

Israel and the U.S.

by Seth Anziska



U.S. President Barack Obama shakes hands with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during their press conference in Jerusalem, part of Obama's official state visit to Israel and the Palestinian Territories in March 2013. (KOBİ GIDEON/GPO/FLASH90/REDUX)

The depth of emotion that surrounds public and private conversations about the relationship between Israel and the U.S. can be staggering. From college campuses to church groups, think tanks to synagogues, and op-ed pages to congressional hearings, few issues are as contentious as America's relationship with the State of Israel.

Supporters of Israel in the U.S. stress shared values and a friendship that is crucial for securing U.S. interests in the Middle East. Despite the turmoil of the Arab Spring and the instability that increasingly marks U.S. relations with longstanding allies like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, backers of a strong U.S.-Israel partnership highlight the benefits of maintaining close ties and continuing to provide extensive economic and military aid to Israel.

For critics of the U.S.-Israel relationship, it is this close friendship that has fueled hostility toward the U.S. in the Arab world. Critics point to the lack of even-handedness that characterizes U.S.-Israeli relations, citing Washington's acquiescence to settlement expansion in the West Bank, the lack of movement in the peace talks with the Palestinian Authority, and strategic differences over relations with Iran and regional allies.

Why is it so difficult to openly debate these matters? For many, Israel's place in the U.S. is not simply a question of how to best secure foreign policy goals in the Middle East. For domestic supporters of Israel—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—the country's fate and America's role in protecting its future raises an existential question of national survival. To question support for Israel or its foreign policy is perceived by some as casting doubt on the broader trajectory of political Zionism and Israel's right to exist. Conversely, domestic defenders of Palestinian rights—whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish—feel that valid concerns about the roots of the Palestinian refugee problem, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip after 1967, and Israel's treatment of its

SETH ANZISKA is a doctoral candidate in international history at Columbia University, focusing on Israeli and Palestinian history, U.S.-Middle East relations and modern Jewish politics. A recipient of the Boren, FLAS and Wexner Fellowships, he has written for *The New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Ha'aretz* and is currently completing his dissertation, *Camp David's Shadow: The United States, Lebanon and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1977–88*.

non-Jewish citizens are overlooked in the mainstream media and political discourse. Vocalizing this unease, by raising genuine concern about the fate of Palestinian rights or Israel's viability as a self-defined "Jewish and Democratic state," is often portrayed as exhibiting an anti-Jewish prejudice, a dangerous conflation of criticism toward Israel's domestic and foreign policy agenda with anti-Semitism. In light of the passion and polemics such debate engenders, how can a more constructive conversation take place?

No matter one's take on U.S.-Israeli relations, it is clear that the nature of this relationship and its future prospects

will continue to be a central concern for policymakers and citizens in the coming years. There is a need to think historically about how the U.S.-Israel relationship has developed, and its attendant complexities over the last six and a half decades. The course of this relationship has never been a clear-cut tale of abiding friendship or persistent antagonism; there has always been a fair amount of both. In revisiting this history, it is helpful to examine Israel's recurring Palestinian question, which remains at the heart of regional conflicts and related policy debates. Israel's own strategic position in the Middle East requires attention as well, particularly in light of the way in

which revolutions and counterrevolutions in the Arab world have transformed the region.

Where are U.S.-Israeli relations heading? What are the challenges these two countries are facing, and how can the recent past offer guidance on the choices that lie ahead? No one could argue that these decisions are clear-cut. Perhaps identifying the origins and milestones that have characterized Israeli-American relations since Israel's establishment in 1948 can delineate a tenable path forward. There is too much at stake—for the U.S., Israel, Palestine and the greater Middle East—to ignore the difficult questions along the way. ■

Historical backdrop

In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. assumed a position of prominence in the Middle East, filling the vacuum left by departing colonial powers. The guiding motivation behind U.S. involvement in the region after 1945 shifted from the rhetoric defending self-determination, which characterized President Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points, to a more strategic interest in securing access to oil resources and containing the U.S.S.R. Yet ideological support for Zionism, a modern national movement seeking the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, could be found in the White House and Congress. It came into conflict with more pragmatic attitudes in the departments of State and Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). President Harry S. Truman, much to the consternation of some of his advisers, was the first foreign leader to recognize the newly created state of Israel in 1948.

Over 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from territories that became Israel in the course of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (an event Palestinians describe as the *nakba*, or "catastrophe"). American policymakers focused exclusively on the humanitarian needs of these refugees rather than the political dimension of their dispossession. This approach was reflected in the ex-

tensive support for the refugee resettlement work of the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA). It also shaped the course of American relations with Israel and the Palestinians in the ensuing decades, as the burgeoning refugee population in the neighboring Arab states of Lebanon, Jordan and Syria grappled with the consequences of prolonged statelessness.

U.S. support for Israel was not inevitable or historically consistent in the early years of Israel's existence. Rather, it only took on its "special" characteristics later on. In the wake of 1948, for example, the U.S. generally displayed an even-handed stance toward Israel and the Arab world as part of a broader Cold War containment strategy. During the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, this approach dovetailed with the Eisenhower Doctrine, a strategy aimed at wresting individual Arab countries away from the U.S.S.R.

Eisenhower's approach to the Middle East culminated with his forceful opposition to the British, French and Israeli action during the Suez Crisis of 1956. The president's critical stance was a result of persistent concerns that Israeli actions were undermining U.S. interests in the Middle East. The U.S. threatened to impose economic sanctions against Israel, even threatening to expel the

country from the United Nations (UN) and disassociate from it politically. An explicit alliance with Israel was viewed as undermining relations with Arab states. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles noted, "backing Israel might be very costly to vital United States national interests." Although Eisenhower forced Israel to withdraw from the Sinai during the Suez campaign, he also acknowledged the legitimacy of Israeli security concerns.

John F. Kennedy's ascendancy to the White House heralded a shift in U.S. policy aims and methods toward the Middle East, with the new president taking bold steps to engage with adversaries like Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt in a bid to promote regional stability. Yet the shifting reality of the Cold War also pushed the U.S. much closer to Israel, and Kennedy began to treat the young country as a bulwark against growing Soviet interests in the Middle East. To this end, U.S. policymakers stressed shared values with the Jewish state and offered military and economic aid to assert regional influence. Kennedy, according to the scholar Yaakov Bar-Simon Tov "was the first president to define US-Israeli relations as special, to take seriously Israel's security problems, and to provide Israel with major defensive arms." As Warren

Bass details in his aptly named study of U.S.-Israel relations in this period, *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the US-Israel Alliance*, Israel managed to introduce a nuclear program despite Kennedy's deep concern with proliferation.

1967 war and aftermath

The replacement of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion with Levi Eshkol in 1963 and the onset of Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency further strengthened U.S.-Israeli relations. Eshkol gave way on nuclear development and allowed periodic U.S. inspection of the Dimona Reactor in return for greater military coordination and aid. Johnson, who was personally "warm and admiring" toward Israel in the view of one expert, decided to supply the country with direct arms shipments, including Skyhawk aircraft with strike capability. Having supplied arms to Saudi Arabia and Jordan as well, Johnson's alignment with Israel was seen as a move to counter Soviet regional influence.

