administration also settled on the idea that Israeli occupation of the territories conquered in the 1967 war could be used as a bargaining chip in any peace negotiations. Moreover, the administration believed that they could not abandon Israel and force it to withdraw without concrete agreements protecting Israeli security. As a result, while the administration rhetorically opposed Israeli actions, including the introduction of settlements, in the occupied territories, it never applied the necessary pressure to encourage the Israelis to shift their policy. Thus, by the end of the Johnson presidency, Israel's position had hardened.

Johnson's Images of Israel

LBJ was not known for his foreign policy experience prior to his presidency. He was widely known as an energetic and skillful political tactician who made his mark as an exceptional congressional leader. As vice president in the Kennedy administration, personal enmity had kept Johnson out of key decision-making processes, especially in foreign policy. To make matters worse, Johnson never felt at ease among the eastern establishment Ivy Leaguers within the Kennedy administration. Ironically, as president, Johnson relied on the advice of many members of the eastern establishment that he had scorned as vice president. His principal foreign policy advisers included Secretary of State Dean Rusk, an expert on the Far East, Undersecretary of State George Ball, and National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, although the position of national security adviser lacked the significance that it would attain under Henry Kissinger in the Nixon administration. While Johnson gave considerable latitude to his foreign policy advisers, he reserved the final decision for himself. Moreover, Johnson often assigned special emissaries to deal with foreign policy challenges, adding a personal connection to his foreign policy making that avoided institutional bureaucracies.

With regard to the Middle East, Johnson possessed limited knowledge. Certainly, Johnson's upbringing in the Bible Belt made him familiar with Christian Zionism. However, he was not particularly religious, and there is no evidence to suggest that he looked at Israel's creation from a Christian Zionist perspective; Joseph Califano notes that he often spoke cynically of others' pious demeanors.² Yet Johnson had an intense attachment to Israel; to a large degree, this attachment was personal.

Much of Johnson's policy in the region emphasized personal relationships. He counted a large number of Israelis and influential American supporters of Israel among his personal friends and advisers. Ephraim Evron, a minister at the Israeli

Embassy, became a close friend and was a frequent guest at the LBJ Ranch in Texas. In addition, Johnson appointed Abe Fortas, a prominent Washington lawyer and supporter of Israel, to the Supreme Court, and Arthur Goldberg, a Supreme Court justice, was named ambassador to the United Nations. Abe Fortas had been particularly important to Johnson's political career. A committed Zionist, Fortas had defended Johnson in his 1948 election dispute and remained a counselor to Johnson throughout his career.

Walt Rostow and his brother, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Eugene Rostow, were also close friends and strong supporters of Israel. Johnson's friendships, too, included Harry McPherson, a special counsel in charge of the "Jewish portfolio," and Universal Artists President Arthur Krim and his wife, Mathilde, an Israeli citizen and former member of the Irgun, a paramilitary group operating in Palestine prior to Israeli independence.³ All of these individuals were ardent supporters of Israel and were close enough to Johnson to have an influence on the Israeli relationship and American policies in the Middle East.

Moreover, Johnson drew notice as a congressman by finding permanent visas for Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi regime.⁴ In addition, as Senate Majority Whip in 1952, Johnson met with Israeli diplomat Abba Eban, at the time a liaison officer to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, for a discussion on Israel. According to Eban, Johnson wanted to "find out everything essential about Israel."⁵ In 1957, Johnson opposed the consideration of economic sanctions against Israel following the Suez crisis; writing to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Johnson declared:

To put it simply, the United Nations cannot apply one rule for the strong and another for the weak; it cannot organize its economic weight against the little State when it has not previously made even a pretense of doing so against the large States. I have . . . seen no suggestions . . . of the application of economic sanctions against the USSR. . . . I have been urging . . . a determined effort . . . to go to the root causes of the troubles in the Middle East. One of these causes has been the hostile activity against Israel on the part of Egypt. . . . I think you will agree that it is not utterly unreasonable for Israel to request guarantees . . . that these attacks against her will not once more be prevalent. . . . I have seen no suggestion . . . that economic sanctions should be applied against Egypt to force that State to agree to permanent cessation of hostile activities . . . the merits, justice and the morality in this situation are clear.⁶

In a private letter on the eve of his election to the vice presidency, Johnson shared his very personal thoughts on Israel and the special relationship.

I think the only real test of a man's attitude on Israel . . . is his past record. . . . I have actively supported the establishment of the State of Israel and have consistently advocated a policy of friendship for and aid to Israel. Friendship and support for Israel are deeply rooted in the American people. The efforts which the Israelis have made in the rehabilitation of hundreds of thousands

of refugees and in the development of their country . . . remind us of the heroism of our own pioneering era during the early phases of American History . . . people look with admiration at the achievements of small Israel. . . . Israel has become a show-case for democracy and it is up to all believers in democracy everywhere to support Israel in every possible way. . . . The world community, including the United States, cannot and will never allow Israel to be conquered by force.⁷

Johnson also demonstrated an admiration and almost sentimental attachment to Israel and its leaders, especially David Ben-Gurion.

I can tell you that no one excels this extra-ordinary leader in breadth, vision, understanding and humanity. . . . There is nothing narrow or provincial about [his] views. . . . Fundamentally, this great man is a humanitarian . . . I have always recognized the justice of Israel's claims to the moral and material support of the United States . . . to a very substantial degree, Israel is the touchstone of the world . . . its preservation and encouragement are essential to the interests and aspirations of humanity.⁸

Soon after Kennedy's assassination and Johnson's assumption to the presidency, Johnson met with Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol in Washington, DC. This visit began a close relationship that established a degree of intimacy unprecedented in previous American-Israeli relations.⁹ Johnson told Eshkol, "The United States is foursquare behind Israel on all matters that affect their vital security interests."¹⁰ Johnson's relationship with Eshkol illustrated his personal attachment to Israel. Presidential aide John Roche explained that Johnson looked "on the Israelis as Texans . . . and Nasser as Santa Ana."¹¹

Johnson and Israel Before the 1967 Arab-Israeli War

The Johnson administration inherited two key issues in the American-Israeli relationship following Kennedy's death. First, President Kennedy had stressed nuclear nonproliferation in his foreign policy. This ran counter to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's commitment to developing Israeli nuclear weapons. The United States had first become aware of Israel's development of a nuclear program in late 1960 when Ben-Gurion conceded the existence of a nuclear facility at Dimona. Soon after becoming president, Kennedy demanded American inspections at the facility, but it was not until 1963 that Israel agreed. However, no clear inspection parameters were in place when Johnson succeeded to the presidency.

At the same time, Israel wanted to increase its arms supplies from the United States in order to supplement sources from Western Europe. In 1962, Kennedy had provided Hawk missiles to Israel. However, the Arab states were spending \$938 million annually on arms, twice Israel's level. Additionally, the Soviet Union sent \$2 billion in military aid to the region between 1956 and 1967,¹² with over 40% of Soviet military aid going to Egypt.¹³

Initially, Johnson maintained the Kennedy approach to nuclear nonproliferation. However, Johnson quickly reassessed the American position. Johnson also demonstrated a willingness to aid Israel, encouraging West German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard to supply Israel with 150 M-48 tanks.¹⁴ As he told one Israeli diplomat shortly after the Kennedy assassination, “You have lost a very great friend. But you have found a better one.”¹⁵ In the first three years of his presidency, Johnson moved American arms supplies to Israel from moderately defensive weapons to highly sophisticated offensive arms. American military aid to Israel rose from \$12.9 million in 1965 to \$90 million in 1966; this more than doubled the cumulative amount from 1948 to 1965.¹⁶ The offensive arms included A-1 Skyhawk attack aircraft, F-4 Phantom Jet fighters, and Patton M-48 tanks.

However, regional events with global repercussions tested Johnson’s commitment to Israel. Egypt, Syria, and Iraq were drifting toward the Soviet Union, and the administration wanted to prevent Soviet influence in Jordan. The United States had enjoyed a stable relationship with Jordan’s King Hussein since the 1950s; the British also maintained a close relationship with the Jordanians, supplying them with 2,000 troops in 1958 after a coup in Iraq sparked fears of unrest. However, in January 1964, the Arab League created the United Arab Command, forming a unified front against Israel, and attempted to divert the Jordan River away from Israel. King Hussein successfully resisted Arab pressure to station Saudi and Iraqi troops in his territory, fearing that he would become a puppet ruler, yet he needed to improve Jordanian defenses; he made it clear that if the United States would not supply his country with the necessary arms, he would request assistance from the Soviet Union.¹⁷

Initially, the Johnson administration deferred Jordan’s request but eventually agreed to sell King Hussein 46 M-48 tanks and considered providing F-104 jets as well. On February 1, 1965, the National Security Council reviewed the issue, and Undersecretary of State George Ball argued:

Jordan . . . a member of the Arab club, must purchase additional equipment somewhere—if not from us, then from the USSR. . . . There is no good solution to this problem and there are disadvantages from every course of action. If we say no to the supersonics, Jordan will ask [for] Soviet aid. If we say yes, Israel will demand supersonics. Thus, no matter what we do, we will be contributing to the arms race in the Middle East which we have been trying to damp down.¹⁸

The administration’s concern that Jordan would get planes from the Soviets if the United States failed to supply them dictated the policy decision. However, the administration’s decision was complicated by the fact that Jordan and Israel remained in a state of war, and Israel feared a growing Jordanian military presence in the West Bank. In addition, the administration was concerned that domestic opposition to the bill might be enough to cause Congress to reject the Jordanian arms sales.¹⁹ Johnson directed the State Department to assure the Israelis that the supply of weapons to Jordan would not threaten their survival; in a memorandum

from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to President Johnson, Rusk concluded, “All our estimates continue to show Israel as maintaining its military superiority over the Arab states for the foreseeable future.”²⁰ However, the administration never believed that Eshkol’s government would accept this argument; therefore, Johnson searched for concessions that might satisfy the Israelis. As a result, the United States conceded the nuclear nonproliferation policy that had emerged in the Kennedy administration, deferring any pressure on Israel until the conclusion of the Jordanian arms deal.

President Johnson, in particular, was also concerned about the domestic repercussions of selling arms to Jordan. Writing to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, Robert Komer argued:

[I]t became crystal clear that the President’s chief reason for not accepting the repeated State/DOD/CIA recommendation was his concern over US domestic reaction. . . . So I kept pressing on State to face up to fact that if we agreed to sell [to] Jordan, we’d have to sell Israel too—as the only way of protection our domestic flank.²¹

In addition to domestic pressures, the Israelis expressed their doubts.

Israeli prime minister Eshkol faced a difficult domestic situation. His coalition government was relatively unstable and an election was nearing. To make matters worse, Ben-Gurion was critical of Eshkol for not doing enough to ensure Israeli security.²² Johnson sympathized with Eshkol and worked to support the Israeli position.

[Eshkol] wants a commitment. It seems that we might, without great danger, raise the ante a . . . bit to [the tanks that] the Germans are giving them, and say if the Germans don’t complete it, we’ll complete it, plus 20 or something.²³

On March 1, 1965, Secretary of State Rusk recommended that the United States supply military equipment to Jordan as well as Israel in order to “abort [Israel’s] strong adverse reaction.”²⁴ As a result, the administration promised 100 tanks to match the sale of American tanks to Jordan, as well as 90 additional M-48A1 and M-48A3 tanks. President Johnson also committed to provide Israel with planes as long as Israel agreed not to attack the Jordanian arms deal. Komer made clear that “any further noises” from Israel would be regarded as a “breach of trust.”²⁵ Johnson told Senator Abraham Ribicoff, “I have really saved [Eshkol], and gone to bat with his equipment and stuff.”²⁶ Prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Johnson administration was positioning the United States with Israel; the war solidified this relationship.

While the United States initially hoped that the 1965 arms sale to Israel would not constitute a precedent, it soon became clear that this was only the beginning of military cooperation. In early 1966, the United States agreed to sell 48 A-4 Skyhawk bombers, hoping to defer pressure from Israel for direct security guarantees. Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban expressed the significance of the agreement,

arguing that it was “a development of tremendous political value” and part of the continuous “intensification of the existing U.S. commitment.”²⁷

Johnson and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War

Prior to 1967, the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) concluded that

the Arab-Israeli dispute [was] heating up . . . Arab cooperation. . . [has] led the Israelis to fear that a significant turning point in the dispute is occurring to Nasser’s advantage. In response, they are hardening their posture toward the Arabs.²⁸

The NIE concluded that it would be difficult for the United States to maintain relations with both Israel and the Arab states.

The deepening of the strategic relationship with the United States was welcome news for Eshkol and Israel. Syria was sponsoring regular Palestinian raids against Israel, and in October 1966, Egypt and Syria signed a mutual defense agreement. Moreover, the terrorist attacks on Israeli soil had led to domestic criticism against the Eshkol government. In response, on November 13, 1966, Eshkol authorized Operation Shredder, a raid into the West Bank retaliating against Arab villages deemed to be supporting Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israel. The Israelis planned a quick surgical strike, but a battle between the Israel Defense Force and Jordanian soldiers near the village of Samu resulted in the deaths of 15 Jordanian soldiers and three Palestinian civilians. In the aftermath of the conflict, riots broke out in the West Bank, threatening to destabilize Jordan’s government.

The American response aimed to avoid a conflict in the region. National Security Adviser Walt Rostow, who had replaced McGeorge Bundy, explained that Israel

badly damaged our ability to go on stabilizing Israel’s Jordanian border. . . . The Israelis have gravely damaged the unspoken truce we’ve helped them build with Hussein. . . . They have upset your delicate and successful balancing act in selling jets to Jordan to keep the Soviets out. . . . We also want to use this . . . to jolt Israeli leaders into realizing that they can’t go on looking to us for protection . . . unless they make some effort of their own to coexist with their neighbors.²⁹

Furthermore, Secretary of State Rusk

promptly called Abe Feinberg to pass the blunt word that Israel was “going too far” in striking Jordan and had better lay off. . . . I told Harman that you fully understood Israel’s problems, but that use of force was dubious at best and use of disproportionate force—against Jordan to boot—was folly indeed. It undermined the whole US effort to maintain Jordanian stability,

which was so much in Israel's own interest that Israel's action was almost incomprehensible.³⁰

While President Johnson questioned the Israeli action, saying, "I just think they're damn fools to let [King] Hussein get thrown out,"³¹ he stopped short of withholding military aid to Israel.

However, concerns about Israeli actions continued to reverberate within the administration. The State Department expressed concern over too close a military relationship with Israel, particularly when Israel's nuclear intentions were unclear. Moreover, State suggested that supplying "the requested [Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs)] to Israel would run contrary to the restraint that is an essential part of our policy."³² The Defense Department also shared State's concerns, suggesting a reduction in the number of APCs the United States should supply to Israel.³³ Despite this, Johnson continued to express his desire "to do everything we can to help the Israelis."³⁴

On May 23, 1967, the eve of war in the Middle East, President Johnson authorized the sale of APCs and Hawk and tank spare parts to Israel.³⁵ Johnson's decision proved significant since the Egyptian government had moved 75,000 troops into the Sinai beginning May 16; Nasser then demanded the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) stationed in the Sinai as a buffer between Israel and Egypt since 1957. This followed Nasser's April decision to close the Straits of Tiran, which controlled access to the Gulf of Aqaba and Israel's southern port, Eilat.

Nasser's actions convinced American policymakers that Egypt was more dangerous than it had perceived. President Johnson expressed his deep concern with the "potentially explosive aspects of the present confrontation." The closing of the Straits of Tiran, he added, was "arbitrary and dangerous."³⁶ At the same time, Johnson cautioned Eshkol "to avoid any action on your side which would add further to the violence and tension in your area." In addition to urging restraint, Johnson also made clear that the United States would not support Israeli actions without prior consultation.³⁷ Throughout the crisis, the administration aimed to "prevent Israel from being destroyed and. . . [stopping] aggression—either through the UN or on our own."³⁸ In particular, the United States was concerned that Israeli "preemptive action . . . would cause extreme difficulty."³⁹ President Johnson concurred, telling Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban that "Israel need not be alone unless it chooses to go alone."⁴⁰

Most within the administration believed that they had time to broker a settlement, but despite his pressure on Israel urging restraint, Johnson believed that Israel would attack: "They're going to hit. There's nothing we can do about it."⁴¹ Johnson was right. The administration's attempts to restrain Israel had failed. On June 5, 1967, war broke out. Two days before the war, on June 3, President Johnson wrote to Prime Minister Eshkol outlining the American position in the Middle East crisis. First, "the United States supported the territorial integrity and political independence of all countries of the Middle East." And, "As a leading maritime nation, [the United States has] a vital interest in upholding freedom of the seas."⁴²

The War's Aftermath

The 1967 war began after an initial air strike by the Israelis that neutralized the Egyptian Air Force; this was followed by an Israeli ground attack that moved deep into the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, King Hussein of Jordan entered the war only to see the rapid destruction of the Jordanian Air Force. King Hussein then rejected an Israeli offer of a ceasefire, and the Israel Defense Forces moved into the West Bank. While Syria initially stayed out of the conflict, Syria's entry into the war was met by an Israeli air attack on Syrian airfields. By June 10, 1967, Israel had completed its final offensive. On June 11, a ceasefire was signed, leaving Israel in possession of the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights.⁴³

Initially, the United States focused on restraining Israel, but once war broke out the administration decided "to go for a full Arab-Israeli settlement and not just another truce."⁴⁴ In addition, American decision makers emphasized the importance of preventing the Soviet Union from exploiting the war for their own gains. The fear was that if the United States were to "over-embrace Israel," it "would give the Soviets even more of a free ride with the Arabs."⁴⁵ Thus, American policy focused on limiting Soviet gains and, as a result, tried to maintain a delicate balancing act between support for Israel and moderate Arab states. According to Ambassador William J. Porter:

[T]he U.S. goal should have been a solution to avoid clear-cut U.S. support for Israel and . . . to provide Israel with the means to salvage the maximum from the current situation. . . . It appeared . . . that Russian interests had been best served by forcing the United States into the position of supporting the Israelis.⁴⁶

President Johnson concurred, expressing serious concerns about Soviet actions and motivations. During a June 7, 1967, National Security Council meeting, Tommy Thompson, the former ambassador to the Soviet Union, "could figure out no explanation for the Soviet misjudgment" that resulted in the catastrophic Arab losses. Johnson, however, remained concerned, responding,

"he was not sure [the United States was] out of our troubles." He could not visualize the USSR saying it had miscalculated, and then walking away. Our objective should be to "develop as few heroes and as few heels as we can." It is important for everybody to know we are not for aggression. We are sorry this has taken place. We are in as good a position as we could be given the complexities of the situation. We thought we [had] a commitment from those governments, but it went up in smoke very quickly. The President said that by the time we get through with all the festering problems we are going to wish the war had not happened.⁴⁷

As a result, the administration continued to work toward avoiding a confrontation with the Soviet Union and used the crisis as a basis to build a comprehensive

peace settlement. Thus, at the cessation of the war, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a diplomatic process. The Soviets demanded that the United Nations convene a special session of the General Assembly and condemn Israel for the war, calling on Israel to immediately withdraw from all the occupied territories. However, the Soviet initiative failed to pass.⁴⁸

On the same day that Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin addressed the General Assembly, June 19, President Johnson addressed the Conference for Educators at the State Department, offering “five great principles of peace.” Rejecting calls for “an immediate return to the situation as it was on June 4,” Johnson outlined his vision. First, Johnson stated, “every nation in the area has a fundamental right to live, and to have this right respected by its neighbors.” This addressed Israel’s central concern about its right to exist. Second, Johnson emphasized “justice for the refugees.” Third, he argued for respect for maritime rights and free navigation of the seas. Fourth, he warned about the dangers of an arms race in the region. These principles were simply reaffirmations of American policies. Finally, Johnson noted, “the crisis underlines the importance of respect for political independence and territorial integrity of all the states of the area.”⁴⁹ While this too was central to American policy, it would prove problematic for the administration’s postwar diplomacy.

The administration faced a key question as it began its diplomatic initiative: how far should the administration go in affirming American support for Israel?⁵⁰ Yuri Tcherniakov, counselor for the Soviet Embassy in Washington, “hoped [the United States] would use [its] influence with Israel not to be too hard in their victory.” Eugene Rostow, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, responded that the United States

did not think . . . that it was practical or realistic to expect the Israelis to withdraw until there were assurances they would return to a condition of peace. . . . [T]here were natural anxieties everywhere that the Israelis had large territorial ambitions. We could not speak for the Israeli Government, but our impression so far was that Israel did not want great territorial changes, but peace and security.⁵¹

The administration suffered under the belief that Israel had no territorial ambitions. Soon after, the administration moved to a policy of acquiescence regarding Israel’s territorial gains. Most significantly, the administration quickly accepted the Israeli position on the retention of Jerusalem.

On June 16, the United States became aware that Israel was planning to annex all of Jerusalem. Reports from Israel noted that the Israeli government had “re-settled” residents of the Mughrabi Quarter of Jerusalem, which bordered the Western Wall, for easier access by Israeli citizens.⁵² And, on July 1, Walworth Barbour, American ambassador to Israel, described Israeli actions in Jerusalem as an “inevitably present” *fait accompli*. Focusing on free access to and protection of religious sites, Barbour expressed concerns about Israel’s territorial acquisitions but asked “whether we have any real alternatives to making the best of a potentially good

situation.” Barbour noted that the territorial acquisitions had occurred because of defensive action by Israel and added:

The imperative of current developments combined with historical Jewish attitudes toward Jerusalem make the possibility of returning to the previous position through action short of outside military force unrealistic. I believe that we should contemplate eventual US acquiescence in Israeli exercise of sovereignty over united Jerusalem with . . . safeguards for the Holy Places and should tailor our tactics in the coming months toward that assumption.⁵³

While the administration expressed concern about Israeli action both in Jerusalem and in the other occupied territories, it did little more.

Both in private and public statements, the Israeli government was making its position clear. On June 14, Israeli Ambassador to the United States Abraham Harman stated, “Israel would stay where it is in occupied territory.” In addition, on June 21, Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban told Secretary of State Rusk, “The ‘natural thing’ was for Gaza to be in Israel.”⁵⁴ On June 26, Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan publicly stated, “Israel was reserving all territorial decisions and claims concerning the lands it conquered until after it had talked with the Arabs face to face.” Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol announced, “as long as our neighbors continue in their policy of belligerence and prepare plans to destroy us we will not return the areas now under our control.”⁵⁵ These statements, and others like them, were gradually forcing a choice for the United States.

On the one hand, the United States was expressing serious concern about Israeli territorial occupation and control of the territories occupied during the war. However, those concerns were tempered by mixed signals of acquiescence and support for Israel’s position. On July 4 and 14, the United Nations General Assembly adopted two resolutions on Jerusalem. The first called upon Israel to rescind all measures and from taking any further action in Jerusalem, and the second deplored Israel for its failure to implement the July 4 resolution. The United States abstained in both cases.⁵⁶ Moreover, in a memorandum for the president at the end of July, McGeorge Bundy, who returned to the administration to coordinate American policy during the crisis, wrote:

The Israeli position appears to be hardening as the Arabs still resist all direct negotiations. . . . I think the evidence grows that they plan to keep not only all of Jerusalem but the Gaza Strip and the West Bank too. . . . [W]e have no practical way of opposing the Israeli position. We can insist on the principle of “withdrawal from danger” but as a practical matter the Israelis will continue to confront the Arabs—and us—with small accomplished facts (today they put in their currency in much of the occupied territory), and we will find it unwise to take any practical action in reply. . . . I doubt if we can or should make the Israeli view of Jerusalem or the West Bank into a federal case. We can’t tell the Israelis to give things away to people who won’t even bargain with them. We may very well be heading toward a de facto settlement on

the present cease-fire lines. . . . In sum, I think the current short-run position should be one of quiet watchful waiting.⁵⁷

The administration continued to express its concerns, but now the Israelis were using Johnson's own commitments to move American policy closer to Israeli positions.

In a September 13 National Security Council meeting, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Arthur Goldberg argued:

[T]here are signs of moderation in the Arab camp, and some signs of hardening in the Israeli camp. . . . Israel takes the President's statement of June 19 and uses the portions it likes and omits those portions it does not like. On the withdrawal issue, they have referred to the President's statement.⁵⁸

In his June 19 speech, Johnson specifically noted:

There are some who have urged, as a single, simple solution, an immediate return to the situation as it was on June 4. As our distinguished and able Ambassador, Mr. Arthur Goldberg, has already said, this is not a prescription for peace, but for renewed hostilities. Certainly troops must be withdrawn, but there must also be recognized rights of national life, progress in solving the refugee problem, freedom of innocent maritime passage, limitation of the arms race, and respect for political independence and territorial integrity.⁵⁹

Moreover, Johnson emphasized that negotiations would not be imposed from the outside, but that the "parties to the peace . . . must make a settlement in the area."⁶⁰ Johnson had substantiated Israel's claims that occupation of the territories would serve as an important bargaining prospect in any peace settlement. Of course, Johnson believed they would actually be bargained.

Johnson's concern for domestic political repercussions also played an important role in the acquiescence of American policy. As Bruce Altschuler explains, Johnson highly regarded public opinion polls, especially when they approved of his policies.⁶¹ And American attitudes toward Israel's swift victory were strong. Polls showed a net shift of 12% of Americans

who felt more friendly toward Israel. . . . If one eliminates the undecided opinions, it is evident that a very substantial majority of those opinions feel that Israel should keep all of Jerusalem. . . . American attitudes toward Israel's role in the present . . . crisis are extremely favorable.⁶²

As a president facing increasing doubt on his policy in Vietnam, Johnson wanted to maintain positive relations with Israel.

Furthermore, the administration continued to believe that the overwhelming Israeli victory would provide openings for a comprehensive peace settlement. In a

memorandum of a conversation between Israeli foreign minister Eban and Secretary of State Rusk, National Security Adviser Rostow explained:

[I]n the absence of a situation of peace, Israel would have to maintain its positions on the basis of considerations of national security but in a peace agreement with Arabs they could be in a flexible negotiating position. . . . [Eban] intimated there may be an exchange of territory over along the international frontier in favor of Egypt.

In addition, Rostow noted that the West Bank “presented particularly difficult problems.” On the one hand, incorporation of the West Bank into Israel “would cause a total reshaping of Israeli politics.” On the other hand, “Creation of a Palestinian state might simply increase irredentist desires.” Most significantly, Rostow left the meeting with the clear understanding that Israel “had in mind some border adjustments for security purposes.”⁶³ Gradually, the administration was accepting the argument that security required additional territory and redrawn borders.

By late October, the Israeli position was hardening and the Israelis were pushing to “maximize territorial security.” Israeli foreign minister Eban told Rostow, “We cannot go back to June 5 lines.”⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the United States and the Soviet Union worked to pass United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. Resolution 242 called for the “Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict” and the “Termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area.”⁶⁵ Known as the “land for peace” resolution, it became the basis for future negotiations.

But, by the end of the year, the United States knew they faced a serious problem with the occupied territories and the land for peace formula. Increasingly, border violations, terrorist raids against Israel, and Israeli retaliatory attacks were undermining any movement toward peace. Harold Saunders expressed the administration’s dilemma in a memorandum to National Security Advisor Walt Rostow in October 1967.

I have spent some days in discussions of what our commitment to territorial integrity in the Middle East means today. . . . This is not just an academic exercise because the answer will eventually determine how hard we lean on Israel if and when a territorial settlement is negotiated. . . . There is a wide gap within our ranks over how we should interpret our past commitment in the wake of the June war. . . . Secretary Rusk has told several foreign ministers . . . that we had no trouble with pre-June boundaries and would work to restore them if we could do so in the context of permanent peace. . . . *Others are more cautious about going that far.* They feel . . . that the drastically changed post-June situation requires some redefinition of past positions. . . . *So here we are:* The Secretary of State intimating that we are honor-bound to go back to 4 June lines if only we can establish conditions of peace. The Secretary of Defense saying we have to stick by Jordan in Israel’s interest as well as our

own. Israel disagreeing violently. The President saying . . . that we can't get back to 4 June lines. Ambassador Goldberg opposing any further public effort to define our position because it will just get us in further trouble. . . . The professionals remembering sadly that Israel is Israel, believing the President and trying to build a position that bridges these . . . contradictory positions.⁶⁶

Saunders highlighted the contradiction between American support for territorial integrity and the view that the conquest of territory by war is unacceptable, and the difficulty in forcing Israel to alter its position. Moreover, many in the administration were suggesting that opposition to territorial acquisition in war did not apply to provoked aggression. In a conversation with Israeli ambassador Harman on December 12, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Eugene Rostow illustrated the fine line the administration was attempting to draw, expressing American concern about the destruction of villages in the occupied territories, but only suggesting Israeli actions "probably violated accepted principles of international law."⁶⁷

As 1967 was ending, Johnson continued to privately press the Israelis on territorial integrity,⁶⁸ but the American desire for balance in the region was no longer holding as the administration began to tilt toward Israel.⁶⁹ On the eve of Israeli prime minister Eshkol's visit to the United States in January 1968, the administration reviewed its policy:

The paramount issue in Israel today . . . is how best to utilize the opportunity created by Israel's military victory . . . to get a satisfactory political settlement, while safeguarding its enhanced security position. . . . Israeli leaders are determined to retain and if possible increase the margin of Israel's military superiority over its Arab neighbors. . . . Eshkol . . . will want as firm and explicit a U.S. commitment as possible. . . . Our position since the June hostilities has been one of support for the Israeli view that pre-June conditions should not be restored. We have agreed . . . that the armistice agreements and armistice lines should be replaced with a lasting settlement based on secure and mutually acknowledge borders. . . . We believe and have publicly stated that there should be no return to the dangerous and insecure situation that prevailed before June 5. . . . The United States voted for the Security Council resolution calling for withdrawal of Israeli forces from occupied territories. We believe Israel should withdraw within agreed frontiers. . . . Finally, we urge Israel to suspend actions in Jerusalem (such as the establishment of Israeli Government offices in the Old City) and on the West Bank (such as the destruction of villages for security purposes) which lend credence to Arab suspicions that a final peace settlement is being prejudged.⁷⁰

On the one hand, the administration expressed concern about prejudging a peace settlement with actions in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Yet the administration also supported Israel's desire not to return to the pre-June 5 situation and for

secure and recognized borders. Moreover, the administration was moving closer to the view that withdrawal did not necessarily mean total withdrawal. Rather, American policymakers were beginning to accept the idea that territory could be negotiated. The United States was sending mixed signals, and soon they would find it very difficult to reverse course.

Israeli territorial occupation, however, remained a significant concern for American policymakers. On April 8, 1968, Secretary of State Rusk, again, noted American concerns with Israeli activity in the occupied territories, specifically the establishment of settlements, and instructed the American Embassy in Israel to reiterate those concerns.

The [Government of Israel] is aware of our continuing concern that nothing be done in the occupied areas which might prejudice the search for a peace settlement. By setting up civilian or quasi-civilian outposts in the occupied areas the [Government of Israel] adds serious complications to the eventual task of drawing up a peace settlement. Further, the transfer of civilians to occupied areas . . . is contrary to Article 49 of the Geneva Convention. . . .⁷¹ Finally, you should emphasize that no matter what rationale or explanation is put forward . . . the establishment of civilian settlements in the occupied areas creates the strong appearance that Israel . . . does not intend to reach a settlement involving withdrawal from those areas.⁷²

Yet, by July, the United States focused on Israeli concerns for “recognized and secure boundaries” and, despite statements to the contrary, relied on past Israeli assurances regarding territorial acquisitions. The United States played down the legal issues associated with territorial occupation and instead emphasized the challenges occupation presented to the peace process. Newly appointed United States Ambassador to the United Nations George Ball told Foreign Minister Eban:

[The United States Government] desires satisfactory settlement of [the] problems of [the] Arab-Israel area. We recognize deep emotions on both sides and are sympathetic with [the] Israeli desire for [a] permanent settlement with recognized and secure boundaries. . . . [The United States Government] will continue [to] support this concept. . . . [C]ontinued Israeli occupation of Arab territory is unnatural. . . . [The United States Government] continues to rely on Israeli assurances [that] it desires [a] reasonable settlement and is not interested in the acquisition of territory. The more [Israel] can reaffirm this position the better standing it will enjoy in world public opinion and the easier its position will be to defend. . . . [The] immediate problem is to avoid Israel’s becoming isolated.⁷³

While Ball stressed the unnaturalness of occupation, he never referred to its illegality. This, coupled with earlier American private and public statements, sent mixed signals regarding Israeli occupation. Those signals would continue to complicate discussions.

The administration expressed concerns about Israeli territorial acquisitions, but also wanted to provide Israel with maneuverability in negotiations. On November 15, 1968, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach relayed a conversation he had with Israeli ambassador Yitzhak Rabin to President Johnson. Katzenbach explained:

[W]e rely on past Israeli assurances that they have no territorial ambitions . . . and . . . we are disturbed by recent indications that at least some members of the Israeli Government are thinking of major territorial acquisitions. While we have long made known to the Israelis our opposition to territorial expansion on their part, we have in the past refrained from injecting ourselves into the substantive negotiating process in order to permit them to play their hand as they have thought best.

Katzenbach further suggested that American pressure on Israel for withdrawal would “register objections . . . on the grounds that, by taking this position . . . we are changing our policy and undercutting Israel’s bargaining position.”⁷⁴ To make matters worse, American policymakers were communicating that border alterations should be a part of negotiations. On November 20, 1968, United States ambassador Harrison Symmes reaffirmed the American position presented to King Hussein in the fall of 1967:

The United States, as a matter of policy, does not envisage a Jordan which consists only of the East Bank. The United States is prepared [for] a return of the West Bank with minor boundary rectifications. However, the United States would use its influence to obtain compensation to Jordan for any territory it is required to give up. . . . The territorial assurances that we have given Hussein are manifestly inconsistent with any proposal that would place ‘certain unpopulated areas of West Bank’ under Israeli sovereignty or jurisdiction. The relevance of ‘unpopulated areas’ to ‘minor border rectifications’ is . . . another moot point.⁷⁵

Symmes seemed to consider the American commitment to border adjustments as insignificant to Israel’s position. However, the Israeli position on withdrawal consistently stressed that withdrawal did not mean total withdrawal. The United States had opened the door to territorial negotiation and acquisition.

In fact, Saunders, the National Security Council’s Middle East expert, acknowledged the mixed signals in American policy.

[The Israelis argue] that we’re practicing “salami tactics” on them. . . . [W]e got them to accept the resolution. Then made them use the word “withdraw”. . . . Now we’re pushing them to accept June 4 lines. The Israelis aren’t going to take this . . . seriously because we speak out of both sides of our mouths. . . . One American says Jerusalem is the key question. Another says it

can be set aside for the time being, implying Israel has a case. . . . The US has undercut Israel's bargaining position without offering anything in return.⁷⁶

And the administration was doing the same with regard to territorial acquisitions and settlements in the occupied territories. Johnson wanted to ensure Israel that they would have secure and recognized borders, and the administration believed that this would require some territorial changes. Moreover, the Johnson administration believed that territorial occupation offered a significant bargaining chip in any negotiations.

The political dynamics in the region were substantially altered by Israel's overwhelming victory over its Arab enemies. By successfully meeting the Arab challenge, Israel now controls all but one of the major sources of the Jordan as well as territory through which diversion was planned, has seriously weakened its major military rival . . . and disrupted the Palestine Liberation Army, and, by occupation of Arab lands, has a strong bargaining posture.⁷⁷

Secretary of Defense McNamara was right. As the 1967 war concluded, "the week that began June 12 saw some remarkably candid discussion of the fact that we were committed to the 'territorial integrity' of all states in the area but we were unable to force Israel to withdraw." We were in a "heck of a jam on territorial integrity."⁷⁸

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3 Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger Limited Withdrawal

The Egyptians have informed us. . . [they] will continue to press. . . [for] total Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in the 1967 conflict to the pre-June 5 lines. . . . I want to assure you that we will not press Israel to accept [this].

—Richard Nixon¹

Richard Nixon came to the White House determined to make a fresh start in foreign policy. The Johnson administration had left a burdensome legacy that included a war in Vietnam, the war of attrition between Israel and Egypt along the Suez, ruptured diplomatic relations with the Arab states, increased Soviet influence in many areas of the world, and a military vacuum in the Persian Gulf. While his primary objective was to end America's involvement in Vietnam, Nixon also had broad objectives aimed at achieving peace in the Middle East and restraining Soviet influence in strategic regions throughout the world. In the Arab-Israeli conflict, Nixon intended to pursue an impartial policy but naturally favored the Israelis. His Secretary of State William Rogers and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger also favored the Israelis.

This is not surprising considering that the Nixon administration came to office in 1969, two years after the 1967 war. But Nixon's foreign policy worldview further narrowed his perspective since his frame of reference was primarily influenced by the Cold War and his views of the Soviet Union. Within this framework, Israel naturally maintained an advantage with American policymakers. American policymakers increasingly lived with the hardening Israeli positions and the deliberate ambiguity of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. While the Nixon administration worked to achieve a settlement between Israel and its Arab neighbors, it also furthered the Israeli ability to advance its settlement project. Like his predecessor, Nixon engaged in mixed signals regarding Israeli occupation and settlements.

When Gerald Ford took over the presidency, he too sought a diplomatic response to the Arab-Israeli impasse. Ford chose to focus on bilateral negotiations between Israel and Egypt, ignoring the Palestinian issues and allowing the Israelis to control the agenda. However, Ford and Kissinger complained of Israeli

intransigence and rigidity throughout the negotiations and threatened a more comprehensive peace settlement. Despite these threats, American financial support for Israel rose, and the United States increasingly linked itself to Israel and never pursued a comprehensive settlement. Furthermore, by emphasizing the Cold War context, Ford, like Nixon, enhanced Israel's position within American foreign policy as a frontline opponent of Soviet expansion in the Middle East. Moreover, like his predecessors, Ford continued the deliberate ambiguity of American policy, sending mixed signals on Israeli occupation and settlements.

Nixon's and Kissinger's Images of Israel

Nixon brought over 20 years of experience into the White House. His views were shaped throughout those years and focused primarily on thwarting Soviet interests and goals. Ultimately, Nixon had spent his entire career emphasizing the significance of maintaining a strategic advantage over the Soviet Union. Throughout the Nixon administration, all foreign policy decisions were motivated by this overriding goal.

Thus, Nixon approached the Middle East with a globalist perspective. In 1967, he wrote Secretary of State Dean Rusk:

I hope that with the outbreak of the Arab-Israel hostilities, our government will bring all possible influence to bear to have all major powers stand up to their responsibility for the maintenance of peace. Let us make it clear that the key to peace in the Middle East is now in Moscow and that peace efforts in the United Nations and multilaterally up to this time have been blocked by the Soviet Union. . . . My fear in the present circumstances is that unless we can demonstrate that our attachment to peace is impartial, we will have given the Soviet Union an unparalleled opportunity to extend its influence in the Arab world to the detriment of vastly important United States and free world interests.²

Nixon came to the presidency emphasizing his concerns about Soviet motives in the Middle East and believed that a balanced approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict would serve American interests.

Nixon's approach stressed key alliances with the Arab states in the region to counterbalance Soviet power and influence. He also wanted to enhance American power in the region and Arab confidence in American leadership. In his memoirs, Nixon wrote:

The potential for a confrontation between the United States and the U.S.S.R. loomed large. . . . At the beginning of my administration, I assigned the Middle East exclusively to Bill Rogers and his Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, Joseph Sisco. I did this partly because I felt that [Henry] Kissinger's Jewish background would put him at a disadvantage

during the delicate initial negotiations for the reopening of diplomatic relations with the Arab states. . . . It was clearly in America's interests to halt the Soviet domination of the Arab Mideast. To do so would require broadening American relations with the Arab countries.³

Thus, Nixon considered the Middle East an important strategic region. The United Kingdom had officially announced its withdrawal from the region in 1971, and Nixon was clearly concerned about the consequences of a power vacuum. Such a vacuum might tempt the Soviets to advance their interests and influence, tipping the Cold War balance in their favor. The United States could not remain indifferent to this possibility.

