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The United States and Israel: 1948-2008

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Introduction: The Two Paradigms

Unlike most alliances, which are exclusively patterned on a single cluster of quintessential strategic factors, the [American-Israeli alliance](#) always incorporated two different dimensions. In the context of Israel's history, contrary to the French-Israeli partnership of the 1950s,^[1] the American-Israeli partnership originated from more than one factor or premise.

As a result, when one of its components temporarily eroded, its counterpart occasionally compensated for the loss, leaving the core of the alliance intact. More frequently, however, the picture emerging from an examination of the American-Israeli dyad has been one of convergence and harmony, with its two divergent components reinforcing one another, thus providing Israel with a highly valuable twofold safety net.

To better elucidate the intrinsic nature of the components that comprise, in the aggregate, this bilateral framework, a distinction should be made between the *special relationship paradigm* and the *national interest orientation*.

The special relationship paradigm can be thought of as a cluster of broadly based attitudes and sentiments in American public opinion that underscore the affinity and similarity between the two states and societies in terms of their pioneering spirit, heterogeneous social composition and democratic values. By comparison, the national interest orientation is predicated upon a strategic vision of the vital regional interests that American policy makers continuously seek to maintain and defend (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 14).

During the Cold War era, the traditional objectives derived from these interests included (1) the desire to mitigate the [Arab-Israeli conflict](#), (2) the wish to maintain political and economic access to [Middle Eastern oil](#) and (3) the quest to increase American influence in the Middle East at the expense of the Soviet Union (but without risking a direct and highly-dangerous superpower confrontation).

In the course of the period that followed the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet empire (1990-2008), the goal of fighting terrorism and the forces of [Islamic fundamentalism](#) came to increasingly dominate American behavior. Concurrently, the desire to contain the considerably less threatening Russia in this new and revised setting largely subsided as a central American objective, particularly during the Clinton presidency.

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Having identified the two paradigms that continuously shaped American attitudes and policies toward Israel during the period under consideration, the following review will divide the period 1948-2008 into 6 distinctive phases that, in view of these two broad conceptions, determined the course and direction of American diplomacy in this sphere. Although this review will not seek to chronologically reconstruct all major events as they unfolded in the American-Israeli framework, it is hoped that by clarifying and explaining the basic factors that effect and shape this relationship, a higher level of understanding concerning the core determinants of this relationship will be achieved.

The Evolution of American Policy Toward Israel

Phase 1: 1948-1957

The special relationship paradigm emerged as a legitimate and pervasive concept as soon as Israel was established in 1948. Its ideological core was implicit in [President Harry Truman's](#) decision^[2] that the United States be the first country to recognize Israel. There is no doubt that this landmark decision was predicated upon moral, cultural and religious premises (such as the perception of Israel as fulfilling the Christian prophecy that the Jews would return to the promised land) rather than upon strictly geo-strategic national security considerations. These geo-strategic considerations, which were originally incompatible with the very essence of the special relationship paradigm, evolved around the recognition of the value of the region's oil resources to the West, and the consequent need to secure the support of the Arab Middle East against the backdrop of the British decision to disengage from parts of the area (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 16; Mart, 2006, p. 56).

For all its significance and magnitude, the decision to recognize Israel (which also reflected Truman's desire to win the Jewish vote in the November 1948 election) can be thought of in retrospect as an aberration of the *modus operandi* of both the Truman and the [Eisenhower](#) administrations in approaching the Middle East. Increasingly preoccupied with the need to contain Soviet penetration and encroachment, the Eisenhower presidency further expanded Truman's initial efforts to block a Soviet thrust into the Middle East by seeking to induce such pivotal powers as Egypt and Iraq to align themselves with the West by providing them generous military and economic support and assistance (Spiegel, 1985, p. 56).

The corollary, or by-product, of this posture was the emergence of an unbridgeable gap between the special relationship paradigm and the national interest orientation, which reflected a pervasive perception of the very essence of the special relationship paradigm as inherently incompatible with the promotion of American national security and core regional strategic interests (Ben-Zvi, 1998, p. 30).