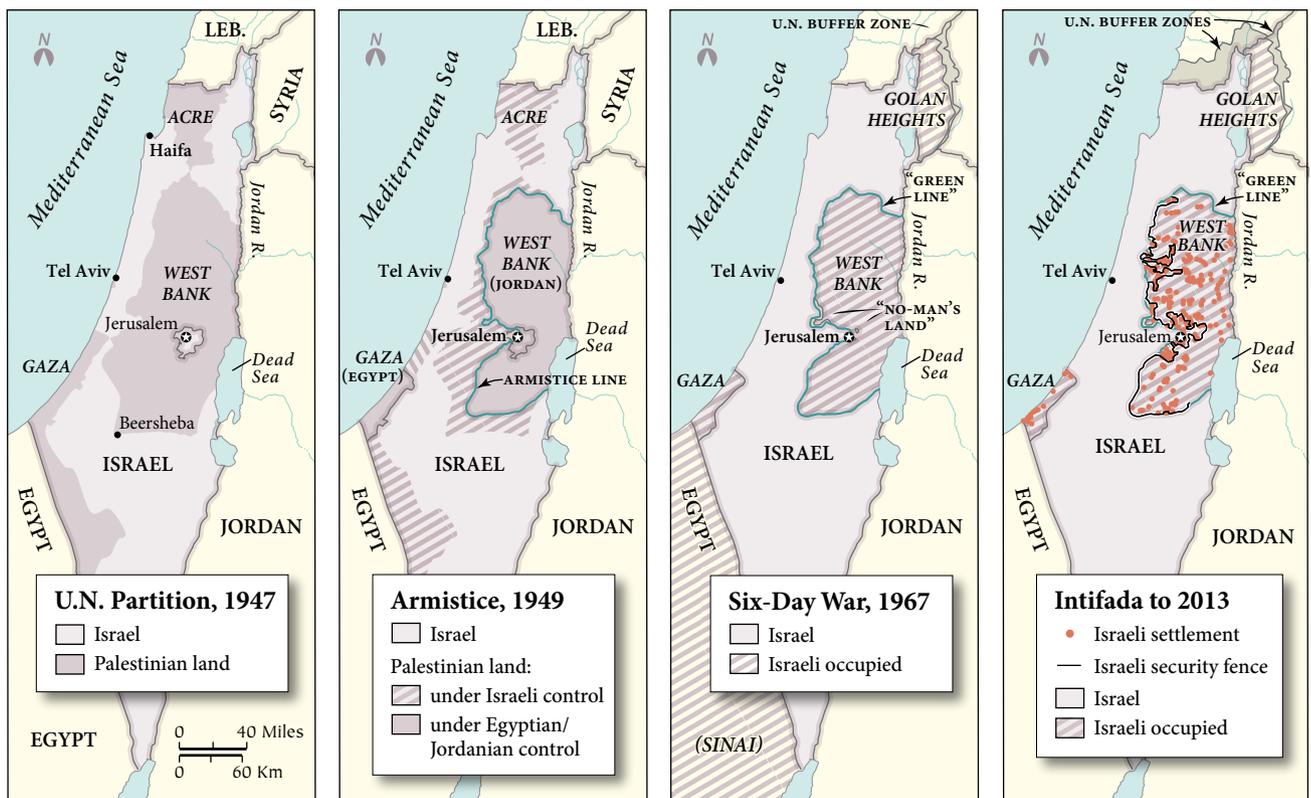
Johnson's focus on Vietnam may have shifted the Middle East to a lower

priority, but the outbreak of a full scale Arab-Israeli war in June 1967 (also known as the Six Day War) moved the region and the fate of U.S.-Israeli relations to center stage. America's political backing "enabled Israel to realize its military aims free of the threat of Soviet intervention." Israel's swift victory in the Six Day War was a watershed moment, not least because it secured control of Arab territory in the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. Johnson decided there should not be a return to the status quo, supporting Eshkol's bid to retain the territories until the Arab states recognized Israel and made peace. This stance was codified in November 1967 in UN Security Council Resolution 242, which was understood internationally as a guideline for pursuing an exchange of "land for peace," but by many accounts did not call for a full withdrawal from all the territories. The resolution also did not refer to the Palestinians directly, calling for a "just settlement to the refugee problem," without mentioning the fate of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Israel's territorial expansion in these

areas raised profound political and demographic questions for the country's leadership. Weeks after the war ended, the question of how to manage the Palestinian population took on central importance. A "decision not to decide," in the words of Israeli historian Avi Raz, ensured control over the territories themselves while avoiding a political resolution of the Palestinian question in national or territorial terms. The creation of the first West Bank settlements in the aftermath of the 1967 War marked the start of an ongoing occupation that has indelibly marked U.S. involvement in the region.

Even with its expansive territorial aspirations, Israel was seen as a regional ally capable of defending U.S. interests in the Middle East. The election of President Richard M. Nixon challenged this new reality. Nixon was suspicious of Washington's tilt toward Jerusalem, and equally apprehensive that missteps in the Arab world had undermined U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East. Soon after he entered office in 1969, he told Secretary of State William Rogers that he sought an "even-handed policy,"



SOURCES: FOUNDATION FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE; THE GUARDIAN; THE UNITED NATIONS

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Note: Israeli settlements in Gaza were evacuated in 2005.

including Israel's return of the territories occupied in 1967, but he faced opposition both from Israel and some of his advisers. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, who opposed Nixon's settlement plan, stated, "the longer Israel holds its conquered Arab territory, the longer the Soviets cannot deliver what the Arabs want."

A crucial development in U.S.-Israeli relations followed after Egyptian President Nasser's death in September 1970. The new Egyptian president, Anwar al-Sadat, pivoted his country to the west, seeking to align with the U.S. rather than the Soviet Union. In a bid to force a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Sadat launched the 1973 October War against Israel. As historian Craig Daigle has recently argued, Sadat wanted to create a "crisis of detente" so as to break the region's status quo. Following an Arab attack on the morning of Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish religious calendar, Israel's leadership sought out U.S. aid to turn the tide of the fighting. A massive U.S. airlift of tanks and airplanes reversed the Egyptian and Syrian advances, and further solidified close U.S.-Israeli relations.

With Nixon distracted by the Watergate scandal, Kissinger negotiated the terms of agreement to end the war. They were passed as UN Security Council Resolution 338, which called

for a "just and durable peace in the Middle East" along the lines of UN Security Council Resolution 242 after the 1967 War. Kissinger, as Nixon's envoy and later as Secretary of State to President Gerald Ford, pursued a step-by-step approach to achieve a diplomatic solution between Israel and her neighbors. But these attempts at negotiating a comprehensive solution favored a piecemeal approach that separated the Israeli-Palestinian issue from broader regional concerns. Palestinian national aspirations, which were emerging as a central point of contention between Israel and the Arab states, were ignored by Kissinger's diplomatic initiatives, such as reaching a cease-fire between Israel, Syria and Egypt. The consequences of 1973, therefore, may have strengthened U.S.-Egyptian and U.S.-Israeli relations, but postwar diplomacy also prolonged regional conflict indefinitely.