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Adviser, also emphasized weakening Soviet influence in the region. He saw the potential to strengthen American alliances and deter Soviet allies. Specifically, Kissinger believed it was important to guarantee Israeli security, maintain Israeli military superiority over the Arab states, and frustrate Soviet influence throughout the region. Thus, impartiality would prove difficult in the region since both Nixon and Kissinger emphasized Soviet motives and interests in the Middle East. As a result, they focused on weakening Soviet influence in the region, which naturally meant strengthening the American alliance with Israel.⁴

Nixon and Kissinger took a global approach to the region; the region mattered less than how the conflict in the region affected Cold War politics. This contrasted with the Department of State's approach, which viewed the conflict as a specific issue, which had little to do with the Soviet Union. However, Nixon's distaste for State's career bureaucrats was clear; in a conversation with Army Vice Chief of Staff Alexander Haig in 1973, Nixon argued, "We can't let State handle the Middle East; they'll screw it up. . . . I have no confidence in State."⁵ This contradicted his initial inclination, noted earlier, to rely on the Department of State for his Middle East policy, demonstrating Kissinger's influence on Nixon's views. Initially, this led Nixon and Kissinger to support a stalemate in the region that limited Soviet and Arab options.⁶

Reflecting the White House's global perspective, National Security Decision Memorandum 92 approved a general strategy to promote cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia to maintain stability in the area in the wake of the vacuum created by the British withdrawal.⁷ According to a memorandum from Henry Kissinger to the president on June 10, 1970:

The situation in the Middle East is now the most dangerous we face. . . . Moreover, the question of the U.S. position there giving way to Soviet predominance is no longer academic. . . . The near term Soviet objective in the Middle East is to destroy Western influence.⁸

To ensure Iranian strength, the Nixon administration provided Iran with F-14 and F-15 aircraft, and agreed to assist Iran in aiding the Kurds in an uprising against Iraq. This weakened Soviet-leaning Iraq, reducing its potential to confront Israel

in any future conflict. This proved significant during the Yom Kippur War; as Kissinger explained, “The benefit of Nixon’s Kurdish decision was apparent in just over a year: only one Iraqi division was available to participate in the October 1973 Middle East war.”⁹

Nixon and Kissinger’s views on the Middle East were clearly shaped by the Cold War. They relied on conventional ideas about Israel and its role in the global struggle. The Cold War focus naturally meant that Nixon would emphasize the American relationship with Israel over a relationship with its Arab neighbors. Despite his desire for impartiality, and his administration’s policy of engaging the Arab states to undermine Soviet influence, Nixon guaranteed Israel’s security as a primary instrument for thwarting Soviet advances. As a result, the Arab states, as well as the Palestinians, were at a serious disadvantage in dealing with the Nixon administration.

In addition, Nixon’s perceptions of Israel and Israelis played an important role in his policies. He described the Israelis and their leaders as “intelligent and tough people . . . surrounded by enemies,”¹⁰ while routinely labeling Palestinians as “extremists.”¹¹ Nixon had a particularly high opinion of Israel’s prime minister Golda Meir: “of all the world leaders I had met none had greater courage, intelligence, stamina, determination, or dedication to their country than Golda Meir.”¹² Nixon admired Israeli patriotism and liked that they showed “guts” and “moxie.”¹³ In a conversation with Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, Nixon told Dayan of his “great admiration for the people of Israel”; he was “tremendously impressed by their spirit.”¹⁴ Arabs, on the other hand, did not fare that well; he described Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, for example, as “belligerent.”¹⁵ In addition, Arabs were “radical,” and Palestinians exhibiting the same toughness in negotiations as Israelis were problematic.¹⁶ The administration also referred to Arabs as irrational.¹⁷

Nixon’s policy toward Israel was often contradictory, wavering between a global approach focused on Cold War interests and his concern for domestic political interests. Domestically, Nixon viewed the Jewish community negatively. In a conversation with the Reverend Billy Graham, who voiced a belief that Jews had a stranglehold on the American media, Nixon agreed, suggesting, “every Democratic candidate will owe his election to Jewish people,” and he called American Jews an “irreligious, atheistic, immoral bunch of bastards.” However, Nixon continued to think differently about Israel, arguing the “best Jews are actually the Israeli Jews.”¹⁸ Furthermore, in his memoirs, Nixon wrote:

I was in a unique position of being politically un beholden to the [Jewish pressure groups in the United States], and this meant that I was more readily trusted by opposing or competing groups; this, in turn, meant that I had more flexibility and freedom to do solely what I thought was the right thing.¹⁹

Nixon viewed the American Jewish community as “unyielding and shortsighted” in their attitudes, and he was determined not to be “pro-Israel because of the Jewish vote.”²⁰

At the same time, Nixon emphasized the importance of Israel in the global Cold War. He wrote:

We are *for* Israel because Israel . . . is the only state in the Mideast which is *pro*-freedom and an effective opponent to Soviet expansion. . . . What all this adds up to is that Mrs. Meir, Rabin . . . must . . . take a strong stand against Soviet expansionism in the Mideast.²¹

Nixon's views of Israel were not as personal as they were with Johnson. Instead, Nixon took a realist approach to Israel, considering its position and significance in the wider Cold War.

After the [1967 Six Day War] high-level visits between Moscow and Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad produced a massive new infusion of Soviet money, men, and materiel. The Soviets wanted to maintain their presence in the Middle East, not because of ideological support for the cause of Arab unity but because it was through Egypt and other Arab countries that the Soviets could gain access to what the Russians had always wanted—land, oil, power, and the warm waters of the Mediterranean. As I commented to Bill Rogers, “The difference between our goal and the Soviet goal in the Middle East is very simple but fundamental. *We* want peace. *They* want the Middle East.” . . . Israel must understand that I have no illusions about Soviet motives. . . . Perhaps I even understand them better than Israel itself.²²

Nixon, Kissinger, and the Rogers Plan

Early in his administration, Nixon sent former Pennsylvania governor William Scranton on a fact-finding mission to the Middle East. Scranton returned, suggesting that the United States should adopt a more even-handed approach to the conflict. He argued:

We are interested, very interested, in Israel and its security, and we should be. But it is important to point out in the Middle East . . . and around the world that we are interested in other countries in the area and have friends among them.²³

Ironically, Nixon's concerns about the American Jewish community led the administration to distance itself from Scranton. Nixon determined that an impartial approach was not politically profitable, and the Scranton mission was forgotten, including in Nixon's memoirs.

Instead, Nixon focused on a potential Soviet-American confrontation in the region. In doing so, Nixon simplified the conflict, arguing that “the Soviets are the main cause of Middle East tensions.”²⁴ While the Soviets were certainly exploiting mutual hostilities in the region and openly supporting Arab nationalism, this simplification blinded the administration to regionally situated causes of

the conflict. Israeli leaders understood this, manipulated the situation, and often argued that the Soviet Union guided Arab actions. Israeli leaders affirmed Nixon's view that Soviet mischief was the root cause of protracted conflict in the region. On August 15, 1970, for example, Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin told Henry Kissinger, "Israel is now under the direct threat of a Soviet pistol . . . a Soviet threat—a threat which is designed to bring Israel to its knees." Kissinger assured Rabin that Nixon was committed to frustrate Soviet influence in the Middle East.²⁵ Israeli leaders used American concerns about the Soviet Union to their advantage. Israeli prime minister Golda Meir told American ambassador Kenneth Keating, "the entire free world should realize that an important [byproduct] of U.S. assistance to Israel will be to preclude Soviet domination of the Mid East."²⁶

Despite agreement on Soviet motives, American-Israeli relations during Nixon's first year in office were tense. Nixon had given control of policy in the Middle East to Secretary of State Rogers, and Rogers pursued his own peace initiative. The Rogers Plan, announced in December 1969, largely followed United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. The Plan called on Israel to return the territories occupied in the 1967 war in exchange for Arab pledges to end the state of war and respect the territorial integrity of Israel. Rogers's even-handed approach was doomed from the start; both the Israeli government and the American Jewish community harshly criticized it. The Israeli Cabinet rejected the attempt to determine the outcome of the conflict, arguing, "The proposals submitted by the U.S. cannot but be construed by the aggressive Arab rulers as an attempt to appease them, at Israel's expense."²⁷

Tensions were running high. Leonard Garment, White House adviser on Jewish affairs, documented Israeli anger. According to sources, Prime Minister Meir described the Plan as "scandal" and "calamitous," and on a "personal level she was 'bitterly disappointed,' 'heart-broken'." Meir was "'furious' at State's 'cynicism'." Ambassador Rabin, too, was "'deeply hurt and offended' by State's handling of the whole matter." Furthermore, the Israeli government suspected that the State Department was attempting to "separate the U.S. once and for all from Israel."²⁸ The rift served to confirm Nixon's views of State, isolate Rogers from the president, and shift responsibility for Middle East policy to Kissinger.

The Plan elevated Kissinger and only served to move the administration closer to the Israeli position. Kissinger argued, "the plan encouraged extremist elements among the Arabs, gratuitously offended the Israelis, and earned the contempt of the Soviets."²⁹ Kissinger told Israeli foreign minister Eban, "There has been no change in U.S. attitude toward Israel . . . we have no intention of diminishing Israel's security . . . our objective remains to enhance Israel's long-term security."³⁰ In addition, the administration did everything it could to distance itself from the Plan. Kissinger noted, "the 'Rogers Plan' . . . was aptly named and did not originate in the White House."³¹ Nixon supported Kissinger's view, arguing:

I knew that the Rogers Plan could never be implemented, but I believed that it was important to let the Arab world know that the United States did not

automatically dismiss its case regarding the occupied territories or rule out a compromise settlement of the conflicting claims.³²

The American Embassy in Israel also appeared to be moving closer to Nixon and Kissinger's view, so by the end of 1969, the administration's impartiality had clearly veered toward the Israeli position. In a telegram titled "US Representation in Israel and the Jerusalem Problem," the Embassy proposed a "de facto transfer of certain . . . offices from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Original emphasis)." According to the Embassy:

We must plan our future relations with Israel on the assumption that Jerusalem will remain its seat of Government. . . . Since the June 1967 war the United States has continued to adhere to past policy regarding Jerusalem but at the same time we have moved to adapt our position to the changed circumstances. . . . [W]e continue to refuse to recognize Israeli annexation . . . and of course we refuse to recognize, and have actively opposed, steps taken by Israel with the intent of annexing the . . . city. . . . Although . . . our own thinking runs in the direction of keeping the city unified.³³

The accommodation toward the Israeli position that had begun in the Johnson administration was now hardening in the Nixon administration. A new administration was, once again, caught in a delicate and nearly impossible balancing act and, like its predecessor, inclined to send mixed signals. Harold Saunders, who remained on the National Security Council in the Nixon administration, explained:

The Israeli strategy of sitting tight until the Arabs agree to negotiate does not seem likely to produce a negotiation. Unhappily, when coupled with Israeli statements about its desire to change the borders, the Israeli strategy appears to be designed to cover widening its borders. . . . [T]he US has had to adopt a position which would permit us to say that we are working for peace and are helping to promote Israel's security not its conquests.³⁴

Kissinger agreed, telling Ambassador Rabin, "It is the conviction of our people that it is in the interests of Israel and in the interests of our ability to help Israel that we should not adopt a position of all-out support of Israel's conquests."³⁵

The U.S. Position on Withdrawal: "We Are for Israel"

By the end of the year, the United States outlined its position on withdrawal in a memorandum responding to the French position calling for "complete evacuation of the Jordanian territories." The memorandum argued:

While we . . . could probably agree on a reasonable border if we were drawing it, there remains a fundamental difference between our respective approaches to the question of how the border is determined. We have . . . rejected the

interpretation that Resolution 242 calls for total withdrawal and should continue to do so. . . . [T]he “complete evacuation” or “total withdrawal” principle could be interpreted as including Jerusalem and subsequently applied to Syria. Our position specifically separates Jerusalem from the withdrawal question and leaves the future status of . . . Jerusalem to negotiations. . . . We leave the question of practical security arrangements for the West Bank for the parties to negotiate. . . . No Israeli Cabinet could survive . . . if it accepted a proposition which committed Israel to withdraw one soldier before a signed peace agreement came fully into effect.³⁶

Therefore, while the Nixon administration continued its commitment to withdrawal in theory, it backed the Israeli view that Resolution 242 did not necessarily require complete withdrawal. Instead, American policymakers focused on negotiations as the basis for final borders and spoke of “reasonable,” “defensible,” and “recognized” boundaries. Like the Johnson administration before it, the administration had moved toward acquiescence to and accommodation of the Israeli position.

By March 1970, President Nixon had abandoned impartiality in the conflict. In a memorandum to Kissinger responding to criticism that the administration was delaying the delivery of weapons to Israel, Nixon argued:

We are for Israel because Israel . . . is the only state in the Mideast which is pro freedom and an effective opponent to Soviet expansion. . . . It is time for Israel . . . to face up to the fact that their only reliable friends are the hawks in this country—those that are hawks in the best sense when it comes to Soviet expansionism any place in the world. . . . What they must realize is that people like RN . . . will stand up for them when the crunch comes basically because we admire them for their character and their strength and because we see in Israel the only state in that part of the world which will not become an abject tool of Soviet policy . . . RN . . . does not want to see Israel go down the drain and makes an absolute commitment that he will see to it that Israel always has ‘an edge’ (Original emphasis).³⁷

Kissinger followed suit. In the summer, Kissinger argued that Soviet influence necessitated further support for Israel. While Kissinger continued to support the need for some form of Israeli withdrawal, he also understood the threat Israel faced.

The situation in the Middle East is now the most dangerous we face. . . . The problem is that the USSR has established a new kind of foothold in the UAR and the U.S. has a strong interest in preventing its consolidation and expansion. . . . It is sometimes argued that the U.S. can only preserve its position in the Arab world by forcing Israeli withdrawal and placating the Arabs. The supposition . . . is that if there is a peace settlement the Arab radicals will cease to be a threat. Arab radicalism . . . is not just a product of

the Arab-Israeli impasse. It exploits that impasse for its own ends, but it has roots of its own. . . . Without some commitment from the U.S. that Israel will have the means of defense, it is impossible to expect Israel even to consider withdrawal.³⁸

In the negotiations over the delay in the supply of military equipment, Israeli ambassador Yitzhak Rabin expressed Israeli anger, arguing that Israel was being asked to negotiate with the Arabs from a weakened position. Assistant Secretary of State Sisco responded with the strongest assertion that the United States would not commit Israel to total withdrawal:

Sisco [pointed] out that Israel [was] being asked to commit itself to the principle of withdrawal. This would leave to parties to work out terms of withdrawal and final borders by negotiation. [The United States] did not buy the Soviet-Arab position on withdrawal.³⁹

The Israelis continued to push the administration for confirmation that the United States supported the Israeli interpretation of withdrawal and Resolution 242. In multiple exchanges throughout the summer of 1970, the administration affirmed its support for the Israeli position, acknowledging that it opposed interpretations of withdrawal that sought to impose pre-1967 borders. In a letter to Israeli prime minister Meir, July 23, 1970, President Nixon wrote:

The Egyptians have informed us. . . [they] will continue to press [for] . . . total Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in the 1967 conflict to the pre-June 5 lines. . . . I want to assure you that we will not press Israel to accept [this]. Our position on withdrawal is that the final borders must be agreed between the parties by means of negotiations. Moreover, we will not press Israel to accept a refugee solution which would alter fundamentally the Jewish character of the state of Israel or jeopardize your security. We will also adhere strictly and firmly to the fundamental principle that there must be a peace agreement in which each of the parties undertakes reciprocal obligations . . . and that no Israeli soldier should be withdrawn from the occupied territories until a binding contractual peace agreement satisfactory to you has been achieved.⁴⁰

However, this did not satisfy the Israelis, and Secretary Rogers instructed Sisco to deliver an oral message through Ambassador Rabin to Israeli foreign minister Eban to clarify the American position and assure the Israeli government of American support. The Israeli government asked for a clarification of the American position as follows:

The US Government undertakes to reject in all international forums any interpretation of Security Council Resolution 242 that would seek to define "withdrawal" as withdrawal of Israel forces to June 4, 1967 lines. Moreover,

the US . . . undertakes to exercise its right of veto in the Security Council, in the event of the Council seeking to adopt such an interpretation.

Sisco responded:

The President has informed the Prime Minister that he will not press Israel to accept total Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in the 1967 conflict to the pre-June 5 lines. We would take the same position in the Security Council and other international forums . . . and would oppose any resolution to this effect.⁴¹

The administration had confirmed that it did not support the formula of total withdrawal from the occupied territories. Moreover, the administration began to move away from withdrawal as a concept, emphasizing instead the concept of secure and recognized borders.

In August, Harold Saunders clearly laid out the American position to Kissinger; furthermore, the administration understood that some Israeli leaders desired significant territorial changes. According to Saunders,

in [Nixon's] letter of July 24 and Sisco on July 27 [they] explicitly assured Israel that the U.S. would not interpret [the 242] formula to mean "total withdrawal." That is, the U.S. would not accept an Arab interpretation of its formula. [The Arabs have treated "principle of withdrawal" as meaning "total withdrawal".] . . . The crux of the matter is. . . [a]t least some members of the [Israeli] Cabinet want to change Israel's borders substantially. Through two years of negotiating. . . "the principle of withdrawal" has become the Arab phrase for total withdrawal while "withdrawal to secure and recognized boundaries" has become the Israeli way of keeping the door open to negotiate boundary changes. The U.S. compromise . . . contains the phrase "withdrawal to secure and recognized boundaries."⁴²

The American position, therefore, accepted the formula that withdrawal, as outlined in Resolution 242, would not be interpreted as restricting Israel's bargaining power. Furthermore, the administration clearly understood that this meant that Israel had the freedom to negotiate a change from its pre-June 4, 1967, borders. Then, again, on December 3, 1970, President Nixon wrote to Prime Minister Meir, repeating:

We will not press Israel to accept the positions of the [United Arab Republic] that there must be total Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in the 1967 conflict to the pre-June 5 lines. . . . Our position on withdrawal is that the final borders must be agreed between the parties by means of negotiations. . . . It follows . . . that we could not be a party to an attempt by the Security Council to substitute its judgment for that of the parties with respect to the territorial and other detailed aspects of a settlement.⁴³

Any pretense of impartiality had now vanished from the administration's position.

The Nixon administration maintained that Israeli withdrawal could only begin when the Arab states ended their state of war against Israel and commenced a formal state of peace. The Nixon administration's position, not surprisingly, contrasted with the Soviet position. The administration's focus on Soviet motives and influence in the region had only moved Nixon closer to the Israeli position on withdrawal. While the Soviets demanded total withdrawal, the United States maintained that boundaries should be negotiated; this provided Israel with the freedom to negotiate new borders and locked the United States into the position of supporting Israeli territorial conquests and expansion.

“No Pressure From Here”

While the administration continued to support the Israeli position on withdrawal and Resolution 242, it also sent mixed signals about Israeli actions. The administration raised concerns that those actions were prejudging negotiations and a final settlement. In essence, the administration was trying to return to a balanced policy to cultivate Arab moderates, like Jordan, and reduce Soviet influence in the region, but that was increasingly more difficult. In April, the administration reiterated its previous position on withdrawal in the context of potential negotiations with Egypt, stating:

No Israeli soldiers should be withdrawn from occupied territories until a binding contractual peace agreement satisfactory to Israel has been achieved. We understand fully that Israeli willingness to pull back its forces in accordance with an interim agreement does not create an added obligation to make a further withdrawal in the absence of a peace agreement, and we agree that no added commitment would be involved on the part of Israel. . . . We understand clearly that a pullback by Israel in accordance with the . . . agreement does not imply Israeli willingness to future withdrawal to the international border or any other line not agreed to in the course of negotiations. Our view regarding borders remains that Resolution 242 neither endorses or excludes the pre-June 5, 1967 lines, in all or in part, as the lines to which Israel will withdraw.⁴⁴

At the same time, the administration began to move toward a formulation that later administrations would rely on. Increasingly, rather than opposing Israeli actions in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, the United States focused on Israeli policies, including settlements, as actions that prejudged a final settlement, and were, therefore, not illegitimate, but obstacles to peace.

In May, Jordan was pushing for United Nations Security Council measures against Israel for its actions in Jerusalem. Undersecretary Sisco met with Ambassador Rabin and expressed American concern for “unilateral de facto steps Israel [was] taking in Jerusalem which tended to prejudge the settlement.” Sisco pushed Rabin to get the Israeli government to “freeze their actions” to “relieve pressure

impelling [the] Jordanians to resort to [the] Security Council and to raise Israel as a disruptive issue."⁴⁵ In a follow-up meeting, Sisco again pressed Rabin, suggesting it would be "helpful" if Israel could respond to Jordanian concerns about Jerusalem. Sisco added, "What Israel should do we left [for] Israel to decide."⁴⁶ As he did earlier, Sisco sent mixed signals, asking the Israelis to consider curtailing their actions in Jerusalem, but leaving it to the Israelis to determine the proper course of action. Moreover, the American Embassy in Israel was encouraging the status quo. In a telegram to the State Department, Deputy Chief of Mission Joseph Zurhellen argued:

[The] Israelis [are] convinced [the] status quo on [the] West Bank can go on for years without risk of significant violence and consequently without constituting [a] threat to any outside power. . . . [The] Israelis are coming to [the] conclusion that they can hold out for, and get, whatever they want on [the] West Bank. . . . Where does this leave the U.S. . . ? In the view of [the] Embassy, while [the] situation is far from ideal . . . it is also far from being intolerable.⁴⁷

Kissinger expressed his strong criticisms of the State Department's handling of the issue. In a memorandum for President Nixon, Kissinger argued that American policy failed to achieve its objectives in the Middle East and was provoking Soviet influence in the region. Most significantly, Kissinger suggested, "Our policy contradicts the core of the U.S. peace initiative by committing us to underwrite continued Israeli occupation rather than encouraging withdrawal. . . . The time has come to change our policy."⁴⁸ Despite Kissinger's suggestion, the policy did not change.

In fact, Kissinger ensured that the United States would move even closer to the Israeli position on withdrawal and settlements. In a conversation with King Hussein of Jordan, Kissinger explained, "Aside from Jerusalem, if the principle of sovereignty could be preserved in some way, then the presence of settlements on security grounds can be considered."⁴⁹ The administration was clearly aware of the predicament they were in; on the one hand, they continued to protest Israeli occupation policies, especially settlements, but on the other hand, they had "no framework for dealing with these changes other than to regret any actions that make a settlement more difficult."⁵⁰ Thus, the administration publicly and privately continued to express concerns to the Israelis but acquiesced to the status quo.

Just prior to his becoming Secretary of State in September 1973, Kissinger argued:

It doesn't help to just urge the Israelis to be flexible in the abstract. We have to know what we want from them. . . . It's insane to stir up the Jewish groups when we have nothing concrete in mind and nothing to work with. If Egypt were to make a proposal, then we could go to the Israelis and urge them to shape up. . . . But if the Egyptians say the entrance price for

negotiations is Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders, and then the Israelis should negotiate with the Palestinians, this is a dream land. No Israeli will accept it. . . . [W]e need to stop grandstanding. . . . If we move away from Israel now without getting anything in return from the Arabs, it will simply whet their appetite.⁵¹

And, soon after, Kissinger told the Israelis, “There will be no pressure from here. . . . As long as [the Arabs] insist on total withdrawal as a precondition, there is no prospect of a negotiation.”⁵²

Shortly after Rogers resigned as Secretary of State, the administration faced a crisis regarding Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. The Israeli Labor Party approved a platform that gave support to settlements and investment in the occupied territories. Specifically, the Labor platform called for the expansion of Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries, loosening restrictions on the purchase of private lands in the occupied territories, and the construction of a sizable settlement in the Sinai.⁵³ The State Department, in particular, was concerned about minimizing damage to American interests and urged a “low-key demarche” expressing the concerns, and wanted White House support for its position. Moreover, the State Department believed it was important to “restate our position to the Israelis” because American “silence in the face of this latest development may be construed . . . as acquiescence, and so encourage the pace of this activity.”⁵⁴

Despite these urgings, in a meeting with Israeli ambassador Simcha Dinitz on September 10, 1973, Kissinger did not raise the issue. Instead, he instructed Sisco to “try to persuade [the Israelis] to delay implementation of the new program.” He explicitly noted “not to make a public demarche.”⁵⁵ Rather than putting further pressure on Israel, Kissinger focused on supporting the Israelis and expressed concern about Americans’ misunderstanding of the issues. Additionally, he laid out a strategy of ensuring that Israel would not face an Arab bloc in negotiations. Most significantly, Kissinger made clear that the United States was not planning to push Israel into negotiations nor was it going to force Israel to abandon its positions. Rather, the United States wanted perceived momentum in the peace process to prevent Israel from being perceived as obstructionist.

The trouble is, the U.S. public doesn’t understand what it really is that the Arabs are proposing—that as a precondition for a negotiation you give up all the territory in exchange for an “end to the state of belligerency,” which is indistinguishable from the ceasefire that exists. They think the issue is Israeli intransigence. Most people don’t understand. . . . [T]here is no immediate pressure. . . . It is absolutely necessary that you don’t let yourself be put into the position of looking like the obstacle to peace. You must keep the Arabs on the defensive. . . . My strategy is to exhaust the Arabs. . . . If we can figure out some way to split the Saudis off. . . . Jordan is already split off. . . . Egypt is already willing to make a separate peace. . . . We are not asking you to give up essential positions.⁵⁶

By the end of September, Kissinger had clearly accepted the Israeli position. In a conversation with William Buffum, United States Ambassador to Lebanon, who argued, “Additional [American] assistance [for Israel] looks like it’s for defense of conquered territory rather than the protection of the homeland,” Kissinger responded by asking “Why should the Israelis give up anything?”⁵⁷ And, in his memoirs, Kissinger explained that the United States was not going to rush the negotiation process: “I saw no need for haste. . . . Above all, I calculated that the longer the process went on, the more likely Sadat would seek to deal with us directly.”⁵⁸ In October 1973, war once again erupted in the region. The Yom Kippur War moved America even further into the Israeli camp.

The October War and Its Aftermath

The October War confirmed the administration’s inclinations on withdrawal. In telephone conversations with Kissinger, President Nixon conceded some Israeli territorial acquisition. Nixon said:

[W]e must have a diplomatic settlement. . . . Fortunately, the Israelis will beat these guys so badly. . . . You and I both know they can’t go back to the other borders. But we must not . . . say that . . . we just go on with the status quo.⁵⁹

Kissinger agreed, suggesting, “I think what we need now—if we can find a resolution that doesn’t flatly say the 67 borders, but leaves it open—something that invokes the Security Council resolution 242 that speaks of withdrawals.”⁶⁰ Both Nixon and Kissinger focused on a diplomatic settlement that would undermine Soviet influence but also ensure Israeli security. The October War intensified the administration’s mixed signals. On the one hand, they supported the Israeli interpretation of Resolution 242, arguing that 242 did not call for total withdrawal. On the other hand, they continued to seek a diplomatic solution that restored Arab sovereignty to the occupied territories. Talking points during the October War underscored the contradictions.

I know that you are concerned by reports of US support for Israel. . . . We do not uphold the post-1967 ceasefire lines as Israel’s final borders. We do feel, however, that the issues of borders and Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories cannot be resolved by force. . . . In our view, the key to peace is to find a way in which Arab sovereignty over the occupied territories and Israeli security can be reconciled. . . . We have noted President Sadat’s call for a ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders. We are certain that Israel will refuse such an arrangement and we will not impose such an outcome on her. In our view, the Arabs stand a better chance of recovering their territory through negotiations than through war.⁶¹

As the October War ended, negotiations at the United Nations Security Council produced Resolution 338, which called for implementation of Resolution 242.⁶²

The debate over the meaning of withdrawal took center-stage once again. The Israeli position remained that withdrawal only referred to withdrawal to secure, defensible, and agreed upon borders, and that withdrawal should not take place until a final peace agreement. The Arab position, by contrast, treated withdrawal in principle, as total withdrawal. Since 1967, "Israel [had] not been asked to undertake any territorial commitments by the US. Rather, Israel. . . 'received support' for its stand that there will be no Israeli withdrawal until a reciprocal and binding peace agreement is reached."⁶³ The administration's position, however, was filled with contradictions. On the one hand, the United States was "prepared to allow Israel to negotiate for what it can get within reasonable limits," thus supporting limited territorial expansion. As Harold Saunders explained, "We are prepared to allow Israel to bargain for whatever terms it can get." Yet, on the other hand, the United States did not want to support an Israeli "right to expand."⁶⁴ The administration was trying to have it both ways. Support of undefined Israeli expansion, albeit limited, left the door open to territorial acquisition and settlements.

In the wake of the October War, Kissinger pursued diplomacy in an attempt to broker peace. Kissinger's strategy enhanced the Israeli position by avoiding a scenario where the Israelis would be compelled to withdraw from all of the territories occupied in 1967. Moreover, it was designed to handle an additional factor complicating Kissinger's efforts: the Palestinians in the West Bank and their desires for self-determination. The October War reinforced the American view that the Palestinians were Soviet-influenced, and that the Palestinians were radical terrorists bent on the destruction of Israel and any moderation by the Palestinian leadership was simply a deception. This view moved the administration closer to Israel and reinforced Israeli control of the West Bank and a unified Jerusalem. Moreover, it encouraged the expansion of Israeli control.⁶⁵ While Kissinger pressed to enhance Jordan's role in the West Bank to prevent "radical Palestinians" from taking over, he also realized that "Israel will not turn over the West Bank to radicals."⁶⁶ American policy sidelined the Palestinians, delaying and evading a comprehensive peace settlement.

As a result, Israeli demands increased, and American policymakers acquiesced further. The step-by-step, limited diplomatic engagement played right into Israel's hands. On Jordan-Israel peace negotiations, in particular, the administration determined that little progress could be made, tacitly supporting the settlement project in the West Bank, and focusing on Jordanian control of the Palestinians. A National Security Council (NSC) memorandum on the "Next Steps Toward an Arab-Israeli Settlement" argued:

It is not clear exactly what we can hope to achieve on [the Jordan-Israel] front now. . . . [A]ny agreement should be portrayed as "disengagement"—not as a political step toward a final settlement but rather a "separation of forces," a "preliminary stage," or something of this nature. . . . [T]he following elements might be included: A withdrawal of Israeli and Jordanian regular forces from the Jordan Valley. . . . To the west of the Jordan River, Jordanian-Palestinian civilian authority would be restored within the disengagement

zone on the West Bank. . . . Some arrangement would be made allowing eight Israeli settlements to stay in the area. . . . A freeze would be agreed, at least informally, on further Israeli land purchases anywhere in the West Bank or Gaza. . . . Press the Israelis to move toward at least a limited agreement on disengagement.⁶⁷

However, the rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) as a leader of the Palestinians presented both an existential threat to the Israelis and a real threat to American interests.

Once again, Kissinger worked to ensure that the Palestinians were bypassed in any negotiations, giving greater control over the West Bank to Israel. From Kissinger's perspective, the security concerns raised by terrorism outweighed other concerns. At the same time, Israeli intransigence in negotiations, particularly with Syria, was leading President Nixon to consider cutting off Israeli aid to force them to the table. Kissinger, however, pushed to prevent this.

With respect to your recent message on cutting off Israel's aid, I must tell you as strongly as I can that such a course would be disastrous. . . . On an immediate tactical level an ultimatum . . . would leave to an explosion here. With 85 Israeli children held by terrorists and three Katyusha rockets found at the outskirts of Jerusalem . . . a cutoff of US aid would produce hysteria. . . . The Israeli position, while tough and shortsighted, falls short of the intransigence that would warrant the contemplated step.⁶⁸

Nixon accepted Kissinger's argument and returned to his staunch support of Israel. In a meeting with Israeli prime minister Rabin in June 1974, Nixon emphasized America's Cold War interests and the importance of détente to Israel and reiterated that he would not pressure Israel on negotiations.

I have no illusions, just as you have no illusions, about the Communists, about the Russians . . . and, frankly, their anti-Semitism. . . . I abhor it. . . . I am simply suggesting . . . that the détente with the Soviets . . . is important to Israel and it is also important to the international Jewish community. . . . [T]he real question is whether or not we can do more good talking to them, very quietly, not making a big show about it, not making it a case of manhood with them or [defense] of their system, by having communication with them. Or whether we say, no, because of the Jewish community in the United States and others who support them. . . . Now, let's talk about détente with regard to Israel. . . . The Soviets supported Syria and . . . Egypt and it was Soviet arms in Syria and . . . Egypt that killed a lot of Israelis. . . . [T]he Soviets wanted a strategic position in the Mid-East and . . . saw an opportunity there. The United States . . . stood by Israel every time there was a crisis. . . . [W]e are not going to stand by and allow a Soviet military presence in the Mid-East. . . . I believe . . . that détente with the Soviets . . . is in the interest, and we will make it in the interest, of a more liberalized Soviet policy with

regard to the emigration of the Jews. . . . Israel does need to be strong. . . . I am not in any position here to say what the settlement ought to be, what it ought not to be. . . . there are still very tough problems to negotiate. . . . As far as our position is concerned, our support of Israel remains unchanged.⁶⁹

Increasingly, the administration viewed negotiations between Jordan and Israel over the fate of the West Bank as intractable. Additionally, Nixon and Kissinger saw the Palestinians as a potential source of Soviet influence in the region. As a result, the administration pursued simultaneous courses of action. While they worked to engage moderate elements of the Palestinians in a peace process, they strengthened the Israeli position to exert further control over radical Palestinians.⁷⁰ As Nixon's term was unceremoniously ending, Kissinger remained. On the eve of Nixon's resignation, American policy still embodied contradictions and mixed signals. The administration continued to promote peace but increasingly focused on developing plans that were "sufficiently modest in scope for Israel to accept." Most significantly, the administration acknowledged that Israeli settlements in the West Bank, in particular, would "remain in place."⁷¹

Ford's Images of Israel

On August 9, 1974, Gerald R. Ford became the first person to become president of the United States without having been elected to either the office of vice president or president. He succeeded to the presidency in the wake of the Watergate scandal and Richard Nixon's resignation. Less than one year earlier, on October 10, 1973, Ford had become vice president following Spiro Agnew's resignation. As vice president, Ford was not an active participant in the Nixon foreign policy process and, as president, Ford's main concern was "healing" the wounds of Watergate and Nixon's resignation. As a result, Ford's intention was to maintain continuity in foreign policy; in practice, this meant continuing the policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union and the search for peace in the Middle East. In fact, the one notable exception to his *détente* policy was that the Soviets were to be kept out of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Continuity in foreign policy was maintained by keeping Henry Kissinger as secretary of State. Not unlike Nixon, Ford was impressed by Kissinger's knowledge of foreign affairs and trusted and respected him; this, in turn, increased Kissinger's power and independence. Ford explained his admiration of Kissinger in his memoirs.

It would be hard for me to overstate the . . . affection I had for Henry. . . . Our personalities meshed. I respected his expertise in foreign policy and he respected my judgment in domestic politics. . . . Kissinger was superb as Secretary of State.⁷²

Kissinger's independence was particularly prominent in Ford's Middle East policy, which became a focus of the administration's brief term in office.

Ford demonstrated his support for Israel when he was a member of Congress. Ford made his mark as an early supporter of the movement to assist Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. On December 13, 1971, Ford, then Republican House minority leader, spoke at the Madison Square Garden rally for Soviet Jewry.

I came here . . . to discuss what the United States Government can do to help Soviet Jewry. . . . [T]he President of the United States has an historic opportunity to serve a compelling humanitarian cause on his forthcoming visit to the Soviet Union. . . . I have offered my support for a House concurrent resolution that calls for the free exercise of religion in the Soviet Union and asks that country to permit its citizens to emigrate to countries of their choice.⁷³

Throughout his congressional career, Ford had prioritized domestic politics and focused on political tactics and feasibility. He was instinctually political, and, as a result, relied on Kissinger for policy orientation and details. Ford was more inclined toward the Israeli perspective and position than Nixon.

Despite his strong support for Israel, Ford desired Israeli cooperation in the peace process, viewing peace as a way to achieve security and stability in the region. In his memoirs, Ford wrote:

I began to question the rationale for our policy. I wanted the Israelis to recognize that there had to be some *quid pro quo*. If we were going to build up their military capabilities, we . . . had to see some flexibility to achieve . . . peace.⁷⁴

Thus, Ford was prepared to pressure Israel to achieve peace in the Middle East. Ultimately, Ford and Kissinger feared that Israeli intransigence in the peace process was damaging its security and American interests in the Middle East. Yet, like his predecessors, Ford sent mixed signals and, despite his reassessment of the American relationship with Israel, further cemented American support of the Israeli position on territorial withdrawal and settlements.

Ford and Israeli-Egyptian Disengagement

Relations with Israel during the Ford administration were challenged by crisis. Egypt, Israel, and the United States assumed that unless substantial progress was made on the Arab-Israeli peace process, hostilities in the region would recommence. Egypt wanted to regain full control over the Sinai Peninsula, while Israel, worried about its security, was concerned about making territorial concessions. However, Israel was willing to consider moving its forces eastward, as long as it retained control over key transportation routes and oil fields in the region. In return, of course, Israel expected concessions from Egypt; most importantly, Israel wanted an end to the state of belligerency with and recognition from Egypt.

American pressure was significant during this period, since American-supplied military equipment during the 1973 October War had given Israel a decisive

advantage in the region. Without American pressure and willingness to engage in peace, Israel had no real incentive to offer concessions. President Ford wanted to prevent a reemergence of conflict in the region, while at the same time preventing Egypt from being increasingly influenced by the Soviet Union. Ultimately, the Ford administration pursued peace and mediation in the region as a way to ensure the exclusion of the Soviet Union from the peace process.

Thus, early in his administration, Ford supported Kissinger's step-by-step approach in the peace process. In one of his first conversations with the new president, Kissinger argued:

The basic strategy has been this: Israel can't stand and we can't handle dealing with all these issues at once. That is what the Soviet Union wants. . . . We must move step by step. . . . We use your newness to delay.⁷⁵

Kissinger's step-by-step approach favored the Israeli position, allowing him to avoid being "pinned down," particularly on the question of borders.⁷⁶ In addition, the United States worked to find ways to facilitate Israeli concessions. On the eve of Israeli prime minister Rabin's visit to the United States, a policy briefing paper argued, "Withdrawal may be relatively easier for Israel to accept if the new line is nowhere the same as the pre-1967 border."⁷⁷ The United States was supporting the Israeli interpretation of Resolution 242 once again. The United States also continued to send mixed signals, suggesting:

A fundamental objective of our Middle East policy since the October war has been to slow the pace of diplomatic efforts aiming at a comprehensive settlement to accommodate the . . . Israeli Government. At the same time, we have believed it essential to keep this step-by-step process moving along. . . . The main point is that a breakdown in the negotiations now will lead to the coalescence again of the international forces which were lined up against Israel after last October's war. . . . If these forces come together again, there will be tremendous pressure on Israel to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders.⁷⁸

In addition to favoring the Israeli position on the interpretation of Resolution 242, the United States expressed concern about Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. However, that concern emphasized the impact of settlements on the peace process and American interests in the region, and encouraged "a silent moratorium on further settlement activities."⁷⁹ Moreover, the United States developed a position to take on the Israeli settlement policy that fell short of declaring the settlements illegal. In a cable to the American Embassies in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt regarding questions about Israeli construction in the occupied territories, Kissinger only expressed American concern.

Ambassador is authorized to take the line below . . . for US policy regarding Israeli settlements in areas occupied in 1967. Secretary is keenly aware that existence of Israeli settlements in Golan, on West Bank, and in Sinai

represents difficult problem for peace-making process. . . . Secretary has made clear to Israelis US concern about problems which settlements, actual and potential, pose for negotiations. US has said repeatedly it does not accept any unilateral action by any party as prejudging elements of a negotiated settlement.

The cable also acknowledged the weakness of this policy.

FYI: We recognize that the above will be less than fully satisfactory. . . . Nevertheless, it is only honest and responsible answer we can give to difficult question. . . . We are not able at this stage . . . to do more than make US position clear as a basis for discussion later.⁸⁰

Thus, the United States had settled on a policy that would not directly pressure the Israelis on settlements.

Ford's Failed Reassessment

Despite increasing support for the Israeli position, Ford and Kissinger became frustrated over Israeli intransigence. Kissinger wanted to focus American peace efforts on negotiations between Israel and Egypt, breaking Egypt away from the Soviet Union and preventing the P.L.O. from seizing the moment. Israel's unwillingness to move the peace process forward threatened American interests. Kissinger argued:

In the Middle East, the Israelis are the villains. . . . The key is whether we can get a separate Egyptian-Israeli negotiation going. The only alternative would be negotiation on the Golan, or with the PLO, and that would require real blood. If we block the PLO . . . the Arabs may turn back to [Jordan's King Hussein]. . . . I told Rabin I would not agree to any economic aid . . . unless they would move with Egypt. . . . I may have to go out to the Middle East because the Israelis are such bastards.⁸¹

Ford shared Kissinger's concerns and expressed them in a meeting with Israeli deputy prime minister Yigal Allon in December 1974.

[T]he commitment to Israel's security is of utmost importance to me. . . . We have worked hard to keep things moving, because momentum is vital. I think it is wise to look at what happens if we don't have results. . . . A potential confrontation in the Middle East—I don't know where that would go with the Soviet Union. . . . If there is war, there will be another oil embargo. . . . Israel and the U.S. would be pretty well isolated. . . . We want Israel to be strong, and we have done a good economic and military job on that. Supposing the worst happens—a war—and Israel is successful. The odds are you would be. Suppose the Soviet Union goes further and doesn't back down. . . . I want

to say as a friend . . . that the consequences of the worst lead me to hope we can change things somehow so we can say [peace] is attainable. . . . [O]n the PLO resolution you saw the United States and four others were the only ones against it. We were glad to stand on that. . . . Every head of state I talked to I told that we were pursuing a step-by-step process. I think it is therefore essential that we move and get something of substance.⁸²

Ford reiterated his concerns with Israeli prime minister Golda Meir. Clearly displaying his frustration with the Israelis, Ford threatened to return to the Geneva negotiations, forcing Israel to pursue a comprehensive peace settlement; at the same time, he signaled his reluctance to pursue a comprehensive settlement, emphasizing that it would mean complete withdrawal from the occupied territories.