Convinced that the pursuit of a pro-Israel policy predicated upon the logic and basic premises of the special relationship paradigm would compel the Arab world to defect to the Soviet orbit, the [Eisenhower administration](#) further reinforced and accelerated its predecessor's overall reserved attitude toward Israel, perceiving it initially as a strategic liability. As a result, not only was Israel excluded from the Baghdad Pact, which President Eisenhower began to construct as soon as he took office in January 1953, but it was also denied military aid, security guarantees and even some less tangible gestures of friendship and goodwill (Ben-Zvi, 1998, p. 30).

The imposition of comprehensive economic sanctions in both 1953 and 1956, the refusal to supply arms in the aftermath of a massive arms deal between Czechoslovakia and Egypt, and the delineation, in 1955, of a joint American-British peace plan (the Alpha Plan) which called for unilateral Israeli concessions in the Negev were the main components of President

Eisenhower's original policy in the Arab-Israeli zone. [\[sU1\]](#)

At the same time, the administration remained unresponsive during its first term to Israel's supporters. The administration depicted their sentiments as nothing more than politically motivated efforts that were initiated by "the Zionists in this country" to pressure the administration into supporting Israel at the direct expense of the national interest and the "welfare of the United States" (Dulles Papers, 1955).

Phase 2: 1957-1967

As indicated above, the first decade of American policy toward Israel was largely characterized by the perception of an irreconcilable gap between the special relationship paradigm and the national interest orientation. This gap was based upon the conviction, articulated most clearly by Secretary of State [John Foster Dulles](#) on February 11, 1956, that "backing Israel might be very costly to vital United States national interests" (Dulles Papers, 1956).

Oblivious to the wave of Arab nationalism and anti-Western sentiments that swept the Middle East, the Eisenhower administration remained irreversibly committed to its preliminary conviction that the strategy of distancing itself from Israel could still induce Egypt's [President Nasser](#) to pursue an accommodative posture toward the west and thus agree to join the [Baghdad Pact](#). The pursuit of such a reserved course was also expected to further reinforce the American effort "to win over... Saudi Arabia through aid ... and through concessions by London to Riyadh in a territorial dispute between the Saudis and one of the British Gulf protectorates" (Spiegel, 1985, p. 68).

It was only during the second half of the 1950s and against the backdrop of Egypt's decision to solidify its ties with the East, that the architects of American foreign and defense policy gradually came to realize that their initial hopes of consolidating a multilateral security alliance in the region that would effectively contain and deter Soviet encroachment could not be reconciled with the actual dynamics of the area, whose main actors remained hostile to American strategic interests and objectives. Consequently, there was no longer a need to secure the goodwill of such powers as Egypt and Syria by coercing Israel into territorial concessions and political isolation, or by imposing upon it comprehensive economic sanctions (Ben-Zvi, 2002, p. 13). With President Nasser refusing to even marginally deviate from this staunchly pro-Soviet policy despite all American overtures, a mood of distrust and disillusionment came to increasingly dominate American Thinking toward Cairo during Eisenhower's second term in the White House.

Indeed, with the acutely menacing vision of Arab defection to the Soviet orbit becoming partially realized despite the initial American course in the Arab-Israeli sphere, President Eisenhower became increasingly predisposed during his second term in the White House to reassess his view of Israel as a strategic liability and an impediment to the administration's regional interests and initiatives (Spiegel, 1985, p. 87), as Israel emerged as a power which - unlike its Arab neighbors - was prepared to protect and defend Western interest and strongholds in the region.

Against the backdrop of this changing landscape it is clear that, at least in its embryonic phase during the late 1950s and in the context of official Washington (albeit not in the broader context of American public opinion, which was overwhelmingly committed to a vision of affinity and similarity between the two states in terms of their commitment to identical values and pioneering spirit), the American-Israeli partnership reflected primarily a cluster of strategic views and considerations rather than ideological, religious, social or cultural attitudes predicated upon the special relationship paradigm. It was only during the

1960s that these attitudes and visions of shared values and legacies would become a significant determinant in the shaping of American policy toward Israel. This alliance also did not reflect any organizational or institutional efforts on the part of the traditional representatives of this orientation (particularly in the Congress and in the American Jewish community) to influence American policy in accordance with the basic premises of this paradigm

Faced with the bankruptcy of its early accommodative policy toward the Arab Middle East and impressed with Israel's military performance in the 1956 Sinai Campaign, the Eisenhower administration gradually abandoned its initial image of Israel as a strategic liability. Instead, it became increasingly predisposed to view the Jewish state as a power that could contribute toward the accomplishment of Washington's overriding objective of preventing the imminent collapse of remaining pro-Western strongholds in the region such as the [Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan](#) (Ben-Zvi, 2007, p. 15).