Reemergence of the Palestinian question

By the late 1970s, a small number of American officials began to recognize the necessity of limited Palestinian rights, fueled by the broader wave of decolonization around the globe. The election of President Jimmy Carter in 1976 helped crystallize this paradigm shift. Carter's administration took a

regional rather than strictly Cold War approach to Israel and the Middle East, marked by a concern with localized political dynamics and awareness of the need to deal with the Palestinian issue head on. Carter asserted that the Israel-Palestine dispute was at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict and should be tackled directly. He also spoke openly of the need for a "Palestinian homeland," making him the first U.S. president to use that term. Carter's critics bitterly opposed such an approach, fearful about the emergence of a Palestinian state. The military activity of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and other Palestinian nationalist groups had raised the global profile of the Palestinian struggle, but also generated widespread condemnation given the Palestinian use of violent tactics to achieve nationalist ends. Nevertheless, by singling out the Palestinian question for substantive consideration while engaging Israel on the need for permanent territorial borders, the Carter administration helped reshape the parameters of any eventual settlement.

The election of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1977 represented a decisive challenge to U.S.-Israeli relations. Begin was a revisionist Zionist with deep-seated ideological opposition to Palestinian territorial rights. He was also a believer in settlement expansion in the occupied territories, which he pursued with the help of Ariel Sharon, his agriculture minister and later Israel's 11th prime minister. Roughly 5,000 Jewish settlers lived in the West Bank when Begin entered office; however, the number of settlers continued to rise, to over 80,000 by the late 1980s, even after the signing of the historic Camp David Accords. These accords, reached on September 17, 1978, led to a formal Egypt-Israel peace treaty signed by Sadat and Begin on March 26, 1979. The treaty ensured the return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, but Begin's price was the retention of the West Bank, which he referred to by the biblical name of "Judea and Samaria." The peace treaty also included more military and economic aid to Israel than had been given under any previous administra-



U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the cabin of his aircraft in September 1975, as he flew from Alexandria, Egypt, to Tel Aviv, Israel, during negotiations to return the Sinai, which was captured by Israel during the 1967 War, back to Egypt. (DAVID HUME KENNERLY/GETTY IMAGES)

tion: \$10.2 billion over four years, a little less than half in grants. Egypt and Saudi Arabia also received military aid and security guarantees, highlighting the spectrum of U.S. allies in the Middle East.

Strategic relationship

Ronald Reagan's election victory in 1980 signaled a return to global Cold War geopolitics, reconstituting the Middle East as a site of contestation between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Given this new reality, relations with Israel were granted strategic priority. General Alexander Haig, Reagan's hawkish secretary of state, articulated a policy of "strategic consensus" between the U.S., Israel and pro-American Arab governments. Given the limits of regional cooperation, the Reagan administration signed a Memorandum of Understanding enshrining bilateral cooperation with Israel on November 30, 1981. This strategic alliance included military cooperation between the U.S. and Israel, and U.S. policymakers afforded Israel the special status of an ally for the first time. As William Quandt, a leading scholar of U.S. foreign policy has written, "the entire relationship was given a strategic rationale that had previously been missing."

Despite this alliance, divergent interests emerged in the 1980s, beginning with Reagan's decision to sell AWACS and F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia. The limits of the Israeli-American relationship emerged most visibly during Israel's 1982 war in Lebanon (the "First Lebanon War"). The invasion was initially an attempt by Israel to contain Palestinian attacks on its northern border towns, but it quickly escalated into a full-scale effort to remake Lebanon as Israel's Christian ally. Secretary Haig was informed of Israel's war plans by Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon in the spring of 1982. Israel's unprecedented siege of Beirut that summer disturbed Reagan deeply and led to a confrontation with Prime Minister Begin. After Reagan and his advisers realized that Israel's actions posed serious challenges to their broader Middle East strategy, the president remarked to Begin that "Your actions in Lebanon have seriously undermined our relationship with those Arab



President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (left) and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (right) stand during the playing of national anthems on the north lawn of the White House during ceremonies for the Camp David Peace Accords in March 1979. (WALLY MCNAMEE/CORBIS)

governments whose cooperation is essential to protect the Middle East from external threats and to counter forces of Soviet-sponsored radicalism and Islamic fundamentalism now growing in the region.... U.S. influence in the Arab world, our ability to achieve our strategic objectives, has been seriously damaged by Israel's actions."

The PLO's evacuation from Beirut at the end of August seemed to provide a window of stability for diplomatic action. Reagan unveiled his administration's new peace plan, dubbed the Reagan Plan, in a primetime address on September 1, 1982. Building on Carter's Camp David framework, he acknowledged that implementation of the Camp David Accords had been slow. "Israel exists; it has a right to exist in peace behind secure and defensible borders; and it has a right to demand of its neighbors that they recognize those facts," the president remarked. Reagan continued: "[W]e must also move to resolve the root causes of conflict between Arabs and Israelis." The central question, he said, was "how to reconcile Israel's legitimate security concerns with the legitimate rights of the Palestinians." For Reagan, this meant "self-government by the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza in association with Jordan," as well as "the immediate adoption of a settlement freeze by Israel." The Reagan Plan reflected a return to the notion of

comprehensive peace; however, it did not support outright the creation of a Palestinian state, opting instead for Palestinian self-government in association with Jordan. Begin was incensed with the new plan issued by the White House. He and his cabinet issued a swift rejection, and the Reagan Plan became the last serious attempt to broker a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict in the 1980s.

U.S. involvement with Lebanon increased in the wake of Israeli military action. Reagan redeployed U.S. Marines to Beirut out of guilt over the failure to protect Palestinian civilians slaughtered in the Sabra and Shatila massacre of September 1982, paving the way for further bloodshed. In October 1983, the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks by Syrian and Iranian proxies led to the death of 241 U.S. servicemen, the highest number of American military deaths in one day since the Vietnam War. Having grown resentful of the Israeli and American presence in their country, local opposition militias metastasized into the birth of Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed paramilitary organization that emerged as a key player in the region during the early 1980s. "American Cold War naiveté opened the door for Iran in Lebanon," said one scholar of the period. In this regard, U.S.-Israeli relations are meaningful beyond debates over military or economic aid, having precipitated transformations in the Middle East in a



An Israeli soldier restrains another from manhandling an arrested Palestinian who lies on a Nablus street with his hands tied together, during anti-Israeli demonstrations in the first intifada in February 1988. (ERIC FEFERBERG/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

manner that has affected both countries well into the 21st century.