I fear Israel is getting more and more isolated. Much as I love Israel, I must say I think we must have movement now. If that is not possible, then I am afraid we just ought to go to Geneva, and I don't want that. The first argument would be about the PLO and getting them in. . . . Brezhnev says the 1967 borders. That is impossible. But what can we do?⁸³

Despite his frustration, President Ford continued to support Israel. In February 1975, Ford received a request from a "good friend" who was "very active in Jewish organizations." The friend provided money for a "forest" in Israel and wanted to dedicate it in the president's name. Ford was asked to send a message to be read at the dedication and wanted guidance regarding whether he could send such a message. In his response, NSC staff member Bob Oakley argued that "'tree planting, of course, is the traditional sign of permanency here.' This sums up the problem each time a new tree is planted . . . in the Occupied Territories." Oakley acknowledged "the Israelis are increasingly settling in and developing the Occupied West Bank" and "[o]fficial US endorsement of this activity would run contrary to our policy." However, he continued to focus on the detrimental impact of settlements on future negotiations and did not discuss the legal questions associated with settlement in the territories occupied after 1967. Rather, he described any presidential message as "inappropriate" and noted that "it is standing practice that no Presidential messages are ever sent to foreign events at the request of unofficial Americans." Moreover, Oakley suggested that it would be appropriate to send a thank you note "expressing his appreciation . . . in general terms."⁸⁴ This episode is important for what was not said; policymakers did not define the settlements as illegal, but continued the practices of earlier administrations, focusing on them as obstacles to the peace process and negotiations.

Despite Ford's continued support of Israel, tensions with Israel reached a peak in March 1975 when Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin rejected Egyptian proposals for a settlement. In response, on March 21, Ford announced a reassessment of American policy in the Middle East and withheld aid from Israel.⁸⁵ Ford and Kissinger were furious at what they saw as both a personal affront and an attack

on American interests in the Middle East. In a conversation with Ford, Kissinger argued:

All of my party is outraged at the Israelis. . . . Israel made no serious effort. They kept haggling over details but they showed no serious purposes. . . . The effect on our policy in the Middle East is devastating. The radicals are vindicated. . . . I have never seen such cold-blooded playing with the American national interest. Every Arab was looking to us; we had moved the Soviet Union out of the Middle East. . . . What they have done is destroy this . . . they want a confrontation. Why? Because they see this as a never-ending process. . . . [W]e have to go to Geneva. . . . [W]e have to put forward a global plan, which will inevitably mean close to the '67 borders. . . . The Soviet Union will put forth the '67 borders. . . . They weren't forthcoming at all . . . Rabin . . . said it was a Greek tragedy. I said his proposals were not unreasonable, but they were disastrous. You have been very kind to the Israelis; what I have done is beyond description. And they do this to us at a moment when we need this. It is a disaster for the United States. We had it won—the Soviet Union was out of the Middle East. . . . This is no reflection on you, but Israel doesn't think they have to be afraid of you.⁸⁶

Kissinger lamented what he saw as the failure of the step-by-step approach, which was “designed to protect the Israelis from having to take final decisions on Jerusalem, borders, the West Bank and Gaza and to give them an opportunity to take decisions on a piece-by-piece basis.”⁸⁷

Despite Ford and Kissinger's anger, the threatened reassessment of American policy in the Middle East failed to alter the administration's approach. In a familiar course of events, the Israeli government did not waiver and mobilized its allies in the United States. Two months later, May 22, 1975, a bipartisan letter signed by 76 senators criticized the administration's efforts to blame Israel for the failure of negotiations.⁸⁸ The administration surrendered only supporting bilateral negotiations and committing the United States to limited Israeli withdrawals from the occupied territories. Consideration of a comprehensive settlement of the conflict was abandoned. In exchange for a disengagement agreement between Israel and Egypt in the Sinai, Ford and Kissinger increased Israeli military and economic assistance, agreed not to negotiate with the P.L.O. until it recognized Israel and accepted Resolution 242, guaranteed Israeli oil supplies, and assured Israel that it would not put forward peace plans without their consultation.

With the Sinai disengagement agreement, Israeli policy on settlements in the occupied territories took center-stage. The administration's capitulation to Israel following its threat of reassessment encouraged Israel to stay the course. In December 1975, the Israeli Cabinet considered authorizing new settlements in the occupied territories, in addition to four previously authorized in the Golan Heights. Israel's actions forced a debate within the administration regarding the American position. Most significantly, the administration considered clarifying its position publicly.⁸⁹ The administration stopped short of going public, instead

settling for the threat of going public in the hopes that it might induce a change in Israeli policy. Rather than the administration's threatened demarche, which was withdrawn from consideration,⁹⁰ Kissinger instructed Ambassador Malcolm Toon to make American views clear to the Israelis and note that the subject was discussed.⁹¹

Throughout 1976, the administration was both aware that the United States alone had the power to alter the Israeli policy on settlements⁹² and that the Israelis had a "strong desire to retain the West Bank permanently."⁹³ Yet the administration remained committed to the Israeli position. The administration stressed that American "silence on this issue . . . should not be construed as a lack of real concern" and described settlement activities as "a serious obstacle to peace," but stopped short of being anything more than "disturbed."⁹⁴

In March 1976, William Scranton, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, brought the issue to a head. Despite vetoing a draft resolution on the situation in the occupied territories, Scranton remarked:

The occupation of territories in the 1967 war has always been seen by the world community to be an abnormal state of affairs that would be brought to an end as part of a peace settlement. Resolution 242. . . established the basic bargain that would constitute a settlement. This bargain was withdrawal of Israeli forces in return for termination of all claims of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of every state in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries free from threats or acts of force. My Government has committed itself to do all it can to bring about this settlement. . . . [M]y Government believes that international law sets the appropriate standards an occupier must maintain . . . and any changes must be necessitated by the immediate needs of the occupation and be consistent with international law. The Fourth Geneva Convention speaks directly to the issue . . . in Article 49: "The occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies." Clearly, then substantial resettlement of the Israeli civilian population in occupied territories including East Jerusalem, is illegal under the Convention and cannot be considered to have prejudged the outcome of future negotiations. . . . Indeed, the presence of these settlements is seen by my Government as an obstacle to the success of the negotiations for a just and final peace between Israel and its neighbors.⁹⁵

The Israelis, who accused the United States of shifting its policy and violating its agreement to consult Israel on the peace process, harshly criticized Scranton's statement. Israeli foreign minister Allon argued that the statement was an American "call for dividing Jerusalem, giving back all territories, and defining the borders."⁹⁶ The administration now faced a serious backlash.

In May 1976, Egypt requested that the Security Council consider the deteriorating situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a result of the continued Israeli

occupation. The Council discussed the situation and forged a consensus statement. Under American pressure, the statement stopped short of declaring Israeli settlements illegal, but emphasized their negative impact on the peace process.

The Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War is applicable to the Arab territories occupied by Israel since 1967. The occupying power was therefore called upon to comply strictly with the provisions of that Convention and to refrain from and rescind any measure that would violate them. In this regard, the measures taken by Israelis in the occupied territories that alter their demographic composition of the geographic nature and particularly the establishment of settlements were accordingly deplored. Such measures, which cannot prejudice the outcome of the search for the establishment of peace, constitute an obstacle to peace.⁹⁷

While Ford approved American support for the statement, it's important to note that Ambassador Scranton

attempted to soften the reference to Israeli settlements being an obstacle to peace, eliminate the reference to deploring Israeli actions, and to insert a balancing statement that the Geneva Convention also gave Israel, as an occupying power, the right to maintain order and provide for the security of the occupied territories.

The administration had determined that that the Israeli preference for “no resolution and no consensus” was “unrealistic.”⁹⁸ While it had failed to get these changes, American policy was clearly favoring Israel's position on settlements.

While American policymakers in the Nixon and Ford administrations thought seriously about the Israeli settlement project, and considered taking steps to thwart it, these considerations did not translate into a sustained or comprehensive alteration in policy. Policymakers increasingly worked to shield Israel from international pressure. Moreover, under Kissinger's direction, the Nixon and Ford administrations took a softer approach on Israeli settlements, sending mixed signals but ultimately highlighting the need for Israeli discretion to prevent a breakdown in the peace process. Moreover, the Nixon and Ford administrations never pressed Israel for a substantial freeze to Israeli settlement construction nor did they back away from Israel's interpretation of Resolution 242. Instead, they supported the Israeli position that 242 did not require complete withdrawal and gradually came to accept Israeli settlements as an unappealing embarrassment, rather than an illegality that required cessation. In fact, American support for Israel soared. In 1970, American aid to Israel totaled \$93.6 million. By 1976, it had more than doubled, totaling \$2.36 billion.⁹⁹ The 1976 presidential election would bring a new administration aiming to reverse American foreign policy. Despite its aims, the United States would continue to send mixed signals and, ultimately, support the Israeli settlement enterprise.

Notes

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- 3 Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 477.
- 4 See Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), 347–51, and 564.
- 5 "Conversation Between President Nixon and Army Vice Chief of Staff (Haig), January 23, 1973," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976: Arab-Israeli Conflict and War, 1973*, eds. Nina Howland and Craig Daigle (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), 8.
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- 11 *Ibid.*, 483.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 1,016.
- 13 Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1982), 202–3.
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- 17 See, for example, Joseph J. Sisco to the Secretary, "Israel's Nuclear Policy and Implications for the United States," in *The National Security Archive: Israel Crosses the Threshold*, April 3, 1969, accessed April 30, 2021, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB189/IN-07.pdf>.
- 18 H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 405.
- 19 Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 435.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 481–82.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 482.

- 22 Ibid., 477, 482. For similar remarks, also see Memorandum of Conversation Between the President, Ambassador Rabin, and General Alexander Haig. August 17, 1970. National Security Council Files. Henry A. Kissinger Office Files. Country Files—Middle East. Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Yorba Linda, California.
- 23 Ralph H. Magnus, ed., *Documents on the Middle East* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1969), 223.
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4 Carter and the Illegality of Settlements

Our position on the settlements is very clear. We do not think they are legal, and they are obviously an impediment to peace.

—Jimmy Carter¹

Jimmy Carter is something of an enigma. He combined profound religious devotion and high moral principles with political realism and a willingness to compromise. While Carter understood the Soviet threat to the United States and aimed to counteract Soviet influence throughout the world, Carter also emphasized a respect for human rights, making it a central tenet of his foreign policy. As president, Carter tried to alter American foreign policy, emphasizing the virtuous power of American leadership. He believed that the states in the Middle East were ready for peace and he wanted peace to demonstrate the power of America's benevolent leadership. Carter achieved his goal with the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. Ironically, the success of the peace between Egypt and Israel reduced the likelihood of a compromise between Israel and the Palestinians. Despite being the first president to publicly declare Israeli settlements illegal, Carter failed to apply real pressure on Israel to curb its policies. In fact, the Camp David Accords stipulated extensive American guarantees to Israel and Egypt, increasing American support for Israel and its policies. Moreover, by removing the Egyptian threat without dealing with Palestinian rights or forbidding the construction of Israeli settlements, Israel was rewarded for its policies, only feeding stronger Israeli refusals to stop the settlement project.

Carter's Images of Israel

As a candidate for the presidency, Carter made clear his commitment to the security of Israel. Carter understood Israel's role as a strategic asset in the Cold War, as well as the special tie between Israel and the United States due to shared democratic values. Thus, when he entered office, his perspective was decidedly biased toward Israel. While governor of Georgia, Carter had visited Israel on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but he had never visited an Arab country nor did he ever meet an Arab leader. In fact, he resented the Arab world for its oil embargo,

arguing that “the greatest nation on earth was being jerked around by a few desert states.”² In his second debate with President Gerald Ford, he stated:

If the Arab countries ever declare an embargo on oil I would consider that not a military but an economic declaration of war, and I would respond instantly. I would not ship that Arab country anything—no weapons, no spare parts for weapons, no oil-drilling rigs, no oil pipe, no nothing.³

Carter’s commitment to Israel was also clear in his view of the Arab boycott of Israel. He described the boycott as a “disgrace.” As president, he requested and obtained from Congress anti-boycott legislation, which imposed serious penalties on violators.⁴

Furthermore, as a devout Southern Baptist, Carter was knowledgeable about the Bible and accepted the belief that the Bible mandated the homeland for the Jews and was therefore ordained by God.⁵ Carter believed that Jews were an “exalted people” and that God had chosen them above all other believers.⁶ In addition, Carter thought that “God wanted him to bring peace to the Middle East, and that somehow he would find a way to do so.”⁷ Therefore, despite his tilt toward Israel, Carter also retained flexibility, seeking out a balanced perspective and possessed a willingness to explore new options with regard to the American relationship with Israel. According to William Quandt, National Security Council staff member:

To some degree, [Carter’s] religious orientation led him to a concern with the lands he had read so much about in the Bible. The idealist in him also seemed to believe that real peace between Arabs and Israelis could be achieved, and he clearly wanted to play a role in bringing that about if possible. Finally, his commitment to the theme of human rights entailed a genuine concern for the homelessness of the Palestinians.⁸

Yet Carter made clear that the United States “should never attempt to impose a settlement on Israel nor should we force Israel to make territorial concessions which are detrimental to her security. . . . Israel must be allowed to live within her defensible borders.” And, most significantly, he argued, “A real peace must be based on the absolute assurance of Israel’s survival and security. . . . The survival of Israel is not a political issue. It is a moral imperative.”⁹ Thus, despite his willingness to pursue peace, Carter would pursue a peace that benefitted Israel. During his presidential campaign, Carter also addressed the territorial issues, stating, “United Nations Resolution 242 calls for. . . ‘withdrawal of Israel’s armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict.’ This language leaves open the door for changes in the pre-1967 lines by mutual agreement.”¹⁰ Before his presidency, Carter shared Israel’s interpretation of Resolution 242.

Rather early in his presidency, Carter took an active approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite the Egyptian-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli agreements reached during the Nixon and Ford administrations, tensions remained high in the region and no official peace agreement had been reached. Israel favored the status quo,

maintaining control of the occupied territories and military superiority over its Arab neighbors. The Arab states were frustrated and restless with the outcomes of the last decade and prone to seek closer ties with the Soviet Union. Nixon and Ford had pursued limited objectives in resolving the conflict; as a result of the Cold War, both administrations primarily ensured Israeli security. Carter, on the other hand, wanted to pursue a more comprehensive peace process, meaning that peace between Israel and the Arab states should not be piecemeal, focusing on separate deals with each Arab state. Carter believed that American passivity in the peace process would lead to increased Arab radicalization and the potential for Soviet reentry into the region. As a result, he hoped to achieve a peace based on United Nations Resolution 242, with Israel exchanging the territories it had occupied in 1967 for recognition by and security guarantees from its Arab neighbors.¹¹

These objectives, however, remained idealistic, and proved much more difficult to implement. Initially, Carter embraced the ideals of Nixon's Secretary of State, William Rogers, that the pre-1967 boundaries should be reestablished, with only minor modifications. This clearly placed the Carter administration in opposition to Israel, which had vehemently disapproved of the Rogers Plan (see Chapter 2). Carter's view was supported by his National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Probably contrary to the expectations of [Israel] my [1976] trip to Golan and my travels within the country convinced me of the futility of seeking security through the acquisition of territory. It became clear to me that Israel could never acquire enough territory to compensate for Arab hostility and that therefore Israeli security would have to be decoupled from the question of territorial sovereignty.¹²

As for the Palestinians, Carter was clearly motivated by his moralism and emphasis on human rights. He argued that the "continued deprivation of Palestinian rights . . . was contrary to . . . basic moral and ethical principles."¹³ Secretary of State Cyrus Vance echoed these concerns: "Ejected from their homes, embittered, radicalized, living in squalor and desperation, the Palestinians remained the central, unresolved, human rights issue of the Middle East."¹⁴ Consequently, Carter initially supported a "homeland" for Palestinians. On March 16, 1977, he publicly declared, "There has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years."¹⁵ In May, he repeated his support, stating, United Nations resolutions supported by the United States

do include the right of the Palestinians to have a homeland, to be compensated for losses that they have suffered. They do include the withdrawal of Israel from occupied territories from the 1967 war, and they do include an end of belligerency and a reestablishment of permanent and secure borders.¹⁶

Carter's remarks caused an uproar in the Jewish community and Israel. Moreover, they complicated American policy. On the one hand, the Arab League had

declared the P.L.O. as the “sole representative” of the Palestinian people. On the other hand, Carter accepted the Ford administration’s policy that the United States would not recognize or negotiate with the P.L.O. as long as it did not acknowledge Israel’s right to exist and accept United Nations Resolutions 242 and 338. Despite this, in August 1977 Carter considered repudiating the pledge and opening up talks with the P.L.O. as a result of his frustration with the Israeli position.¹⁷

Carter hoped to achieve broader peace goals based on Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, security guarantees, and a homeland for the Palestinians. He hoped to achieve this by inducing Israel, Egypt, and other Arab neighbors to engage in negotiations. To do this, Carter devised a rather demanding schedule of talks with Israel and the Arab states during his first year in office; he and his advisers believed that negotiating with Arab states would produce friction with Israel, and wanted to avoid postponing them to Carter’s third or fourth year in office, when a presidential election would be approaching.¹⁸ In the end, however, Carter’s efforts contributed to a hardening of Israeli policy and a stronger American commitment to Israel, including implicit support for Israeli settlements.

“We Should Protest This”

Carter approached the Middle East with a determination to bring peace to the region. His four years in office were dominated by the Middle East, most notably the revolution in Iran, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Arguably, it was Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict that focused his attention most of all. One month after Carter’s inauguration, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance told Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin that the United States would not deliver military equipment approved for delivery at the end of the Ford administration.¹⁹ As a result, tensions were high during Rabin’s March 1977 visit to Washington. Carter described Rabin as a

“cold fish”, unresponsive to [his] probing about Israeli willingness to deal with the PLO. Carter took the view that the US could dictate the terms of peace and how the negotiations should unfold. . . . Carter was impatient, believing Israeli leaders were too cautious.²⁰

Following the meeting, Carter declared:

I think that what Israelis would like to have is what we would like to have: a termination of belligerence toward Israel by her neighbors, a recognition of Israel’s right to exist, the right to exist in peace, the opening up of borders. . . ; in other words, a stabilization of the situation in the Middle East without a constant threat to Israel’s existence by her neighbors. This would involve substantial withdrawal of Israel’s present control over territories. . . . I would guess it would [involve] some minor adjustments in the 1967 borders. But that still remains to be negotiated.²¹

One week later, Carter stated, “There has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years.”²² Carter had not only publicly declared that the Israelis should withdraw from the occupied territories with only “minor adjustments,” but he demonstrated stronger support for the Palestinians than any previous president. Carter was on a collision course with Israel.

On March 30, 1977, the administration turned its attention to Israeli settlements when the National Security Council discussed a Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) memorandum on the Israeli settlement program. The memorandum argued:

The main purpose of the Israeli settlement program is to delineate the future borders the Israelis desire. . . . Far from bringing a final peace nearer, the settlements have heightened . . . tensions. . . . The Israeli government has . . . linked its settlement program to its political aims. . . “creating facts” on the ground.²³

One month later, an informal decision by members of the Israeli government led to the establishment of a new settlement in the West Bank. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski discovered:

A Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative . . . suggested that the location of the settlement near the ‘green line’ (1967 boundary) would place it within the ‘minor modifications’ referred to by President Carter. He . . . anticipated land confiscation and the establishment of a permanent . . . site.

In the margins, Carter responded, “We should protest this.”²⁴

In May, relations deteriorated further when Likud leader Menachem Begin was elected prime minister. Begin had spent the majority of his political career in the opposition. He took a revisionist viewpoint, calling for territorial annexations and the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. In July 1970, Begin criticized the American and Israeli governments for attempts at peace, arguing:

Suddenly, and for the first time since the six day war, there is . . . a clear undertaking for the state of Israel to agree to the repartition of Eretz Israel [Land of Israel]. We oppose such repartition. . . . We never imagined that after Judea and Samaria came under Jewish rule, we would announce that we have no right to them and undertake to hand them to [Jordan].²⁵

Begin also had a reputation for resisting an active American role in Israeli policy; he feared that an “externally devised formula” for peace might be imposed on Israel.²⁶

The C.I.A. described him as a “hardliner” who believed that “all of Eretz Israel is historically and biblically the rightful homeland of the Jewish people.”²⁷ In his first speech to the Israeli Knesset, Prime Minister Begin stated, “The government

will plan and establish and encourage settlements, both rural and urban, on the land of the homeland.” At the same time, there was a small glimmer of hope, as Begin argued, “The government will invite Israel’s neighbors . . . to conduct direct negotiations for the signing of a peace contract between them.” But that glimmer of hope was dashed when he added, “without prior conditions from either side and without a formula for a solution being invented externally.” More significantly, Brzezinski wrote, “Some Israeli sources see this as a deliberate avoidance of a statement that he will negotiate on the basis of 242–338.”²⁸

In July 1977, Begin came to Washington. His visit revealed the wide disparity between the American and Israeli views. In meetings with Carter, Begin defended Israel’s right to establish and expand Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. Carter responded by opposing such actions as being contrary to international law and American policy. He also discussed “the importance of not building settlements, but [Carter] said nothing about legalizing settlements already in existence.”²⁹ Carter’s silence on the issue of legalizing existing settlements sent a mixed message to Begin, and left a door open for the expansion of Israeli settlements. Lastly, Carter outlined a five-point program meant to achieve a comprehensive peace, based on United Nations Resolution 242, involving open borders and free trade; that peace would call for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and a Palestinian entity.³⁰ Begin conveyed Israel’s principles of peace as well, focusing on territory and made clear that Israel intended to maintain its presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Because of the vastness of territory, we will be prepared, in the context of a peace treaty and the determination of the permanent boundary between Israel and Egypt, for a substantial withdrawal of our forces in the Sinai. We shall stay on the Golan Heights and be prepared for a withdrawal . . . in the context of a peace treaty and the determination of the permanent boundary between Syria and Israel. Concerning Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip, our position is that we shall not place them under any foreign rule or sovereignty on the basis of . . . our people’s right to the Land. . . [and] our national security.³¹

Despite their disagreements, Carter told the Cabinet that his meeting with Begin “went well”; he described “Begin as a man of ‘deep feelings, commitments, integrity, and honesty’,” and believed that Israel would demonstrate “flexibility” in the peace process.³² Following Begin’s return to Israel, the Israeli Cabinet approved the legality of three Israeli settlements. Begin believed that Carter would be angry for six months but then acquiesce.³³ Carter responded by becoming the first president to publicly declare the settlements “illegal”:

This matter of settlements in the occupied territories has always been characterized by our Government, by me and my predecessors as an illegal action. But I think that the establishment of new territories [settlements] or the recognition of existing territories [settlements] . . . provide obstacles to peace.³⁴

Begin was right about Carter. While Carter continued to insist on the illegality of settlements, the administration failed to provide the necessary pressure on Israel to curtail settlement policies.

“The Publicity Causes Me Great Difficulties”

The administration now decided to pursue the reestablishment of the Geneva conference process, focusing on a comprehensive peace settlement, in the hopes that this would pressure the Begin government. However, this proved difficult. First, the Geneva process would likely involve direct Palestinian participation, which Israel opposed. Second, the new Israeli government insisted on the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, complicating the negotiations. Finally, Israel’s September 1977 invasion of Lebanon in retaliation for Arab acts of terrorism inside Israel made a comprehensive settlement less likely. Thus, in an effort to continue the peace process, Secretary of State Vance went to the Middle East. Initially, Carter considered involving the P.L.O. in negotiations, but the administration was aware of the complications and challenges of pursuing this policy. Noting greater flexibility by the P.L.O., Brzezinski argued that this could “generate the greatest degree of pressure on Begin.” Carter added that Begin’s position was based on “P.L.O. intransigence” and an American meeting with the P.L.O. could “break the ice.”³⁵ This only increased Israeli suspicions of the administration.

In September, Carter met with Israeli foreign minister Moshe Dayan to express his concerns about Israeli inflexibility. Carter emphasized the difficulties caused by Israeli settlements, particularly in the West Bank, telling Dayan that “the U.S. has always felt that Israeli settlements on the West Bank are illegal and that their establishment . . . make a renewed Geneva Conference impossible, and that this casts doubt on 242.” Yet Carter also told Dayan, “an increase in the population of existing settlements would be preferable to the establishment of new ones.”³⁶ Like his predecessors, Carter was sending mixed signals. In addition, Carter stressed his concerns with the publicity surrounding Israeli settlements, noting, “The publicity causes me great difficulties. . . . Whatever you do, I hope you will not do this loudly.”³⁷ On the one hand, Carter made clear that the Israeli settlement project was illegal; on the other hand, he told the Israelis to continue to conduct their policy, but do so quietly.

In a press conference following his meeting with Carter, Dayan explained that the United States “had not exerted any pressure on Israel, despite differences on withdrawal, settlements, and the status of the West Bank.” While Carter “made no bones that he considered the settlements illegal and an obstacle to negotiations,” Carter did not push Israel to alter course.³⁸ In addition, the administration appeared to be moving away from the focus on a comprehensive settlement in light of practical realities. A C.I.A. report argued:

Based only on the pattern of settlements, it appears that Israel will continue to resist withdrawing from the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. . . . Thus, the only substantial part of the Occupied Territories that Israel

could give up without yielding any Jewish settlement, now in being or under construction, would be the remainder of the Sinai.³⁹

In October, the United Nations General Assembly debated a resolution on illegal Israeli practices in the occupied territories, including settlements.⁴⁰ The administration faced a dilemma. White House Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan explained:

Our position on illegal settlements is well known. While this is the rationale for our having to support this resolution, it can also be the reason that we choose to abstain. We made strong public statements in protest of Israeli settlements policy. . . . An alternative which should be considered is to abstain from this formal vote, pointing out . . . that our public position . . . is well known and that this resolution is disruptive to the peace process. . . . New legalism, UN resolutions and other technicalities will have very little positive effects. . . . The recent history of our efforts is that the Israelis have been forthcoming . . . and the Arabs have been more difficult. . . . I do not understand why we would want to restate something that is insured to be interpreted in Israel as an insult. . . . If we vote against Israel . . . on this matter, we should certainly gain something for it from the Arabs. . . . Our vote against Israel . . . could precipitate a political confrontation in the Congress that could be unfavorable to the Administration (Original emphasis).⁴¹

The administration abstained on the vote.⁴² And, in November, the administration voted no on a General Assembly resolution reaffirming calls for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and calling for an international peace conference with P.L.O. participation.⁴³

Despite his desire to pursue a comprehensive peace, Carter maintained and reaffirmed American policy, and was anything but consistent on the messages American policy was sending. The Carter administration decided that political considerations, including public relations and ensuring Israeli participation in negotiations, outweighed a vote against Israel at the United Nations. However, by doing so, Carter sent contradictory messages to the Israelis; the administration had described the settlements as illegal, but refused to hold the Israelis accountable in an international forum. In fact, on two more General Assembly resolutions in the month of December, the United States sided with Israel, voting no.⁴⁴

“Settlements . . . Are Inconsistent With . . . 242”

In mid-December, Carter and Begin met to discuss the peace process with Egypt, including initial Israeli proposals. The two leaders sparred on issues, including the meaning and interpretation of Resolutions 242 within the context of the occupation of the West Bank. Carter argued:

The basis for our agreements and negotiations . . . has been Resolution 242. All Israeli governments have endorsed 242. The crux of 242. . . was

withdrawal of Israel from occupied territories in exchange for secure boundaries and the guarantee of permanent peace. I realize that 242 has been interpreted differently . . . and we have basically taken the Israeli position that this does not mean total withdrawal. . . . I hope that Israel will not ignore the crux of 242 on withdrawal.

Begin noted, “242 as you rightly said does not oblige Israel to total withdrawal. 242 envisages secure boundaries.” Begin then explained that the Jordan River is the security line. Carter did not object; instead, he expressed concern about the “public description of the proposal” and its impact on Sadat.⁴⁵ On the following day, Carter repeated:

The basis for our agreements . . . has been UN Resolution 242. . . . The crux of Resolution 242. . . is that Israeli will withdraw from occupied territories in return for secure borders and permanent peace. . . . We have taken the Israeli view that the language does not call for total withdrawal to the 1967 borders. . . . I hope that Israel will not ignore that the crux of 242 involves withdrawal in exchange for peace.

Begin responded more forcefully.

Resolution 242 does not oblige Israel to total withdrawal. It simply talks about territories occupied . . . not the territories and not all territories. It envisaged the establishment of secure boundaries. . . . Our proposal is not in contradiction with Resolution 242. The 1967 line did not constitute a secure border. . . . There will be autonomous rule for the local population. . . . Israeli state sovereignty will go to the 1967 line.⁴⁶

In both conversations, Carter acknowledged and accepted that Resolution 242 did not require total withdrawal. Rather than deviating from previous American presidents, Carter confirmed American policy.

Despite this, the administration remained concerned about Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories and continued to pressure the Israelis. Most significantly, the issue increasingly became personal as Carter viewed Israeli actions as purposely deceptive. Relying on conversations he had with Israeli foreign minister Dayan, Carter believed that he had an Israeli commitment to curtail settlement activity.⁴⁷ In particular, the administration emphasized three separate statements from the September 1977 meeting:

One year from now, there will be no new civilian settlements. . . . There will only be settlers in uniform in military camps. If the President can be helpful in the negotiations, we can take a year and do just this.

We have in mind just these six [settlements on the West Bank].

Settlements will not decide boundaries, and if a settlement is beyond our final border, it will either be removed or we will get agreement with our neighbors.⁴⁸

Thus, Carter was furious when the Israeli government announced plans to build new settlements in the West Bank, defying what he believed to be a commitment from the Israelis not to do so. In a strong message to Begin, Carter wrote:

[W]e have mentioned that settlements in themselves convey at the very least the impression of permanence of Israeli occupation which clearly is not conducive to . . . productive peace negotiations. It must be recognized that . . . the settlements . . . are inconsistent with Security Council Resolution 242. . . . [W]e clearly understood [Foreign Minister Dayan] to say that your government would limit new settlement activity in all the occupied territories . . . until September 1978, rather than only three months. . . . Your government has said that no settlement would be permitted to become a real obstacle to peace, and I continue to rely on that assurance.⁴⁹

Carter now believed Begin's government was actively creating obstacles to peace.⁵⁰

Carter increasingly focused on Resolution 242 and withdrawal in an effort to get Begin to acknowledge its provisions. In February, Carter instructed Brzezinski to "document for me Israel's acknowledgment of 242 as [the] basis for peace," despite Brzezinski explaining that Begin did not accept a commitment to withdrawal on all fronts.⁵¹ President Anwar Sadat of Egypt was also disappointed with Begin's position, but Sadat was willing to forego withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza as long as Israel totally withdrew from the Sinai.⁵² As a result, the administration began to move away from its emphasis on a comprehensive peace settlement, instead, focusing on an agreement between Israel and Egypt. However, this still meant that Begin's reluctance about total withdrawal from the Sinai had to be overcome. In a memorandum for the president, Secretary of State Vance wrote:

We will need to convince [Begin] that Israel now risks losing the opportunity for peace with Egypt which is Israel's primary objective. . . . Begin and the Israelis are not yet ready for the necessary decisions on withdrawal and the Palestinian problem. . . . [Begin] has expressed surprise and dismay about our position on the illegality of settlements and on the requirement, under UN Resolution 242, for withdrawal "on all fronts." . . . [W]e must get his understanding of the U.S. position: Successful negotiations must be based on UN Resolution 242, including the need for withdrawal on all fronts. The Israeli settlements are illegal, no new settlements should be established, and the future of existing settlements must be negotiated.

While Vance suggested pressuring Israel to “suspend further settlement activity while negotiations” were taking place, he also explained that the United States should be prepared to help Israel ensure a military presence in the occupied territories for security.⁵³

“Deception”

The administration turned its attention to getting a settlement on the Sinai to achieve success, and, at the same time, demonstrating forward progress elsewhere to allow Sadat to save face. Moreover, administration officials understood that a separate Egyptian-Israeli agreement would make agreement elsewhere more difficult.⁵⁴ Since Egypt had been Israel’s main opponent since 1948, a bilateral agreement would eliminate Israel’s greatest threat and provide little incentive for Israel to negotiate further agreements. As the administration began to shift its attention toward an Egyptian-Israeli agreement, its own rhetoric was beginning to undermine its position. In April, Brzezinski reported:

We are beginning to hear some of our own words played back to us by the Israelis. For example, the Israelis now say, correctly, that we do not call for full withdrawal . . . and that we can envisage long-term security arrangements which would permit Israeli military installations beyond Israel’s political borders. We will need to be careful not to have our views interpreted as support for substantial border changes and Israeli military outposts.⁵⁵

The difficulty facing Carter, in particular, was striking a balance between supporting Israeli security and pressuring Israel to make hard decisions concerning the occupied territories.

As plans were being made for the historic Camp David meetings between Sadat and Begin, Carter’s own ability to pressure the Israelis was tempered by Sadat’s increasing desire to accept less than a commitment on withdrawal in the West Bank. Most notably, Sadat appeared more and more likely to pursue a course that provided him with enough to suggest success. The study papers for the Camp David discussions argued:

Your task with Sadat will be to persuade him to settle for less than a clearcut Israeli commitment now to the 1967 borders in the West Bank with only minor modifications, while at the same time not appearing to back away from positions we have previously taken. Sadat will still need enough to say to Arab colleagues that he won an Israeli commitment to withdraw. . . . We do not want to jeopardize . . . Resolution 242 because it is the only agreed basis for a peace settlement. At the same time, we must recognize that we in 1978 live in a different world from the days of 1967. . . . [W]e are no longer talking about withdrawal as a black and white proposition. In 1967, Resolution 242 spoke explicitly of “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces.” . . . Today, we have

Israeli military government and Israeli settlers in the West Bank. . . . Neither Begin nor Sadat is talking about total withdrawal (Original emphasis).⁵⁶

In a handwritten note, Carter acknowledged that the administration should defer discussions on the West Bank provided he could get the Israelis to agree on the “principle of withdrawal” and a commitment not to change the “Arab character” of the occupied territories.⁵⁷

While the administration continued to press for a “moratorium” on settlements in the West Bank, they did not attempt to rollback existing settlements and Carter continued to support Israeli opposition to a Palestinian state.⁵⁸ Repeatedly throughout the Camp David meetings, Carter called for curtailing Israeli settlements in the occupied territories,⁵⁹ and each time, he backed down. Carter’s decision not to pursue a comprehensive peace for the Palestinians and to back away from insisting on a compromise over Jerusalem led the Begin government to agree to a gradual withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula.

Nevertheless, the United States and Israel continued to spar over settlements in the occupied territories. Carter, once again, believed Begin had deceived him. The American proposal at Camp David read, “After the signing of this framework and during the negotiations, no new settlements will be established and there will be no expansion of physical facilities in existing settlements unless otherwise agreed by the parties.” Begin objected to this and the language was removed from the section of the document concerning the West Bank and Gaza. Instead, Begin included the language in a private letter to Carter. The final language read, “After the signing of this framework and during the negotiations, no new Israeli settlements will be established in this area. The issue of future Israeli settlements will be decided and agreed among the negotiating parties.” Carter argued that this applied to the West Bank and Gaza, and was furious when Begin attempted to change the language again.⁶⁰

Begin, however, argued that he had told Carter that he would “think about it. . . . By any standard, such a reaction cannot be construed as an acceptance.” Instead, Begin noted:

I transmitted my written response. . . . The text read: . . . “I have the honour to inform you that during the agreed period for negotiations . . . no new settlements will be established by the Government of Israel in Sinai, in the Gaza District and in the area of Judea and Samaria.” As shown by the record . . . this was the only commitment I assumed at Camp David . . . with reference to the settlement issue.⁶¹

The crux of the issue was Begin’s concentration on details. During the Camp David negotiations, Begin agreed to submit the question of settlements in the Sinai to the Israeli Knesset for a vote, but he did not agree to do the same for any other settlements. Carter, however, insisted that Begin committed Israel to a five-year settlement freeze.⁶²

The issue heated up during Carter's March 1979 meetings in Egypt and Israel. Carter went to the region to break an impasse between Egypt and Israel, and finalize a peace agreement. Specifically, the Israeli Cabinet had rejected phased withdrawal from the Sinai. In his meetings with Sadat, Carter acknowledged Sadat's never mentioning Israeli settlements as a major point of concern.⁶³ This gave the administration some maneuverability in negotiations with Israel. However, Carter's meetings in Israel did not go well. Begin explained that he could not sign any agreement until he submitted the proposals to the Cabinet and the Knesset for debate. This infuriated Carter.

I asked him once if he actually wanted a peace treaty, because my impression was that everything he could do to obstruct it, he did with apparent relish. . . . I have rarely been so disgusted in all my life as I was that evening with Begin. I was convinced he would do everything possible to stop a treaty, than face the problem of full autonomy he had promised on the West Bank/Gaza.⁶⁴

[The meeting with Begin] was . . . very unpleasant. . . . There was no give on any issue.⁶⁵

Despite difficult negotiations, Carter and Begin finally came to an agreement. Carter returned to Egypt and successfully concluded the agreement between Egypt and Israel. Following the agreement, Brzezinski told Carter:

The peace treaty is generally recognized as your accomplishment. . . . Our goal remains that of a comprehensive peace; . . . We will now seek to resolve the Palestinian problem in all its aspects. . . ; [the] U.S. stand on settlements has not changed, and we will react negatively to any intensified Israeli settlement activity. The U.S. in the future may not only abstain at the UN but perhaps even vote directly against Israel, if the need arises.⁶⁶

With the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli agreement, the administration considered moving forward with negotiations on the West Bank and Gaza. But Brzezinski was right; Israeli settlements would not go away, and would continue to force the administration to contemplate American policy and American relations with Israel. In April, the Israeli government announced the establishment of new settlements near Nablus. Carter decided to send a note of disapproval to the Israeli government.⁶⁷ The administration believed it was in a strong position to "gain Israeli agreement for a freeze on further settlement activity" and began considering "negotiations on land ownership, [with] some concessions to the Israelis—perhaps . . . the right of individual Israelis to buy land in the West Bank and Gaza." The administration had concluded that their chances of convincing Begin to a permanent freeze on settlement activity were "slim"; as a result, they pursued accommodation and acquiesced to a policy focused on managing settlement activity.⁶⁸ At the same time, the administration also decided "the best issue on which to take a stand is Israeli settlement activity."⁶⁹

Acquiescence

Over the summer, disagreement between Israel and the United States intensified. In June, Begin lashed out at “the campaign of incitement [against the Israeli Government] conducted by certain circles.” Begin alleged that he had only promised to abstain from settlement activities during the three month period of negotiations with Egypt, which ended in December 1978. He concluded:

Ever since my first visit to President Carter . . . I have stated and reiterated that we have an absolute right to settle in all parts of Eretz Israel. . . . Under no circumstances did I ever agree with the announcements . . . alleging that our settlements are illegal or that they constitute an obstacle to peace. . . . Since forming the Government of Israel we did not mislead anybody . . . and principally during . . . the Camp David discussions, we have declared and reiterated: A) Jerusalem is the eternal, indivisible capital of Israel. B) We have the full right to settle in all parts of Eretz Israel. . . . C) Under no circumstances will we permit the establishment of a Palestinian state. . . . We have promised autonomy . . . for the Arab inhabitants of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza District, Jews and Arabs living together in Eretz Israel, and security for Israel and all its citizens.⁷⁰

The Carter administration persisted, but ultimately failed; and, in a final blow to the administration, it publicly acquiesced.

In March 1980, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 465. Among other things, Resolution 465 determined

that all measures taken by Israel to change the physical character, demographic composition, institutional structure or status of the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem, or any part thereof, have no legal validity and that Israel’s policy and practices of settling parts of its population and new immigrants in those territories constitute a flagrant violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War and also constitute a serious obstruction to achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East; . . . [deplored] the continuation and persistence of Israel in pursuing those policies and practices and [called] upon the Government and people of Israel to rescind those measures, to dismantle the existing settlements and in particular to cease, on an urgent basis, the establishment, constructing and planning of settlements in the Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem; . . . [and called] upon all States not to provide Israel with any assistance to be used specifically in connexion with settlements in the occupied territories.⁷¹

The resolution was adopted unanimously, with the United States voting to support it. Two days later, Carter disavowed the American assent to the resolution,

arguing that support of the resolution was a mistake resulting from failed communication. In his statement, Carter backed away from his forceful condemnation of Israeli settlements and promoted negotiations as the basis for resolving the issue of Israeli settlements.

I want to make it clear that the vote of the United States in the Security Council of the United Nations does not represent a change in our position regarding the Israeli settlements in the occupied areas nor regarding the status of Jerusalem. While our opposition to the establishment of Israeli settlements is longstanding and well known, we made strenuous efforts to eliminate the language with reference to the dismantling of settlements in the resolution. This call for dismantling was neither proper nor practical. We believe that the future disposition of existing settlements must be determined during the current Autonomy Negotiations. As to Jerusalem, we strongly believe that Jerusalem should be undivided with free access to the holy places for all faiths, and that its status should be determined in the negotiations for a comprehensive peace settlement. The United States vote in the United Nations was approved with the understanding that all references to Jerusalem would be deleted. The failure to communicate this clearly resulted in a vote in favor of the resolution rather than abstention. I want to reiterate in the most unequivocal of terms that in the Autonomy Negotiations . . . the United States will neither support nor accept any position that might jeopardize Israel's vital security interests. Our commitment to Israel's security and well-being remains unqualified and unshakable.⁷²

Despite having declared settlements illegal, Carter, like his predecessors, sent mixed signals. Rather than strongly opposing any settlement activity, Carter now accepted the idea that Israeli settlements must be left to negotiations between the parties. He ultimately determined that the administration's declaration that the settlements were illegal would hurt him politically in the 1980 presidential election.⁷³ As a result, the United States would not stand in the way of the Israeli settlement project.