Not only was Israel, by virtue of its strategic interests, geographical proximity, and proven military capabilities increasingly depicted now as the only regional power that could assist the U.S. and Britain in their efforts to defend the besieged Jordanian monarchy, but it increasingly came to be looked upon in Washington as having considerable deterring and balancing potential *vis-à-vis* Egypt and Syria, (countries that were now viewed in Washington as the regional proxies of "International Communism" (Little, 2002, p. 93; Ben-Zvi, 1998, pp. 59-96; Ben-Zvi, 2007, pp. 31-53).

A major precipitant along the road of this perceptual change was the July 1958 Jordanian Crisis, which followed the April 1957 attempted *coup d'état* ("the Zerqa plot") against King Hussein^[3] and American military intervention in Lebanon. The crisis was the by-product of the Iraqi revolution of July 14, 1958, which brought an abrupt and violent end to the Iraqi branch of the Hashemite Monarchy. The revolution further exacerbated Hussein's security predicament. The King, who in early July managed to abort a military coup, now faced an acute threat from the new military regime in Baghdad, which had cut its oil supplies to Jordan. Syria also closed its border with Jordan (Ben-Zvi, 2007, p. 40).

Against the backdrop of this grave and imminent threat to [King Hussein's](#) regime, on July 17, the Eisenhower administration agreed to ship vital strategic materials to Jordan including petroleum, as part of a joint American-British airlift. Israel also played its own important part in the mission (Ben-Zvi, 2007, p. 40).

Although the role assigned to Israel in the operation of permitting the British and American airlifts into Jordan through its airspace may appear at first glance relatively insignificant, the lessons and inferences drawn in Washington from Israel's behavior were nonetheless profound by virtue of unequivocally demonstrating to the American leadership that the Israeli government could now be viewed as a reliable and credible strategic ally of the Western powers. With Saudi Arabia refusing to grant the U.S. and Britain over-flight rights or the use of the American airfield at Dhaharan, Israel now emerged in American thought as the only regional power "that was prepared to contribute, from its resources of spiritual strength and determination, to a stable international order" (FRUS, 1958, p. 58; Ben-Zvi, 1998, pp. 59-96; Ben-Zvi, 2007, pp. 31-53).

With this recognition of Israel's role as a reliable and valuable asset in the 1958 Crisis, at least some of the tension that had existed for a full decade between the respective premises of the special relationship paradigm and the national interest orientation began to fade into the background of the American-Israeli framework. Instead, a vision of basic compatibility and convergence between them emerged. This perception came to increasingly pervade the sphere of American-Israeli relations during the remaining Eisenhower period, although there

remained within the administration (particularly within the Department of State) vocal and powerful voices of resistance to this change and to its policy implications.

Clearly, in an environment in which the main Arab actors were either irreconcilably hostile to the West or, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, reluctant to become engaged in any containment design, there was no alternative to Washington's reliance upon Israel as a bulwark and guardian of American strategic interests in the region. Indeed, by providing a tangible, undisputed proof of Israel's *modus operandi*, the Jordanian Crisis was transcended beyond its original parameters and ultimately became a major yardstick for assessing Israel's role in the area, eventually (albeit not during Eisenhower's tenure as president) overshadowing and outweighing the traditional approach toward Israel, which was continuously advocated by the Middle Eastern experts of the Department of State despite the revised strategic landscape (Ben-Zvi, 2007, p. 41).

This revised view of Israel as a strategic asset, which came to dominate the administration's collective attitude in the aftermath of the July Crisis^[4] was manifested in numerous statements, messages and internal memoranda. It was most comprehensively articulated in a detailed policy-memorandum, which was submitted on August 19 to the National Security Council (NSC) by the NSC Planning Board. According to the memorandum:

It is doubtful whether any likely U.S. pressure on Israel would cause Israel to make concessions which would do much to satisfy Arab demands which - in the final analysis - may not be satisfied by anything short of the destruction of Israel. Moreover, if we choose to combat radical Arab nationalism and to hold Persian Gulf oil by force if necessary, then a logical corollary would be to support Israel as the only pro- West power left in the Near East (Eisenhower, 1958).