Palestinian agitation continued to grow in the occupied territories in the wake of the PLO's evacuation from Beirut. By December 1987 Israel's control over the Palestinian territories was seen as intolerable, and spontaneous protests erupted in the Gaza Strip and spread to the West Bank. The first *Intifada* ("shaking off") exploded, demonstrating that Isra-

el's subjugation of the Palestinians could not be ignored. Israeli Defense Minister and future Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin publicly sanctioned "a policy of beatings and breaking of bones." Before long, as Quandt notes, "images of savage Israeli beatings of Palestinian youngsters were a part of the American evening television news." Israel's image in the mind of the U.S., long informed by cultural assumptions of a biblical David (Israel) fighting

Goliath (the Arab states), had been overturned.

The PLO, which was based in exile in Tunisia, was "more surprised than the Israelis" by the uprising, which was entirely generated from within the territories, and was a spontaneous eruption. Seeing an opportunity to capitalize on popular discontent in order to secure political clout, the PLO began to play a leadership role in the *Intifada*—as did the Muslim Brotherhood's Palestinian offshoot Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement. However, it was the PLO, long maligned by Israel and the U.S. as a terrorist organization, that would gradually emerge as the sole representative of the Palestinian people.

In one of President Reagan's final acts in office, the U.S. agreed to begin a dialogue with the PLO. Its longstanding leader, Yasser Arafat, formally accepted UN Resolution 242 in December 1988, acknowledging Israel's right to exist and renouncing terrorism. The PLO's recognition of Israel and acceptance of the "two state solution" had begun to emerge in the mid-1970s, and was implicitly endorsed as part of the November 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence. Arafat's accompanying public statement in Geneva ended on a triumphal note: "Victory is at hand. I see the homeland in your holy stones. I see the flag of our independent Palestine fluttering over the hills of our beloved homeland." ■

The peace process

The election of George H. W. Bush precipitated new opportunities and challenges for U.S. diplomatic relations with Israel. During Bush's tenure and with the help of Secretary of State James Baker, the peace process was revitalized as a key foreign policy goal for the U.S. The context for this re-emergence was the end of the Cold War, which had removed the Soviet threat, and the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1990. Israel's special relationship with the U.S. suffered as its strategic value in the region was undermined by international events, and Reagan's personal warmth toward Israel gave

way to the tougher stance of Bush and Baker. The two men did not appreciate the obstinacy of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, and viewed his settlement policy as "a deliberate attempt to foil US peacemaking." One particularly bitter debate erupted around the U.S. refusal to grant Israel loan guarantees of \$10 billion in light of ongoing settlement expansion. Baker publicly recited the number of the White House switchboard at a press conference, telling the Israelis, "When you are serious about peace, call us!"

Bush and Baker launched the Madrid Conference in October 1991. It was

the first official face-to-face gathering that included representatives from Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories. The Palestinians were part of a joint Jordanian delegation coordinating closely with the PLO leadership in Tunisia, who were prevented from attending the conference by Israel. President Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev co-chaired these direct multilateral negotiations, which were significant but short-lived; more symbolic than substantive. Among the most important procedural legacies of Madrid was the idea of an interim agreement between Israel and the Pales-

tinians, a move that deferred final status issues like the refugee question and the fate of Jerusalem.

This pattern of negotiating would persist following the Oslo Accords, which were signed on the South Lawn of the White House on September 13, 1993. The Accords, which resulted from secret talks in Norway's capital, were considered a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as they formally launched a multi-year peace process between the parties. President William Jefferson Clinton, the former governor from Arkansas who had developed close ties with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, took an active role as a full partner in these negotiations. Clinton's close cooperation with the Israelis fostered Rabin's confidence, who famously shook hands with Yasser Arafat as their deputies signed the Declaration of Principals. As Clinton's first term ended, the U.S.-Israeli partnership had become a cornerstone of American foreign policy. In the words of Vice President Albert Gore, this convergence was "the closest we have with any of our friends and allies anywhere in the world."

But the peace process launched by the Oslo Accords was nowhere near as picture perfect as the famous handshake suggested. In September 1995, Arafat and Rabin signed the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, or Oslo II, establishing the Palestinian Authority (PA) and dividing the West Bank into three separate zones of control. There was enormous skepticism of Arafat's move in the Arab world, where he was seen as selling out meaningful Palestinian sovereignty for the sake of his own return to the West Bank, where he was to be appointed as president of the PA. Oslo II granted the PA limited self-government, for an interim period of time, providing the vestiges of statehood without actual content. The process around Oslo lulled its proponents into the false belief that real issues like Jerusalem, refugees' right of return, settlements and security were being dealt with. Oslo II became the basis of the Wye River Memorandum in 1998 and President George W. Bush's Roadmap for Peace in 2002.



U.S. President Bill Clinton watches as PLO leader Yasser Arafat shakes hands with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, September 13, 1993. Rabin and Arafat shook hands for the first time after Israel and the PLO signed a historic agreement on Palestinian self-government in the occupied territories. (J. DAVID AKE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

Extremists on both sides of the conflict detested Oslo and its consequences and attempted to undermine the interim milestones it aimed to secure. In Israel, Rabin's concessions in negotiating with the Palestinians set off denunciations by right-wing politicians and incitement against the prime minister. On November 4, 1995, after a rally to support Oslo, Rabin was assassinated.

Collapse

Benjamin Netanyahu, a fierce critic of the Oslo process and leader of the Likud party, defeated Labor leader Shimon Peres in the 1996 elections to replace Rabin. A spate of suicide bombings by Hamas inside Israel prompted support of a hardline politician who was outspoken against terrorism. Clinton worked to revive the floundering Oslo process, and he brought Netanyahu and Arafat together in Maryland at the Wye River Plantation in October 1998. The memorandum that resulted advanced the interim steps of Oslo and signaled an agreement to resume permanent status negotiations.

Yet despite the U.S.' best efforts, the Oslo Accords were beset by structural deficiencies and the erosion of trust between the parties. The PA never got control of more than 18% of the territory in the West Bank, and settlements continued to expand at a rapid pace, with

the number of Israeli settlers doubling between 1993 and 2000. Daily life for Palestinians did not improve, given the ongoing restrictions of movement and the limited Israeli military redeployment in the territories. Hamas, which rejected the concessions of Oslo, was increasingly seen as a counterweight to the corruption-prone environment developing around Arafat and his advisers.

Determined to overcome these shortcomings, Clinton hastily launched a summit at Camp David in July 2000. Ehud Barak, a Labor leader with more moderate views than Netanyahu, had been elected prime minister in May 1999 with a mandate to carry on with Rabin's pursuit of peace. Clinton invited Barak and Arafat to join him at Camp David in an effort to break the logjam around the negotiations, but it was a piecemeal attempt that left key issues unresolved. There would not be a full return to the 1967 borders, and issues such as sovereignty over Jerusalem and the right of return for Palestinian refugees remained unresolved. The debate over Barak's final offer and Arafat's refusal is a fierce one, yet blame for the collapse of the summit was pinned entirely on the Palestinians by Clinton and his advisers. In a final attempt to revive the failed talks before leaving office, Clinton crafted a set of parameters in December that led to the Taba Summit



Rescue crews remove body bags from the site of a Palestinian suicide bomb attack on a Jerusalem bus in June 2002. (RICKI ROSEN/CORBIS)



A Palestinian hands his I.D. to an Israeli soldier at a Jerusalem checkpoint in 1991. (DAVID H. WELLS/CORBIS)

in January 2001, by which point the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, or the second *Intifada*, had erupted.