As the autonomy negotiations proceeded, the administration embarked on a policy that would seek to freeze future settlement activity but protect existing settlements against "attempts to 'dismantle' them, or to 'strangle' them with a ring of Arab 'settlements.'"⁷⁴ Moreover, American policy increasingly supported the Israeli position on Jerusalem, despite Israeli actions to expand its power. On August 20, 1980, Secretary of State Edmund Muskie explained the American abstention on Security Council Resolution 478, which censured Israel for its occupation of Jerusalem.⁷⁵ He tried to strike a balance between opposing Israeli actions in Jerusalem and American support for Israel. Ultimately, his explanation continued to send contradictory messages.

The resolution before us today is illustrative of a preoccupation which has produced this series of unbalanced and unrealistic resolutions on Middle East

issues. . . . [T]he question of Jerusalem must be addressed in the context of negotiations for a comprehensive, just and lasting . . . peace. The status of Jerusalem cannot simply be declared; it must be agreed to by the parties. . . . We have encouraged all parties to refrain from unilateral actions which seek to change the character or status of Jerusalem. In line with this position we will not vote against the resolution as presently written. So there can be no mistake, let me note that we will continue firmly and forcefully to resist any attempt to impose sanctions against Israel under Chapter VII. . . . We will vote against any such resolution. But if we do not vote against the version before us today, neither can we find cause to support it. For the resolution is still fundamentally flawed. . . . Israel, for example, is to be censured—yet there is no censure . . . of violence against Israel or of efforts that undermine Israel’s legitimate security needs. Further, the resolution before us calls upon those states that have established diplomatic missions in Jerusalem to withdraw them from the holy city. In our judgment this provision is not binding. It is without force. And we reject it as a disruptive attempt to dictate to other nations.⁷⁶

The administration also increasingly moved from a staunch proponent of the illegality of settlements to the familiar argument of its predecessors that settlements were “harmful” to peace negotiations.⁷⁷

After he lost the presidency to Ronald Reagan, Carter angrily scolded the Israeli ambassador, arguing that Begin had only given up the Sinai so that he could “keep the West Bank.”⁷⁸ Yet Carter never backed the idea of a Palestinian state, nor did he punish Israel for its continued policy on settlements. In fact, the Israelis profited significantly from the Carter administration. Not only had Begin won his argument on settlements, but Israel received increased American military support, since an important part of the Camp David agreement guaranteed American military aid to Israel and Egypt. In order to get an agreement on the Sinai, Carter committed \$4 billion in economic and military assistance to Egypt and Israel;⁷⁹ the majority of that aid went to Israel. Total aid to Israel jumped from \$1.9 billion in 1979 to \$5.1 billion in 1980.⁸⁰ Moreover, by the time Carter left office, Israel had formally annexed Jerusalem “in its entirety” as its capital,⁸¹ and the number of settlers in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights had grown. Furthermore, despite Carter’s success at Camp David, his successor would publicly reverse his declaration on settlements.

Notes

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- 3 The Second Carter-Ford Presidential Debate, October 6, 1976 Debate Transcript, *Commission on Presidential Debates*, accessed January 23, 2015, <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-6-1976-debate-transcript>.
- 4 Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 278.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 273–75.
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- 10 Jimmy Carter on Middle East Issues—Carter Family Papers, 1976 Campaign Files, “Defense, 9/74–12/74 Through Foreign Policy Defense—Correspondence/Recommendations/Analysis [1],” Box 36, Jimmy Carter Library.
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- 19 Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 190.
- 20 Ken Stein and Rich Walter, “Prime Minister Rabin and President Carter Meet in Washington,” *Center for Israel Education: Today in Israeli History*, March 7, 1977, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://israeled.org/prime-minister-rabin-president-carter-meet-washington/>. Also see “Carter Meets with Yitzhak Rabin,” March 7, 1977, *History Channel: This Day in History*, accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/carter-meets-with-yitzhak-rabin>; Carter, *White House Diary*, 31.
- 21 “The President’s News Conference of March 9, 1977,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter 1977*, Book I—January 20 to June 24, 1977 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1977), 342.
- 22 “Clinton, Massachusetts Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the Clinton Town Meeting, March 16, 1977,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter 1977*, Book I—January 20 to June 24, 1977 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1977), 387.
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- 30 Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 290–91.
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5 Reagan and Bush 41

Not Illegal but a “Real Problem”

Well, it seems to me under 242, I don't see how they can be considered illegal.
—Ronald Reagan¹

If any settlements are used for Soviet Jews, it will put us in an extremely difficult position and limit sharply our ability to facilitate their resettlement.
—George H.W. Bush²

When Ronald Reagan became the fortieth president of the United States, he inherited numerous issues in the Middle East, including three armed conflicts: the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the Iran-Iraq war; and the civil conflict in Lebanon, which was aggravated by cross-border raids by Palestinian guerrillas and Israeli troops. These conflicts were compounded by terrorism and hostile relations with Iran and Syria. Additionally, the Arab-Israeli peace process was stalemated; with Palestinian autonomy negotiations permanently stalled, and the United States adhering to its self-imposed ban on negotiations with the P.L.O., American credibility in the region was significantly reduced.

Reagan's initial Middle East policy aimed for “strategic consensus,” promoted by Secretary of State Alexander Haig; it involved American cooperation with Israel and moderate Arab states in opposition to Soviet expansion and influence in the region.³ The “strategic consensus” was based on two assumptions: first, that cooperation and mutual understanding between the United States and Israel and moderate Arab states was a given; and second, that moderate Arab states shared the American view that the Soviet Union was the primary threat in the region. However, these assumptions disregarded the deep suspicions and animosities between Israel and the Arab states.

Additionally, Reagan came to office a strong admirer of Israel, and his administration legitimized and strengthened many of the Israeli positions. Reagan and his advisors did not even pretend to offer an even-handed approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Their Cold War politics, in particular, emphasized the importance of Israel as a bulwark against radicalism and Soviet influence in the Middle East. Moreover, the administration's focus on terrorism meant that they were willing to delegitimize and bypass the P.L.O. in the peace process, increasing Israel's hold

on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in particular. With regard to settlements, the administration reversed Carter's publicly declared policy when Reagan repeatedly described settlements as "not illegal." Finally, the administration took a strategic approach to the region, de-emphasizing the human aspects of the conflict. Thus, by 1988, the peace process was transformed by the growth in Israeli settlements, making peace between Israel and its neighbors less likely and more challenging. As a result, America's failure to curb Israeli territorial expansion and settlement in the 1980s had a profound impact on future American policy.

Reagan's vice president, George H.W. Bush (Bush 41), won the 1988 presidential election. The Bush administration avoided pronouncements on the legality of settlements and strongly criticized the settlements because they were an obstacle to peace. While the Bush administration sparred with Israel's Shamir government over settlements, the Rabin government found a kinder and gentler president. The administration went from arguing that Israel should "lay aside . . . the unrealistic vision of a Greater Israel"⁴ and delaying Israeli loan guarantees to overlooking the expansion and construction of settlements in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. The administration neither confirmed nor denied Reagan's pronouncement that the settlements were "not illegal," but like previous administrations, Bush 41 capitulated to the Israeli position.

Reagan's Images of Israel

During his 1980 campaign, Ronald Reagan focused on what he and his advisors saw as the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy. In the Middle East, Reagan argued that Carter's strategy lacked coherence and was inconsistent. Moreover, he suggested that Carter "failed to recognize [the] strategic importance of Israel." Finally, Reagan lambasted Carter for the "dangerous impasse" in peace negotiations caused by Carter's flirtations with the P.L.O. Reagan suggested that his approach would emphasize Israeli security needs, guarantee that Jerusalem "is now and will continue to be one city, undivided," and that he would not prejudge any negotiations.⁵ Most significantly, Reagan was strongly biased toward Israel with little sympathy for the Palestinian people. Reagan surrounded himself with advisors who agreed with this position, viewing Israel as a critical component in the Cold War.

This fit well with Reagan's Manichean view of the world as good versus evil; in this world, Israelis were heroes, while Palestinians were the villains. There were few nuances in Reagan's worldview and he was impatient with details; as a result, broad concepts governed his foreign policy. His views were largely shaped by the Cold War and his anti-Soviet beliefs; describing the Soviet Union as an "evil empire,"⁶ Reagan dealt with other countries, and defined allies and enemies in terms of their relationship to the Soviet Union. Suggesting that previous presidents had ignored the Soviet threat, Reagan argued, "Let's not delude ourselves, the Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren't engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn't be any hot spots in the world."⁷ Israel's role in preventing the Soviet Union from dominating the Middle East was a

central component of this view. In a January 1980 policy statement, the Reagan campaign claimed:

The central objective of American policy in the [Middle East] should be to prevent the extension of Soviet influence or domination over any nation or coalition of nations. The region . . . is of pivotal geopolitical importance. . . . The crucial element in determining the success or failure of American policy is the fate of Israel. Israel is America's . . . ultimate regional deterrent to the extension of Soviet hegemony . . . by virtue of its military power, geographic location, and uncompromising willingness to defend its security interests. The [Carter] administration's dangerous posture of seeking to pressure Israel into accepting terms of settlement of important diplomatic issues congenial to the PLO strikes at the heart of American's security interests in the region.⁸

Reagan promoted Israel as a strategic ally throughout his 1980 presidential campaign. In a meeting with Jewish leaders, Reagan argued, "In my Administration, there will be no more betrayals of friends and allies by the United States." Illustrating his unwillingness to engage the Palestinians in dialogue, Reagan noted, "The West Bank should be a decision worked out by Israel and Jordan." Reagan also stressed his belief in the "right of settlements in the West Bank" stating, "I don't see how they can be considered illegal." Finally, Reagan added, "without the presence of a strong Israel, our own position . . . in the area would be markedly weaker today."⁹ Most significant, Reagan viewed Israel as an important strategic ally whose defense was vital to American strategic and national interests.

Israel is the only stable democracy we can rely on in a spot where Armageddon could come. The greatest responsibility the United States has is to preserve peace—and we need an ally in that area. We must prevent the Soviet Union from penetrating the Mideast. The Nixon Administration successfully moved them out; if Israel were not there, the U.S. would have to be there.¹⁰

Reagan also viewed Israel in personal terms. The Holocaust had left a significant impression on him. In a September 1980 address before B'nai B'rith, Reagan explained that America's commitment to Israel was a "moral imperative" as well as a strategic interest. Citing Soviet advances in the Middle East, he stressed the importance of America's "friendship with Israel" and the appalling "way the Carter Administration has mistreated our friends." He ended the address by drawing on the Old Testament account of Job's holding steady to his principles, suggesting the United States and Israel shared important values.¹¹

His personal connection to Israel was not surprising. Reagan tended to view policy making as an extension of his personal relationships. The fact that he had many Jewish friends inclined him toward viewing American policy toward Israel as impacting those friendships. Wolf Blitzer described Reagan as extremely pro-Israeli; "a lifetime of experience led him to see Jews as part of the 'us' group in his us-against-them mind set."¹² Reagan disliked personal confrontation and Samuel

Lewis, ambassador to Israel, suggested that Reagan went to great pains to avoid conflict. When he was angry, particularly with Israel, he attempted to soften his language with an apologetic demeanor.¹³

Finally, influential conservative thinkers influenced Reagan's views of Israel. Defining terrorism as a threat jeopardizing both American and Israeli interests, Richard Pipes, who served in Reagan's National Security Council from 1981 to 1982, equated Israeli and American interests suggesting that both countries were fighting a global conspiracy emanating from the Soviet Union.¹⁴ Likewise, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, who served as Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations from 1981 to 1985, saw Israel as a state that was willing to use its military might to deal with the terrorist threat. Focusing on Israel's successful rescue operation of hijacked hostages from Entebbe, Uganda in 1976, Kirkpatrick argued, "a culture of appeasement . . . is a profoundly mistaken culture."¹⁵ Most significant, Reagan's Manichean outlook played into these ideas and made it easier to define the Middle East and American policy toward the region. He saw the region, even after eight years in office, as one rooted in hatreds "reaching back to the dawn of history," and Arabs as possessing a "pathological hatred" of Israel; in Reagan's view, the region was savage and uncivilized.¹⁶ As a result, he tended to defer to Israeli views about the region and, more specifically, the Arab-Israeli conflict. Consequently, Israeli settlement expansion continued throughout the 1980s.

The "Most Friendly" Administration

Throughout the Reagan administration, Israel and the United States shared an almost symbiotic relationship. Reagan's first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, explained, "Israel [had] never had a greater friend in the White House than Ronald Reagan."¹⁷ This opinion was shared by Israeli foreign minister Yitzhak Shamir who stated, "This is the most friendly administration that we have ever worked with. They are determined that the strong friendship and cooperation will continue and even be strengthened despite the differences that crop up from time to time."¹⁸ As president, Reagan voiced similar sentiments. At a welcoming ceremony for Prime Minister Begin, Reagan stated:

Israel and America may be thousands of miles apart, but we are philosophical neighbors sharing a strong commitment to democracy and the rule of law. . . . The challenges we face are great with the forces of aggression, lawlessness, and tyranny intent on exploiting weakness. . . . Working with all our friends in the Middle East, we seek to reinforce the security of the entire region. As we consult about these problems, rest assured that the security of Israel is a principal objective of this administration and that we regard Israel as an ally in our search for regional stability.¹⁹

And in a letter to Prime Minister Begin, Reagan wrote:

Any decision . . . in the region will be made in the context of my administration's firm commitment to Israel's security and the need to bring peace to the

region. Israel remains America's friend and ally. . . . I recognize the unique bond between the United States and Israel and the serious responsibilities which this bond imposes on us both.²⁰

This derived from the administration's belief that Israel shared American values and was a strategic asset to the United States in its conflict with the Soviet Union.

The Reagan administration ensured that Israel would maintain military superiority over its neighbors. In another letter to Prime Minister Begin, Reagan wrote, "You can rely on the full cooperation and always friendly understanding of United States in a common search for the peace and stability that will assure Israel's security and its well-being through the ages."²¹ Israel, thus, received preferential treatment in economic and military aid to the region. During the Reagan administration, assistance to Israel reached high levels. Between 1981 and 1984, the United States provided Israel more than \$2 billion each year; from 1985 on it increased to over \$3 billion each year.²²

Reagan's unwavering support for Israel highlighted a clear difference with the Carter administration. In an interview with reporters, he explained:

As to the West Bank, I believe the settlements there—I disagreed when the previous Administration referred to them as illegal, they're not illegal. Not under the U.N. resolution that leaves the West Bank open to all people—Arab and Israeli alike, Christian alike. I do think perhaps now with this rush to do it and this moving in there the way they are is ill-advised because if we're going to continue with the spirit of Camp David to try and arrive at a peace, maybe this, at this time, is unnecessarily provocative.²³

A memo for the National Security Council provided a vigorous defense of Reagan's position.

The settlements are legal, but the issue is properly a political question. . . . The USG has recognized no country's sovereignty over the West Bank. . . . The issue of sovereignty is open and will not be closed until the actual parties to the conflict formally consent to a peace agreement. In the meantime, there is no law that bars Jews from settling on the West Bank. No one should be excluded from an area simply on account of his nationality or religion (Original emphasis).²⁴

For the remainder of his two terms in office, Reagan and his administration would continue to defend or ignore Israeli settlement expansion. The administration never backed away from Reagan's declaration that the settlements were "not illegal" nor did they ever explicitly declare them legal. Instead, they emphasized settlements as ill-advised, "unhelpful" obstacles to peace.²⁵

242: Not All Territory

In addition to its position on settlements, the Reagan administration embraced the Israeli interpretation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242. Again,

the Arab interpretation of Resolution 242 was that it required total withdrawal from all of the territories occupied in 1967. Israel disagreed, and the United States made clear that it supported Israel's position that Resolution 242 did not require total withdrawal and Israel did not have to withdraw until the Arabs negotiated peace. A National Security Council memo argued:

[Resolution 242 affirms] every State's right to "secure and recognized boundaries." [and provides] that peace should include Israeli withdrawal "from territories occupied in the recent conflict." (Note: [It] does not require withdrawal from all such territories.) No withdrawal whatsoever is required before the establishment of peace (Original emphasis).²⁶

The administration's position was challenged in August 1981 when Saudi King Fahd proposed an eight point Middle East peace plan during an Arab League summit in Fez, Morocco.

Fahd's proposal called for an independent Palestinian state that would include the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem, which the Israeli government vehemently opposed. While not specifying Israel, the Fahd Plan also proposed that all states in the region live in peace, presumably acknowledging Israel's right to exist. In addition, the Fahd Plan mandated Israeli withdrawal from "all Arab territory occupied in 1967" and a dismantling of all Israeli settlements built in the occupied territories since 1967, including in East Jerusalem.²⁷ In an analysis of the plan, Geoffrey Kemp, senior director for Near East and South Asian affairs on the National Security Council, argued that the Fahd Plan offered the "standard Arab interpretation of . . . Resolution 242" on withdrawal. Kemp went on to state, "The resolution, however, does not refer to 'all' territory (Original emphasis)"; in doing so, the administration outlined and supported the Israeli position. Moreover, Kemp stressed that the administration "does not call for dismantling of Jewish settlements. . . . President Reagan said they were not illegal." Finally, the Reagan administration would uphold his predecessors' policy and oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state.²⁸ It would take almost another year before the administration would put its own peace plan forward.

Over the course of the next year, the administration continued to grant Israel wide-latitude in its policies. Despite acknowledging that Israeli settlements presented an obstacle to peace and Palestinian autonomy, the administration emphasized the settlements as an "indispensable margin of security for Israel." Moreover, the administration argued that settlement activity prevented the development of an independent Palestinian state dominated by the P.L.O.²⁹ On June 5, 1982, the administration was faced with a new challenge in the region when Israel attacked P.L.O. strongholds in southern Lebanon after sustained attacks against Israeli civilians in the north of Israel. Israel gradually expanded its operations and eventually occupied large areas of Lebanon, including western Beirut. Under the intense pressure from Israeli attacks, the P.L.O. leadership was forced to relocate from Beirut to Tunis, Tunisia.

In late June 1982, President Reagan met with Israeli prime minister Begin. During his meetings, Reagan emphasized cultivating the peace process to ensure Israeli security. Most significantly, Reagan saw the defeat of the P.L.O. as a positive sign for Israel and expressed hope that Israel might relax its policies in the West Bank.³⁰ Moreover, Reagan urged Begin to “develop more Egypts” so that the United States could “convince countries to start dealing with Israel and . . . recognize Israel.”³¹ However, throughout all of his conversations, Reagan never directly raised the issue of Israeli settlements. Instead, Reagan focused on bringing Jordan into the peace process.

Reagan’s Plan

On September 1, 1982, Reagan put forth his peace initiative aimed at reigniting the peace process. Vaguely worded, the peace plan was designed to attract broad support and encourage Jordanian participation. Reagan’s stated objective was to “reconcile Israel’s legitimate security concerns with the legitimate rights of the Palestinians.” First, the plan argued that peace could neither be based on an independent Palestinian state nor on Israeli sovereignty over the occupied territories. Second, any resolution for the Palestinians must be sought in association with Jordan, which was designated as the representative of the Palestinian people. Third, the plan called for Israeli withdrawal within the context of Resolution 242; most significantly, while withdrawal applied to all fronts, final borders would be determined by the “extent of true peace and normalization and the security arrangements offered in return.” Finally, the plan supported the indivisibility of Jerusalem.³²

By stressing Israeli security, Reagan had acquiesced to the long-standing Israeli argument regarding the occupied territories. Furthermore, Reagan never acknowledged that Palestinian rights were national, thus implying that Palestinians as a people might have rights but one of those rights was not statehood. Again, this conformed with the Israeli position. Perhaps most significant, Israel consistently defined its security in terms of land. Thus, Reagan’s plan implicitly accepted Israel’s insistence on security including control of the occupied areas, allowing Israel to dictate the map of the region. Under the Reagan Plan, Israel was only required to make some withdrawals from the occupied territories. However, Reagan emphasized the importance of Israeli control, not sovereignty.

The Israeli government immediately rejected the plan in a unanimous vote by the Cabinet, arguing that the American proposal would cause “serious danger” to Israel.³³ Adding insult to injury, the Israeli Cabinet also announced a vigorous program on Jewish settlement in the occupied territories. The American response was weak, suggesting that the new policy was “most unwelcome.” In addition, the administration made clear that it would “not alter its stand on settlements.”³⁴ However, by not specifying that stand, the Israeli government could presume that the United States stood by Reagan’s declaration that settlements in the occupied territories were legal.

Almost two weeks later, Secretary of State Shultz assured Jewish Americans that the United States would not impose peace on Israel. Shultz emphasized the Israeli argument on borders and withdrawal.

If Israel's adversaries want peace and justice they must recognize, clearly and explicitly, the right of the state of Israel to exist. . . . Our vision of the future on the West Bank is one guided by a vision of a secure Israel living within defensible borders and by our abiding belief that it is not in Israel's long term interests to try to rule over the more than one million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. . . . [However,] peace cannot be achieved by the creation of an independent Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza. . . . The extent of Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank and Gaza [should be] determined by the quality of the peace offered in return.³⁵

Shultz not only accepted the Israeli prescription for "defensible borders" and limited withdrawals, but also acknowledged Israel's demographic challenge; if Israel were to annex the West Bank and Gaza, it would threaten Israel's identification as Jewish state. Moreover, regarding settlements, Shultz reiterated the argument that Jews have a right to live and settle in the West Bank and Gaza, but that "settlement activity prior to the conclusion of negotiations is detrimental to the peace process."³⁶ Thus, the administration continued its previous argument that settlement was legal but problematic for peace.

The Reagan Plan ultimately supported the continuation of Israel's settlement policy. While the plan called for no new settlements during negotiations, it supported the existence of current settlements, and argued that the status of the settlements should be determined through negotiations. Furthermore, the administration continued to argue that "legality was not the issue—continued new settlements were 'unhelpful to the peace process.'"³⁷ Finally, by failing to rescind Reagan's earlier pronouncement that settlements were not illegal, the administration lent further credence to Israeli policies. Under pressure from Israel, the administration made clear that the United States would not "deny Jews the opportunity to live in the West Bank and Gaza."³⁸ And in a personal letter to Prime Minister Begin, Reagan assured him that his plan did "not detract from my deep conviction that individual Jews have the continuing right to live peacefully in the West Bank and Gaza."³⁹ In essence, the Reagan Plan was dead on arrival. Whatever the Reagan administration might have said about Middle East peace and Palestinian rights, Reagan was unwilling to apply adequate pressure and risk the American relationship with Israel.

Israeli opposition was not the only issue that doomed the peace plan. Within a month of the announcement of the plan, the situation in Lebanon began to unravel. In the mistaken belief that all was calm, a multinational peace force had been withdrawn, Lebanon's president-elect was assassinated, Israeli forces moved back into Beirut, and Lebanese Christian militias massacred Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila. This led the United States to introduce a Marine contingent as part of a new multinational force. As American policymakers turned their focus

to Lebanon, they increasingly deferred to Israeli policies. Focusing on the situation in Lebanon allowed Israel to delay a solution to the West Bank and Gaza, and consolidate their control over the occupied territories.⁴⁰

The administration's plan was followed by an Arab initiative adopted at Fez, Morocco. The Fez Plan called for Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territories occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, the dismantlement of all Israeli settlements, and the creation of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Despite an Arab concession advocating a United Nations Security Council guarantee of the right of all states in the region to live in peace, the United States rejected the plan. In fact, Secretary of State Shultz later described the plan as complicating the peace process because of its endorsement of Palestinian statehood.⁴¹ By 1983, the administration had put aside its interest in Arab-Israeli peace, focusing on a resolution to the situation in Lebanon.

The Administration Wields the Veto

For the remainder of its term, the Reagan administration made no serious attempt to engage Israel and the Palestinians in the peace process. Rather, the administration allowed Israel to expand its control of the occupied territories without consequence. In essence, the administration gave up leadership in the peace process and ceded authority to its close ally, Israel, allowing them to proceed with settlement construction without American interference. To solidify American support for Israel, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 111 (NSDD 111). Emphasizing the situation in Lebanon and growing crisis in the Persian Gulf due to the Iran-Iraq war, it argued for a "stronger strategic relationship with Israel" as a means "for inducing cooperation on the broader peace process." Also, NSDD 111 stressed the administration's continued concern with the Cold War and Soviet threats to the region. While the administration was determined to "review and favorably consider outstanding Israeli requests" for military equipment, it only suggested restating in "stronger terms our opposition to Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank and Gaza" and urging "Israel to improve the quality of life for the Palestinians in the occupied territories."⁴² By the end of the year, the United States and Israel had signed an agreement strengthening strategic cooperation and ensuring the funding of air base facilities.⁴³ From 1983 to 1988, the United States and Israel would sign eight memoranda of agreement on security and defense and a host of other agreements, solidifying the Reagan administration's closeness to Israel.

The administration's support of Israel is also seen in its consistent veto of United Nations Security Council resolutions condemning Israel.⁴⁴ Most notably, the United States vetoed resolutions specifically condemning the establishment of Israeli settlements in and occupation of the territories, including resolutions in 1983, 1986, and 1988.⁴⁵ And, as violence broke out during the first intifada, the United States voted against multiple draft resolutions condemning Israel for its actions in the occupied territories. Arguing that the February 1988 draft resolution was an "untimely effort to involve the Security Council on issues which are . . . best

dealt with through diplomatic channels,” Deputy U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Herbert Okun returned to the idea that a solution could not be “imposed upon” the negotiating parties.⁴⁶

In addition, the intifada led the administration to stress the shared American-Israeli values, thereby strengthening the relationship with Israel and acquiescing to Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza. The administration viewed the violence of the intifada as motivated by terrorist and anti-democratic elements. Secretary Shultz argued, terrorism and violence

is directed against *us*, the democracies, against our most basic values and often our fundamental strategic interests. . . . How tragic it would be if democratic societies so lost confidence in their own moral legitimacy that they lost sight of the obvious: that violence directed against democracy or the hopes for democracy lacks fundamental justification.⁴⁷

The belief in shared values provided an important cover against criticism of Israel. Even when administration officials criticized Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, they tended to argue about the occupation’s impact on Israel rather than on the Palestinians. As noted in Shultz’s earlier ideas, if Israel annexed the West Bank and Gaza, either it would cease to be a democracy or it would cease being Jewish. Throughout the 1980s, the Reagan administration emphasized the Israeli position and, as a result, ignored Israeli settlement expansion.

In 1981, there were 16,200 Israeli settlers in the West Bank. By 1988, that had more than quadrupled to 66,500 settlers.⁴⁸ President Reagan’s pronouncement that settlements were “not illegal,” coupled with the rejection of the Reagan peace initiative and the war in Lebanon, led the administration to ignore Israeli activities in the West Bank and Gaza. From the administration’s standpoint, the democratic values and ideals shared with Israel could not be sacrificed. Israel’s settlement policies could be overlooked as long as Israel remained a strategic asset in the region. Despite challenges to the relationship with Israel, the Bush 41 administration would continue the American policy of accommodation.

George H.W. Bush’s Images of Israel

George H.W. Bush was a product of the northeastern aristocracy. The son of Wall Street banker and Connecticut Senator Prescott Bush, he graduated from Phillips Academy Andover and Yale University. Bush won the 1988 election for the presidency after having served eight years as Reagan’s vice president. Arguably, he was one of the most experienced men ever to hold the office. Bush enlisted in the Navy on his eighteenth birthday and became one of its youngest pilots, flying nearly five dozen missions during World War II before being shot down on September 2, 1944 over Chichi Jima in the Pacific Ocean. After the war, Bush relocated his family to Texas and gained success in the oil industry. He then served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1966 to 1970, before becoming Richard Nixon’s ambassador to the United Nations. During the Nixon and Ford administrations,

Bush also served as chairperson of the Republican National Committee, head of the U.S. Liaison Office in China, and director of Central Intelligence.

Bush's experiences gave him a pragmatic, cautious, and often flexible approach to policy making. Bush guarded traditional American Cold War interests, and was often deliberate and reactive in his decision-making. Ultimately, Bush preferred consensus building and deal making to rigid ideological leadership. During his career, he had learned that there were patriots on both sides of the political aisle. Bush's experience taught him about the value and importance of cultivating personal relationships. He used personal diplomacy to encourage agreement and work toward solutions. When he was ambassador to the United Nations, for example, Bush used his interest in baseball and invited the Economic and Social Council to a game at Shea Stadium. This personal touch was important to his diplomatic skill.

Bush's caution and emphasis on personal relationships impacted his views of Israel. Along with his Secretary of State, James Baker, Bush wanted to move the peace process forward. However, Bush was reluctant to pressure Israel. As ambassador to the United Nations, Bush exhibited his pragmatic approach to peace, emphasizing the importance of America's role as a mediator and stressing pragmatic solutions. Most important, Bush highlighted the significance of perceptions.

If we are to preserve our ability to play a middleman or catalytic role in the [peace process], it seems to USUN that we should go along with a [resolution which reaffirms Resolution 242]. . . . This position has been a constant one ever since the June 1967 war and was based . . . on the practical political perception that no lasting peace can be arranged in the [Middle East] . . . as long as Israel insists on occupying significant amounts of Arab territory. . . . Should [the] US equivocate on this matter, we fear Sadat and other Arab moderates would conclude that [the] US is incapable of withstanding Israeli pressures and their willingness to cooperate with future US efforts to promote a political settlement would be destroyed.⁴⁹

Bush's experiences as United Nations ambassador emphasized an even-handed approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. During a 1971 debate on the status of Jerusalem, Bush noted:

[A]n Israeli occupation policy made up of unilaterally determined practices cannot help promote a just and lasting peace any more than that cause was served by the status quo in Jerusalem prior to June 1967, which, I want to make clear, we did not like and do not advocate reestablishing.⁵⁰

And, in September 1971, the United States voted in favor of United Nations Security Council Resolution 298, which deplored Israeli failure to heed earlier resolutions and declared invalid any Israeli actions that changed the status of Jerusalem.⁵¹ However, the extent of Bush's experiences with the Middle East was limited. His interests and expertise focused on China and the Soviet Union.

Unlike many of his predecessors, Bush lacked an emotional attachment to Israel, concentrating instead on the strategic interests of the relationship. Bush was a realist who emphasized the national interest and acted based on how each policy could best serve that interest. As a result, the Middle East was not a priority at the outset of the administration. Bush and Secretary of State Baker did not see an advantage in pursuing an active peace process in the Middle East. More significantly, the Cold War commanded Bush's attention early in his term. Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership in the Soviet Union opened up new possibilities for an American-Soviet relationship. Bush, naturally, emphasized transforming the relationship with the Soviet Union and ending the Cold War peacefully. Thus, in the Middle East, Bush relied on his ability to cultivate personal relationships and did not seriously engage in the peace process until after Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait in August 1990. Bush's instinct was to promote even-handedness in the region, and it led him into a dispute with Israel, but, like his predecessors, he ultimately acquiesced.

The Clash: Bush Versus Israel

Shortly after Bush moved into the White House, Israel announced the establishment of new settlements in the West Bank. Bush was familiar with the settlements issue due to his tenure as United Nations ambassador. At the United Nations, Bush had opposed settlements, but his pragmatic approach to policy making meant that he had no illusions about altering the Israeli position, especially since he would be dealing with a Likud government led by Yitzhak Shamir, who had made clear in his inaugural speech that he would continue the "holy work" of establishing settlements.⁵² Early in his administration, Bush confronted Prime Minister Shamir on the announcement regarding newly established settlements. In a one-on-one meeting, Bush explained:

He was greatly upset by the fact that soon after the visit of [Israeli Foreign Minister] Arens. . . , Israel went ahead and started up new settlements. If they went ahead with the settlements now, the United States could well have no alternative but to support a critical resolution in the [United Nations]. This was an issue of great concern to us.

In response, Prime Minister Shamir said that "settlements ought not to be such a problem."⁵³ This meeting reflected Bush's pragmatic approach to the peace process and emphasized his attempts at even-handedness. However, this meeting would also contribute to significant disagreements between the United States and Israel, illustrating the costs of Bush's reliance on personal diplomacy.

According to Bobbie Kilberg, deputy assistant to the president for Public Liaison:

[T]he President did not get along with . . . Shamir whatsoever. . . . And. . . , again you go back to personal relationships. . . . He based his ability to work on many foreign-policy issues with how he related to the players, and he just

did not get along with Shamir. He did not trust him. He didn't believe him. Early on in the Presidency, Shamir came in and one of the first things they discussed was Jewish settlements, and Shamir said to the President, "That shall not be of concern." The President took that . . . to mean that the United States didn't have to worry about Jewish settlements because Shamir would take control of that situation. Shamir didn't mean that at all. According to Shamir, it meant "it's no business of the United States. It's not of your concern, it's *our* concern. Leave us alone in that."⁵⁴

Dennis Ross, director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, and Richard Haass, National Security Council senior director for Near East and South Asian Affairs, share similar understandings of the meeting. According to Ross:

Bush said to Shamir, "You know there is a real problem with settlements. I've got a real problem with settlements. I think they're a real problem." And Shamir literally said, "Well, they won't be a problem." Now Bush took that to mean, *Great, you're not going to be building them.* And Shamir took it to mean, *Well, I don't think they should be a problem, therefore they won't be a problem.* . . . Shortly after the meeting [Bush] was shown intel . . . that showed the Israelis were starting new settlements. . . . And therefore Bush thought, *This guy lied to me.* Now Bush being the kind of guy he was, with a code, with a sense of propriety, the idea this guy would lie to him really was something he just never got over.⁵⁵

And, Haass added:

What Shamir was saying was it *shouldn't* be a problem; you Americans are exaggerating the significance. Bush took it to mean, oh, I've got this pledge that he's not going to do anything to cause me a problem. So when Shamir then . . . continued to do things with settlements, and start new settlements—literally every time Jim Baker would show up there he'd be greeted by a new wave of settlements—Bush took it as an act of bad faith; this guy has lied to me, this guy has crossed me. . . . [O]nce these things get on the wrong track it's hard to get them on the right track.⁵⁶

While Bush's reliance on personal relationships could facilitate successful diplomacy, as it did with the end of the Cold War and in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, it also could constrain diplomacy. As a result, American relations with Israel during the Bush administration were tense.

In addition to Bush's initial confrontation with Shamir, Secretary of State Baker's May 1989 address to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) added to the tensions. Baker warned Israel:

[N]ow is the time to lay aside, once and for all, the unrealistic vision of a Greater Israel. Israeli interests in the West Bank and Gaza, security and

otherwise, can be accommodated in a settlement based on Resolution 242. Forswear annexation; stop settlement activity; allow schools to reopen; reach out to the Palestinians as neighbors who deserve political rights.⁵⁷

The Israelis responded by dramatically increasing settlement activity in response to the influx of Soviet Jews as the Cold War ended.

In November, Bush and Shamir met again. Bush expressed his disappointment and frustration in their one-on-one meeting.

You and I had a frank discussion alone on this. I tried to be clear that U.S. policy is to discourage settlements. . . . Settlements are unacceptable to us. . . . [T]his new settlement that you have announced puts me in a difficult and embarrassed position.

However, Bush failed to apply any real pressure, focused on the personal affront of the announcement, and suggested that the timing of the announcement rather than the settlement itself was the problem.

What I don't understand is why just before coming here you would confront me with this embarrassment. . . . [W]hy does it have to happen now? This . . . puts me in an embarrassing position with the press and the American people. I can't say to them that we in any way acquiesce. . . . [T]he world will see it as your . . . creating a fait accompli. It leaves a bad impression.

Shamir responded by attempting to clarify the "misunderstanding." "As you can see," he argued,

this is hardly a great matter. We are doing what we need to do without making any special effort. We have received no complaints from the Arab side. It is not an important matter. Nor is it an obstacle to the peace process.⁵⁸

In addition, when the Israeli delegation met with President Bush and his advisors, Bush again focused on the personal and political fallout associated with the announcement of new settlements. Again, he failed to apply any direct pressure aimed at getting Israel to alter its course. Bush emphasized that "the recent announcement by the Government of Israel . . . causes me problems and puts me in an embarrassing position personally." He continued:

As President, I see a strong relationship with Israel as good for the United States. . . . I was embarrassed by the timing of your announcement. If any settlements are used for Soviet Jews, it will put us in an extremely difficult position and limit sharply our ability to facilitate their resettlement. . . . [O]thers . . . see settlements as a de facto situation on the ground that makes it harder for them to work with us to facilitate a peace process. . . . Your policy on settlements is causing us problems.

Bush also stressed the impact on Israeli support in the United States, arguing, “What you are doing tends to undermine the blanket support you once enjoyed here.”⁵⁹

Soviet Exodus

The administration’s concerns were heightened by the end of the Cold War and the exodus of Soviet Jews to Israel. Bush was “determined . . . to do everything possible within our means to help the outflow and absorption into Israel.”⁶⁰ The United States proposed \$400 million in Housing Investment guarantees to Israel for the absorption of these immigrants, but the administration did not want Soviet Jews to be settled in the occupied territories.⁶¹ In a telephone conversation with Shamir, Bush argued:

Our problem now is that legislation is coming up on the Hill (concerning U.S. assistance to the resettlement of Soviet Jews). Unless we get assurances that settlement has been curbed we are in a direct dilemma since such assistance would conflict with our policy. . . . If you could end direct and indirect support for settlement activity, then we could support the initiative on the Hill. . . . A cessation of the incentives and subsidies (to settlement activity) would help here, so that your policy would not fly in the face of our policy.⁶²

And, on March 1, 1990 before the House Subcommittee on Foreign Aid Appropriations, Secretary of State Baker said:

I think . . . within the administration, there is probably support for the idea that if there was some assurance—if the government of Israel could . . . provide some assurances that it would not be engaging in any new or additional settlement activity . . . that is, settlement activity in the territories—it’s entirely possible that the administration might then be able to support legislation such as this. . . . But, we would want those assurances.⁶³

Baker was now applying direct pressure on the Israeli government heightening the already existing discord between the United States and Israel.

The Israelis countered, making matters worse when Yosef Achimeir, Shamir’s Cabinet secretary, admitted that Shamir, “an open believer in . . . ‘greater Israel’ . . . would not be unhappy if Soviet immigrants [chose] to live in the occupied territories.”⁶⁴ Shamir added that East Jerusalem was not occupied territory since all of Jerusalem was Israeli, and stated that East Jerusalem would include “as many Soviet Jewish immigrants as possible.”⁶⁵ In response, Bush raised questions about Israeli claims to East Jerusalem arguing, “We do not believe there should be new settlements in the West Bank or in East Jerusalem.”⁶⁶ This broke with past administrations, which generally quietly accepted settlement building activity in East Jerusalem. However, Bush never disavowed Reagan’s statement that settlements were “not illegal,” nor did he suggest that already existing settlements should

be removed. Furthermore, the administration quickly reversed course, suggesting that Bush never meant to make an issue of the status of Jerusalem.⁶⁷

Despite both Bush and Baker's words, the House and Senate quickly approved the loan guarantees, setting up a confrontation between the administration and the Israeli government since the administration refused to act until it received assurances from Israel. Congress pressured the administration. In a letter to President Bush, signed by eight senators, Senator Rudy Boschwitz argued:

We agree with long-standing United States policy that Jerusalem should never again be divided and that its people should be free to live wherever they wish without regard to their faith. In our view, the status of Jerusalem need not be settled early in the current peace process, and it should not be linked to other issues. We are deeply concerned, however, that recent statements on the subject of Jerusalem may raise doubts as to whether that policy has changed. In particular, these statements could raise doubts about our long-standing commitment to the right of Jews to live in Jerusalem. . . . Mr. President, we support your determination to advance the peace process. . . . We believe, however, that your clarification that our policy on Jerusalem has not changed is urgently needed now.⁶⁸

The administration now faced criticism from Israel and at home, but continued its refusal to act on the loan guarantees.

In response, on May 3, 1990, Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater stated:

The President believes Jews and non-Jews in Jerusalem ought to act in a manner that does not threaten the city's comity or in any ways prejudice prospects for the peace process. . . . The long-standing opposition of the United States to settlement activity in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 is well known. So too is the position of the United States supporting a united Jerusalem whose final status is determined by negotiations.

But, in handwritten notes on his statement, administration officials were clearly concerned, arguing, "if we use [the] stick we will lose . . . Israelis will be afraid to take risks if we lose the [American] Jewish Community."⁶⁹ The administration held firm throughout the summer but pressure mounted for the release of the funds.