The second *Intifada* lasted for five years and took the lives of over 1,000 Israelis and 4,000 Palestinians, including military and civilian casualties. According to some accounts, it began with Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem on September 28, 2000. Sharon, a Likud party candidate running for prime minister, ascended the *Al-Haram Al-Sharif* with over 1,000 bodyguards. After his visit, which infuriated Palestinian bystanders, he declared, "the Temple Mount is in our hands and will remain in our hands. It is the holiest site in Judaism and it is the right of every Jew to visit the Temple Mount." Other accounts of the period blame Yasser Arafat and Palestinian factions for pre-organizing the violence or not doing more to stop it when it erupted.

The unrest extended to general strikes like the first *Intifada*, but also armed attacks on soldiers and civilians, assassination attempts against Israeli and Palestinian leaders, and a manifold increase in suicide bombing. These attacks, which often targeted civilians, shook Israeli society to the core, and engendered a rightward shift in domestic politics. The psychological trauma of recurring violence was no less intense for Palestinians. In both West Bank cities and the Gaza Strip, the PA was targeted, urban centers were re-occupied by Israeli soldiers, and an expanded network of checkpoints controlled dai-

ly movement. There was a marked increase in Israel's use of targeted assassinations against Palestinian militants in densely packed urban areas, resulting in civilian deaths as well.

For many Americans, the attacks of September 11, 2001, emerged as a primary reference point for understanding the violence in the Middle East. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who defeated Ehud Barak in the elections of February 2001, encouraged such a strong link. He found a stalwart ally in U.S. President George W. Bush, whose rubric of fighting the War on Terror resonated with Sharon's own tactics at home. Sharon refused to meet with Yasser Arafat; Bush made it clear that he would not deal with Arafat either. The Israelis launched "Operation Defensive Shield" in March 2002, the largest post-Oslo incursion into the Palestinian territories, to "rout out...terrorist infrastructure." The destruction of the PA infrastructure in tandem with Sharon's isolation of Arafat exacerbated divisions between the ruling Fatah faction of Palestinian nationalists and Hamas, which would extend to a violent rupture several years later.

U.S. foreign policy during the Bush years had a formative impact on events in the Middle East, from the launching of two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to a sweeping policy of democracy promotion in the Arab world. Bush had a vision for addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that he unveiled in his Roadmap for Peace. In a speech on June 24, 2002, Bush remarked, "the current

situation offers no prospect that life will improve. Israeli citizens will continue to be victimized by terrorists, and so Israel will continue to defend herself, and the situation of the Palestinian people will grow more and more miserable. My vision is two states, living side by side, in peace and security." This vision was conditioned on the removal of Arafat. Bush continued, "I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, leaders not compromised by terror."

Arafat died in France on November 11, 2004, having been flown to a hospital outside of Paris with a publicly unknown condition. In the 2005 Palestinian presidential elections, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza chose Mahmoud Abbas as his successor. Abbas has remained in the post ever since. In January 2006, Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections brought Hamas to power, but the international community rejected the results. The U.S. opted for a policy of boycotting Hamas, which it viewed exclusively as a terrorist organization. The Quartet (EU, Russia, UN and U.S.) cut funding to the PA, and Israel withheld tax revenues it had collected. In June 2006, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh sent President Bush a letter by way of an American professor asking for the boycott to be lifted, and de facto recognizing Israel. As Haniyeh wrote, "We are so concerned about stability and security in the area that we don't mind having a Palestinian state in the 1967 borders and offering a truce for many years.... We are not warmongers, we are peace

makers and we call on the American government to have direct negotiations with the elected government.” Bush did not answer, maintaining his boycott of the movement.

In Israel, Sharon’s retrenchment had led to a unilateral plan for withdrawal from the Gaza Strip settlements by fall 2005. Rather than negotiations, the prime minister believed that Israel had to pursue an alternative path. In the words of his chief adviser, Dov Weisglass, the disengagement plan was part of a broader diplomatic agenda for Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process...When you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed indefinitely from our agenda. And all this with authority and permission. All with a presidential blessing and the ratification of both houses of Congress.

As Weisglass suggested, the U.S. played a crucial role in facilitating this move, a clear sign that the pattern of U.S. mediation between the Israelis and Palestinians had fully evolved into active alignment with the agenda of one side during the Bush years.

Alongside the disengagement plan, Sharon launched the construction of what the Israeli’s refer to as the security barrier between Israel and the West Bank. The barrier consisted of large sections of fencing and a massive fortified wall in various locations. It was seen as a necessary counterterrorism measure by the Israeli public, but also signaled that the wall was a mechanism to annex sections of Palestinian territory and ensure Israel’s retention of major settlements. The Israeli Supreme Court, which was besieged with petitions by Palestinian farmers and families cut off from their land and homes as a result of the barrier, ordered several modifications but largely supported the endeavor. The debate over the wall reverberated abroad; many of Israel’s

supporters viewed the fortification as a necessity for security, while critics condemned the wall for uprooting Palestinian families, cutting homes from agricultural land, and marring the landscape of the West Bank. Many believed that the barrier would mark Israel’s future border with a Palestinian state. In July 2004, the International Court of Justice deemed the wall illegal, arguing that it was in violation of international law.

Sharon suffered a massive stroke in January 2006. Ehud Olmert, the former mayor of Jerusalem, succeeded him. Olmert promised to continue with Sharon’s disengagement plan, and extend it to the West Bank. The outbreak of the Second Lebanon War on July 12, 2006, shifted Olmert’s plans, as he responded with overwhelming force to Hezbollah’s abduction of two Israeli soldiers along the northern border. The ensuing 34-day war, during which Israel targeted Hezbollah as well as Lebanese civilian infrastructure, and Hezbollah launched Katyusha rockets into Israel, led to the death of over 1,000 Lebanese and 163 Israelis. In the wake of the 2006 war, which also served as a proxy battle between Israel and Iran, Hezbollah claimed a victory by dint of its staying power despite the Israeli bombardment. President Bush disagreed at the time, but in his memoir, *Decision Points*, he remarked that Israel’s “shaky military performance” had compromised its international credibility. In

2007, the Winograd Commission, an Israeli commission of inquiry, accused Prime Minister Olmert of mishandling the war, and thousands of Israelis protested and demanded his resignation.