On October 2, 1990, Israeli foreign minister David Levy sent a letter to Secretary of State Baker stating, "I can confirm that the official policy of the Government of Israel with respect to the absorption of immigrants from the Soviet Union is . . . not to direct or settle Soviet Jews beyond the green line."⁷⁰ Baker then announced that the United States would provide the loan guarantees, having been given assurances from Israel that it would not settle Soviet immigrants in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem.⁷¹ Within four days, Shamir declared that the agreement did not cover Jerusalem and announced plans to build settlements in East Jerusalem. Baker was asked about the announcement, refused

to answer, but continued to withhold the funds.⁷² The administration added further fuel to fire when they joined in passing in a unanimous United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israel for “acts of violence against Palestinians in a confrontation on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem.”⁷³

On October 18, Foreign Minister Levy sent a subsequent letter to Baker “[i]n the wake of various reports with differing puzzling interpretations of my letter.” Levy explained, “You are fully aware of the fact that my letter . . . contains no commitment—either direct or indirect—to avoid building in Jerusalem or anywhere else, including Judaea, Samaria, and Gaza.” Levy then quoted from the minutes of his meeting with Baker on September 5, 1990 in which Baker purportedly said, “You are not requested to make any move contravening your . . . position.” Levy also cited a September 21, 1990 follow-up letter in which Baker wrote:

You particularly stressed the fact that your government will not be in a position in which it is asked to give up the principle of settlement. . . . Being aware of your problems and despite our strong objection to settlement activity, I have made an effort to prevent a situation that would challenge your government’s basic principle.

Baker had seemingly acquiesced. Furthermore, Levy made clear that the only agreement the Israeli government made was that the loan guarantees would be used only in areas under Israeli rule prior to June 1967.⁷⁴ Yet the administration still refused to release the funds.

Settlements and Loan Guarantees

In early 1991, Israel privately requested that the United States provide \$10 billion in loans over the next five years to house Soviet Jewish immigrants. The administration was able to delay Israel’s formal request for the loan in an attempt to link the aid to Israeli settlement activity. Meanwhile, Israel continued to expand its presence in the occupied territories. In early 1991, over 200,000 settlers lived in almost 200 settlements throughout the territories, including East Jerusalem. Nearly one-half of the land in the West Bank and one-third in Gaza were reserved for Israeli settlement, and there were approximately 120,000 Jews in East Jerusalem. Furthermore, the number of Israelis settling in East Jerusalem and the West Bank had increased at a rate of 10% per year since Bush’s election in 1988. In addition, nearly 9,000 Soviet immigrants had settled in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in 1990; one in every five new settlers in the West Bank was a Soviet Jewish immigrant.⁷⁵

Israel also embarked on a massive expansion of Israeli settlements.⁷⁶ In September, Jackson Diehl reported that Israeli housing minister Ariel Sharon had an ambitious plan to build 12 new Jewish towns along the eastern edge of Israel’s pre-1967 border to create a “series of urban blocks that will have the dual effect of eliminating the old border and ‘legitimizing’ more than two dozen settlements.” In addition, Sharon planned to create a belt of housing around Jerusalem to sever

it from Palestinians in the West Bank.⁷⁷ In further defiance of the administration, which was encouraging a peace conference that included the Soviet Union, Shamir formally requested the \$10 billion in loans for resettlement of Soviet immigrants. On the same day of the request, Bush told reporters:

I am going to ask Congress to defer, just for 120 days, consideration of this absorption aid package. . . . [I]t is in the best interest of the peace process and of peace itself that consideration of this absorption aid question for Israel be deferred. . . . Look, we all know the passions on both sides, and this is no time to inflame the passions on both sides.⁷⁸

Additionally, in a letter to Republican Senator Bob Dole, minority leader, Bush wrote:

I am deeply concerned that if we address Israeli absorption guarantees now . . . we could divert attention and momentum from our efforts to get the parties together for these historic negotiations. . . . It is our judgment that if we address absorption assistance now we risk losing everything. . . . An issue of this sensitivity could be seized upon by rejectionists intent on thwarting negotiations. . . . Providing a pause is the single most important step Congress could take to get these historic peace negotiations launched.⁷⁹

On September 12, nearly 1,000 pro-Israeli lobbyists from at least 35 states descended on the Capitol to pressure the administration to reverse course.⁸⁰ On that same day, Bush threatened the use of his veto power, arguing “I’m going to stand for what I believe here.”⁸¹

A defiant Israel responded by continuing to press for the loan guarantees. Israeli prime minister Shamir described the matter as a domestic political battle, and he called on Jewish groups in the United States to “ignore” the administration’s warnings. Shamir added, “We don’t see any reason to change our position. . . . We will continue to follow our own way because we are convinced that it is the correct and just way.”⁸² However, the Senate agreed to Bush’s request for a delay.⁸³ Shamir remained defiant, arguing:

We see construction all over Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, in fact, throughout all of Eretz Yisra’el, and this construction will continue. . . . We will build, and I hope very much that we will get the guarantees, too. In any event what I am certain about is that we will continue absorbing immigrants. . . . Autonomy will not harm the Jewish settlement, or the Jewish construction, or the Jewish security. Autonomy is one of the ways to settle the conflict.⁸⁴

Over the next year, the administration pursued a diplomatic campaign to weaken Shamir’s position in the upcoming summer 1992 Israeli elections.

In February, the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that Israeli assurances to restrict new housing within Israel with regard to the 1991 \$400 million loan guarantee were meaningless.⁸⁵ In April, the State Department Office of Inspector General issued a report identifying a “major recipient of U.S. weapons and technology” as exhibiting a “systematic and growing pattern of unauthorized transfers” of U.S.-supplied technology. Government officials identified the violator as Israel and recommended disciplinary action.⁸⁶ One month later, the State Department issued a report on Israeli settlements demonstrating that they had increased by 25% over the past year, outpacing Israeli efforts to find residents for the new housing units. The report noted that nearly 245,000 settlers lived in about 250 settlements in the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, constituting 13% of the population in the territories.⁸⁷ In addition, on May 12, State Department Spokesperson Margaret Tutwiler reiterated American support of the Palestinian right of return, causing Shamir to respond, “The Palestinians’ right of return is hot air and empty words and will never be realized”; he added that the right of return was “reserved for the Jewish nation only.”⁸⁸ Finally, Bush ignored a sense of the Senate resolution sponsored by 30 senators and approved by a 99–1 vote that “the United States government should support loan guarantees to Israel for refugee absorption.”⁸⁹ On June 23, Bush appeared to have won the argument, when Shamir’s Likud government was defeated and replaced by Yitzhak Rabin’s Labor government. The Bush administration openly hailed Shamir’s defeat.⁹⁰

A Kinder, Gentler Bush Administration

With Rabin’s election, the administration’s attempts to link aid to a settlement freeze evaporated and the administration essentially capitulated to Israel. Soon after Rabin’s election, the administration showed signs of altering its course. During a discussion with reporters on July 28, an administration spokesperson said:

I cannot speculate on any specific aspect of the talks between the President and Prime Minister Rabin. I will say that we have noted that the new Israeli government has shifted fundamentally Israel’s national priorities, and taken steps that should lead to a severe and substantial reduction in settlement activity.⁹¹

In August, President Bush invited the new Israeli prime minister to his summer retreat in Kennebunkport, Maine where Bush announced his approval of Israel’s request for \$10 billion in loan guarantees.⁹² However, Israeli policy had not changed. During his inaugural address, Prime Minister Rabin stated, “We see the need to stress that the Government will continue to enhance and strengthen Jewish settlement along the lines of confrontation, due to their importance for security, and in Greater Jerusalem.”⁹³ Rabin only agreed to halt “political” settlements, but he made clear that Israel would continue “security” settlements and left no doubt that settlement activity would carry on in East Jerusalem.⁹⁴

On September 11, President Bush formally asked Congress to approve up to \$10 billion in Israeli loan guarantees. On October 1, Congress approved the loan guarantees despite polls indicating that 80% of Americans opposed the funds. Additionally, Congress reserved to itself the right to override any presidential suspension of the guarantees should Israel violate its assurances. This was a major victory for Israel.⁹⁵ No other country had ever received such provisions. The Bush administration had publicly capitulated on its policy, and Israel continued its settlement activity. In fact, as the administration came to a close, Bush overlooked the completion of housing units in the West Bank and all new construction in East Jerusalem, as well as the establishment of settlements in the Golan Heights.

Despite the Bush administration's initially tough stand on Israeli settlements, they ultimately acquiesced and Israeli settlement activity continued. Personal relations were a deciding factor in Bush's policy. Bush's personal animosity to and mistrust of Shamir helped the administration stand firm on its policy. Likewise, Bush's personal affinity and trust for Rabin made a deal on loan guarantees easier. Bush

didn't make a secret of the fact that he very much wanted . . . Rabin to win. He very much hoped Rabin would win the next election . . . because he loved Rabin and could really get along with him.⁹⁶

Moreover, "Baker . . . made a decision . . . that [the United States] would not do the deal on loan guarantees because to do that would work against . . . Rabin."⁹⁷ Bush's efforts opposing Shamir had not changed Israeli policy, and in the end, Bush himself accepted the reality of the situation.

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6 Bill Clinton

“Complicating Factors”

I think [Israeli building in the West Bank and Israeli settlements are] a complicating factor.

—Robert H. Pelletreau, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs¹

In the 1992 presidential election, Arkansas governor Bill Clinton defeated George H.W. Bush, making Bush 41 a one-term president. Following the Bush administration’s success in orchestrating the Madrid Peace Conference after the defeat of Iraq, Bush only played a minor role in the peace process. As a result, when Clinton took office, the peace process was at a standstill. Despite its stance on Israeli settlement expansion, the Bush administration backed away from seriously pressuring Israel to pursue peace. Shortly before leaving office in January 1993, the Bush administration delivered the first \$2 billion in loan guarantees, granting Israel easier terms than those outlined by Congress.² Shortly after he became president, Clinton made clear that he would oppose any attempt to reduce American assistance to Israel.³

When Clinton came to office, it quickly became clear that he would be a staunch advocate for and friend of Israel. Despite Clinton’s support for Middle East peace negotiations, the Clinton administration implicitly endorsed the use of U.S. loan guarantees for Israeli settlements. President Clinton proved to be one of the most pro-Israel presidents, and by the end of his eight years in office, Israeli settlements had vastly expanded. Always cognizant of the political price Bush had paid with the appearance of pressuring Israel, Clinton was hesitant to confront Israel and was more sympathetic to Israeli security needs. His political instincts told him never to get ahead of Israel.

Clinton’s Images of Israel

As a Southern Baptist, Bill Clinton felt a special affinity for Israel. In December 1981, Clinton toured Israel with his pastor, W.O. Vaught. That experience gave him a

deeper appreciation of my own faith, a profound admiration for Israel, and . . . some understanding of Palestinian aspirations and grievances. It was

the beginning of an obsession to see all the children of Abraham reconciled on the holy ground in which our three faiths came to life.⁴

Vaught had a profound influence on Clinton. Visiting him in the Arkansas Governor's Mansion, Vaught told Clinton, "Bill, I think you're going to be President someday. I think you'll do a good job, but there's one thing above all you must remember: God will never forgive you if you don't stand by Israel."⁵

During his 1992 campaign for the presidency, Clinton adopted a position supporting the Madrid peace talks but criticized Bush and Baker for pressuring Israel. Clinton accused the Bush administration of eroding "the taboo against overt anti-Semitism," and suggested that he would not refuse to grant loan guarantees for housing Israeli immigrants.⁶ In addition, the Clinton campaign argued, Bush's 1992 support for Israel was an "election year conversion. . . . Since his election, George Bush has been bullying Israel and offending the American Jewish community."⁷ Finally, Clinton pledged a policy of "all-out, unconditional support for Israel," and in a speech to the Jewish Leadership Council, Clinton argued that he would give Israel the \$10 billion in loan guarantees, with or without restrictions on settlements.⁸

Beyond this, the Clinton administration did not have strong views on the Middle East. Initially, Clinton and his first Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, were reluctant to get bogged down in Middle East conflicts, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, Christopher had been Deputy Secretary of State in the Carter administration; this raised fears that he would be quick to criticize Israel and inclined to favor the Palestinians.⁹ Christopher did not want to provoke those fears by pressuring Israel or actively pursuing peace negotiations.

Anthony Lake, Clinton's National Security Advisor, also downplayed the Middle East. With the end of the Cold War, Lake offered a foreign policy vision focusing on democracy and capitalism. Lake told an audience at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, "The successor of a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies." Lake argued, America's central strategy "must be to strengthen the core of major market democracies, the bonds among them and their sense of common interest."¹⁰ The administration's focus, therefore, was the expansion of democracy and markets, especially in the newly emerging democracies throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The Middle East received little mention in Lake's address, with the exception of containing rogue states like Iraq.

Moreover, Martin Indyk, the National Security Council staff expert on the Middle East, and Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, promoted a "Syria-first" strategy. Indyk and Satloff argued Middle East peace negotiations presented the Clinton administration with "an opportunity to end the Arab-Israeli conflict, to secure peace and Arab recognition for the Jewish state and to settle Arab and Palestinian grievances." At the same time,

they warned that radical and extremist forces posed challenges for this agenda. They concluded:

The negotiating process is alive, if not so well. It has brought the Syrian and Jordanian tracks to the point of “problem solving,” which renders them ripe for breakthroughs. On the Palestinian track, however, progress will be much more difficult, requiring a sustained effort to overcome the gaps in concept and weakness of the Palestinian delegation. . . . **In the first instance then, the Clinton administration should resume the role of “honest broker” and get the talks back on track as quickly as possible** (Original emphasis).¹¹

On Indyk and Satloff’s recommendation, Secretary of State Christopher traveled to the Middle East to assess where negotiations stood. On March 3, 1993, President Clinton met with his advisers. Christopher told the group that Syria’s leader, Hafez al-Asad demanded that Israel fully withdraw from the Golan Heights; in return, he offered peace and security for Israel. Additionally, Israeli prime minister Rabin seemed pleased by this. While Colin Powell, still serving as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended against the United States using its troops to provide security on the Golan Heights, Clinton opined that it might be worth it.¹²

Thus, the administration began by downplaying the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and challenges. In fact, the Clinton administration was aware of the Oslo channel of negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, but did not believe that they would prove successful.¹³ As a result, Clinton let Israel take the lead on peace negotiations, deferring to Israeli prime minister Rabin, whom he respected and admired.¹⁴

Clinton Backs Israel

The Clinton administration demonstrated its pro-Israel stance early. During confirmation hearings for Warren Christopher, Republican Senator Jesse Helms noted that in January 1992 Senator Al Gore, the vice-president-elect, had

protested the characterization of the territories as, “Palestinian,” and went on to say. . . . “The United States should never again participate in the unfair condemnation of any nation, let alone an ally. Compromising the truth and our principles is wrong and diminishes us as a nation and harms the peace.” President Clinton . . . also called it a mistake. . . . Will you recommend that the U.S. oppose any [U.N.] resolution that refers to the disputed territories as “occupied Palestinian territories”?

Christopher responded:

Senator . . . I certainly associate myself with the views of Governor Clinton and Senator Gore. . . . [I]t does seem to me to be the correct position. . . . I’ve

always thought those needed to be balanced. That is, if the actions of Israel are going to be condemned, it was very important to describe the provocation or describe what was being responded to. So, in general terms, I certainly endorse what I understand to be the request.¹⁵

Christopher had seemingly accepted not only the idea that the United States would not condemn Israel for its actions in the occupied territories, but also the view that the territories were not occupied, but “disputed.”

And, in February 1993, Christopher effectively endorsed Israel’s right to deport Palestinians and made a veiled threat to veto any United Nations Security Council action that might condemn Israel for deportations. Hailing an Israeli decision to take back 100 of over 400 Palestinians deported in December 1992 as a “break-through,” Christopher argued:

The United States believes that this process . . . is consistent with UN Resolution 799. . . . As a consequence . . . we believe that further action by the Security Council is unnecessary and could even undercut the process.¹⁶

One month later, on March 9, 1993, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Edward Djerejian endorsed the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. During testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East where the loan guarantees approved during the Bush administration were discussed, Chairman Lee Hamilton asked, “[D]o we permit the expansion of existing settlements?” Djerejian responded, “There is some allowance for—I wouldn’t use the word ‘expansion’ but certainly some activity—construction activities in existing settlements . . . basically in terms of natural growth and basic, immediate needs in those settlements.”¹⁷

In its first year in office, the Clinton administration was publicly endorsing Israel’s policies in the occupied territories. More than acquiescence, Clinton signaled clear support for Israeli policies. By not refuting or retracting Djerejian’s testimony, the administration removed Israeli settlements as an official source of friction between the United States and Israel. Six days later, on March 15, following a meeting with Prime Minister Rabin, Clinton reassured Rabin that he would oppose any attempt to reduce assistance to Israel. In addition, Clinton accepted the Israeli concept of “peace with security,” arguing, “The Israeli people cannot be expected to make peace unless they feel secure, and they cannot be expected to feel secure unless they come to know real peace.” To that end, Clinton announced that the United States would reinforce its commitment to Israel’s “qualitative military edge.”¹⁸

The United States endorsed the Israeli position in negotiations, as well. In a draft Israeli-Palestinian declaration of principles, the administration failed to describe the territories as “occupied.” In fact, the document failed to mention the occupation, withdrawal, or an exchange of land for peace; the document suggested that any agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians would “constitute

the implementation of Resolutions 242 and 338 in all their aspects” whether or not there was an exchange of land for peace, or withdrawal. The document referred to the “territories” as “a single territorial unit,” and emphasized, “negotiations on the land issue” to determine “permanent status.” The document did emphasize giving “Palestinians real control over decisions that affect their lives,” but did not specify what this means; specifically, the document only calls for the transfer of “civilian administration” in the territories. Finally, the document recognized “Israel’s responsibility for its nationals and for overall security of the territories,” stressing that there must be “arrangements and mechanisms” to “enhance mutual security and address the needs of both sides.”¹⁹ The document appeared to accept both the Israeli position on the territories as not being “occupied,” but “disputed,” and the significance of the territories to Israeli security.

A month later, in July 1993, the State Department sent its annual report to Congress on Israeli settlement policies. It described settlements as “obstacles to peace,” but suggested a “new Israeli policy” on settlements had emerged and that this policy was advantageous to the peace process. However, the report also noted that there was no commitment to change Israeli settlement policy in East Jerusalem, where Israel declared it would continue to expand.²⁰ Most significantly, the report accepted the rhetoric of the Rabin government, which suggested the policy had changed; in reality, however, Israel continued its settlement expansion and only rhetorically altered its policy.

The Oslo Accords

By the summer of his first year in office, Clinton was firmly allying the United States with Israel. Meanwhile, in the spring of 1993, Israeli leaders had agreed to pursue negotiations under Norwegian sponsorship with Palestinians who were acting on behalf of Yasser Arafat, the leader of the P.L.O. What began as a back-channel negotiation eventually led to a negotiated agreement, the Oslo Accord. The Oslo Accord included Israeli recognition of the P.L.O. as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and transferred direct control to a small amount of territory, starting with Gaza and the town of Jericho in the West Bank. This provided the Palestinians with a territorial base, but Israelis surrounded the territory on all sides, making political and economic authority difficult. However, if this first step went well, there would be additional Israeli withdrawals, Israeli settlement activity would be frozen, and further negotiations would commence. In a celebratory meeting in September 1993, Clinton hailed the Accord, stating:

[L]et us today pay tribute to the leaders who had the courage to lead their people toward peace, away from the scars of battle, the wounds, and the losses of the past toward a brighter tomorrow. . . . What these leaders have done now must be done by others. Their achievement must be a catalyst for progress in all aspects of the peace process and those of us who support them must be there to help in all aspects. For the peace must render the people who make it

more secure. A peace of the brave is within our reach. Throughout the Middle East, there is a great yearning for the quiet miracle of a normal life.²¹

Following the signing of the Oslo Accord, the Clinton administration remained determined not to pressure Israel and supported long-time American policy continuing to oppose the creation of an independent Palestinian state.

The Oslo Accord's Declaration of Principles failed to resolve the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the future status of Jerusalem and Israeli settlements. The Accord did not call for a Palestinian state, satisfying both Israeli and American leaders. It also did not call for a freeze on the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. Instead of dealing with these difficult issues, the Accord provided a transitional period in which Israel would make additional concessions contingent on security. Essentially, Israel would test the responsibility and accountability of the Palestinian police. Meanwhile, the Clinton administration had only played a minor role in the negotiations that created Oslo. Thus, the administration coaxed the parties, but relied mainly on Israeli leaders to guide the negotiations forward. Israeli prime minister Rabin was in no rush to engage in further withdrawals from the West Bank. As a result, Rabin focused on negotiations with Jordan and Syria, and the United States followed.

The Israelis withdrew from Jericho and much of Gaza in mid-1994, bringing Arafat and other P.L.O. leaders into Gaza. Arafat and the P.L.O. entered Palestinian politics, gaining an opportunity to achieve direct political power and control. According to Dennis Ross, "The Israeli government had made a choice to try to settle the conflict with the Palestinians, and to recognize that peace with the Palestinians would offer the best guarantee of security."²² However, the Israelis did not pull back from Israeli settlements in Gaza sending a clear message that the Israeli settlement policies would not change. Rather, the Israeli government focused on a gradual process of building trust; once trust had been built, Israel would theoretically make further concessions.

Nevertheless, the Oslo Accords and the Oslo process that emerged from them soon broke down. One reason for their failure was that they had been negotiated by the exiled P.L.O. leadership, rather than by Palestinians actually living in the occupied territories. Former president Carter accused Arafat of using the Accords to "administer Palestinian affairs in the West Bank and Gaza," assuring him a powerful role in the occupied territories.²³ The agreement benefitted Israeli leaders, too, ensuring that existing Israeli settlements in the occupied territories would be unaffected, and Israeli authorities could shift responsibility for stability and control in the West Bank and Gaza to Arafat.

Within Israel, and the West Bank and Gaza, however, resistance to the Accords soon emerged. In the West Bank and, especially, Gaza, Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement gained strength as a major political opponent of Arafat and the more secular Fatah, the political arm of the P.L.O. Hamas was involved in terrorist attacks and had killed Israeli soldiers prior to the signing of the Accords in September 1993. This fed fears in Israel, stoked by the conservative Likud party, that concessions to Palestinians only endangered Israeli security and emboldened

terrorists. Most significantly, perhaps, the Oslo Accords were intentionally ambiguous, providing Israel with leeway regarding its commitments to Jericho and Gaza, as well its policy on Israeli settlements.

The Oslo Accords also raised questions about the Clinton administration's role in the peace process. After all, the Israelis and Palestinians had reached agreement through back channels that lacked American participation. The good offices of Norway had brokered the deal. In fact, President Clinton and the United States were criticized for stealing the stage from the Norwegian negotiators.²⁴ Throughout 1993 and 1994, the Clinton administration stepped back, letting Israel take the lead, thereby ceding to Israeli positions and policies in negotiations. With little American involvement, Israel signed a peace treaty with Jordan in October 1994. King Hussein had agreed to drop claims to Jerusalem and the West Bank, and met in secret negotiations with Rabin prior to Clinton assuming office.²⁵ As Aaron David Miller later argued, however, an important lesson "to emerge from the Oslo years is that ignoring bad behavior on either side dooms any chance of serious and successful negotiations."²⁶ Throughout the remainder of his first term, Clinton focused on keeping the peace process going simply as an end in itself, often ignoring the facts on the ground. The administration had come to believe that a comprehensive peace would be more likely if the parties were simply engaged.²⁷

In addition, the United States became too focused on its dialogue with Israel at the expense of the Palestinians. This raised significant questions about Clinton's even-handedness in the peace process. Robert Malley argued, "Failure to give Arab states a genuine role in the process relieved them of any responsibility for its success."²⁸ Miller criticized the administration's position more harshly, arguing that no "senior-level official involved with the negotiations was willing or able to present, let alone fight for, the Arab or Palestinian perspective."²⁹ And, Daniel Kurtzer, who left the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs Bureau in 1994 arguing that he was shut out of policy making, criticized the Clinton administration's emphasis on terrorism and terrorist acts without acknowledging the fact "that radical Islam was replacing secular nationalism as the most powerful political ideology in the region." Kurtzer further suggested the administration failed "to understand the depth and the danger of the threat and [was] hesitant and tepid" in responding to the challenge.³⁰

In the peace process, the administration failed to understand that its inclinations to perceive Arafat as a powerful negotiator actually undermined the process in the eyes of other Palestinians and Palestinian leaders. As Arafat increasingly became unwilling or unable to control political violence, the United States moved even closer to its credible allies in the Israeli leadership. To make matters worse, in May 1994, Arafat declared:

"The jihad will continue. . . . Jerusalem is not only of the Palestinian people but of the entire Islamic nation. . . . You must come to fight, to begin the jihad to liberate Jerusalem, your first shrine. . . . I regard [the Oslo Accords] as no more than the agreement signed between our prophet Muhammad and the

Quraysh in Mecca,” a commitment that was repudiated once Muslims gained the advantage.³¹

As a result, the United States turned its attention to Syria, where the administration believed it could produce results. Between 1993 and 1996, Secretary of State Christopher unsuccessfully negotiated with Syria and Israel. Syrian President Hafez al-Asad demanded Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, including all Israeli settlements, as a condition of any agreement. Just ten days before a January 1994 meeting between President Clinton and Asad in Geneva, the Israeli government authorized 500 housing units in the Golan Heights.³² When asked about Israeli settlements, Clinton fell back on the ambiguous American position that settlements would be an issue to be “resolved in connection with the peace process.”³³ And, in March 1994, Robert H. Pelletreau, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, appeared before the Europe and Middle East Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Responding to questions from Congressman Lee Hamilton regarding Israeli settlement policy and the American response, Pelletreau explained:

The question of settlements . . . is deferred by agreement in the declaration of principles. . . . When the Rabin government came into power, it announced a number of measures that cut back on settlement activity but did not stop completely settlement activity. And it is true . . . that there has been some increase in that activity [in Jerusalem]. . . . I think it’s a complicating factor. . . . My understanding is that a distinction is drawn between settlements that have a security purpose and those that might be founded for other purposes. . . . I think [incentives to settlers to relocate in Israel] is an Israeli government decision and a matter for the Israelis to determine.³⁴

While the administration deducted over \$400 million in loan guarantees due to Israeli settlement expansion, Pelletreau described settlements as “complicating factors,” implying that they might not present an obstacle to peace.

The Rabin Assassination and the Rise of Netanyahu

Events throughout 1994 and 1995 moved the administration further toward the Israeli position. Violence erupted in February 1994 when Baruch Goldstein, a member of the far right Israeli Kach movement, massacred 29 Palestinians praying inside the Ibrahimi Mosque at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. While Israeli authorities denounced Goldstein’s attack, mass Palestinian protests erupted throughout the West Bank. In April 1994, two suicide bombings carried out by Palestinian militants inside Israel and launched by Hamas killed 8 Israelis and wounded 55. Over one year later, in November 1995, Israeli prime minister Rabin was assassinated by ultranationalist Yigal Amir, an opponent of the peace process and the Oslo Accords. These events, especially the death of Rabin, moved Clinton, who, according to Secretary of State Christopher, reflected upon his mortality.³⁵

Following Rabin's death, the administration vowed to stand "shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel in its crushing hour of need" and work "together to fulfill Rabin's legacy—a legacy of defending Israel and pursuing peace."³⁶ President Clinton was particularly impacted by Rabin's death, writing, "We had become friends in that unique way people do when they are in a struggle that they believe is great and good. . . . I had come to love him as I had rarely loved another man."³⁷ Reflecting on the implications of the assassination in 2009, Clinton explained:

[N]ot a single week has gone by that I did not think of Yitzhak Rabin and miss him terribly. . . . Nor has a single week gone by in which I have not reaffirmed my conviction that had he not lost his life . . . within three years we would have had a comprehensive agreement for peace in the Middle East.³⁸

Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres succeeded Rabin. After Rabin's funeral, Peres told Clinton that he would keep Rabin's promises. While Peres was committed to the peace process, he was unaware that Rabin had committed to withdrawal in the Golan Heights.³⁹ Peres worked with the United States to pursue the possibility of a peace agreement with Syria, and continued discussions with Palestinian leaders regarding the implementation of the Oslo Accords. Peres would not have much time to pursue these negotiations, however. In February and March 1996, a wave of Palestinian bombings reinforced Israeli concerns about security. Those concerns contributed to a change in government in May 1996, when Likud narrowly beat Labor and Benjamin Netanyahu became Israel's prime minister. Clinton had forged a close personal relationship with Rabin and had hoped that Rabin's successor, Peres, would continue the work started by his predecessor. Now, Clinton was faced with an Israeli government that was suspicious of the Palestinians, wanted to expand rather than cede territory, and harshly criticized the Oslo process. Furthermore, Dennis Ross noted that Netanyahu was "overcome by hubris," and determined to lead America in the peace process.⁴⁰

Netanyahu had campaigned on bringing security to Israel, arguing that Oslo had endangered Israel, Arafat was a terrorist, and Israel would not make territorial concessions. Moreover, he viewed Israel as possessing a right to rule and settle over Greater Israel from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. While Netanyahu was willing to accept Palestinian control over some cities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, he was adamant about securing and maintaining Israeli settlements. Prior to the election, Netanyahu had argued, "A government under my leadership sees advantage in Jewish construction beyond the Green Line." And in May, he told the chairman of the Golan regional council, "It is our responsibility to continue and to develop the settlement enterprise in the Golan at every opportunity." In his inauguration speech, Netanyahu explained:

Zionism is not dead. . . . We have a wonderful youth, willing to mobilize for national tasks. We will encourage this spirit; we will encourage pioneering settlement in the Land of Israel: in the Negev, Galilee, Judea and Samaria, and the Golan. The settlers are the real pioneers of our day, and they deserve

support and appreciation. But above all we will guard and strengthen Jerusalem, the eternal capital of the Jewish people, undivided under the sovereignty of the State of Israel.⁴¹

Ariel Sharon, Israeli Minister of Energy and Water Resources for the new government, added:

It is impossible today to reverse the settlement enterprise—completely impossible. . . . It is clear that the existing communities will grow. This expansion is . . . outlined in the master plans and will occur on state lands. I would add settlements in security areas. . . . In the beginning these communities will seem like isolated points: in the end it will become a territorial continuity. It is necessary to settle in areas that are required for the protection of a Jewish majority in Greater Jerusalem and along the ridges that dominate the coastal plain. Also between Jerusalem and the north of the Dead Sea, in the space between Wadi Kelt and the Kidron stream, more communities will be established.⁴²

The Clinton administration failed to criticize the new government following these pronouncements. While the Clinton administration continued to suggest that settlements were “complicating” the peace process, and that settlements were an issue for the negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, in essence, they capitulated to Israeli policies. During a briefing, Department of State Spokesperson Nicholas Burns again emphasized that settlements were merely “complicating factors,” arguing:

We’re aware of the comments made [by Likud] during the campaign. In the past, settlement activity has created a great deal of tension and it has been a complicating factor in the Middle East, and in relations between Israel and the Palestinians and others. We certainly believe that to be true. I think it is also true that Israel and the Palestinians have decided to resolve this question, if they can, in the context of the final status talks. . . . So it’s up to them now to resolve that problem, but it has been a matter of tension and complication in the past, certainly. . . . [I]t has been complicating and it has produced tension—“it,” being the matter of settlements.⁴³

In July, Netanyahu met with Clinton at the White House. Following their meetings, Clinton was asked about the settlement policy of the new Israeli government. Clinton’s response was ambiguous, suggesting that the United States would not prevent Israel’s settlement policies.

Well, first of all, keep in mind the settlements as an issue in the abstract, or the larger issues of settlements, are, by prior agreement of the parties, to be resolved by agreements. . . . [W]e know as a practical matter that the settlements issue can become a contentious one, can become a problem. . . . So

it's something that we have said repeatedly has to be handled with great care. Now, I think just saying those two things is about all that needs to be said. This is something that the more you talk about it, you could do more harm than good in the ultimate peace process.⁴⁴

After meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak later that month, and once again being asked about Israeli settlement policies, Clinton acknowledged settlement expansion and implied American acquiescence.

Our positions are just what they were. . . . The settlement issue under the Oslo accords is a matter for determination between the parties as we move to the end of the negotiations. . . . [I]n the previous [Israeli] administrations, Prime Minister Rabin and Prime Minister Peres, the existing settlements expanded more or less with population growth in the State of Israel. And that was not considered to be a serious violation of the understandings that were existing at that time.⁴⁵

Settlements were no longer clear “obstacles to peace”; they were now an issue to be negotiated.

The Hebron Negotiations

Complicating the situation further, prior to Netanyahu's election, Israeli prime minister Peres had agreed to withdraw Israeli forces from Hebron in the West Bank. Peres delayed the implementation of the agreement until after the May election. Following his win, Netanyahu made clear that he would not implement the Hebron agreement and that any discussion on Hebron would involve a new negotiation. Arafat, not surprisingly, objected, arguing that any renegotiation would set a dangerous precedent for all other agreements. As a result, negotiations were deadlocked. Netanyahu was determined to change the dialogue between Israel and Palestine, and raise the Israeli commitment to settlement and settlers in the occupied territories.

In September, Israel opened a restricted roadway, using checkpoints preventing Palestinian entry into Israel and passing through Palestinian towns, between Jerusalem and the Etzion Bloc settlements in the West Bank.⁴⁶ In addition, Israel continued its settlement construction and expansion throughout the West Bank.⁴⁷ But with American encouragement, Netanyahu agreed to meet with Arafat to discuss Israel's withdrawal from Hebron.⁴⁸ Netanyahu offered a revision to the Hebron agreement for Israeli withdrawal from 80% of the city. At the same time, Netanyahu pleased his hardline supporters. First, Netanyahu unilaterally opened access to an ancient tunnel running along the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, allowing people to go directly to the Western Wall. Palestinians began demonstrations soon after the announcement and violence followed. With high casualties on both sides, Netanyahu blamed the Palestinian leadership and police force for failing to contain the violence, while Arafat blamed Netanyahu for his provocative action.⁴⁹

Additionally, Netanyahu increased settlement expansion.⁵⁰ The administration responded by notifying Congress that it would deduct only \$60 million from the \$2 billion installment of loan guarantees, despite Israel's spending over \$300 million on settlements. However, the administration determined "that it was 'important to the security interests of the United States' to restore \$247 million of the deducted guarantees . . . to compensate Israel for costs incurred in its redeployment in Gaza and Jericho."⁵¹ In essence, the administration was directly supporting Israel's settlement policies.

As 1996 came to an end, and Clinton was preparing to enter his second term, Secretary of State Christopher forged a redeployment agreement over Hebron. The Hebron Protocol gave Israel control of approximately 20% of Hebron, where nearly 20,000 Palestinians and 400 Israeli settlers were residing. While this represented the first time that a right-wing Israeli government ceded territorial control to Palestinian authorities, the control was aesthetic, as the Israel Defense Forces were given exclusive security control over the settlers. To produce the agreement, Secretary of State Christopher offered a letter of assurances to Israel on behalf of the United States. The letter contained understandings that served Israeli interests. First, Christopher noted that the United States intended "to continue . . . efforts to help ensure that all outstanding commitments are carried out by both parties . . . on the basis of reciprocity." Additionally, Christopher explained that Arafat and the Palestinian leadership were responsible for maintaining order and security. In essence, the United States was placing a "burden of proof" on the Palestinians; if they failed to comply, the agreement could be called into doubt.

Second, Christopher suggested a twelve-month timetable for Israeli withdrawal and redeployment in Hebron. However, the timetable was never explicitly negotiated and did not imply a firm commitment. Third, the United States implicitly ceded authority to Israel to decide the extent of further withdrawals. Christopher wrote, "I have advised Chairman Arafat of U.S. views on Israel's process of redeploying its forces, designating specified military locations and transferring additional powers and responsibilities to the Palestinian Authority." In other words, Christopher told Arafat that the United States supported the Israeli positions on these issues. Finally, Christopher acknowledged continued American support for Israeli security, writing:

[T]he United States' commitment to Israel's security is ironclad and constitutes the fundamental cornerstone of our special relationship. The key element in our approach to peace, including the negotiations and implementation of agreements between Israel and its Arab partners, has always been a recognition of Israel's security requirements. Moreover, a hallmark of U.S. policy remains our commitment to work cooperatively to seek to meet the security needs that Israel identifies. Finally, I would like to reiterate our position that Israel is entitled to secure and defensible borders, which should be directly negotiated and agreed with its neighbors.⁵²

Christopher specifically used Israeli language calling for “secure and defensible borders,” rather than Resolution 242’s call for “secure and recognized” borders. The United States capitulated to the Israeli position on borders yet again. Most significantly, by supporting the agreement, which maintained the Hebron settlements, the United States was acknowledging, acquiescing to, and supporting the continued existence of settlements and settlers around Hebron.

The Handoff: From Christopher to Albright

This would be Christopher’s final action as Secretary of State. On January 23, 1997, Madeleine Albright would become the first female Secretary of State and serve throughout the remainder of the Clinton administration. In August, Albright addressed the National Press Club in Washington, DC where she argued that progress in the peace process was “threatened.” Albright condemned the “campaign of terror” against the Israeli people following the resumption of negotiations on Hebron, arguing:

Terrorism is evil. It can never be justified. It is the instrument of cowards. . . . And its design in the Middle East is to murder the peace process by shredding security and destroying the hope for peace. . . . We have come too far in the process of Arab-Israeli peace making to allow the vultures of violence to shape the region’s future. . . . We must respond to those who have declared war on peace by waging a war on terror.

Albright also pressured the Palestinian Authority to combat terrorism by “sharing information and coordinating law enforcement action” in an “unrelenting effort to detect and deter potential terrorists.” Most significantly, Albright contended that settlers were not terrorists and settlements did not condone terrorism: “Let me be clear. There is no moral equivalency between suicide bombers and bulldozers, between killing innocent people and building houses. It is simply not possible to address political issues seriously in a climate of intimidation and terror.”⁵³ Albright maintained her predecessors’ commitment to Israel, and she bolstered that commitment with support for Israeli settlers.

Increasingly, the administration was accepting Netanyahu’s argument that the Palestinians were to blame for the failure of the peace process. Specifically, the administration argued that Palestinian terrorism and the Palestinian leadership’s failure to combat it were at fault. Following a terrorist attack in Jerusalem in September, President Clinton declared:

Today’s bombing in Jerusalem is an outrageous and inhuman act. . . . It is clear that the perpetrators of this attack intended to kill both innocent people and the peace process. . . . They must not be allowed to succeed. . . . [T]he Palestinian Authority, through concrete actions on its own and continuing work with the Israeli authorities, must do all it can to create an environment that leaves no doubt that terror will not be tolerated.⁵⁴

Less than a week later, Albright met with Netanyahu in Jerusalem. She repeated her condemnation of terrorists stating, “The enemies of peace are purposefully and relentlessly attacking Israel.” Albright again reprimanded Arafat and the Palestinians arguing, “[T]he Palestinian Authority must take unilateral steps and actions to root out terrorist infrastructure.”⁵⁵ The administration emphasized Israeli security needs as a central focus of the peace process.

Additionally, the United States maintained its policy of acquiescence to Israeli settlements. On September 17, 1997, a State Department spokesperson responding to a question about an Israeli housing project in the West Bank acknowledged the difficulty that settlements caused for the negotiation process but also emphasized that settlements were not “a question of law.” The spokesperson explained:

We think that it’s not up to us to micromanage how Prime Minister Netanyahu implements his views about the wisdom or lack of wisdom of this project. . . . [T]hat’s really up to the Israeli Government. . . . [T]his is a about property rights, people purchasing property and then trying to build on that property. . . . It’s really an Israeli internal matter, that’s precisely why I said we weren’t in a position to micromanage it.⁵⁶

Israeli settlements had now shifted from “complicating factors” to “property rights.” In doing this, the administration lent credibility to the settlers’ arguments about possession of the land in the occupied territories. Furthermore, on October 1, Secretary of State Albright was interviewed by Matt Lauer on NBC’s *The Today Show*. When Lauer asked about a new construction project in a settlement near Jerusalem, Albright responded:

I wasn’t happy. [Netanyahu and I] had a conversation, and I felt that going forward with those kinds of buildings was not helpful. It is not in any way not part of what they can do, but they shouldn’t do it. . . . It’s legal. But I think that, in this kind of an atmosphere, it’s very important not to take actions that are viewed by the other side as creating more difficulties.⁵⁷

Albright contended that settlement construction and settlements were legal. When a State Department spokesperson was asked about Albright’s response, the spokesperson explained:

The fact of the matter is that there is nothing in the interim agreement, as such, and under Oslo, that prohibits settlement activity. We think it is unhelpful and counterproductive. But . . . the statement was technically correct.

While they continued to argue that settlements were “counterproductive” and “unhelpful,” the administration tried to explain away Albright’s statement, arguing that it only applied to the provisions under Oslo and was not intending to change American policy.⁵⁸

Yet Secretary Albright tried to draw a similarly fine line in a response to questions about a “settlement time-out” two days before the interview. Making clear that a “time-out” was not an agreement to freeze settlement construction, Albright emphasized the importance of avoiding “unilateral actions that can preempt or prejudge the outcome of . . . negotiations.” At the same time, Albright offered a confusing explanation of a “time-out” which suggested that it would be at the discretion of the parties as part of negotiations.

Well, what is going to happen is . . . the definition and content of a time-out regarding unilateral steps so that each side can ensure the right environment for the duration of the . . . negotiations. I would take that to mean that there is an agreement on a time-out. But the length and content of it—although the length is pretty clear . . . that is basically an issue of the content.