For the Palestinian national movement, the international boycott on Hamas sowed internal divisions with the secular Fatah faction, whose militias were being funded and trained by the U.S. and Arab states like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. A civil war erupted between the factions, and Hamas took over the Gaza Strip with Fatah remaining entrenched in the West Bank. The Palestinian unity government, which had preserved joint Hamas and Fatah rule, was disbanded, and an “emergency cabinet” was set up with Salam Fayyad as the new technocratic prime minister. The U.S., taking a heightened interest in reviving peace efforts between Israel and the Palestinians now that Hamas was out of the picture, encouraged Israel’s siege of Gaza and the lifting of sanctions in the West Bank. Despite this move, Hamas remains a key constituent in the Palestinian national movement.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice led the Bush administration’s revival of U.S. efforts to mediate peace, and invited Israelis, Palestinians and other Arab representatives to a conference in Annapolis, MD, in November 2007. The Annapolis Conference was intended to restart the peace process and boost international support for a negotiated settle-



A Palestinian man walks along the Israeli-constructed barrier wall separating Jerusalem from Abu Dis, a village in the West Bank. (WENDY SUE LAMM/CONTRASTO/REDUX)



Hamas militia members take position after they evacuated Gaza streets in May 2006. The Hamas-led Palestinian government ordered its militia off Gaza's streets in the wake of clashes with President Mahmoud Abbas's rival Fatah movement that stirred fears of civil war. (MOHAMMED SALEM/REUTERS/CORBIS)

ment between Israel and the Palestinians. Once again, the U.S. had come to the realization that peace between Israel and its neighbors was a necessity for securing U.S. interests in the region, and that by ignoring the urgency of the issue, the conflict had only been exacerbated.

At the beginning of the conference, Bush read from a joint statement signed by the Israelis and the Palestinians supporting a two-state solution.

We agreed to immediately launch good faith, bilateral negotiations in order to conclude a peace treaty resolving all outstanding issues, including core issues, without exception.... The final peace settlement will establish Palestine as a homeland for the Palestinian people just as Israel is the homeland for the Jewish people.

The parties agreed to meet regularly after Annapolis in order to implement Bush's Roadmap and conclude a peace treaty by the end of 2008. On the day the conference ended, Olmert warned of the consequences of not reaching a solution with the Palestinians in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*.

If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses, and we face a South African-style struggle for equal voting rights (also for the Palestinians in the territories), then, as soon as that happens, the State of Israel is finished.... The Jewish organizations, which were our power base in America, will be the first to come out

against us...because they will say they cannot support a state that does not support democracy and equal voting rights for all its residents.

It was a startling and frank admission by the prime minister, who continued negotiating with Abbas over the most contentious issues, including the division of Jerusalem and the Palestinian right of return. Observers claim that the two leaders came very close to a resolution, meeting 26 times between Annapolis and the outbreak of the Gaza War on December 27, 2008.

The number of rocket attacks from the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip increased throughout 2008, until a ceasefire was brokered between Israel and Hamas in June. An Israeli raid in Gaza was followed by airstrikes targeting Hamas

members and further rocket attacks. Olmert then launched "Operation Cast Lead," a 22-day air campaign and ground invasion that pounded Gaza, resulting in the death of over 1,100 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. Olmert intended to rout out rocket attacks and weapons smuggling into Gaza, with an undeclared goal of removing Hamas from power, but attacks from the movement intensified during the confrontation. A unilateral Israeli ceasefire was declared on January 18, 2009. The UN Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, led by South African Justice Richard Goldstone, investigated the war and found both Palestinian militants and the Israeli army guilty of potential war crimes. Goldstone, coming under pressure by Israel, would later retract his claim that the Israelis deliberately targeted Palestinian civilians in the attack, having been unable to corroborate evidence without Israel's cooperation or to gather evidence in Gaza without Hamas' full cooperation. But the legacy of the Gaza War remained a troubling one, given the humanitarian catastrophe that confronted the population of the Strip and Israel's deepening isolation globally. As *The New York Times* reported on the war's impact, Israel faced its "worst diplomatic crisis in two decades." Ehud Olmert, besieged by corruption charges, announced his intention to resign, and Israeli elections in February 2009 elections brought Benjamin Netanyahu back to office. There was little hope that the negotiations Olmert and Abbas had been pursuing would continue. ■

Obama and Israel

In the U.S., the transformative 2008 presidential elections brought Barack Obama to the White House. It was a heady time for supporters of a new American role around the globe, given the widespread disillusionment with the 43rd President. Bush's approval rating—which was over 80% in the aftermath of 9/11—stood at 34% upon leaving office in January 2009. Obama's victory spurred hopes in the Middle East that the U.S. would return to a more evenhanded policy when it

came to the Arab world and Israel. In his first few weeks in office, the President appointed former U.S. Senator George Mitchell as his Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, a position intended to demonstrate the importance the Obama administration placed on a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mitchell, who had overseen negotiations for peace in Northern Ireland as the architect of the Good Friday Agreement and who had authored the Mitchell Report on the Arab-Israeli conflict,

was seen as a serious diplomat capable of achieving progress. More broadly, Obama wanted to change the image of the U.S. in the Middle East. “My job to the Muslim world is to communicate that the Americans are not your enemy,” Obama said in a January interview with *Al-Arabiya*, “We sometimes make mistakes. We have not been perfect.”

This theme would be expanded in Obama’s historic speech at Cairo University on June 4, 2009. In front of a large audience of Egyptian students, Obama charted a new path for U.S. engagement in the region, and singled out Israel and the Palestinians as a primary concern. As Obama explained to his audience, “America’s strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied.” Obama continued, turning to the Palestinians.

It is also undeniable that the Palestinian people—Muslims and Christians—have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. ... America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own.

In the President’s view, “the only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states, where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security.” How to achieve this goal remained a difficult task. Obama stressed an end to Palestinian violence, telling his audience that it would not resolve the conflict, and that Hamas would have to put an end to their tactics. As for Israel’s responsibility, Obama implored Israelis to “acknowledge that just as Israel’s right to exist cannot be denied, neither can Palestine’s. The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.”

As it had been for Carter and Begin 30 years earlier, Obama’s disagreement with Netanyahu over the settlements would derail his ambitious first term

agenda for a resolution to the conflict. Ten days after Obama’s Cairo speech, Netanyahu delivered his own address at Bar-Ilan University, where he formally accepted the principle of two states living side by side.

We must also tell the truth in its entirety: within this homeland lives a large Palestinian community. We do not want to rule over them, we do not want to govern their lives, we do not want to impose either our flag or our culture on them. 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. Neither will threaten the security or survival of the other.

For Netanyahu, however, the content of that Palestinian state was far less than they would be willing to accept: It was to be “demilitarized,” with Jerusalem remaining the capital of Israel, and the Palestinians giving up on the right of return. Netanyahu also argued that natural growth for existing Jewish settlements on the West Bank would be permissible.