And, a State Department spokesperson explained that it was unwise to “discuss publicly exactly what such a time-out would entail.”⁵⁹ In essence, the administration was again providing Israel with as much room to maneuver on settlements as it needed. In its focus on technicalities, the administration was trying to placate the Israeli position while coaxing the Palestinians to the table for further negotiations. However, by doing this, the United States was encouraging further Israeli obfuscation and ambiguity on settlements and settlers in the occupied territories. The Clinton administration, like its predecessors, was capitulating to Israeli positions.

Clinton’s Plan: From Wye to Camp David

The result was that settlement construction and expansion in 1997 was widespread, and negotiations remained stalled. This included between 4,000 and 5,000 new housing units constructed in the West Bank settlements. In addition, the Netanyahu government had acquired additional land for nearly 1,400 housing units. Furthermore, by the end of 1997, there were nearly 167,000 settlers in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.⁶⁰ Yet the Clinton administration continued to try to break the deadlock between the Israelis and Palestinians. In January 1998, Clinton met with Netanyahu and laid out an American plan for peace. Clinton proposed an additional Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and improved efforts in Palestinian security.⁶¹

In May, Secretary of State Albright met with the Israelis and Palestinians to gauge support for the plan. While Arafat and the Palestinian leadership accepted the plan, Netanyahu and the Israelis rejected it. Netanyahu was defiant in his dismissal of the plan and threatened to boycott an upcoming summit in Washington, DC. In an interview in London, Albright delivered a weak ultimatum, suggesting that if Israel did not accept the plan, the United States might “reexamine its approach to the peace process.”⁶² However, a reexamination and pressure did not materialize. Instead, after a three-month standoff with Israel, the United States directed Arafat and the Palestinian leadership to secure the “best deal” they could get from negotiations. In addition, President Clinton sent a letter to the

Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations stating, "it is not our intention to second-guess Israeli decisions on security. . . . At no time have I given an ultimatum to either party."⁶³

Clinton decided to break the deadlock in the fall, proposing a summit meeting between Netanyahu and Arafat at the Wye River Plantation in Maryland. After several days of difficult negotiations and an "all-night stand," Netanyahu and Arafat signed the Wye River Memorandum.⁶⁴ The Memorandum committed the Palestinians to further security measures, particularly "zero tolerance for terror and violence," and confirmation of the P.L.O. revocation of the clause on the destruction of Israel in the Palestinian National Charter. In return, Israel agreed to further withdrawals only if the Palestinians fulfilled their promises.⁶⁵ Netanyahu made some initial withdrawals but with an upcoming Israeli election and the need to placate Israeli hawks opposed to any territorial concessions, he claimed that the Palestinian leadership had not gone far enough with security for further withdrawals.

As the May 1999 Israeli election approached, the Wye agreement was put aside, and the Israeli government increased settlement construction and expansion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.⁶⁶ On May 4, 1999, the five-year interim period for the Oslo Accord ended. In the lead up to its end, Arafat threatened to declare Palestinian statehood. Netanyahu responded swiftly, threatening to annex Israeli-controlled areas in the West Bank. Frustrated with the stalled implementation of the Wye agreement, President Clinton sent a letter to Arafat in April pleading with him to "continue to rely on the peace process" and "negotiations." Clinton also made clear that the United States would "continue to exert maximum efforts to have both parties avoid unilateral steps or actions designed to change the status of the West Bank and Gaza or to prejudge . . . issues reserved for . . . negotiations."⁶⁷ The administration appeared to be reasserting itself on the issue of settlements. Aaron David Miller noted that the administration made it clear that "settlements are worse than destructive."⁶⁸ And, State Department Spokesperson James Rubin said, Israel is "acting and expanding settlement activity beyond contiguous areas, inconsistent with their commitments or words to us."⁶⁹ However, the administration never applied anything more than rhetorical pressure to enforce compliance. In essence, the United States had simply publicly scolded Israel for its actions. Nevertheless, the perception of American support encouraged Arafat to back down on his threat to declare statehood.

Attention now turned to the May 17 Israeli election where Netanyahu faced Labor leader Ehud Barak, a protégé of Rabin and a decorated general. Barak emerged victorious to American delight.⁷⁰ The change in Israeli government did little to alter Israeli policies; in fact, Barak was cautious about implementing the Wye agreement because he was unwilling to oppose the Israeli settlement movement.⁷¹ As a result, Barak renegotiated the terms of the Wye accords at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt in September 1999. Once again, the United States did little more than reassure Arafat that the administration was aware of how "destructive settlement activity has been to the pursuit of . . . peace."⁷² Meanwhile, the settlement

population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip continued to grow. Throughout the fall, the Barak government approved additional plans for settlement construction and expansion.⁷³

In January 2000, Barak agreed to meet with Syrian President Asad in an attempt to further negotiations toward an Israel-Syria peace agreement. By March, negotiations had failed. While Barak was willing to withdraw from South Lebanon and the Golan Heights, he only offered a limited withdrawal from the Golan that did not satisfy Syria's demand to withdraw to pre-1967 borders. The administration believed that Barak had deceived them. Aaron David Miller explained, "Not only did Barak's territorial offer have zero chance of working, it wasted valuable time and again eroded American credibility."⁷⁴ Asad's death in June ended any real chance at an Israel-Syria agreement.

Failure at Camp David

Despite this, the administration pressed on in the hopes of achieving a final status agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians. With his term of office winding down, Clinton took a more active role in negotiations. Using backchannels, the administration proposed a risky peace effort at Camp David in July 2000. At the summit, Clinton suggested a reversion to pre-1967 borders with special arrangements for existing Israeli settlements. Clinton's plan also outlined a Palestinian right to return but Israel had "the sovereign right to determine who should be admitted to Israel."⁷⁵ According to Secretary Albright, Barak created a "pressure cooker" atmosphere aimed at forcing Arafat to make concessions.⁷⁶ Barak provided little in terms of his positions, but the administration assumed that Israel might be willing to give up a large portion of the West Bank, with some limited Israeli annexations of land in the West Bank, along with giving some control to Palestinians over Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem.⁷⁷ However, Arafat was holding out for all of the West Bank and believed that Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon had weakened his position with Palestinian hardliners who saw force as the best way to extract Israeli concessions.⁷⁸

The summit failed before it started. Barak immediately rejected Clinton's plan and Clinton decided not to proceed, fearing that it would "corner" the Israelis.⁷⁹ Clinton continued to hold out for a deal and applied pressure to Arafat. During discussions in which Clinton proposed 89.5% of the West Bank, Arafat responded that Rabin had offered him 90%. Clinton angrily denied that Rabin had ever made such a commitment telling Arafat, "We can all go home and I will say they seriously negotiated and you did not."⁸⁰ Meanwhile, Barak was also angry, and in a letter to Clinton, he wrote:

This is a manipulative attempt to pull us to a position we will never be able to accept, without the Palestinians moving one inch. . . . [T]he American team is not objective. . . . I do not intend to allow the Israeli state to fall apart physically or morally. The state of Israel is the implementation of the dream of the Jewish people. . . . There is no way that I will preside in Camp David over the

closing of this saga . . . There is no power in the world that can force on us collective national suicide.⁸¹

Clinton continued to hope that he could break the impasse, but on July 25, he announced that the Israelis and Palestinians had failed to reach an agreement. In addition, he made it clear that the Israeli and American positions were aligned, and Arafat was the villain:

Prime Minister Barak showed particular courage, vision, and an understanding of the historical importance of this moment. Chairman Arafat made it clear that he, too, remains committed to the path of peace. . . . The Prime Minister moved forward more from his initial position than Chairman Arafat. . . . I would be making a mistake not to praise [Prime Minister] Barak, because I think he took a big risk. And I think it sparked . . . in Israel a real debate, which is moving Israeli public opinion toward the conditions that will make peace. So I thought that was important, and I think it deserves to be acknowledged.⁸²

Clinton provided further support for Barak in an interview with Israeli television reporters on July 28. During the interview, Clinton claimed he “always wanted to move our Embassy to west Jerusalem”⁸³ and warned Arafat that there “should not be a unilateral declaration” on Palestinian statehood or the “entire [American] relationship will be reviewed.”⁸⁴ Clinton never mentioned the challenge that settlements presented. He placed the burden of peace squarely on Arafat’s shoulders: “I would hope that Chairman Arafat and the other leaders in the Arab world will work to prepare their public for the proposition that there can be no agreement without courage and conscience but also honorable compromise.”⁸⁵

While Clinton failed to broker an agreement, the administration orchestrated the perception of success, particularly with the American and Israeli publics. However, the appearance of success was shattered in the fall. On September 28, 2000, Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif with hundreds of Israeli police. Palestinians viewed the action as a deliberate provocation, and reacted by throwing stones at Jews praying at the Western Wall. Israeli police responded with force, killing and wounding several Palestinians. Sharon’s action and the Palestinian reaction was the beginning of several months of violence; the second, or Al-Aqsa, intifada had begun. Throughout the crisis, American policymakers worked to get a truce.

Despite the violence and difficulty with getting a truce, Clinton pressed on with peace in the hopes of establishing his legacy as a peacemaker. In a meeting on December 23 at the White House between American, Israeli, and Palestinian representatives, Clinton proposed a compromise solution for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Clinton proposed a Palestinian state comprising approximately 95% of the West Bank and Gaza Strip; Israel would annex the remaining land, which included major settlement blocs and nearly 80% of the Israeli settlers and swap land for the

territory it was annexing, thus protecting settlers and settlements. Additionally, Israel would gain sovereignty over the Western Wall and the Palestinians would gain sovereignty over the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. The Palestinians would also waive the unlimited “right of return” to Israel and Israel would agree to assist the Palestinian people suffering from the 1948 war.⁸⁶

Barak, who was facing an upcoming Israeli election, conditionally accepted the proposal as a basis for negotiations if Arafat were to accept it. Arafat, however, raised significant objections. First, Arafat argued that a Palestinian state would lack viability with the divisions and connections proposed by the plan. Second, the plan would divide “Palestinian Jerusalem” from the rest of Palestine. Third, Palestinians would not “surrender the right of return.” Most significantly, Arafat argued:

[T]he Palestinian side rejects the use of “settlement blocs” as a guiding principle as recommended by the United States’ proposal. The use of this criterion subordinates Palestinian interests in the contiguity of their state and control over their natural resources to Israeli interests regarding the contiguity of settlements, recognized as illegal by the international community. . . . Ultimately, it is impossible to agree to a proposal that punishes Palestinians while rewarding Israel’s illegal settlement policies. . . . Under such a proposal, a number of Palestinian villages will be annexed to Israel.⁸⁷

Clinton’s proposals would go no further.

By the end of the Clinton administration, there were over 200,000 Israeli settlers and around 200 settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.⁸⁸ Throughout its tenure, the Clinton administration did little to slow the expansion of these settlements. Additionally, the Clinton administration became the first U.S. administration to refuse to condemn Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem, vetoing a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israeli confiscation of Palestinian land in Jerusalem in 1995.⁸⁹ In vetoing the resolution, then United Nations ambassador Albright stated:

I have cast this veto today—reluctantly, but without hesitation—on an issue of principle for the United States. The principle is this: the only path to achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East is direct talks between the parties. My Government was compelled to oppose this resolution because the Council sought to declare itself on a permanent-status issue—Jerusalem—and thus violated this principle. These issues must be resolved by the parties, with the support of the international community, but without its interference At this point, progress towards peace in the Middle East depends not on what the United Nations does, but on what the parties agree to.⁹⁰

While Albright made clear the settlements were “unhelpful,” she admonished the Council for “acting in a way that is detrimental to the process.”⁹¹

In addition, when Prime Minister Rabin argued, “The Government is firm in its resolve that Jerusalem will not be open to negotiation. The coming years will also be marked by the extension of construction in Greater Jerusalem,”⁹² the Clinton administration raised no objections. The Clinton administration’s rationale was that the Declaration of Principles signed in 1993 provided that the status of Jerusalem and settlements were to be determined through negotiations. After eight years in office, the Clinton administration moved American policy even deeper into the Israeli camp. Clinton had proven to be a staunch advocate for Israel and failed to apply significant pressure for Israel to change course. The Clinton administration’s chance at peace had ended. Near the end of his presidency, Clinton addressed the Israel Policy Forum. He provided lessons for the peace process going forward and continued to show his admiration for the Israelis: “Prime Minister Barak . . . has demonstrated real courage and vision in moving toward peace in difficult circumstances while trying to find a way to continue to protect Israel’s security and vital interests.”⁹³ Both Barak and Clinton would no longer have the opportunity to be peacemakers; with the elections of Ariel Sharon in Israel and George W. Bush in the United States, the hawks would bear the mantle of peace.

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7 George W. Bush

From “Anything But Clinton” to More of the Same

[The Palestinians] have offered up . . . various portions of that so-called occupied territory . . . and at no point has it been agreed upon by the other side. . . . [I]t seems to me focusing on settlements at the present time misses the point.

—Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense¹

George W. Bush (Bush 43) came to office inheriting the Al-Aqsa intifada and a failed peace process. Additionally, Syrian President Hafez Al-Asad’s death coupled with the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon created uncertainty and instability throughout the region. Soon after Bush’s inauguration, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak lost his election to Ariel Sharon. Sharon, known as the “Butcher of Beirut” for failing to prevent the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, had provoked the intifada by visiting the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in September 2000. With such instability, it wasn’t surprising that Bush initially took a very cautious approach to the peace process. The Mitchell Commission, which had been convened in October 2000 to investigate the outbreak of violence in September, had concluded that Israel must evacuate some of its settlements and freeze settlement construction.² But the Bush administration chose to ignore the Commission’s report and its suggestions. Instead, Bush adopted the ABC (Anything But Clinton) approach to the peace process.

Ironically, Bush 43’s ABC approach led directly from Clinton’s experiences with the peace process. Bush perceived the peace process as a “losing issue.” This was not surprising since “Clinton’s handoff to . . . Bush . . . left a lot to be desired. Negotiations had broken down and the Palestinian territories were in flames. For good measure, Clinton warned his successor against dealing with Arafat.”³ A quick assessment of the Clinton administration’s peace initiatives would have been enough to give any administration pause. Bush did not want to invest significant political capital and personal energy into risky negotiations that might fail.

Despite his initial caution, however, Bush 43 was the first president to publicly declare his formal support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But, like his predecessors, Bush adhered to a policy that assumed that the peace process and the expansion of Israeli settlements were not incompatible.

Moreover, Bush wanted to “change the way people think” about the conflict and use Palestine as a “laboratory” for freedom and democracy.⁴ This meant that for peace and stability to come to the Middle East, the Palestinians would have to change. Ultimately, the Palestinians would have to cease all acts of terrorism and organize democracy. This placed the burden of peace squarely on the Palestinians, and meant that, from the beginning, Bush would be a great friend to the Israelis.

George W. Bush’s Images of Israel

George W. Bush, the eldest son of President George H.W. Bush, entered the presidency after a controversial election in which he received 271 Electoral College votes but less than 500,000 votes than his opponent, Vice President Al Gore. Throughout Bush’s campaign, he described himself as a “compassionate conservative.” Bush, like former president Jimmy Carter, was overtly Christian, proudly proclaiming that the political philosopher he most identified with was Jesus “Christ, because he changed my heart.”⁵ As President, Bush declared:

I had a drinking problem. . . . There is only one reason that I am in the Oval Office and not in a bar. I found faith. I found God. I am here because of the power of prayer.⁶

At the May 2001 Yale University commencement, Bush said:

When I left here, I didn’t have much in the way of a life plan. I knew some people who thought they did, but it turned out that we were all in for ups and downs, most of them unexpected. Life takes its own turns, makes its own demands, writes its own story, and along the way, we start to realize we are not the author.⁷

He believed that he was “in God’s hands.” Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere,⁸ he viewed the world through a Manichaean lens. There was a “monumental struggle between good and evil. But good will prevail.”⁹ Bush thought

there is a value system that cannot be compromised—God-given values. . . . There are values of freedom and the human condition. . . . What’s very important as we articulate foreign policy through our diplomacy and military action is that it never look like we are the author of these values. . . . We are all God’s children.¹⁰

Additionally, Bush felt a special attachment to Israel. As governor of Texas, he traveled to Israel to “listen and learn.” He was struck by

how small Israel is. . . . It’s a small country and it was important for our Israeli host [Ariel Sharon] to remind our delegation of how really small it

was . . . how small the population was between . . . enemy lines and population centers.

Bush also learned “how important the Golan Heights are to the security” of Israel. Most significantly, he emphasized the importance he attached to Israel’s democracy suggesting that “Israel is the only . . . country that practices democracy in the Middle East.”¹¹ Bush’s visit not only created a first-hand connection to Israel the place but also established a human connection and a warm relationship with Ariel Sharon. This proved important following Sharon’s February 2001 election as Israel’s prime minister.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush addressed the AIPAC Conference. His address reflected his strong connections to Israel, stressing shared values and the “special friendship” between Israel and the United States. Declaring that Americans and Israelis are “brothers and sisters in the family of democracy” and “natural allies,” Bush revealed his belief that the “10 Commandments . . . are the core principles of democracy, the charter of human dignity and equality.” Emphasizing his concern for Palestinian violence, Bush also explained that he would support the peace process, but not at Israel’s expense; moreover, he hailed “the sacrifices Israel is making” for peace.¹² The speech made clear that Bush would be a champion of Israel in the peace process.

As president, Bush demonstrated his administration’s commitment to Israel, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the lead up to the 2004 presidential election, the administration produced a pamphlet titled “President George W. Bush: A Friend of the American Jewish Community.” Most significantly, the pamphlet demonstrated the Bush administration’s commitment to “dealing decisively with terrorism.”¹³ This placed the administration squarely on the side of Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Four years earlier, on May 3, 2001, Bush told the American Jewish Committee that he would be “steadfast in supporting Israel against terrorism and violence, and in seeking the peace for which all Israelis pray.”¹⁴ Bush’s beliefs, commitments, and values would have a profound impact on American relations with Israel and the Israeli settlement project.

George W. Bush’s Faithful Friendship With Israel

As a candidate for the presidency, George W. Bush argued for a more “humble” foreign policy.

Our nation stands alone right now in the world in terms of power. . . . [W]e’ve got to be humble and yet project strength in a way that promotes freedom. . . . [I]f we’re humble. . . , they’ll respect us. . . . I think the United States must be humble and must be proud and confident of our values, but humble in how we treat nations that are figuring out how to charter their own course.¹⁵

And, on the Middle East, Bush criticized Palestinian violence in the Al-Aqsa intifada, emphasized American credibility and support for Israel, and suggested that he would take a hands-off approach to the peace process.

I call on Chairman Arafat to have his people pull back to make the peace. I want everybody to know, should I be the president, Israel's going to be our friend. I'm going to stand by Israel. . . . [I]t's important to have credibility and credibility is formed by being strong with your friends and resolute in your determination. . . . I think that when it comes to timetables, it can't be a United States timetable as to how . . . discussions take place. It's got to be a timetable that all parties can agree to. . . . This current administration has worked hard to keep the parties at the table. I will try to do the same thing. But it won't be on my timetable. It'll be on the timetable that people are comfortable with in the Middle East.¹⁶

Bush's suggestion of a hands-off approach was coupled with his strong belief in democracy as a solution for the world's problems.

In Bush's first month in office, Ariel Sharon became Israel's prime minister. In a March meeting, before the terrorist attacks on September 11 and Bush's launching a war on terror, Bush and Sharon cemented their friendship and the American-Israeli alliance. Bush made a sharp contrast with his father's presidency, telling Sharon that he would "use force to protect Israel."¹⁷ His strong support for Sharon was contrasted by the pressure he placed on Arafat to be a peacemaker. While he noted that Israel "should exercise restraint in its military response," he called on Palestinian leaders to denounce extremism.

I'm . . . deeply concerned about the escalating violence in the Middle East. . . . The Palestinian Authority should speak out publicly and forcibly . . . to condemn violence and terrorism. It should arrest those who perpetrated the terrorist acts. It should resume security cooperation with Israel. . . . I've asked Secretary [of State Colin] Powell to call Chairman Arafat today and contact other leaders to urge them to stand against violence.¹⁸

Additionally, the United States vetoed a United Nations draft resolution regarding the violence caused by the Al-Aqsa intifada,¹⁹ arguing:

The United States opposed this draft resolution because it is unbalanced and unworkable and hence unwise. It is more responsive to political theatre than political reality. In this draft resolution, some pretended that the Council could impose a solution, including a protection mechanism for civilians, in the absence of an agreement between the parties. . . . Regrettably, the Palestinian Authority has never fulfilled its commitment, made at Sharm el-Sheikh, to speak out unequivocally, in Arabic, against violence.²⁰

President Bush and his administration consistently lashed out against Palestinian violence and the Palestinian leadership prior to the terrorist attacks on September 11. In August, following terrorist attacks in Israel, Bush angrily denounced Arafat and the Palestinians, while noting the “moderate restraint” of the Israelis.

Europe and moderate Arab nations must join with us to continue to send a consistent message that there will be no peace unless we break this cycle of violence. . . . I think he can do a lot more to be convincing the people on the street to stop these acts of terrorism and the acts of violence. I said in the Oval Office it is very important for Mr. Arafat to show a 100 percent effort, to do everything he can to convince the different parties on the West Bank and in Gaza to stop the violence.²¹

On the following day, Bush repeated his demands on the Palestinian leadership. Again, he used tougher rhetoric for Arafat, while urging restraint from the Israelis.

My only point is—and I’m going to continue to make the point and so is my administration—that the cycle of violence has got to end in order for the peace process, or any peace process, to begin. And therefore, Mr. Arafat must clamp down on the suicide bombers and on the violence. And the Israelis must show restraint.²²

One week later, Bush firmly supported Israel, and, once again, denounced the Palestinian leadership. When asked whether an American representative would attend the United Nations Conference on Racism in South Africa, Bush responded:

We have made it very clear, through Colin Powell’s office, that we will have no representative there, so long as they pick on Israel, so long as they continue to say Zionism is racism. If they use the forum as a way to isolate our friend and strong ally, we will not participate. . . . But the fundamental question is whether or not Israel will be treated with respect at the conference. And if not, then we will assess prior to the beginning. . . . [W]e will not participate in a conference that tries to isolate Israel and denigrates Israel.²³

And, regarding violence in the region, Bush stated:

In order for there to be any peace talks in the Middle East, the first thing that must happen is that both parties must resolve to stop violence. The Israelis have made it very clear that they will not negotiate under terrorist threat. And if Mr. Arafat is interested in having a dialog that could conceivably lead to the Mitchell process, then I strongly urge him to urge the terrorists, the Palestinian terrorists, to stop the suicide bombings, to stop the incursions, to stop the threats. . . . The Israelis will not negotiate under terrorist threat, simple as that. And if the Palestinians are interested in a dialog, then I strongly urge Mr. Arafat to put 100-percent effort into solving the terrorist

activity, into stopping the terrorist activity. And I believe he can do a better job of doing that.²⁴

Throughout the summer, the Bush administration put little pressure on Israel, noting American solidarity with its friend and ally. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the relationship with and support for Israel grew even stronger.

A War on Terror

On September 11, 2001, four coordinated terrorist attacks on the United States were carried out by Al-Qaeda, an Islamist extremist group. Two hijacked planes deliberately crashed into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center and a third plane attacked the Pentagon. A fourth hijacked plane, Flight 93, crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania following an attempt by the passengers to retake the plane. In brief remarks immediately after the attacks, Bush declared, "Terrorism against our Nation will not stand."²⁵ Later that day, Bush added, "Freedom, itself, was attacked . . . by a faceless coward, and freedom will be defended. . . . Make no mistake: The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts."²⁶ That evening Bush addressed the nation from the Oval Office.

A great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining. Today our Nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature. . . . America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day. Yet, we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world.²⁷

The next day, following a meeting of the National Security Council, Bush called the attacks "acts of war," signaling his intention to "use all our resources to conquer this enemy."²⁸ Bush declared a War on Terror (WOT); it would be a "crusade" to "rid the world of evildoers."²⁹ The WOT would have far-reaching consequences, including moving Bush closer to Israel and further isolating the Palestinian leadership as the administration increasingly identified them with terrorism.

Following the terrorist attacks on the United States, the Bush administration shifted further to the right. Within the administration, there existed a sharp division between neoconservatives, like Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and moderates, like Secretary of State Colin Powell. The September 11 attacks brought this division front and center. Moderates like Powell argued that the roots of Islamic rage were in "humiliation and grievances"

like the suffering experienced by Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. As a result, diplomacy aimed at ending that suffering, and a focus on the peace process would result in enhancing the values of freedom and democracy.³⁰ The neoconservatives believed that Islam was antithetical to democracy, and the terrorists' despised freedom and the values shared by the United States and Israel. Moreover, corrupt authoritarian regimes throughout the Middle East were stoking the flames of Muslim rage against the United States and Israel. As a result, authoritarian states must either be defeated or reformed. In Iraq, the administration would embark on a war of liberation. However, countries like Egypt and quasi-states like Palestine needed to be democratized and reformed. As Vice President Cheney explained to the Commonwealth Club in August 2002:

The ultimate vision, clearly, is for two states—Israeli and Palestinian—living side by side with peace and security for both. We believe that is not possible, after years of effort, unless there's some fundamental changes in the Palestinian entity. So we pushed aggressively for reform. We've got a major effort underway. . . . We hope that that effort will bear fruit, that there will be created a Palestinian entity, if you will, that is capable of being an effective interlocutor for the Israelis and that will set the stage then for the kinds of resolutions that, obviously, are going to be required in order to bring that conflict to an end. . . . Establishing a viable Palestinian Authority is going to be key to being able to safeguard Israel against attacks launched against Israel from the Palestinian territory and beginning to make progress in the basic peace process itself.³¹

Bush's beliefs about democracy and freedom, and his bias toward Israel predisposed him toward the neoconservative position. However, he initially listened to Powell.

In an attempt to urge calm and revive the peace process, Bush suggested, "The idea of a Palestinian state has always been a part of a vision, so long as the right to Israel to exist is respected."³² Within days, Sharon responded warning the United States not to "appease the Arabs at [Israeli] expense. . . . We cannot accept this." Invoking the Munich Pact between British prime minister Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler, Sharon argued, "Don't repeat the terrible mistakes of 1938, when the enlightened democracies in Europe decided to sacrifice Czechoslovakia for a comfortable, temporary solution. . . . Israel . . . will not be Czechoslovakia." Additionally, Sharon blamed the Palestinians for the violence, stating, "All of our efforts to reach a cease-fire were sabotaged by the Palestinians, and the fire never stopped, not even for one single day."³³ Powell responded by repeating Bush's remarks:

There has always been a vision in our thinking . . . that there would be a Palestinian state that would exist at the same time that the security of the state of Israel was also recognized, guaranteed and accepted.³⁴

In November 2001, Bush doubled-down with his address to the United Nations General Assembly. At the same time, he continued to emphasize the struggle against terrorism.

The American Government . . . stands by its commitments to a just peace in the Middle East. We are working toward a day when two states, Israel and Palestine, live peacefully together within secure and recognized borders. . . . We will do all in our power to bring both parties back into negotiations. But peace will only come when all have sworn off forever incitement, violence, and terror.³⁵

Despite his rhetorical support for a Palestinian state, Bush placed the burden of peace on the Palestinian leadership.

Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has been the defining reality of Palestinians' lives there for over three decades, longer than most of the Palestinians living there have been alive. . . . The occupation hurts Palestinians, but it also affects Israelis. The sad truth is that it is the young people who serve on the front lines of conflict who are at risk. Embittered young Palestinians throw stones, and young Israeli soldiers on the other side learn only that Palestinians are to be feared, seen as enemies. . . . Israeli settlement activity has severely undermined Palestinian trust and hope. It preempts and prejudices the outcome of negotiations and, in doing so, cripples chances for real peace and security. The United States has long opposed settlement activity. . . . [S]ettlement activity must stop. For the sake of Palestinians and Israelis alike, the occupation must end. And it can only end with negotiations. Israelis and Palestinians must create a relationship based on mutual tolerance and respect so negotiations can go forward.³⁶

Bush's intentional use of "Palestine" and his calls for Palestinian statehood were coupled with Powell's denunciation of Israeli occupation one week later. Bush's and Powell's remarks were criticized by neoconservatives at home and the Israeli leadership. While Powell tried to revive the peace process, his critics emphasized the links between Palestinian terrorism and Al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks against the United States. David Wurmser, a member of the Department of Defense Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group, argued:

[W]ith the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the loss of funding from the K.G.B., many of the most militant groups in the Middle East had begun to band together: the Palestine Liberation Organization; the Saudi Wahhabi fundamentalists, who had spawned al-Qaeda and bin Laden; Hezbollah; Saddam Hussein's Iraq; and the radicals in Iran.³⁷

According to the neoconservatives within the administration, these groups were working together to undermine and attack the United States. Additionally, Bush

faced pressure from Congress. In a bipartisan letter, 89 senators urged the administration not to restrain Israel from retaliating against Palestinian violence.³⁸ By the end of the year, it appeared that the neoconservatives were winning out as Bush shifted further to the right. In December 2001, Bush directed his administration to freeze assets linked to funding Hamas terrorists in Israel;³⁹ the WOT had broadened to include the Palestinians. Additionally, the United States vetoed a draft resolution dealing with the Palestinian Question and the Al-Aqsa intifada at the United Nations Security Council.⁴⁰ In his explanation of the American veto, United States Ambassador to the United Nations John Negroponte argued:

The question before us today is whether the draft resolution under consideration here in the Security Council can make a meaningful contribution to improving the situation in the Middle East. Unfortunately, the draft resolution before us fails to address the dynamic at work in the region. Instead, its purpose is to isolate politically one of the parties to the conflict through an attempt to throw the weight of the Council behind the other party. One of the fundamental flaws of this draft resolution is that it never mentions the recent acts of terrorism against Israelis or those responsible for them. . . . It is President Arafat's responsibility, as leader of the Palestinian Authority, to take a strategic stand now against terrorism. There can be no coexistence with terrorist organizations or acquiescence in their activities. The Palestinian Authority, using all necessary means and with absolutely no further delay, must arrest those responsible for planning and carrying out terrorist attacks and destroy the formal and informal structures that perpetuate terrorism.⁴¹

Bush's movement away from Powell's position and toward the neoconservative position encouraged Israel to marginalize Arafat and the Palestinians. In response, Arafat demanded an end to Palestinian militant "terrorist activities," including suicide bombings.⁴² However, in January 2002, Arafat's position was weakened when the Israeli military intercepted and seized the *Karine A*, a Palestinian freighter carrying 50 tons of weapons, including short-range rockets, antitank missiles, and explosives. Arafat denied any knowledge of the weapons shipment, but the Bush administration held him responsible. In a hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Secretary Powell argued:

I made it clear to Chairman Arafat directly and to his associates that until the violence is ended, or comes as close to ending as is reasonable, and until the incitement ends, until there is an explanation for this ship and then an understanding that these kinds of activities cannot take place any longer, it is going to be difficult to move forward. Once that is dealt with, the violence is down, arrests are made, explanations for the ship, then the United States is ready to engage. . . . Chairman Arafat must act decisively to confront the sources of terror and choose once and for all the option of peace over violence. He cannot have it both ways. He cannot engage with us and others in pursuit of

peace and at the same time permit or tolerate continued violence and terror. In that regard, I have made clear to Chairman Arafat that the smuggling of arms to the Palestinian Authority by Iran and Hizballah aboard the *Karine A* is absolutely unacceptable. Chairman Arafat must ensure that no further activities of this kind ever take place and he must take swift action against all Palestinian officials who were involved. Chairman Arafat knows what he must do. Actions are required, not just words.⁴³

The Karine A affair, coupled with the violence of the Al-Aqsa intifada and Bush's suspicions of Arafat, led the United States to conclude that Arafat and the Palestinians were the problem in the peace process.

The Axis of Evil

Increasingly, the administration accommodated the Israeli position and Israeli concerns, and was willing to overlook Israeli excesses, including military retaliation and settlements. Moreover, Bush was able to link Palestinian violence to the wider WOT, thus providing a common enemy for Israel and the United States. In his January 2002 State of the Union address, he declared:

My hope is that all nations will heed our call and eliminate the terrorist parasites who threaten their countries and our own. . . . But some governments will be timid in the face of terror. And make no mistake about it: If they do not act, America will. . . . States like [North Korea, Iran, and Iraq,] and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.⁴⁴

Though never naming Arafat or the Palestinians, specifically, Bush increasingly associated them with the "terrorist parasites," and saw them as an obstacle to Middle East peace. The antidote, he argued, was freedom and democracy:

In a single instant, we realized that this will be a decisive decade in the history of liberty, that we've been called to a unique role in human events. Rarely has the world faced a choice more clear or consequential. . . . We have known freedom's price. We have shown freedom's power. And in this great conflict . . . we will see freedom's victory.⁴⁵

Arafat responded to Bush's State of the Union in a *New York Times* op-ed. He began by condemning terrorist attacks and stating his desire for a two-state solution to the conflict. Arafat also attacked Israel and Ariel Sharon, arguing:

Israel has yet to understand that it cannot have peace while denying justice. As long as the occupation of Palestinian lands continues, as long as Palestinians are denied freedom, then the path to. . . [peace] will be littered with obstacles. The Palestinian people have been denied their freedom for far too long

and are the only people in the world still living under foreign occupation. How is it possible that the entire world can tolerate this oppression, discrimination and humiliation? The 1993 Oslo Accord . . . promised the Palestinians freedom by May 1999. Instead, since 1993, the Palestinian people have endured a doubling of Israeli settlers, expansion of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land and increased restrictions on freedom of movement. How do I convince my people that Israel is serious about peace while over the past decade Israel intensified the colonization of Palestinian land from which it was ostensibly negotiating a withdrawal?⁴⁶

Despite Arafat's pleas, Bush increasingly accommodated Israeli leaders. In remarks following a meeting with Prime Minister Sharon on February 7, Bush described Sharon as a "good friend" who held a "mutual desire to rid the world of terror." Most significantly, he "assured the Prime Minister that we will continue to keep pressure on Mr. Arafat to convince him that he must take serious, concrete, real steps to reduce terrorist activity in the Middle East."⁴⁷ When asked if the United States was prepared to talk with Arafat, Bush strongly denounced terror and held Arafat responsible for terrorist activity.

Arafat has heard from us. I can't be any more clear in my position, and that is that he must do everything in his power to fight terror. Obviously, we were at first surprised and then extremely disappointed when the Karine A showed up loaded with weapons, weapons that could have only been intended for one thing, which was to terrorize. . . . Arafat has heard my message. I can't be any more clear about it, that he must do everything in his power to reduce terrorist attacks on Israel. And that—at one point in time he was indicating to us that he was going to do so, and then all of a sudden a ship loaded with explosives shows up that most of the world believes he was involved with.⁴⁸

Bush had essentially given Sharon a "green light."

On March 27, Hamas suicide bombers killed thirty civilians at a Passover celebration at the Park Hotel in Netanya. The attack was the deadliest during the Al-Aqsa intifada. Sharon responded harshly with the largest military operation, Operation Defensive Shield, in the West Bank since 1967. Operation Defensive Shield began with a siege on Arafat's compound in Ramallah. Sharon was harsh in explaining the offensive, arguing, "The Palestinians must be hit, and it must be very painful. . . . We must cause them losses, victims, so that they feel a heavy price."⁴⁹ Bush initially responded by wading into the peace process, appointing General Anthony Zinni as special envoy. And, on April 4, Bush emphasized a two-state solution to the conflict, but also called for an end to the occupation and Israeli withdrawal.⁵⁰ However, Bush continued to pressure Arafat, stating:

Everyone must choose; you're either with the civilized world, or you're with the terrorists. All in the Middle East also must choose and must move

decisively in word and deed against terrorist acts. The Chairman of the Palestinian Authority has not consistently opposed or confronted terrorists. . . . Chairman Arafat renounced terror as an instrument of his cause, and he agreed to control it. He's not done so. The situation in which he finds himself today is largely of his own making. He's missed his opportunities and thereby betrayed the hopes of the people he's supposed to lead. Given his failure, the Israeli Government feels it must strike at terrorist networks that are killing its citizens. . . . I call on the Palestinian people, the Palestinian Authority, and our friends in the Arab world to join us in delivering a clear message to terrorists: Blowing yourself up does not help the Palestinian cause. To the contrary, suicide bombing missions could well blow up the best and only hope for a Palestinian state.⁵¹

While the administration's rhetoric continued to emphasize peace, the administration accommodated the Israelis. Most significantly, administration officials increasingly linked Israel's struggle to the wider WOT.

In April, at the Rally in Support of Israel, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz argued, the Bush administration "rallied the world against the forces of terror" and implied that the rally demonstrated not only "solidarity with Israel" but support for the global WOT. Wolfowitz told the crowd:

President Bush wants you to know that he stands in solidarity with you. . . . Terrorism must end. Hatred of Israel must end. The murder of innocents must end. . . . The single greatest threat to peace and freedom in our time is terrorism. And the advance of peace requires the end of terror. . . . The people of Palestine and their leaders must . . . recognize . . . that suicide bombers are the single greatest obstacle to ending their suffering and to realizing the Palestinian state. . . . Stopping terror is the most important thing you can do to serve the Palestinian cause. . . . [T]he future does not belong to the terrorists. It belongs to those who dream the oldest and noblest dream . . . the dream of peace among nations.⁵²

Taking a cue from the American WOT, Israeli deputy prime minister Natan Sharansky argued that Israel faced a battle against "savage Palestinian terror." Sharansky suggested that compromising with Palestinian terror only bred more terrorism, and he declared, "Make no mistake about it. Arafat is at the root of the terror . . . the center of the axis of terror."⁵³ And former Israeli prime minister Netanyahu argued:

No greater friend of Israel has ever been in the White House. . . . Israel and the United States are today fighting the same battle, waging the same war, confronting the same evil. Like the United States, Israel did not seek this war. It was forced on us by a savage enemy that glorifies in a culture of death. . . . An enemy that sends children to die and that kills other children is an enemy that cannot be placated. An enemy that openly preaches the destruction of our

state is not a partner for peace. With such evil, there can be no negotiations and no concessions.

Netanyahu then equated Arafat with totalitarian leaders, including Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Osama bin Laden.⁵⁴

The Neoconservative Triumph

During the spring and summer, despite Powell's encouragement of the peace process, it appeared that the Bush administration's neoconservatives had triumphed. In May, Press Secretary Ari Fleischer was asked about settlement construction and the peace process. While acknowledging that it was "longstanding" American policy to "call on Israel to stop constructing settlements," Fleischer returned to the old argument that settlements were simply "not helpful" to the peace process.⁵⁵ And, in August 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld clearly demonstrated the Bush administration's accommodation of Israeli settlements and occupation. Writing off the Palestinian leadership and referring to the "so-called occupied territories," Rumsfeld argued, the Israelis

made some settlements in various parts of the so-called occupied area, which was the result of a war, which they won. They have offered up . . . various portions of that so-called occupied territory, the West Bank, and at no point has it been agreed upon by the other side. I suspect . . . that there will be some sort of an entity that will be established. Maybe it will take some Palestinian expatriates coming back into the region and providing the kind of responsible government that would give confidence that you could make an arrangement with them that would stick. . . . The settlement issues—it's hard to know whether they're settlements in portions of the real estate that will end up with the entity that you make an arrangement with or Israel. So it seems to me focusing on settlements at the present time misses the point. The real point is to get an effective interlocutor. The real point is to get a condition so that you can have a peace agreement.⁵⁶

Throughout the fall, the United States continued its policy of ambiguity and acquiescence on Israel's settlement expansion. At a press briefing, State Department Spokesperson Richard Boucher told a reporter:

There was not a Powell-Peres understanding on natural growth of settlements. Natural growth of settlements is an issue that has been around for a long time. It is an issue that has been discussed between Secretary Powell and Foreign Minister Peres and other Israeli leaders—Prime Minister Sharon and others. So it is a subject that had been discussed—about what was meant by those who advocated such things. Our position on settlements, I think, has been very consistent, very clear. . . . [Secretary Powell] said settlement

activity has severely undermined Palestinian trust and hope, preempts and prejudices the outcome of negotiations, and in doing so, cripples chances for real peace and prosperity.⁵⁷

Most notably, the Bush administration continued to stand behind Israel's settlement expansion and growth in Jerusalem. On December 3, 2002, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution, "Jerusalem." The resolution stated, "any actions taken by Israel to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration on the Holy City of Jerusalem are illegal and therefore null and void and have no validity whatsoever."⁵⁸ The Bush administration was one of five countries that voted against the resolution; this marked a change in the administration's position, as the administration had abstained from similar resolutions in the past. As previous administrations had done, the Bush administration emphasized negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians as the basis for resolving issues in Jerusalem.⁵⁹ By doing so, however, like previous administrations, they acquiesced to Israeli control and expansion of the city. Ultimately, it meant ignoring settlement construction.

In the same month, the United States also vetoed a United Nations Security Council draft resolution dealing with the Al-Aqsa intifada. The draft resolution demanded

Israel, the occupying Power, comply fully with its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, and refrain from the excessive and disproportionate use of force in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.⁶⁰

The administration's veto of the resolution came on the same day that President Bush was meeting with the Quartet—the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations—to discuss the group's proposed Roadmap for peace. Bush outlined the principles of the plan on June 24, when he called for a two-state solution.⁶¹ The Roadmap proposed mutual recognition, international support for the Palestinian economy, and negotiations over the final status of borders, refugees, Jerusalem, and settlements. Following his discussion with the Quartet, Bush continued to pressure on the Palestinians, arguing:

All of us must work hard to fight against terror so that a few cannot deny the dreams of the many; that we must encourage the development of Palestinian institutions which are transparent, which promote freedom and democracy; that we must work together to ease the humanitarian situation. . . . The people in the neighborhood must assume their responsibilities.⁶²

Bush's remarks emphasized not only the expectation that the Palestinian leadership must put a stop to terrorism, but also his belief that democracy and freedom were a necessary component of peace in the region.

A Vision for the Middle East

In November 2003, Bush laid out his vision for the Middle East. The speech came eight months after the American invasion of Iraq, which toppled the government of Saddam Hussein. Bush emphasized his belief that freedom and democracy were a part of God's plan. Arguing that "[I]berty is both the plan of heaven for humanity and the best hope for progress here on Earth," Bush explained that democracy was a central focus of his policy in the Middle East.⁶³ Stressing the compatibility of Islam and democracy, Bush maintained that "groups of men have gained influence in the Middle East and beyond through an ideology of theocratic terror."⁶⁴ He suggested that governments in the Middle East needed to confront their challenges through responsible leadership and reform. Specifically addressing the Palestinian people, Bush, once again, placed the burden of peace with their leadership.

For the Palestinian people, the only path to independence and dignity and progress is the path to democracy. And the Palestinian leaders who block and undermine democratic reform and feed hatred and encourage violence are not leaders at all. They're the main obstacles to peace and to the success of the Palestinian people.⁶⁵

Bush concluded, "the United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. . . . The advance of freedom is the calling of our time. It is the calling of our country."⁶⁶

In the summer, Bush had met with Palestinian leaders at Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. According to Palestinian foreign minister Nabil Shaath, Bush told them:

I am driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, George go and fight these terrorists in Afghanistan. And I did. And then God would tell me George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq. And I did. . . . And now again, I feel God's words coming to me, Go get the Palestinians their state and get the Israelis their security, and get peace in the Middle East. And, by God, I'm gonna do it.⁶⁷

Thus, Bush's focus on democracy and the WOT was coupled with his belief in a divine mission. This only increased the pressure on the Palestinian leadership. Not only were they responsible for stopping terrorist activity, but they also were responsible for democratic reform. As if that was not enough, Bush saw these two things as part of a divine mission.

Meanwhile, the peace process stalled. First, Prime Minister Sharon rejected any halt to settlement expansion. Additionally, the Bush administration defended the Israeli government, arguing that the issue of settlements remained "under discussion." When asked about whether the administration would push the Israelis to

stop settlement projects, State Department Spokesperson Richard Boucher suggested that a settlement freeze “sounds great rhetorically,” and added:

But you all know enough about this subject to know that this issue has been discussed for many years, that there are very involved aspects to this of funding, of so-called natural growth, . . . questions of children, questions of cousins, questions of schools, questions of perimeters, questions of land. . . . We have a position that this matter is still under discussion with the Israelis. . . . The road map says “freeze on settlement activity.” We’re in discussions with the Israelis about how exactly that can be implemented. . . . Whether you call it natural growth, whether you call it, you know, perimeters and children and subsidies and, you know, building new floors versus building out, there are discussions, there are subjects that need to be discussed. . . . We need to reach understandings on how exactly the settlements freeze would be implemented. The United States supports a freeze on settlements. . . . A freeze means a freeze. And we want it to be clear what that is, and that’s why you have to discuss these things to make sure that we have a common understanding that a freeze is a freeze, and it’s not a freeze that results in continued expansion or growth.⁶⁸

Ultimately, Boucher failed to clarify the meaning of a settlement freeze and left it to discussions where the Israelis would have an opportunity to define its meaning.

The administration also continued its insistence that ending Palestinian terrorism was the highest priority in the peace process. Vetoing yet another United Nations Security Council draft resolution,⁶⁹ Ambassador Negroponte argued:

The draft resolution put forward today was flawed in that it failed to include the following three elements: a robust condemnation of acts of terrorism; an explicit condemnation of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade as organizations responsible for acts of terrorism; and a call for the dismantlement of infrastructure that supports these terror operations wherever located . . . This draft resolution did not take a clear stand against the actions of these terrorist groups or call for decisive action against them. The Palestinian Authority must take action to remove the capability of extremist groups to conduct terrorist outrages. . . . [W]e will not support any draft resolution that evades the explicit threat to the Middle East peace process posed by Hamas and other such terrorist groups. . . . We note once again that the Government of Israel is already aware of the views of the Council members on the issue of Mr. Arafat. Moreover, Secretary of State Powell stated that the United States does not support either the elimination of Mr. Arafat or his forced exile. While Mr. Arafat is part of the problem, we believe that this problem is best solved through diplomatic isolation, and we have made that view clear.⁷⁰

The United States vetoed another draft resolution in October. This time, the draft resolution specifically condemned “all acts of violence, terror and destruction.” However, it focused its attention on the illegality of Israel’s construction of a separation barrier in the West Bank.⁷¹ The barrier divided contiguous Palestinian areas and reconfigured areas of the West Bank, thereby laying the groundwork for de facto annexation of most settlements and expanding Israeli control of land in the occupied territories. The barrier was intended to prevent Palestinians without permits from entering Israel, and, more specifically, from keeping Palestinian terrorists out of Israel. But, much of the barrier’s route was inside the Green Line boundary between Israel and the West Bank, and the location of Israeli settlements helped to determine the location of the barrier. In its veto of the draft resolution, Negroponte stated:

The draft resolution put forward today was unbalanced and did not condemn terrorism in explicit terms. It failed to address both sides of the larger security context of the Middle East, including the devastating suicide attacks that Israelis have had to endure over the past three years. A Security Council resolution focused on the fence does not further the goals of peace and security in the region. . . . All parties have responsibilities in bringing peace to the Middle East, to prevent outrages such as the Haifa attack and to deny perpetrators safe haven in their territory. Ending terrorism must be the highest priority. . . . The destructive impact of terrorist bombings and the failure to dismantle the organizations and infrastructure that encourage those acts have slowed progress on the road map, but we will not be deterred.⁷²

The consequences of American acquiescence and accommodation of Israeli policy resulted in a 35% increase in housing expansions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.⁷³ Throughout 2004, American accommodation of Israeli policies continued.

Israeli Disengagement From the Gaza Strip

In June 2004, the Israeli government announced the unilateral Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005. The rationale emphasized maintaining a Jewish state with a Jewish majority. Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert noted:

There is no doubt in my mind that very soon the government of Israel is going to have to address the demographic issue with the utmost seriousness and resolve. This issue above all others will dictate the solution that we must adopt. In the absence of a negotiated agreement—and I do not believe in the realistic prospect of an agreement—we need to implement a unilateral alternative. . . . More and more Palestinians are uninterested in a negotiated, two-state solution, because they want to change the essence of the conflict from an Algerian paradigm to a South African one. From a struggle against “occupation,” in their parlance, to a struggle for one-man-one-vote. That is, of course, a much cleaner struggle, a much more popular struggle—and

ultimately a much more powerful one. For us, it would mean the end of the Jewish state. . . . [T]he parameters of a unilateral solution are: To maximize the number of Jews; to minimize the number of Palestinians; not to withdraw to the 1967 border and not to divide Jerusalem.⁷⁴

Prime Minister Sharon explained:

[S]ettlements which will be relocated are those which will not be included in the territory of the State of Israel in the framework of any possible future permanent agreement. At the same time, in the framework of the Disengagement Plan, Israel will strengthen its control over those same areas in the Land of Israel which will constitute an inseparable part of the State of Israel in any future agreement.⁷⁵

According to Bernard Avishai, the disengagement was designed to prevent further peace negotiations. Sharon pursued the Gaza withdrawal while also pursuing the annexation of Jerusalem and the West Bank to further isolate the Palestinians and solidify the Israeli position in the region.⁷⁶

In April 2004, Sharon formally informed President Bush of his plan, arguing:

[T]he State of Israel has accepted the Roadmap. . . . The Palestinian Authority under its current leadership has taken no action to meet its responsibilities under the Roadmap. . . . [T]here exists no Palestinian partner with whom to advance peacefully toward a settlement.⁷⁷

Bush described Sharon's plan as demonstrating "real progress" toward peace. Furthermore, he reiterated his commitment that "Palestinians must undertake an immediate cessation of armed activity and all acts of violence" and that Israel retained "its right to defend itself against terrorism." Bush emphasized the security of Israel and, once again, placed the pressure for peace negotiations on the Palestinian leadership. More significantly, Bush told Sharon:

In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli populations centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949.⁷⁸

Bush acknowledged the existing Israeli settlements as "populations centers," and made it clear that the United States did not expect Israeli withdrawal to pre-1967 borders. In doing so, Bush not only accommodated Israeli policies, but also implicitly sanctioned the Israeli construction of the separation barrier inside the Green Line.

Therefore, Israel continued to build the separation barrier and sustained the expansion of settlements in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The Bush administration accommodated Israeli settlements and settlement expansion. In August, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Adam Ereli told the press, "[W]e continue to

have discussions with the Government of Israel on [a settlement freeze].” However, Ereli refused to suggest that Israel had violated its commitments regarding freezing settlement expansion and construction, despite evidence to the contrary. Instead, Ereli stated that Israel had “made a commitment to freeze settlement activity . . . and that is the commitment they have made, that is what we are working with the Israelis . . . on.”⁷⁹ The ambiguity of these statements, along with the continued expansion of settlements without consequences, signaled persistent American acquiescence and accommodation to Israeli policies.

In October, the United States demonstrated its continued commitment to Israel when it, once again, vetoed a United Nations Security Council draft resolution.⁸⁰ United States ambassador John Danforth told the Council that the resolution lacked “credibility and deserves a ‘no’ vote.” According to Danforth:

The draft resolution condemns Israel’s military actions in Gaza. It criticizes incursions into the Jabaliya refugee camp. It condemns Israeli acts of “destruction.” And it laments extensive human casualties among Palestinians. It demands that Israel, as the “occupying Power” withdraw its forces immediately. Tough words. The United States has no problem with tough words, but only when they are accurate and when there is balance. Now consider what the draft resolution does not say. It does not mention even one of the 450 Qassam rocket attacks launched against Israel over the past two years. It does not mention the 200 rockets launched this year alone. It does not mention the two Israeli children who were outside playing last week when a rocket suddenly crashed into their young bodies. . . . It does not mention that Hamas took credit for killing those Israeli children and maiming many other Israeli civilians, calling those deaths and woundings a “victory.” It does not mention that the terrorists hide among Palestinian civilians, provoking their deaths, and then use those deaths as fodder for their hatred, lawlessness and efforts to derail the peace process. It does not mention the complete failure of the Palestinian Authority to meet its commitments to establish security among its people. . . . Nor does it acknowledge the legitimate need for Israel to defend itself.⁸¹

Again, the United States focused on the WOT and placed the burden of peace on the Palestinians. Danforth concluded that the resolution “only encourages the terrorists.”⁸²

The Freedom Agenda and the Palestinians

On November 11, 2004, Yasser Arafat died, raising the possibility of a renewal of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the possibility that a new Palestinian leadership might be more successful in meeting the Bush administration’s conditions for peace. However, the prospects for peace were quickly dashed. Prime Minister Sharon made clear that Israel would only be “willing to coordinate various moves with [a new Palestinian] leadership and . . . resume

diplomatic negotiations” if the new leadership would fight terrorism. Furthermore, American officials Elliott Abrams and Daniel Fried made clear that the United States was not prepared to move forward with the Roadmap if the Palestinians did not halt terrorism, dismantle terrorist organizations, and enact major governmental reforms.⁸³ This isolated new Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas. On November 12, President Bush made Abbas’s job more difficult by stating, “We look forward to working with a Palestinian leadership that is committed to fighting terror and committed to the cause of democratic reform. . . . We seek a democratic, independent, and viable state for the Palestinian people.”⁸⁴

Bush’s “Freedom Agenda”—battling terrorism and promoting democracy—ignored the continued expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem. In 2004 and the first months of 2005, the Israeli government issued nearly 2,000 tenders, marketing and promoting settlement itself, in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.⁸⁵ In the end, Bush’s emphasis on terrorism and democracy made the prospects for peace more difficult. In April 2005, Bush and Sharon met at Bush’s ranch in Crawford, Texas to discuss the Gaza withdrawal. While the administration saw the Gaza withdrawal as possibly laying the groundwork for withdrawal in the West Bank, Bush made clear that Gaza would be a test for the Palestinians. According to Elliott Abrams, “If this experiment failed, if the Palestinians could not rule Gaza, Sharon would have proved to the world that moving forward in the West Bank was not possible.”⁸⁶

In December 2005, Sharon suffered a massive stroke that debilitated him. Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert became acting prime minister, and, in May, Olmert became prime minister in his own right. In addition, in January 2006, Bush’s insistence on democratic reforms and elections led to a Hamas victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Bush’s reaction was to move even closer to Israel, stressing that Israel and the United States must act as one in the face of the threat from Hamas.⁸⁷ As a result, Olmert and Bush quickly bonded. Meeting together in late May, Olmert agreed to try negotiations and meet with Abbas, but emphasized that Abbas must fight terrorism.⁸⁸ In a move aimed at promoting negotiations, Olmert told Congress:

We will NOT yield to terror, we will NOT surrender to terror and we WILL WIN the war on terror and restore peace to our societies. The Palestinian Authority is ruled by Hamas—an organization committed to vehement anti-Semitism, the glorification of terror and the total destruction of Israel. As long as these are their guiding principles, they can never be a partner.

While condemning terrorism and Hamas, Olmert also provided possibilities for peace.

Israel must still meet the momentous challenge of guaranteeing the future of Israel as a democratic state with a Jewish majority, within permanent and defensible borders and a united Jerusalem as its capital—that is open and accessible for the worship of all religions. This was the dream to which Ariel

Sharon was loyally committed. This was the mission he began to fulfill. . . . I extend my hand in peace to Mahmoud Abbas, elected President of the Palestinian Authority. On behalf of the State of Israel, we are willing to negotiate with a Palestinian Authority. This authority must renounce terrorism, dismantle the terrorist infrastructure, accept previous agreements and commitments, and recognize the right of Israel to exist.⁸⁹

Olmert's government made clear that it would "strive to shape the permanent borders of the State of Israel as a Jewish state, with a Jewish majority, and as a democratic state," but also acknowledged that it would consider "the reduction of Israeli settlement in Judea and Samaria."⁹⁰ However, this never materialized. Instead, the territorial fragmentation of the West Bank continued, with an increased number of checkpoints, continued construction of the separation barrier, and the expansion of settlements.

In June 2006, using tunnels from Gaza into Israel, Hamas attacked Israeli soldiers. And, in July, hopes for peace were diminished further when Hezbollah launched an attack from Lebanon into northern Israel. The Bush administration responded swiftly, arguing that Hezbollah provoked Israel. Bush argued, "Hezbollah had instigated the conflict, and Israel had a right to defend itself." He hoped that Israel would "deliver a major blow against Hezbollah and their sponsors in Iran and Syria."⁹¹ The administration pushed to disarm Hezbollah and all Lebanese militias.⁹² As a result, Bush initially opposed a ceasefire, encouraging Olmert to respond militarily.⁹³ However, after Israel accidentally bombed a building, killing children, the administration pressed for a ceasefire. Secretary Rice told Olmert, "Get it over with. After today, you have no ground to stand on. And, I'm not going to let the United States go down with you."⁹⁴ Bush agreed, arguing:

I wanted to buy time for Israel to weaken Hezbollah's forces. I also wanted to send a message to Iran and Syria: They would not be allowed to use terrorist organizations as proxy armies to attack democracies with impunity. Unfortunately, Israel made matters worse.⁹⁵

With a ceasefire, Secretary Rice worked to reenergize the peace process. While Rice put emphasis on diplomacy, others in the administration, particularly Vice President Cheney, viewed peace as contradictory to the WOT.⁹⁶ Bush supported Rice, but he would only go so far. In July, and again in November, the United States vetoed United Nations Security Council draft resolutions pertaining to the conflict.⁹⁷ Following the November veto, United States Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton argued:

The draft resolution does not display an even-handed characterization of the recent events in Gaza. . . . [W]e are disturbed at the language of the draft resolution that is, in many places, biased against Israel and politically motivated. . . . [T]he draft resolution remains an unbalanced text. Among many

such examples are the following. The preambular text equates Israeli military operations, which are legal, with the firing of rockets aimed at civilians into Israel, which is an act of terrorism. . . . [W]e are disturbed that there is neither a single reference to terrorism in the proposed draft resolution, nor any condemnation of the Hamas leadership's statement that Palestinians should resume terror attacks on a broad scale or of calls by the military wing of Hamas to Muslims worldwide to strike American targets and interests. More terror, whether directed at Israel, the United States or others, is not the solution, nor will it enable the Palestinian people to achieve their aspirations. It is the responsibility of any Palestinian Authority Government to prevent terror and to take the necessary steps to stop attacks and dismantle the terrorist infrastructure. Hamas has failed utterly in that regard by continuing to play a role in perpetuating instability and violence.⁹⁸

Annapolis and the Roadmap

One year later, in Annapolis, Maryland, negotiations were held between Israel and Palestine to further the Roadmap. As the conference approached, settlement expansion and construction continued throughout the West Bank and Jerusalem. While the settler population in East Jerusalem remained stagnant, settlements around East Jerusalem expanded, essentially surrounding the city. In 2006, the West Bank settler population soared to almost 270,000, a 5.8% population rate increase from the year before.⁹⁹ Additionally, the separation barrier's construction continued, with the Israeli government providing nearly \$30 million in April 2006.¹⁰⁰ And, the United States continued to downplay the settlements and settlement expansion, offering more ambiguous statements. In an interview with Haaretz, Secretary Rice suggested:

Well, sometimes we don't talk about things in public, but . . . the Israeli Government is quite aware . . . of American policy and of our expectations . . . that the obligations under the roadmap are going to be carried out.¹⁰¹

The Annapolis Conference aimed to address settlements, along with other core issues, including, Jerusalem, refugees, and borders. However, the conference failed to produce anything substantive. The result of Bush's meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders was a joint understanding stating:

In furtherance of the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security we agree to immediately launch good-faith bilateral negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty, resolving all outstanding issues, including all core issues without exception, as specified in previous agreements. We agree to engage in vigorous, ongoing and continuous negotiations, and shall make every effort to conclude an agreement before the end of 2008.¹⁰²

Despite the joint understanding, negotiations never materialized. Hamas and Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran called for a boycott of the conference and its outcomes. Hamas held demonstrations against the conference in the Gaza Strip, while demonstrators in the West Bank were beaten under the orders of the Palestinian leadership. Jewish activists also opposed the conference, fearing concessions leading to the loss of Jerusalem and the West Bank. Bush's desire to facilitate the meeting, his failure to bring pressure to bear on Israel, along with the long-standing American view that the parties must negotiate ongoing issues, failed to move the peace process forward.

Additionally, the United States quickly returned to its acquiescent support and ambiguous concern about Israeli settlements. When asked about settlements and a settlement freeze at the end of November 2007, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Sean McCormick replied:

[Olmert] made certain promises. He's made them—made public commitments. He's made private commitments to us. . . . There are obligations under the Roadmap and Prime Minister Olmert has made implementation, full implementation, of the Roadmap one of his goals. He's committed to that. And there are certain steps along the way; this is an iterative process. So I'm not going to comment on the state of the process at this time. . . . They've made certain commitments. . . . And the end result, we hope, is going to be a final agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. They will define what the contents of that agreement are. And the other outcome of the process is that the Roadmap will be fully implemented. And along the way there are going to be a number of different steps.¹⁰³

And, in early January 2008, National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley argued:

[T]his whole issue of settlements gets a lot easier once there is an understanding between Israel and the Palestinians as to what the territory of a new state is going to look like. . . . [T]he road map is pretty flat. It talks about ending expansion of . . . settlements. . . . [R]oad map obligations are road map obligations.¹⁰⁴

Again, American policymakers insisted that settlements would only be discussed as a part of the negotiations. In addition, both the United States and Israel used ambiguous language to distinguish between existing and new settlements. Moreover, the United States suggested territorial changes would be a necessary part of negotiations.

The Israeli leadership, in particular, made this distinction, and continued to rely on American support to further their policies. Prime Minister Olmert explained to the press, Bush and Rice

know that there is a moratorium on new settlements and the new expropriation of land in the Territories. And they also know, and we have made it clear

that Jerusalem . . . is not in the same status. And they know that the population centers are not in the same status. . . . We are not going to build any new settlements or expropriate land in the Territories. . . . [E]veryone knows that certain things in Jerusalem are not in the same tactical level as they are in other parts of the Territories which are outside the city of Jerusalem. . . . So there was nothing that happened that was not known in advance to all our partners in this process. We made clear our positions; we made clear exactly what we can do, what we can't do, what we want to do and what we will not be able to do. And I think that they all know it and they, at least even when sometimes they disagree with us, they at least respect our sincerity and openness about these issues.¹⁰⁵

In other words, there would be no new settlements in the West Bank, but the existing settlements, particularly those in and around Jerusalem, would remain. Moreover, the Israeli government would continue to promote settlement throughout Jerusalem itself.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration continued to treat Israeli settlements as simply another issue for negotiation. In May 2008, President Bush went to the region to encourage implementation of the Roadmap. While the United States still hoped to get an agreement before the end of Bush's term in office, Bush did little more than promote the Annapolis process. Moreover, what little pressure the Bush administration was willing to apply to Israel regarding Israeli settlements and occupation were ignored; continued acquiescence and ambiguous statements with no consequences were the norm. Additionally, Bush continued to place the burden of peace on the Palestinian leadership. Following a meeting with Prime Minister Olmert, Bush explained, " Hamas's objective—stated objective is the destruction of the State of Israel. And therefore, the United States will stand strongly with Israel, as well as stand strongly with the Palestinians who don't share that vision."¹⁰⁶ Later, in an address to the Israeli Knesset, Bush emphasized the shared values between the United States and Israel, and, again, connected peace in the Middle East to the WOT.

We believe that democracy is the only way to ensure human rights. So we consider it a source of shame that the United Nations routinely passes more human rights resolutions against the freest democracy in the Middle East than any other nation in the world. . . . We believe that targeting innocent lives to achieve political objectives is always and everywhere wrong. So we stand together against terror and extremism, and we will never let down our guard or lose our resolve. The fight against terror and extremism is the defining challenge of our time. It's more than a clash of arms; it is a clash of visions, a great ideological struggle. . . . [I]t is an ancient battle between good and evil. The killers claim the mantle of Islam, but they are not religious men. . . . They accept no God before themselves, and they reserve a special hatred for the most ardent defenders of liberty, including Americans and Israelis. And that is why the founding charter of Hamas calls for

the elimination of Israel. And that is why the followers of Hizballah chant: “Death to Israel! Death to America!” That is why Usama bin Laden teaches that the killing of Jews and Americans is one of the biggest duties. And that is why the President of Iran dreams of returning the Middle East to the Middle Ages and calls for Israel to be wiped off the map. . . . Some seem to believe that we should negotiate with the terrorists and radicals, as if some ingenious argument will persuade them they have been wrong all along. We’ve heard this foolish delusion before.¹⁰⁷

There were also no illusions about where Bush stood; he had chosen the WOT over peace, and did little to break the diplomatic stalemate in the peace process.

In June, Secretary Rice went to the region for discussions with Palestinian and Israeli leaders in an attempt to foster negotiations over the Roadmap, but brought more of the same. During a press conference, Rice was asked about settlements and settlement construction. Rice made clear that the United States would do little more than “press the case,” arguing:

The Israeli Government is, of course, a sovereign government and it is making its own decisions. But it is the view of the United States that we cannot communicate more strongly that it is Israel that . . . will . . . benefit from the establishment of a peaceful and democratic Palestinian state. And so it is in Israel’s interest to do everything that it can to promote an atmosphere of confidence. And that is the point that we will make and we will continue to make.¹⁰⁸

Rice also told reporters on route to Tel Aviv:

I think [settlements are] a problem that . . . I’m going to address with the Israelis. And . . . it gives us every reason that we really ought to be determining the boundaries of the state, because what’s in Israel will be in Israel at that point, and what’s in Palestine will be in Palestine.¹⁰⁹

Rice’s comments implicitly acknowledged that settlements would play an important part in the negotiation of borders. Earlier in May, Rice was asked about “facts on the ground” and President Bush’s letter to Ariel Sharon in 2004. She explained that the letter

acknowledged the current realities as of . . . 2004—subject to mutual agreement between the parties. And of course, there are . . . current realities and new realities since 1949 and 1967 for both sides. And all of those will have to be taken into account in an agreement. So what the President’s letter said is there are population realities. . . . So this is nothing new, that those realities have been acknowledged. . . . [T]here are realities for both sides, which is why they need to draw a map and get it done.¹¹⁰

Secretary of State Rice had not only accepted the realities on the ground but made clear that any agreement must take them into account. This implied that settlements would help to determine the new borders of a Palestinian state.

By the end of 2008, with the Bush administration exiting office, over 1,000 new buildings were being constructed in Israeli settlements, with continued construction in isolated areas of the West Bank, and intensive settlement construction in East Jerusalem.¹¹¹ Despite American descriptions of settlements as “unhelpful” and American policymakers “pressing the case” privately with Israel, the Bush administration had, like its predecessors, acquiesced to Israeli policy. As in the past, rhetoric without consequences allowed the Israelis to continue settlement activity unhindered by direct pressure. United States priorities and interests, particularly with the ongoing WOT, led the Bush administration to ignore much of Israel’s occupation. When the administration finally reinvigorated the peace process at Annapolis, it was already too late. Bush had publicly called for a two-state solution, but as he left office, the prospects for a two-state peace had receded.

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8 Barack Obama's Failed Expectations

I shared with the Prime Minister the fact that under the roadmap and under Annapolis that there's a clear understanding that we have to make progress on settlements, that settlements have to be stopped in order for us to move forward.

—President Barack Obama¹

Despite high hopes that Barack Obama's presidency would lead to major changes in the Middle East, his presidency did not curb Israeli settlement expansion or construction. While President Obama often condemned settlements, arguing they were undermining hopes for peace, Israeli construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem thrived throughout his eight years in office.² Obama's criticism of Israeli leaders and settlement construction may have actually emboldened the Israelis. By the end of the Obama administration, settlements were an increasing reality that would continue to hamper the peace process. Yet there were no consequences for Israel. In fact, in 2016, the United States agreed to provide Israel with \$38 billion in military assistance over a decade, the largest aid package ever given to another country.³

Like Bush 41, Obama's relations with Israel were impacted by his personal relationship with Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Relations between Obama and Netanyahu were strained from the start, constraining Obama's influence with Netanyahu and Israel. Moreover, Netanyahu had significant disagreements with the Obama administration's policy toward Iran. The expectations that Obama would be able to defuse tensions between Israel and the Palestinians quickly evaporated. The personal tension between Obama and Netanyahu prevented any real breakthrough from materializing. Like its predecessors, the Obama administration came to office with great expectations for Israeli-Palestinian peace, but left office with Israel more deeply entrenched in the occupied territories.

Obama's Images of Israel

In 2008, Senator Barack Obama defeated Senator John McCain to become the first African-American president of the United States. Obama became president

after only serving four years in the U.S. Senate. His inexperience drew criticism from Washington insiders. His main rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton, described Obama as “irresponsible and frankly naïve.”⁴ While Obama had little foreign policy experience, arguably the most important speech he ever gave focused exclusively on foreign policy. On October 2, 2002, while serving as Illinois State Senator, Obama outlined his opposition to war with Iraq, arguing:

I don't oppose all wars. . . . What I am opposed to is a dumb war . . . a rash war. What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by . . . armchair, weekend warriors in [the Bush administration] to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne.

Obama went on to argue that Saddam Hussein and Iraq posed “no imminent and direct threat to the United States or to his neighbors.”⁵

Obama's opposition to the Iraq war served, in part, to propel him to the presidency, and provided a basis for his worldview. In his opposition to the war, Obama essentially suggested that the United States has too often relied on its military power to address challenging world problems. Rather, Obama preferred persistent diplomatic engagement. He believed that American foreign policy required changes. Most significantly, he emphasized the restoration of American credibility and leadership throughout the world. Obama believed the United States needed to be less arrogant and listen with compassion more often. Tom Donilon, Deputy National Security Advisor and later National Security Advisor, explained, “We came into office at a period of very significant diminution of American influence, prestige, and power in the world. And our principal strategic goal was the restoration of that position.”⁶ Obama's concern with American arrogance led him toward multilateral solutions. He later argued:

One of the reasons I am so focused on taking action multilaterally where our direct interests are not at stake is that multilateralism regulates hubris. . . . We have history in Iran, we have history in Indonesia and Central America. So we have to be mindful of our history when we start talking about intervening, and understand the source of other people's suspicions.⁷

This, seemingly, had profound implications for the Middle East. Obama was especially concerned about the view of the United States in the Arab and Muslim world. He was convinced that the rhetoric of the WOT and abuses like those that occurred at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq only fed hatred of the United States. As David Remnick claimed, “If . . . Bush's foreign policy was largely a reaction to 9/11, Obama's was a reaction to the reaction.”⁸ During his campaign, Obama promised an early address in a major Muslim country aimed at transforming the American relationship with the Muslim world. Six months into his presidency, Obama called for a new beginning at Cairo University in Egypt.

The Cairo speech aimed to “speak the truth” about American relations with the Middle East and the Muslim world. The address was an effort to bridge the divisions that emerged following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the subsequent WOT, and the Bush 43 administration’s invasion of Iraq. Illustrating his desire for a multilateral approach emphasizing diplomacy and engagement, Obama argued, “Just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire.” Obama identified several tensions in the relationship, including violent extremism, war, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Specifically addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Obama made a commitment to pursue peace. He acknowledged that American ties with Israel are “unbreakable” but pledged to pursue the “legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own.” Obama also called on Hamas to “put an end to violence . . . and recognize Israel’s right to exist.” Most significantly, Obama announced, “The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. . . . This construction violates previous agreements and undermines . . . peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.”⁹

While the speech closed to a standing ovation, many leaders throughout the Middle East “reacted with guarded optimism.” However, Jewish settlers in the West Bank criticized Obama as “out of touch with reality” and Hamas dismissed the speech as misleading.¹⁰ The initial reactions demonstrated just how difficult Obama’s task would be. The hopes that Obama could break the impasse in the peace process and curb Israeli settlements never materialized. Instead, Obama abandoned the region, preferring not to spend his political capital on an unlikely peace. Like his predecessors, Obama was caught between his desire to protect Israel and his determination to foster the peace process. In the end, he quietly, and often reluctantly, chose Israel, abandoning the peace process.

Obama’s Strained Relations With Israel

Barack Obama came to office intending to reverse the policies of the Bush 43 administration. If Bush 43 entered office with an ABC (Anything but Clinton) mind-set, Obama entered office with an ABB (Anything but Bush) mind-set. The Bush administration had ignored Israeli settlements despite Israel’s obligations under the Roadmap, and had damaged American credibility in the Middle East with the war in Iraq. Obama set a new tone almost immediately by appointing former Senator George Mitchell as Special Envoy for Middle East Peace. In 2000, Mitchell led an American fact-finding commission, which produced the Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee Report, or Mitchell Report. Published in 2001, the Mitchell Report called upon Israel to halt settlement expansion in the occupied territories, and the Palestinian leadership to prevent violence and terrorism.¹¹ By appointing Mitchell, the Obama administration was sending a clear message that it would rely on past Israeli obligations regarding a settlement freeze, since the Mitchell Report was a basis for the Roadmap.

While Mitchell’s appointment may have raised hopes among Palestinians, Dennis Ross’s appointment at the State Department and later in the National Security

Council as a Middle East expert undercut those expectations. Ross had served in the Clinton and Bush 43 administrations, and also co-founded the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank with strong connections to the AIPAC. Moreover, Ross argued that the modus operandi of the Bush and Clinton administrations was to “take Israeli ideas or ideas that the Israelis could live with and work them over—trying to increase their attractiveness to the Arabs while trying to get the Arabs to scale back their expectations.”¹² Throughout the first three years of the Obama administration, tensions flared, ending with both Mitchell and Ross resigning their posts.¹³

Obama initially focused on addressing the consequences of Operation Cast Lead, a three-week conflict between Israel and the Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The conflict was devastating for the Palestinians, leaving over 1,000 dead. On January 22, 2009, Obama explained:

[J]ust as the terror of rocket fire aimed at innocent Israelis is intolerable, so too is a future without hope for the Palestinians. I was deeply concerned by the loss of Palestinian and Israeli life in recent days and by the substantial suffering and humanitarian needs in Gaza. Our hearts go out to Palestinian civilians who are in need of immediate food, clean water, and basic medical care, and who have faced suffocating poverty for far too long.¹⁴

Additionally, Obama supported opening the Gaza border crossings, raising expectations that he would apply pressure to Israel to lift its blockade. However, any hopes that Obama would pressure Israel quickly evaporated. Instead, the administration worked to strengthen the Bush administration’s policy aimed at interdicting weapons to Hamas.

Just prior to leaving office, the Bush administration had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Israel, committing the United States to addressing the “problem of the supply of arms and related material and weapons transfers and shipments to Hamas and other terrorist organizations in Gaza.”¹⁵ On March 13, 2009, the Obama administration signed a Program of Action with nine other countries providing a “new mechanism to seek to block arms shipments to Gaza, which constitute a threat to regional peace and security.”¹⁶ Additionally, the Obama administration continued to ship weapons to Israel and admitted that it would not suspend the billions of dollars in military aid promised by the Bush administration.¹⁷ The Obama administration also did little to alleviate the conditions for Palestinians in Gaza. Despite its awareness that Israel was blocking the delivery of humanitarian goods,¹⁸ the administration maintained its support for Israel and failed to take steps toward ending Israel’s blockade of Gaza. Illustrating that the administration would go to great lengths to avoid direct pressure on Israel, State Department Acting Spokesperson Robert Gibbs was “not able to tell you from here whether [pasta],” which was prevented from getting to Gaza by the Israeli blockade, constituted legitimate humanitarian aid.¹⁹

Ironically, at the same time, President Obama was calling on Israel to implement a settlement freeze. After meeting with Israeli prime minister Netanyahu in

May 2009, Obama declared, "I shared with the Prime Minister the fact that under the roadmap and under Annapolis that there's a clear understanding that we have to make progress on settlements, that settlements have to be stopped in order for us to move forward."²⁰ And, on June 2, Obama repeated his call for an end to settlements:

I do believe that if you follow the roadmap approach that has been laid out, if Israel abides by its obligations that includes no settlements, if the Palestinians abide by their obligations to deal with the security situation, to eliminate incitement.²¹

Two days later, in his Cairo University speech, Obama declared, "It is time for these settlements to stop."²² These statements, all within a week, were the strongest and clearest condemnation of settlements in the Obama administration. As with previous administrations, the Obama administration would fail to couple serious action with its strong rhetoric.

President Obama continued to push for a settlement freeze throughout the summer and into the fall, but was out-manuevered by Prime Minister Netanyahu. The Israelis alleged that the Bush administration had reached an agreement with Israel in 2003 over the definition of a "settlement freeze." According to the Israelis, the Bush administration had agreed to additional settlement construction within existing Israeli settlements, as long as no new land was acquired for settlements. Most significantly, the Israelis argued that they "agreed to the road map and [moving] ahead with the removal of settlements and soldiers from Gaza in 2005 on the understanding that settlement growth could continue" elsewhere. The Bush administration described the Israeli position as an "overstatement," but this disagreement only increased the tensions between Obama and Netanyahu.²³

The Israeli government responded by distinguishing between types of settlements and settlement growth. Prior to their meeting, Netanyahu spoke at Bar-Ilan University, arguing:

Many good people have told us that withdrawal from territories is the key to peace with the Palestinians. . . . The territorial question will be discussed as part of the final peace agreement. In the meantime, we have no intention of building new settlements or of expropriating additional land for existing settlements. But there is a need to enable the residents to live normal lives, to allow mothers and fathers to raise their children like families elsewhere. The settlers are neither the enemies of the people nor the enemies of peace. Rather, they are an integral part of our people, a principled, pioneering and Zionist public.²⁴

Netanyahu made clear that he would not allow a freeze in the natural growth of existing settlements. However, Netanyahu also implied his acceptance of a two-state solution to the conflict: "In my vision of peace, in this small land of ours, two

peoples live freely, side-by-side, in amity and mutual respect. Each will have its own flag, its own national anthem, its own government.”²⁵

Three days later, Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met to discuss the peace process. Lieberman argued that Israel had an understanding with the Bush 43 administration and explained, “[W]e cannot accept this vision about absolutely completely freezing . . . our settlements. I think that we must keep the natural growth.” Secretary Clinton responded by calling for a “stop to the settlements” and stating that there was no formal or informal agreement with the Bush 43 administration regarding “natural growth.”²⁶ The Obama White House ignored the calls for the “natural growth” of settlements, focusing instead on Netanyahu’s perceived willingness to achieve peace through the establishment of a Palestinian state.²⁷ Meanwhile, two days later, Obama’s special envoy, George Mitchell, repeated, “We believe there should be a stop to settlements.” However, he emphasized, “The important thing about the prime minister’s speech is that he . . . included in his objective a Palestinian state.”²⁸

From June to September, the administration continued the familiar pattern of previous administrations conducting negotiations with Israel to define Israel’s conditions for Palestinian statehood. Pressure from Congress was clearly having an impact on the administration’s course of action. In a letter to President Obama in May, 76 senators called for continued support for Israel, emphasizing that the United States “must take into account the risks [Israel] will face in any peace agreement.”²⁹ Additionally, a letter from members of the House of Representatives noted that the United States must serve as a “trusted mediator and devoted friend of Israel.”³⁰ Neither letter called on Israel to alter its policies as a means to foster peace.

“The Best I Can Get Is Restraint”

In September, American negotiators met with Palestinians to discuss moving the peace process forward. The Palestinians were clearly angry that the United States had excluded them from negotiations with Israel, arguing that this undermined any negotiation proposal. Moreover, American negotiator David Hale acknowledged that there would be “less than [a] 100% freeze” on Israeli settlements, despite defining a freeze as an “end to all settlement activity.” Hale proceeded to pressure the Palestinians to resume negotiations, arguing, “If there is no meeting, there will be no freeze. . . . No one will get what they want. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat urged Hale to “Give me something . . . to save face! . . . [W]hy would we negotiate’67 or Jerusalem? . . . To allow us to help you, you need to help us.” Erekat added, “For your information [Netanyahu’s exclusions] will mean more settlement construction in 2009 than in 2008. This is the biggest game of deceit since 67.”³¹

The next day, Hale attempted to convince Erekat to accept the Israeli restraints on settlements rather than a complete freeze, stating, “Construction will stop—all new activities. . . . I know we wanted more but there are political constraints. Restraint on settlements is better than unrestricted growth everywhere.” Dennis

Ross added, "The package includes no new tenders, no new confiscation." Erekat responded, "I'm not coming from Mars! 40% of the West Bank is already confiscated. They can keep building for years without new tenders!"³² As with previous administrations, the Obama administration was backing off its commitment to a complete settlement freeze; instead, it was willing to accept a partial freeze to avoid further disagreements with Israel. Furthermore, the settlement freeze would not include East Jerusalem, where thousands of new tenders for settlements were issued. Ultimately, Obama's inability to secure a complete settlement freeze damaged his credibility with the Palestinian leadership.

George Mitchell's meeting with Erekat in October demonstrated even further movement away from a complete settlement freeze. Erekat and other Palestinian negotiators stressed the significance of the Jerusalem exemption, explaining that this was "more harmful than not reaching any deal." Mitchell basically brushed the argument aside, arguing, "[Y]ou have to deal with the world as it is, not as you would like it—for that reason the best [I] can get is 'restraint'." Mitchell suggested that he would have "more leverage" with the Israelis in negotiations, applying pressure to the Palestinians to accept the situation and resume negotiations; he added, settlement construction in Jerusalem would continue "in the absence of negotiations."³³ Like its predecessors, the Obama administration was accommodating and accepting the Israeli position on settlements; this is not surprising, since Obama and his team were pragmatists, and did not want continued tensions with their Israeli ally. The administration had tried and failed to get the Israelis to accept a complete settlement freeze. Instead, they decided that it was up to the Palestinians to compromise and accept Israeli "restraint." This was far from Obama's initial declaration that settlement activity must stop.

On October 2, Erekat and Mitchell met again. Erekat told Mitchell, "The Israelis always exploit our weakness. . . . We have to agree to these terms . . . while Israel does not implement anything and gets away with it. . . . Israel exploits vagueness." Meanwhile, Mitchell continued to press the Palestinians to negotiate, arguing, "No negotiation is not in your interest." Most significantly, Erekat and Mitchell argued about a settlement freeze. Erekat accused the administration of backing away from a complete settlement freeze and, like previous administrations, failing to live up to its word. Mitchell tried to convince Erekat that Obama was "different."³⁴ Yet the Obama administration continued to give the sense that negotiations were moving backward. By late October, Erekat told the administration that they had lost the momentum in the peace process, and that Netanyahu had taken advantage of them.³⁵ It was also clear that the administration was inching even closer to the Israeli position.