This position, which was enacted via a 10-month settlement freeze, did not include East Jerusalem or apply to the 3,000 housing units already under construction. During a visit by U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden to Israel in March 2010, Netanyahu’s government announced the construction of 1,600 further units in the East Jerusalem

neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the move “deeply negative,” and Obama was reportedly “livid.” General David Petraeus, testifying in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee shortly after Biden’s visit, remarked that tensions over Israel-Palestine have “an enormous effect on the strategic context in which we operate.” Netanyahu, acknowledging the bad timing, still defended the building in a Jerusalem neighborhood as part of long-standing Israeli policy. “Our policy on Jerusalem is the same policy followed by all Israeli governments for 42 years, and it has not changed. As far as we are concerned, building in Jerusalem is the same as building in Tel Aviv,” Netanyahu remarked. The President met with Netanyahu at the White House on March 26, in an encounter that by most accounts was unpleasant. Obama asked for written guarantees that the freeze would be extended, but Netanyahu refused to give them. Reports about U.S.-Israeli relations were filled with recrimination and anger in the media, having hit the lowest point in years.

In September 2010, Obama hosted Netanyahu, Abbas, Jordan’s King Abdullah and Special Envoy Mitchell for the restart of negotiations to reach a final status settlement. As Israel’s settlement moratorium lapsed, the talks broke down, and Mitchell eventually resigned from the office of the Special Envoy in May 2011.



Palestinian protesters throw stones at Israeli vehicles during an October 2013 protest against the expanding of Jewish settlements in Kufr Qadoom village, near the West Bank city of Nablus. (NIDAL ESHTAVEH/XINHUA/EYEVINE/REDUX)

After his own resignation as secretary of defense some months later, Robert Gates reportedly remarked that Netanyahu was “ungrateful” to the U.S., who received “nothing in return” for ensuing Israel’s security. Sentiments like those from Gates seeped down into public discourse, with more vocal criticism and frustration mounting with the policies of the right-wing Likud-led government. Even within the American pro-Israel community there were signs of fracturing, as the growth of a more centrist political action group, J Street, mounted a challenge to the rightward leaning lobby powerhouse, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Obama publically declared his support for the demarcation of an Israeli-Palestinian border along the 1967 lines in the spring of 2011. He clarified that this included mutually agreed land swaps after his speech elicited criticism from Republican officials. The political costs of the President’s involvement in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking had become abundantly clear ahead of the 2012 elections. The upheaval in the Arab world, which had begun in Tunisia at the end of 2010, had also shaken the U.S. position in the region. The “Arab Spring”—a contested term used to describe events as disparate as the Egyptians overthrow of the long-standing President Hosni Mubarak to the protests in Syria that turned into a full-scale civil war—nonetheless left an indelible mark on Israel and the Palestinians. It also shaped the degree of U.S. involvement in resolving the conflict given the proliferation of other regional crises. As Obama won reelection in 2012, and Netanyahu emerged with a third term as prime minister in early 2013, the complexities and tensions affecting the U.S.-Israeli relationship had not at all subsided.

In an effort to reset his relations with Israel, Obama’s first trip abroad in his second term was to Israel and the West Bank. He delivered a major speech directly to Israeli students in Jerusalem’s International Convention Center on March 21, 2013. In his speech, Obama displayed a close identification with the Jewish state:

I believe that Israel is rooted not just in history and tradition, but also in a simple and profound idea: the idea that people deserve to be free in a land of their own.... And Israel has achieved this even as it has overcome relentless threats to its security—through the courage of the Israel Defense Forces, and a citizenry that is resilient in the face of terror.

Observers noted the change in tone from Obama’s Cairo speech, which had put many Israelis on edge. Here was an American leader in the heart of Jerusalem, speaking directly to young people (rather than their political leaders in the Knesset), signaling that he identified with their success and empathized with the challenges they faced. At the same time, Obama turned to the fate of the Palestinians, and the underlying tension that animates Israeli political reality.

The Palestinian people’s right to self-determination and justice must also be recognized. ...Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a free people in their own land.

It was a bracing assessment by Obama, who had compelled his audience to acknowledge the untenable nature of the occupation, and the degree to which it was compromising the core of Israel’s identity as a democracy.

Obama put forth his own set of principles that could guide the parties back to negotiations. “Now is the time for the Arab World to take steps toward normalized relations with Israel. Meanwhile, Palestinians must recognize that Israel will be a Jewish state, and that Israelis have the right to insist upon their security. Israelis must recognize that continued settlement activity is counterproductive to the cause of peace, and that an independent Palestine must be viable with real borders that have to be drawn.” The statement on borders echoed Obama’s earlier calls for the return to the 1967 lines, but the insistence that Palestinians recognize Israel as a “Jewish state” was a nod to the demands of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Critics dismissed the speech as a wholesale adoption of Israel’s posi-

tion, having pinned their hopes on an American president who might restore balance to American involvement in the region.

Yet Obama, like so many of his predecessors, faced a crush of domestic and foreign policy crises, and could not expend the political capital that would result from entangling himself in the intricacies of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. On July 29, 2013, the president appeared alongside former U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk, appointing him as the new Special Envoy for Middle East Peace. Indyk, who had extensive government experience and went on to head the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, would shoulder the burden of U.S. involvement along with the new secretary of state, John Kerry. A passionate voice for American engagement in Arab-Israeli peacemaking from his time in the Senate, Kerry had signaled this issue as a top priority after taking office in early 2013. During his UN General Assembly speech in September, Obama announced the pursuit of Israeli-Palestinian peace as a priority alongside the negotiation of a nuclear deal with Iran and addressing the civil war in Syria.

The scaling back of U.S. engagement with Egypt and the broader unrest in the Arab world signaled a more modest agenda for American foreign policy in the Middle East, one that recognized the limits of military intervention. Opponents of this new agenda voiced concern that it also revealed American weakness in the region, a similar criticism that surfaced when Reagan defeated Carter in 1980. Behind the scenes, the Israelis and the Palestinians conducted several rounds of negotiations, excluding Indyk from some of the meetings. They set a nine-month timetable to reach an agreement. At the time of this writing, the negotiations have failed to produce a viable framework for a political solution. Netanyahu’s detractors have argued that his demands are unreasonable and the prime minister is proceeding with bad faith.

On November 7, 2013, Kerry criti-

cized the Israelis for their actions on settlements during a press conference with Netanyahu in Jerusalem. The latest Israeli moves, which included the surprise announcement of more than 20,000 planned settlement units by Housing Minister Uri Ariel, went even further than previous building in bisecting a possible Palestinian state. In the view of some observers, the announcement revealed an internal power struggle between Netanyahu and the more intransigent right-wing members of his coalition government who hope to scuttle any possible deal. Regardless of the reason, this action elicited the resignation letters of the chief Palestinian negotiators, Saeb Erekat and Mohammed Shtayyeh, who vocally opposed Israeli settlement activity. Erekat, who has attempted to resign several times before, criticized Israel's "government of settlers, for settlers and by settlers." Mahmoud Abbas suggested that the PA might consider pursuing the UN Security Council as a venue to discuss the settlements, despite having promised Kerry not to go to the international community for the duration of the negotiations.