In a meeting with Secretary of State Clinton in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Netanyahu told reporters:

I said we would not build new settlements, not expropriate land for addition for the existing settlements, and that we were prepared to adopt a policy of restraint on the existing settlements, but also one that would still enable normal life for the residents who are living there.

Clinton supported for this position, arguing:

What the prime minister is saying is historically accurate. There has never been a precondition. It's always been an issue within the negotiations. What the prime minister has offered in specifics of a restraint on the policy of settlements, which he has just described—no new starts, for example—is unprecedented in the context of the prior two negotiations. It's also the fact that for 40 years, presidents of both parties have questioned the legitimacy of settlements. But I think that where we are right now is to try to get into the negotiations. The prime minister will be able to present his government's proposal about what they are doing regarding settlements, which I think when fully explained will be seen as being not only unprecedented but in response to many of the concerns that have been expressed. There are always demands made in any negotiation that are not going to be fully realized. I mean, negotiation, by its very definition, is a process of trying to meet the other's needs while protecting your core interests. And on settlements, there's never been a precondition, there's never been such an offer from any Israeli government.³⁶

Not only had Clinton supported Netanyahu's position, but she specifically suggested that American policy now supported "restraint" rather than a settlement freeze. And, like previous administrations, the Obama administration was sending mixed signals, arguing that restraint was "unprecedented" but settlements were illegitimate. The administration had only emboldened Netanyahu and Israel.

Netanyahu Takes the Lead

On November 25, Netanyahu seized the advantage, offering a ten-month moratorium on settlement in the West Bank to "help launch meaningful negotiations." However, Netanyahu refused to curb settlement expansion in Jerusalem, and made clear that any "freeze" applied only to new settlement construction.³⁷ Thus, settlement expansion continued, and Netanyahu had no intention of stopping it. In March 2010, Vice President Joe Biden visited Israel and reiterated the American commitment to Israeli security. During Biden's visit, Israel announced the construction of 1,600 housing units in East Jerusalem.³⁸ However, the United States did little more than repeat the rhetoric of the illegitimacy of settlements; in fact, the Obama administration continued to rely on negotiations to reach a resolution to the challenge—negotiations that increasingly appeared unlikely.

The Obama administration also continued to back away further from demanding a settlement freeze. Two months earlier, in January 2010, Daniel Rubenstein told Palestinian negotiators, "There is unanimity that [a settlement freeze is] not feasible."³⁹ In essence, the administration had reverted to the American position prior to President Obama's inauguration. Instead of pressuring Israel and Netanyahu to commit to a settlement freeze, the administration was pressuring the Palestinian leadership to accept a letter of assurance that the United States continued to believe that settlements were illegitimate. President Obama also blamed

both sides for the failure. In an interview with Joe Klein, Obama suggested, “[W]e overestimated our ability to persuade” the Israelis and Palestinians. He also argued that he should not have raised expectations at the beginning of his presidency, but tempered that by stating, “[T]he Israelis, I think . . . showed a willingness to make some modifications to their policies.”⁴⁰ Like his predecessors, Obama lauded Israeli concessions, but did not share the same praise for the Palestinian leadership. Additionally, he did not back away from Secretary Clinton’s statement that Netanyahu’s “restraint” on settlements was unprecedented.

Following Biden’s March visit to Israel, Netanyahu came to the United States for the annual AIPAC conference. Obama and Netanyahu had a series of meetings at the White House, ending with Obama walking out of a meeting after failing to get Netanyahu to agree to halt settlement construction in Jerusalem.⁴¹ The congressional reaction to the rift was swift, criticizing President Obama for undermining American relations with Israel. Referring to Israel’s announcement of settlement expansion during the Biden visit, Congressman Eliot Engel, a Democrat from New York, declared:

The timing of that announcement was wrong, but I don’t think that we should blow the timing of that announcement out of proportion. We should not have a disproportionate response to Israel. . . . Last year, when there was public pressure being put on Israel not to expand settlements, there was no simultaneous public pressure being put on the Palestinians, and we saw that the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas just sat back, didn’t make any concessions, didn’t say that he would do anything positive to further peace talks, and just thought that the United States would wring concessions out of Israel.⁴²

Engel had suggested that the Palestinians failed to offer concessions while the Israelis were prepared to negotiate. Republican Senator John McCain, who had lost the 2008 presidential election to Obama, applied additional pressure, arguing, “[I]f we want the Israeli Government to act in a way that would be more in keeping with our objectives . . . it does not help them to have public disparagement.”⁴³ Senate Democrat Joe Lieberman concurred, adding:

[T]he American relationship with Israel is one of the strongest, most important, most steadfast bilateral alliances we have in the world because it is not based on temporal matters—that is, matters that come and go and politics or diplomacy—it is based on shared values, shared strategic interests in the world, and, unfortunately, now on the fact that we in the United States and the Israelis are also targets of the Islamist extremists, the terrorists who threaten the security of so much of the world. . . . I just want to say . . . the permits for this housing are in an area of Jerusalem that is today mostly Jewish. The Israeli Government has taken the position . . . that anybody ought to be able to buy property and build and live in any section of Jerusalem they choose to regardless of their religion or nationality or anything else. That is

a very American concept. . . . It is not a violation of the moratorium on new settlements.⁴⁴

Democratic Congressman Jerry Moran also weighed in, suggesting:

Israel has a history of making peace with its neighbors and is prepared to make peace now. But peace is a two-way street, and the Palestinians' commitment to that peace is in doubt. Rather than make demands upon Israel for concession after concession, President Obama should work closely and privately with Israel, recognizing our two Nations' long and trusted alliance.⁴⁵

One month later, Democratic Senator Ben Cardin scoffed:

We should not forget that it was the Palestinian's leaders who walked away from the negotiation table at Camp David in 2000. . . . Today, it is Israel who continues to acknowledge the necessary framework for any peace agreements. . . . President Obama must not place wrongful or unreasonable pressure on Israel or, worse, to put forward a proposal without Israel's consent.⁴⁶

Facing mounting congressional pressure, the Obama administration resumed talks with Israel and reemphasized its commitment to the peace process. In June, President Obama met with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and reaffirmed the American commitment to a two-state solution to the conflict. However, Obama's frustration was evident, as he described the peace process as a "dead end."⁴⁷ In contrast to his June meeting with Abbas, Obama's July meeting with Netanyahu was upbeat, signaling the administration's desire to move past the tensions in the relationship. President Obama stressed that his administration had "[constantly reaffirmed] the special relationship between the United States and Israel, that our commitment to Israel's security has been unwavering." Obama also emphasized that he "trusted" Netanyahu.⁴⁸ Obama did not mention Israeli settlements, and Netanyahu's "moratorium" on settlement construction had no demonstrable effect. In May, Israeli minister of construction Yisrael Katz confirmed that "thousands of units" were being built in the West Bank, and that Israel planned additional construction in the fall.⁴⁹

From ABB to More Like Bush

On September 26, Israel's ten-month moratorium on settlement expansion in the West Bank ended. The Obama administration now returned to the Bush 43 administration's policy of providing security incentives to coax Israel into concessions. In exchange for unilateral security guarantees, including a long-term Israeli security presence in the Jordan Valley, the administration pushed for a limited and undetermined continuation of the moratorium on settlement construction in the West Bank. Most significant, reports suggested that the administration would "drop requests that Israel suspend settlement construction" if

negotiations failed to produce an agreement on borders by February 2011.⁵⁰ The Obama administration's offer demonstrated just how far American policy had reversed. First, the administration was negotiating bilaterally with Israel; a similar American-Palestinian dialogue failed to materialize. This gave Israel an enormous advantage in any negotiations. Second, and most important, Obama was willing to drop his public calls for a settlement freeze in exchange for limited Israeli concessions.

Obama's offer, however, was preempted by the Arab League's endorsement of a Palestinian decision to suspend talks unless Israel agreed to a settlement freeze. Unable to convince Israel, the United States announced that the package is "not under discussion at this time."⁵¹ The administration was backing further away from the peace process, acknowledging the frustration and relying on the Israelis and Palestinians to resolve the core issues. In a speech at the Brookings Institution, Secretary of State Clinton stated:

I understand and indeed I share the deep frustrations of many of you in this room and across the region and the world. . . . [N]egotiations between the parties is the only path that will succeed in securing their respective aspirations; for the Israelis, security and recognition; for the Palestinians, an independent, viable sovereign state of their own. . . . There is no alternative other than reaching mutual agreement. . . . Now, it is no secret that the parties have a long way to go and that they have not yet made the difficult decisions that peace requires. . . . It is time to grapple with the core issues of the conflict on borders and security; settlements, water and refugees; and on Jerusalem itself.

Clinton proceeded to outline American policy, emphasizing negotiations between the parties as its main approach. On settlements, Clinton made clear that the United States "did not accept the legitimacy of continued settlement activity." However, she conceded to Israel's long-standing position, stating, "The fate of existing settlements is an issue that must be dealt with by the parties" in negotiations.⁵² The administration was no longer pursuing a settlement freeze but had returned to the standard American policy of previous administrations. While Clinton noted that settlements were "corrosive not only to peace efforts. . . , but to Israel's future,"⁵³ the administration would not impose a solution to the conflict. The Obama administration would no longer be a proactive actor in the dispute; on the contrary, the administration would adopt a reactive approach and shield Israel from international pressure.

This strategy became clear at the United Nations Security Council in February 2011. In its first, and only veto, the Obama administration opposed a draft resolution condemning Israeli settlements, describing the settlements as "illegal," and demanding that "Israel, the occupying Power, immediately and completely ceases all settlement activities."⁵⁴ The United Nations would try to achieve what the Obama administration had failed to achieve, a complete settlement freeze. On the eve of the vote on the draft resolution, President Obama called Palestinian leader

Mahmoud Abbas, pressuring him to withdraw the resolution, arguing, “it’s better for you and for us and for our relations.” According to Abbas, Obama also warned that there would be serious consequences if the draft resolution proceeded.⁵⁵ The next day, the Obama administration used its veto. While acknowledging continued American opposition to settlement activity, United States ambassador Susan Rice argued:

[T]he only way to reach [a two-State solution] is through direct negotiations between the parties, with the active and sustained support of the United States and the international community. It is the Israelis’ and Palestinians’ conflict, and even the best-intentioned outsiders cannot resolve it for them. . . . [T]his draft resolution risks hardening the positions of both sides. . . . While we agree with our fellow Council members—and indeed with the wider world—about the folly and illegitimacy of continued Israeli settlement activity, we think it unwise for this Council to attempt to resolve the core issues that divide Israelis and Palestinians.⁵⁶

And with that, the Obama administration’s push for a settlement freeze reverted to standard American policy; the United States would not impose a solution on Israel and the Palestinians. As a result, settlement construction and expansion would continue.

With its veto, the Obama administration emulated its predecessors. The administration’s veto signaled the end of the administration’s concerted efforts in the peace process. On May 20, 2011, George Mitchell resigned his post as Special Envoy, highlighting the administration’s failure.⁵⁷ On the day before Mitchell’s departure, President Obama spoke at the State Department. The speech mainly focused on the events of the Arab Spring, but Obama concluded with a discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His remarks not only repeated the typical policies of previous administrations, but they also indicated that his administration would no longer seek a comprehensive peace settlement.

For over 2 years, my administration has worked with the parties and the international community to end this conflict, building on decades of work by previous administrations. Yet expectations have gone unmet. Israeli settlement activity continues. Palestinians have walked away from talks. . . . Now, ultimately, it is up to the Israelis and Palestinians to take action. No peace can be imposed upon them. . . . [W]hile the core issues of the conflict must be negotiated, the basis of those negotiations is clear: a viable Palestine, a secure Israel. . . . These principles provide a foundation for negotiations. . . . I’m aware that these steps alone will not resolve the conflict, because two wrenching and emotional issues will remain: the future of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees.⁵⁸

Additionally, Obama argued that pre-1967 borders, with “mutually agreed swaps” should be the basis for agreement.⁵⁹

Israeli prime minister Netanyahu's response was immediate. On his way to the United States, Netanyahu demanded that Obama "reaffirm" the commitments made by Bush 43 in 2004.⁶⁰ Specifically, Bush had told Netanyahu that "it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949."⁶¹ In essence, Bush negated pre-1967 borders as the basis for a peace agreement. Moreover, Netanyahu had told the Knesset that "we must maintain the settlement blocs. There is widespread agreement that the settlement blocs must remain within the State of Israel."⁶² The United States and Israel were, once again, on a collision course. Following his meeting with Obama at the White House, Netanyahu publicly admonished Obama.

[W]hile Israel is prepared to make generous compromises for peace, it cannot go back to the 1967 lines, because these lines are indefensible, because they don't take into account certain changes that have taken place on the ground, demographic changes that have taken place over the last 44 years. . . . [W]e can't go back to those indefensible lines, and we're going to have to have a long-term military presence along the Jordan.⁶³

While Obama was angry and believed his office had been insulted,⁶⁴ he relented. At the AIPAC conference, Obama declared:

[S]ince my position has been misrepresented several times, let me reaffirm what "1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps" means. . . . [I]t means that the parties themselves—Israelis and Palestinians—will negotiate a border that is different than the one that existed on June 4, 1967. That's what mutually agreed-upon swaps means.⁶⁵

Netanyahu continued the pressure, seizing upon the moment, and on May 24, before a joint session of Congress, he stated:

This compromise must reflect the dramatic demographic changes that have occurred since 1967. The vast majority of the 650,000 Israelis who live beyond the 1967 lines, reside in neighborhoods and suburbs of Jerusalem and Greater Tel Aviv. . . . Under any realistic peace agreement, these areas, as well as other places of critical strategic and national importance, will be incorporated into the final borders of Israel. The status of the settlements will be decided only in negotiations. . . . The precise delineation of those borders must be negotiated. We will be very generous on the size of a future Palestinian state. But as President Obama said, the border will be different than the one that existed on June 4, 1967. Israel will not return to the indefensible lines of 1967.⁶⁶

Abbas Pushes Back

In defiance of Israel and the United States, Palestinian leader Abbas pushed for recognition of Palestinian independence and statehood. Most notably, Abbas

announced, “[T]his September, at the United Nations General Assembly, we will request international recognition of the State of Palestine on the 1967 border and that our state be admitted as a full member of the United Nations.”⁶⁷ Throughout the summer, Palestinian leaders built their case. Congress reacted quickly. On June 28, 2011, the Senate passed Senate Resolution 185 by unanimous consent without debate. The resolution declared:

[E]fforts to form a unity government without accepting the Quartet conditions, to bypass negotiations and unilaterally declare a Palestinian state, or to appeal to the United Nations or other international forums or to foreign governments for recognition of a Palestinian state would violate the underlying principles of the Oslo Accords, the Road Map, and other relevant Middle East peace process efforts.

Additionally, it called on President Obama to “veto any resolution on Palestinian statehood that comes before the United Nations Security Council.”⁶⁸ A little more than one week later, on July 7, the House of Representatives passed House Resolution 268 by a vote of 407–6.⁶⁹ The House resolution urged the Palestinian leadership to “[C]ease all efforts at circumventing the negotiation process, including through a unilateral declaration of statehood or by seeking recognition of a Palestinian state from other nations or the United Nations.”⁷⁰

On July 11, the Quartet held a working dinner with Secretary of State Clinton. The meeting failed to produce results, confirming not only that the administration failed to resume peace talks, but that the administration was actively opposing Palestinian membership at the United Nations.⁷¹ In September, State Department Spokesperson Victoria Nuland told reporters:

It should not come as a shock . . . that the U.S. opposes a move in New York by the Palestinians to try to establish a state that can only be achieved through negotiations. . . . [I]f . . . something comes to a vote in the UN Security Council, the U.S. will veto.⁷²

Two days earlier, Nuland acknowledged American lobbying to prevent the Palestinian move, stating:

We have been absolutely clear publicly and privately . . . with all of the states that have traditionally worked actively on this dossier, but also now with states that could be confronted with a decision in the General Assembly, and making clear that we think that this is the wrong way to go and that it could potentially make getting back to the negotiating table harder.⁷³

Then, on September 21, President Obama addressed the General Assembly. While he acknowledged frustration with the failed peace process, he urged the United

Nations to continue to support negotiation between the parties and rejected Palestinian attempts to use the United Nations to achieve their goals.

One year ago, I stood at this podium, and I called for an independent Palestine. I believed then and I believe now that the Palestinian people deserve a state of their own. But what I also said is that a genuine peace can only be realized between the Israelis and the Palestinians themselves. One year later, despite extensive efforts by America and others, the parties have not bridged their differences. . . . I know that many are frustrated by the lack of progress. . . . I am convinced that there is no shortcut to the end of a conflict that has endured for decades. Peace is hard work. Peace will not come through statements and resolutions at the United Nations. If it were that easy, it would have been accomplished by now. Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians who must live side by side.⁷⁴

While Obama chided the Palestinians for their actions, he did not mention Israeli settlements or occupation. And, prior to a meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu on the same day, Obama argued, “[P]eace cannot be imposed on the parties. It’s going to have to be negotiated. One side’s actions in the United Nations will achieve neither statehood nor self-determination for the Palestinians.”⁷⁵

In contrast to their May meeting, Obama and Netanyahu stood arm-in-arm. Despite the damage to his credibility, Obama supported Israeli opposition to Palestinian membership at the United Nations. According to one commentator, the Obama administration was “going balls-out for Israel.” The administration had come to believe that “anything that poisons the prospects for peace . . . by emboldening the Palestinians and making the Israelis feel cornered” was unacceptable.⁷⁶ This indicated Obama’s retreat from sustained diplomatic engagement in the peace process. While the United States continued to quietly argue for a stop to settlement activity and a two-state solution, its public actions demonstrated just how far the administration would go to protect Israel. On October 31, 2011, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, voted to admit Palestine as a full member. The administration responded:

Today’s vote by the member states of UNESCO to admit Palestine as a member is regrettable, premature, and undermines our shared goal of a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in the Middle East. The United States remains steadfast in its support for the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state. But such a state can only be realized through direct negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The United States also remains strongly committed to robust multilateral engagement across the UN system. However, Palestinian membership as a state in UNESCO triggers longstanding legislative restrictions which will compel the United States to refrain from making contributions to UNESCO.⁷⁷

The Obama administration faced increasing challenges with Congress pressuring the administration to cut funding from any United Nations agency that admitted Palestine as a member. The administration was only saved from making a decision by the United Nations Committee on the Admission of New Members, which was unable to make a unanimous recommendation to the Security Council. Despite the administration having little to do with this outcome, it took credit for the results.

As President Obama entered an election year, the likelihood of a major breakthrough in the peace process or increased American pressure on Israel faded. Meanwhile, Israeli settlement expansion and construction continued. A September 2012 United Nations report argued, “[N]o tangible progress on the political track was made.”⁷⁸ The report also documented a slowdown in Palestinian economic growth, with high levels of poverty and unemployment, and food insecurity, “compounded by further settlement activity.”⁷⁹ It noted that settlement activity “continued apace” and settler violence remained a “serious concern.”⁸⁰ The Obama administration’s efforts to curtail settlement activity had failed. Worse still, the administration had lost interest in curtailing it.

Kerry Takes the Reigns

On February 13, 2013, John Kerry became the sixty-eighth Secretary of State. Kerry revived American interest in the peace process with Obama’s reluctant support.⁸¹ Kerry was given wide latitude, providing Obama the opportunity to distance himself from further failure. Meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu in May, Kerry declared:

There have been bitter years of disappointment. It is our hope that by being methodical, careful, patient—but detailed and tenacious—that we can lay out a path ahead that could conceivably surprise people, but certainly exhaust the possibilities of peace.⁸²

Yet Israeli settlement activity continued at a rapid pace. In an exchange with a reporter about incentives and consequences to curb Israeli settlement construction and expansion, State Department Spokesperson Jen Psaki replied:

The Secretary has expressed his concern. . . . We don’t accept the legitimacy of continued settlement activity. [W]e encourage both sides to act in a way that will provide for a path to peace. . . . [O]ur focus right now is not on consequences as much as working with both sides to try to move them back to the table.⁸³

Psaki made clear that there would be no consequences for continued Israeli settlement activities.

Throughout the summer, Secretary of State Kerry pushed hard to get the parties back to the negotiating table. In July, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met to discuss timetables for negotiations, settlements, and possible land swaps. Kerry

suggested that “Israel will retain 85% of the settlement blocs in a future peace deal.”⁸⁴ Once again, the United States was accommodating to Israeli interests. Two weeks later, Psaki told reporters that American policy toward settlement activity had not changed. Arguing that the United States opposes “any unilateral actions by either party,” Psaki refused to declare Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem illegitimate. Additionally, while Psaki expressed “concerns about ongoing settlement activity,” she stressed negotiations between the parties on “the question of borders.”⁸⁵ Once again, the Obama administration had moved away from pressuring the Israelis on settlements and, like its predecessors, acquiesced to the Israeli position that the legitimacy of settlements would ultimately be determined through negotiations.

As 2013 came to an end, it was increasingly clear that Kerry’s efforts to broker peace were unlikely to succeed. Kerry not only faced obstacles from the Israelis and Palestinians, but also from National Security Advisor Susan Rice. According to Dennis Ross, Rice told the Israelis that Kerry’s approach was “imbalanced” against the Palestinians.⁸⁶ The tension between the State Department and the White House caused confusion and further deadlock. The American-Israeli relationship was, once again, facing formidable stress. Tensions were fueled by Israel’s increased settlement activity and American desire for a nuclear deal with Iran. According to Israeli finance minister Yair Lapid, there was a “crisis with the United States.”⁸⁷ At one point, a senior American official reportedly referred to Netanyahu as “chicken shit.”⁸⁸

Nevertheless, Kerry was determined to push negotiations forward. Most importantly, Kerry sought to cultivate his relationship with Netanyahu in an effort to get concessions from the Israelis. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met 25 times in the last six months of 2013.⁸⁹ In November, talks were suspended following a vast increase in settlement construction and expansion. Faced with failure, Kerry and his team pushed even harder to get a deal. In February 2014, the Americans offered a proposed framework for agreement. According to the framework, Israel would get recognition as the “nation-state of the Jewish people.” Most significantly, the document stated, “[T]he new secure and recognized international borders between Israel and Palestine will be negotiated based on the 1967 lines with mutually-agreed swaps whose size and location will be negotiated.” Netanyahu agreed to accept the 1967 borders as a basis for negotiations, but he insisted on avoiding any mention of “territorial contiguity.” The document also included no right of return for Palestinians. The document’s most controversial issue was the status of Jerusalem. Abbas was reportedly furious about the weak wording on Jerusalem, which essentially gave Israel full control.⁹⁰

The administration amended the document in an attempt to get Palestinian agreement. The amended document stated:

Once the needs of both sides are met on all the foregoing issues, the two-state solution will have to be expressed in the Agreement through mutual recognition and establishment of a state of peace between Palestine, the nation-state of the Palestinian people, and Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people.

This is without prejudice to the historical narratives of both sides, and with full equal rights for all and no discrimination against any of their citizens.⁹¹

Abbas did not accept the framework, frustrating the Obama administration's negotiations. Like Clinton administration officials, many now believed that the Palestinians were incapable of delivering a peace agreement. However, the most damning part of the entire negotiation process was Kerry's failure to secure any concessions on Israeli settlements.

According to a senior American official:

The negotiations had to start with a decision to freeze settlement construction. We thought that we couldn't achieve that because of the current makeup of the Israeli government, so we gave up. We didn't realize Netanyahu was using the announcements of tenders for settlement construction as a way to ensure the survival of his own government. We didn't realize continuing construction allowed ministers in his government to very effectively sabotage the success of the talks. There are a lot of reasons for the peace effort's failure, but people in Israel shouldn't ignore the bitter truth—the primary sabotage came from the settlements.⁹²

The administration had “given up” on the idea of a settlement freeze. With Netanyahu's refusal to pursue a freeze, the United States simply chose to ignore the issue. The Obama administration had acquiesced to Israeli settlement activity; most notably, they claimed that “after talks blew up. . . [we learned] that this is also about expropriating land on a large scale.”⁹³ This is difficult to understand, since this had clearly been the Israeli policy since 1967. It was equally disturbing that American officials were “surprised” by Netanyahu's negotiation tactics. The tensions in the relationship had been clear from the start of the Obama administration, and the difficulty of extracting concessions from Netanyahu was hardly surprising. What was surprising was the administration's willingness to accommodate and acquiesce to those positions, despite Obama's initially strong stance against settlements.

Netanyahu acknowledged the collapse of the talks by declaring that he would not allow the creation of a Palestinian state. Moreover, he pledged to “continue to build in Jerusalem, we will add thousands of housing units, and in the face of all the (international) pressure, we will persist and continue to develop our eternal capital.”⁹⁴ President Obama was equally blunt, arguing:

[T]he issue is a very clear, substantive challenge. We believe that two states is the best path forward for Israel's security, for Palestinian aspirations, and for regional stability. . . . And Prime Minister Netanyahu has a different approach. And so this can't be reduced to a matter of somehow let's all hold hands and sing “Kumbaya.” This is a matter of figuring out, how do we get through a real knotty policy difference that has great consequences for both countries and for the region?⁹⁵

Obama added that he would reevaluate the peace process following elections in Israel, and hinted that he might consider supporting United Nations action.

Obama's Last Stand

In 2016, the Obama administration would have its opportunity at the United Nations. But first, the administration would conclude a ten-year agreement providing Israel with \$38 billion in military aid. The administration touted the deal as “unprecedented,” a “reflection of President Obama’s unshakeable commitment to Israel’s security,” and “the largest single pledge of military assistance in U.S. history.”⁹⁶ Three months later, on December 23, 2016, the administration abstained from United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334, condemning Israel settlement activity as a “flagrant violation” of international law, and stressing a “cessation of all Israeli settlement activities,” allowing the resolution to pass by a vote of fourteen in favor.⁹⁷ The administration had faced considerable pressure to veto the resolution. United States Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power explained the administration’s abstention.

Today the Security Council reaffirmed its established consensus that settlements have no legal validity. The United States has been sending the message that the settlements must stop privately and publicly for nearly five decades. . . . Indeed, since 1967, the only President who had not had at least one Israeli-Palestinian-related resolution adopted during his tenure is Barack Obama. . . . But in reality this vote was not straightforward for us. . . . For the simple truth is that for as long as Israel has been a member of this institution, it has been treated differently from other nations at the United Nations.⁹⁸

Power’s statement reflected the mixed signals of decades of American foreign policy. The Obama administration would not vote to condemn Israel, despite its strong stance against settlements in 2009. Instead, it would allow a vote to condemn Israel to pass. Yet, at the same time, the administration would protect and defend Israeli security, giving Israel a clear military advantage with the \$38 billion aid package. Thus, the American abstention was a hollow victory.

Secretary of State Kerry described the vote as preserving “the possibility of the two state solution.”⁹⁹ However, the failure of the Obama administration to apply significant pressure to Israel enhanced the prospects for Israeli expansion, and, therefore, a one-state solution. Like his predecessors, Obama shielded the Israelis from any real consequences. His presidency was strong on rhetoric and weak on action when it came to dealing with the problem of Israeli settlement construction and expansion. By the end of his administration, settlements had expanded significantly. In 2009, there were a little over 300,000 settlers living in 121 Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and almost 200,000 settlers living in 12 settlements in East Jerusalem.¹⁰⁰ At the end of 2016, settlers in the West Bank neared 400,000, with nine new settlements added during the Obama administration. East Jerusalem did not see a surge in the number of settlers, but this meant that there were

now 600,000 settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem alone.¹⁰¹ The Trump administration would only make things worse.

Notes

- 1 "Remarks Following a Meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and an Exchange with Reporters, May 18, 2009," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Barack Obama*, Book I—January 20 to June 30, 2009 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2010), 670, accessed October 4, 2021, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-2009-book1/pdf/PPP-2009-book1-docpg666.pdf>.
- 2 See Griff Witte, "Israeli Settlements Grew on Obama's Watch. They May Be Poised for a Boom on Trump's," *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2017, accessed August 15, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israeli-settlements-grew-on-obamas-watch-they-may-be-poised-for-a-boom-on-trumps/2017/01/02/24feca6c-d23-11e6-85cd-e66532e35a44_story.html.
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- 4 "Clinton: Obama 'Irresponsible' and 'Naïve'," *CBS News*, July 24, 2007, accessed August 26, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/clinton-obama-irresponsible-and-naive/>.
- 5 "Transcript: Obama's Speech Against the Iraq War," *NPR*, January 20, 2009, accessed August 26, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99591469>.
- 6 Donilon quoted in James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (New York: Viking, 2012), 342.
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9 Settled

While we don't believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal.

—Sean Spicer, White House Press Secretary¹

The election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States took American policy toward Israeli settlements from bad to worse. The mixed signals, acquiesce, and accommodation of Israeli settlement activities by previous administrations turned to outright support in the Trump administration. On February 15, 2017, President Trump held his first official meeting with a foreign leader, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Trump declared, “I’m looking at two-state and one-state [solutions]. . . . I can live with either one.”² By doing so, Trump rejected previous American policy rhetorically insisting on the creation of a Palestinian state. However, Trump essentially said out-loud what decades of American acquiescence and accommodation of Israeli policies had created; the likelihood of a Palestinian state diminished significantly the farther the world got from 1967. At this meeting, Trump also asked Netanyahu to “hold back on settlements for a little bit.”³ According to *The Guardian*, “Netanyahu . . . could barely contain his pleasure.”⁴ In essence, Trump’s asking Netanyahu to “hold back” momentarily on settlements would potentially lead to a one-state solution, an Israeli solution, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At best, the Trump administration adopted a lackadaisical approach to Israeli settlements, arguing “[W]e don’t believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace.”⁵ Much of this can be attributed to Trump’s Middle East peace team, which included Jared Kushner, Jason Greenblatt, and Ambassador David Friedman. All three were pro-Israel, and Kushner and Friedman were most definitely pro-settlement. Kushner was reported to have substantial ties to the Israeli settler movement.⁶ As noted in the introduction, Friedman openly advocated for Israeli settlers and settlements, and in December 2017, he pressed the Department of State to stop using the term “occupied” to describe Israel’s presence in Judea and Samaria, the Israeli terms for the West Bank.⁷ While the State Department rejected his request and emphasized its continued focus on a comprehensive peace

process, it revealed Friedman's view that the West Bank was not separate from Israel. Trump followed suit, declining to back any mention of a Palestinian state until September 2018; even then, it was hardly a wholehearted endorsement since he only suggested that a "two-state solution works best."⁸

Making matters worse, in December 2017, Trump announced that the United States would officially recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the American Embassy to the city. In a statement, Trump argued:

I've judged this course of action to be in the best interests of the United States of America and the pursuit of peace between Israel and the Palestinians. This is a long-overdue step to advance the peace process and to work towards a lasting agreement. . . . [T]oday, we finally acknowledge the obvious: that Jerusalem is Israel's capital. This is nothing more, or less, than a recognition of reality.⁹

Trump went further, suggesting that this action would not detract from the peace process, but would actually enhance it. On January 2, 2018, Trump tweeted, "We have taken Jerusalem, the toughest part of the negotiation, off the table."¹⁰ December also saw the Trump administration issue a veto at the United Nations Security Council on an Egyptian draft resolution. The resolution stressed, "Jerusalem is a final status issue to be resolved through negotiations," and demanded, "all States comply with Security Council resolutions regarding the Holy City of Jerusalem, and not to recognize any actions or measures contrary to those resolutions."¹¹ United States Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley argued:

The fact that this veto has been exercised in [defense] of American sovereignty and in [defense] of America's role in the Middle East peace process is not a source of embarrassment for us. It should be an embarrassment to the remainder of the Security Council. . . . What is troubling to some people is not that the United States has harmed the peace process. We have, in fact, done no such thing. Rather, what is troubling to some people is that the United States had the courage and honesty to recognize a fundamental reality. Jerusalem has been the political, cultural and spiritual homeland of the Jewish people for thousands of years. They have had no other capital city, but the United States recognition of the obvious—that Jerusalem is the capital and seat of the modern Israeli Government—is too much for some.¹²

Not surprisingly, while Israeli officials lauded the Trump administration's decision on Jerusalem, Palestinian leaders expressed anger and frustration. Following Trump's announcement, Palestinian officials announced a boycott of the peace process.¹³ The administration ignored the Palestinians, pushing ahead with its peace initiative and hoping Arab allies would pressure Mahmoud Abbas to negotiate. When Abbas failed to comply, the administration retaliated, cutting all American assistance to the United Nations Relief Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), the agency responsible for providing services to 5 million

Palestinians. Additionally, the administration announced that it would withdraw \$200 million from the United States Agency for International Development programs supporting Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.¹⁴

Trump's support of Israel and punishment of Palestinians did not end there. Settlement expansion and construction increased significantly during the Trump administration. The West Bank settler population was over 475,000 in January 2021. While Israel's population grew only 8% during the four years of the Trump administration, the settler population grew nearly 13%. And, in 2020, Israel approved the construction of over 12,000 new units, the largest number of units approved since 2012.¹⁵ On November 18, 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered remarks on Israeli settlements. He began those remarks suggesting that "the Trump administration is reversing the Obama administration's approach towards Israeli settlements."¹⁶ However, this was a significant exaggeration, since the administration's approach was simply the culmination of years of American foreign policy.

Despite the rhetoric decrying Israeli settlements as obstacles to peace, Clinton and Bush 43 carved out major exemptions for continued settlement expansion and construction in East Jerusalem, and large settlement blocs in the West Bank. And, in spite of all its denunciation of settlements, the Obama administration provided a large aid package to Israel and essentially gave up on trying to curb Israeli settlement activity. Furthermore, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford did little to curb Israeli settlement expansion and construction, and sent contradictory messages about the American position on settlements. Additionally, while Carter declared settlements illegal, he failed to seriously pressure Israel to cease its activities. Reagan then reversed Carter's denunciation of settlements, with Bush 41 illustrating, once again, that the United States was strong on rhetoric and weak on action. The Trump administration agreed with Reagan, noting, "After carefully studying all sides of the legal debate. . . [the] establishment of Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank is not . . . inconsistent with international law."¹⁷ In doing so, the Trump administration was much more consistent with American policy than many presumed.

Most administrations since 1967 avoided saying anything about the legality or illegality of Israeli settlements. However, the action of these administrations consistently allowed the growth of settlements with little consequence for Israel and Israeli policymakers. Even when presidential administrations took a strong rhetorical position on settlement expansion and construction, like Carter, Bush 41, and Obama, little changed. Since 1967, Israel learned that they could withstand American condemnations of settlements because those condemnations lacked teeth. In most cases, presidents downplayed their public scolding of Israel, instead privately scolding their counterparts. These contradictory messages only made it more difficult for the United States to hold Israel accountable. Too often, presidents succumbed to personal, domestic, and other pressures, allowing Israel to continue its activities unabated.

American foreign policy has an almost rhythmic consistency about it. Despite new presidents' claims of monumental changes, change is rare. For all the

pronouncements of President Joe Biden's differences with Trump, his foreign policy toward Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a lot more of the same. Biden did restore assistance to Palestinians through the UNRWA. However, the initial aid was significantly lower than it had been prior to Trump's elimination of the American contribution. In 2017, aid to the UNRWA was nearly \$360 million. And, the Obama administration increased aid significantly, from \$268 million in 2009.¹⁸ Biden's aid package fell below 2009 levels, at \$235 million.¹⁹ Pressure throughout the year led Secretary of State Antony Blinken to announce an increase of aid to previous levels.²⁰ However, the Biden administration has not reversed Trump's relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem nor its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and the administration has not hinted that this will change.

In fact, the Biden administration has demonstrated little interest in the Middle East outside of the Iranian nuclear challenge. The administration has not prioritized the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the peace process. Moreover, while the administration has emphasized that a two-state solution is the only way to resolve the conflict, they have failed to provide a detailed plan of action. Biden's first speech as president at the United Nations barely mentioned the conflict.²¹ What is particularly concerning is that Biden is the first president in the twenty-first century not to outline a plan for resolving the conflict.

At the same time, the Biden administration has shown signs that it wants to end the Palestinian isolation fostered by the Trump administration. The Trump administration closed the American consulate in Jerusalem, the primary American mission to the Palestinians. Secretary of State Blinken has announced that the United States will reopen that consulate.²² The Biden administration also applied pressure to Israel to agree to a ceasefire with Hamas, following violence between the two in the Gaza Strip.²³ This was in stark contrast to the Trump administration's willingness to give Israel free reign against Hamas.²⁴ Yet President Biden took great pains to emphasize that this was not an abandonment of Israel: "The United States fully supports Israel's right to defend itself against indiscriminate rocket attacks from Hamas and other Gaza-based terrorist groups that have taken the lives of innocent civilians in Israel."²⁵ Blinken also cautioned Israelis and Palestinians not to take steps that "ultimately undermine the prospect for returning to the pursuit of two states," including settlement activity.²⁶

Nevertheless, all of this fit the familiar pattern of mixed signals. Blinken framed his public statement much like other administrations had done. With the exclusion of President Carter, administrations have refrained from referring to settlements as illegal; Blinken did as well. Instead, like previous administrations, the Biden administration has fallen back on familiar phrasing, describing settlements as "undermining" the peace process, "obstacles to peace," or "ill-advised." While this certainly backs away from the Trump administration's argument that Israel would not have to dismantle a single settlement and could extend its sovereignty to the settlements, it once again, fails to employ any real consequences for continued Israeli settlement activity. During his presidential campaign, Biden openly opposed Israeli moves to annex territory.²⁷ Yet the Biden administration

has been a strong advocate of Israeli security and mostly silent on the West Bank and Jerusalem.

In an interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, Blinken, once again, described the administration's policy as "do no harm." Blinken repeated what other administrations have said, notably that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians should take unilateral actions that might damage the prospects for peace, but also announced that the United States would keep the American Embassy in Jerusalem and agreed that Jerusalem is Israel's capital. Most interesting was Blinken's acknowledgment that "the control of Golan . . . remains of real importance to Israel's security. Legal questions are something else."²⁸ Essentially, the administration's silence on the "legal questions" and emphasis on Israeli security signals American accommodation to Israel's position regarding control of the West Bank and Jerusalem.

It appears that the Biden administration has decided that the peace process is a losing issue. With other priorities, including the COVID pandemic, the administration has chosen to focus on the humanitarian needs of the Palestinians, and reducing any immediate tensions between Israelis and Palestinians that may escalate into a wider conflict. The administration has chosen a reactive rather than proactive approach to the conflict. By doing so, the administration has ceded direction and control of the peace process to the stakeholders in the region, meaning that Israel maintains a decisive advantage. The Biden approach, thus far, is cautious. The administration has failed to clarify its positions on the conflict, particularly its position on settlements, Jerusalem, and Israeli control of the West Bank. While the administration considered appointing an envoy for the Middle East, it has not yet done so, again suggesting its reluctance to engage in the peace process.²⁹

In June 2021, 73 congressional Democrats pressed the administration on the issue. Welcoming the "initial release" of aid to the Palestinians, the representatives encouraged the administration to oppose "possible unilateral annexation of territory." Additionally, the letter asked the administration to

[m]ake clear that the United States considers settlements to be inconsistent with international law. . . [s]trongly oppose the forces expulsion via eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in East Jerusalem and throughout the Palestinian territory; [and] [e]nsure that all relevant official U.S. documents and communications once again consistently refer to the status of the West Bank and Gaza Strip as occupied.³⁰

Consistent with a pattern, the administration said very little. Instead, the administration preferred to use private pressure with the Israelis. Its public comments have aimed to foster Biden's image as a supporter of Israel. Overall, Biden has maintained the traditional American policy of reaffirming a commitment to Israel, regardless of Israeli actions toward Palestinians.

Like its predecessors, the Biden administration has refused to directly criticize or condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank or Jerusalem. When asked whether the United States considered Israeli settlements in the occupied territories

to be illegal, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price avoided the question, arguing, “We . . . continue to encourage all sides to avoid actions . . . that would put the two-state solution further out of reach.”³¹ Price reiterated his remarks the following day, emphasizing, “We believe when it comes to settlement activity that Israel should refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tensions and that undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution.”³² And, in November 2021, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield repeated these arguments in her meeting with Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz. Thomas-Greenfield repeated the standard American argument that Israel should avoid “unilateral actions that undermine the prospects of a two state-solution such as settlement activity and home evictions.” She also affirmed the American commitment to Israeli security vowing to replenish Israel’s Iron Dome missile defense system.³³

Where does this leave the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israeli settlement activity today? Since the 1967 war, the United States has done little to curb Israeli settlement activity. Israeli leaders have not given signs that settlement expansion and construction will stop in Jerusalem or the West Bank, in particular. The United States has paid lip-service to the idea of a two-state solution. In reality, American mixed signals regarding, accommodation of, and acquiescence to Israeli policies have ultimately helped Israel settle the conflict by achieving a one-state solution. Since 1967, American policymakers have determined that the status quo, Israeli dominance and control, is preferable to the alternative. Presidents have tolerated Israeli policies and acquiesced to Israeli settlement activities. As a result, the United States is no longer a credible leader in the peace process. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essentially “settled,” and future American presidents are unlikely to change course.

Notes

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