Relations today

2014 is poised to be a decisive year for U.S.-Israeli relations in light of ongoing international attempts to broker a deal with Iran on the nuclear issue and the narrowing timetable for an agreement with the Palestinians. Israeli strategic thinkers may not countenance a nuclear equipped Iran, but they also recognize the constraints under which their government can act. The recent diplomatic solution brokered by the P5 +1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) in Geneva in November undermines Israel's international legitimacy in the event of a unilateral attack on Iranian soil. Some of Israel's staunchest allies in Congress worry that American diplomacy is compromising Israel's window of immunity. During a congressional briefing against new Iranian sanctions in November, Secretary Kerry's statements were brandished as "anti-Israeli" by Republican senators, a reminder that



(KICHKA/CARTOONARTS/NYTS)

U.S.-Israeli relations remain fraught. But while Netanyahu's repeated calls for swift action may resonate in some parts of Washington, the leadership in Jerusalem knows that the relationship between the two countries and their mutual security interests are too intertwined to countenance unilateral action in the face of a red light from President Obama.

In his Jerusalem speech, Obama acknowledged these tensions and spoke forcefully about the dangers posed to Israel and the U.S. in the event of a nuclear-armed Iran. "When I consider Israel's security, I also think about a people who have a living memory of the Holocaust, faced with the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iranian government that has called for Israel's destruction. It's no wonder Israelis view this as an existential threat. But this is not simply a challenge for Israel – it is a danger for the entire world, including the United States... As President, I have said to the world that all options are on the table for achieving our objectives. America will do what we must to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran." It is a promise that continues to mitigate Israeli concerns about the diplomatic breakthrough in Geneva, but for how long? There are reports of joint Israeli-Saudi Arabian planning for a military option against Iran in the wake of a diplomatic agreement, a further sign of shifting alliances in the Middle East. As the U.S. tries to manage

these competing tensions in the region, in addition to the upheaval in Egypt and the civil war in Syria, Iran's nuclear issue will continue to shape relations with Israel in the coming year.

Whether or not the successive rounds of talks between Israel and the Palestinians amount to an agreement, the persistent lack of a resolution profoundly shapes American—and global—opinions of Israel. From the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem in 1948 through the onset of Israel's occupation in 1967 and the more recent attempts to reach a two-state solution, the question of equality and civil rights has taken center stage. Israel's conflicting identity as both a proud democracy and a definitively Jewish state continue to clash with one another. The country's staunchest supporters have grown uncomfortable with the structural inequality that is manifest in the political status quo, both inside Israel and in its relationship to the Palestinians. Of all Israel's allies, perhaps no country is as well equipped as the U.S. to recognize the risks of this imbalance, and to support a resolution. But given the track record of American involvement in the peace process, and the longer history of relations with Israel, there is no guarantee that the U.S. can play a constructive role. So it may be up to Israel—the most powerful player in this conflict, albeit an anxious and beleaguered one—to reckon with what the future might hold. ■

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discussion questions

1. Israel has grown as a democratic government that has developed key institutional strengths through freedom of the press, civil society and fair elections. It has also pursued settlement expansion programs and the construction of the West Bank wall. Do such policies and actions curtail the democratic potential of Israel?
2. Leaders have dealt with various strategies for negotiations regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With past mediation efforts in mind, is the piecemeal approach a viable path toward peace deals? Is success dependent on the political administration and the individual leaders that are involved in the negotiation efforts?
3. How has the Arab Spring impacted U.S. relations with Israel? How has the tumultuous political environment of the Middle East influenced Israeli-Palestinian negotiations?

4. To what extent are there similarities between U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and Israel's national interest in the region? Did a special relationship between the United States and Israel evolve from coinciding foreign policy interests in the Middle East or did such a special relationship exist prior to coinciding foreign policy agendas?

5. In September 2013, President Barack Obama and President Hassan Rouhani held the first telephone conversation between high officials of the two countries since 1979; in November 2013, the U.S. and five countries struck a deal to temporarily freeze Iran's nuclear program. What do such efforts signal to Israel, and how do U.S. negotiations with Iran shape Israeli foreign policy in the region?

6. Each United States president has assigned varying degrees of attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the larger context of Arab-Israeli issues. Would it be more advantageous for the Obama administration to view other regional powers as partners in mediation efforts or has the Israeli-Palestinian issue developed into a conflict solely between two entities?

suggested readings

Avishai, Bernard. **The Tragedy of Zionism: How Its Revolutionary Past Haunts Israeli Democracy.** New York: Helios Press, 2002. 389pp. \$16.95 (paper). From a leading writer and analyst of Israel, a critical study of Zionism's impact on the emergence of the Israeli state and relations with the Palestinians.

Eisenberg, Laura Zittrain and Neil Caplan. **Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace, Second Edition: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. 452pp. \$35.00 (paper). Eisenberg and Caplan coherently link over sixty years of Arab-Israeli negotiations and identify a pattern of negative behavior that has continually prevented the emergence of a sustainable peace.

Hertzberg, Arthur. **The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader.** Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1997. 648pp. \$34.00 (paper). An indispensable anthology of writings by leading Zionist thinkers, with brief biographies of each figure.

Gorenberg, Gershom. **The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977.** New York: Times Books, 2006. 480pp. \$30.00 (paper). A groundbreaking account of Israel's settlement project in the occupied territories, focusing on the early years of Labor led efforts.

Khalidi, Rashid. **The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood.** Boston: Beacon Press, 2007. 288pp. \$17.00 (paper). From a leading scholar of the Middle East, an extended treatment of the Palestinian attempts to achieve independence and the reasons for their ongoing failure.

Kimmerling, Baruch and Joel Migdal. **The Palestinian People: A History.** Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. 608pp. \$25.50 (paper). A comprehensive history of the Palestinian people, with a focus on Palestinians in Israel and identity formation, from the 19th century through the peace process.

LeVine, Mark and Gershon Shafir, eds. **Struggle and Survival in Palestine/Israel.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. 472pp. \$34.95 (paper). A social history that examines personal narratives to provide a human dimension to the history of the region.

Morris, Benny. **The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 666pp. \$62.00 (paper). A pioneering study of the Palestinian exodus during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war by a leading Israeli revisionist historian.

Ross, Dennis. **The Missing Peace: The Inside Story for the Fight for Middle East Peace.** Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005. 880pp. \$25.00 (paper). Ross, chief U.S. negotiator under Bush and Clinton, details the highs and lows of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations from 1988 to 2001 in this exhaustive insider's account.

Shlaim, Avi. **The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World.** New York: Norton, 2001. 704pp. \$24.95 (paper). A critical study of Israel's foreign relations with its Arab neighbors by a leading historian of the conflict.

Quandt, William B. **Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967.** Third ed. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005. 535pp. \$24.95 (paper). Authoritative account of U.S. involvement in Arab-Israeli peacemaking by scholar and former NSC official in the Nixon and Carter administrations.

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