Despite this emerging perception of Israel as a key pro-Western bastion that was capable of effectively deterring Cairo's unabated regional ambitions, it soon became clear that a gap would continue to exist between images and actual American behavior. While the seeds of strategic collaboration between Washington and Jerusalem were planted in July 1958, the American-Israeli partnership remained largely embryonic during the remaining two and a half years of the Eisenhower era.

The public recognition of Israel's support during the Jordanian Crisis did not automatically lead the administration to abandon such tenets of its policy toward Israel as its long-standing refusal to supply advanced weapons systems to Ben Gurion's government. The Department of State remained adamantly opposed to the sale of arms to Israel despite Israel's apparent vulnerability to an Egyptian air strike. Thus, in March 1960, Secretary of State Christian Herter rejected Israel's request to purchase defensive Hawk short-range, anti-aircraft missiles. [President John F. Kennedy](#) overruled his State Department in August 1962, finally closing the gap between perceptions and actual policy (Ben-Zvi, 2002). The president was motivated by several strategic and political considerations, including his desire to balance the Soviet supply - in late 1960 - of the advanced MIG-9 interceptors and the IL-28 light bombers to Egypt (which increased Israel's vulnerability to a surprise Egyptian air attack), and his wish to compensate Israel for the accommodative policy that he pursued toward Egypt (particularly in the economic sphere). Furthermore, the fact that - by 1962 - Israel had already become a proven strategic asset in Washington helped diminish and downgrade - in Kennedy's mind - the magnitude and significance of the Hawk decision as a precedent.

With the power of the Department of State and its Middle East experts - "the Arabists" - vastly reduced during the Kennedy presidency and with the Department of Defense's full support of the Hawk sale in light of Israel's continued vulnerability to Egyptian air-strikes, President Kennedy was able to revise, at long last, the American traditional arms sales policy

toward Israel. In August 1962, the Hawk deal was settled, closing the gap not only between the perception of Israel as a strategic asset and the specific operational posture derived from this recognition, but also between the basic premises of the special relationship paradigm and the national interest orientation. Support for Israel could now be justified on ideological, social, cultural, religious and politically strategic grounds. The fact that "President Kennedy identified on both a personal and political level with the young Jewish state and the values that drove its rapid social, economic and political development in its early years of independence" (Goldman, 2008, p. 4) was, therefore, another factor (patterned on the special relationship paradigm), which converged with his determination to restore the balance of military capabilities between Egypt and Israel (and thus help alleviate the legitimate security concerns of the strategically valuable Israel).

While the Kennedy era also witnessed a severe confrontation between Washington and Jerusalem, which surfaced in the spring of 1963 as a result of Kennedy's demand that Israel open its newly-constructed nuclear plant in Dimona for periodic and intrusive international inspections (Cohen, 1998, p. 156), it was the decision to sell Israel the Hawk missile that left its durable mark on the evolution of [American-Israeli relations](#). Four years after Israel had demonstrated its strategic value to the West, the Kennedy administration moved to augment the perceptual change with concrete action, paving the way for Israel to become the recipient of sophisticated American weaponry in the following years.

Once the precedent of selling advanced weapons systems to Israel had been established it became easier for future presidents to cope with the remaining pockets of resistance within the administration (in particular within the Office of Near Eastern Affairs in the Department of State) that remained oblivious to the changing strategic landscape and to Israel's role as defender of Western interests in the area. These Department of State officials continued to adhere to their preconceived convictions concerning the dangers to American regional interests seemingly inherent in the provision of sophisticated weapons to Israel. The 1965 sale of 210 M-48A Patton tanks and the 1966 sale of 100 Skyhawk fighter-bombers exemplified the new arms-sales policy – a policy that helped Israel to achieve victory in the 1967 War. (Ben-Zvi, 2002, p. 3).

And although the actual politics of arms sales to Israel continued to be, during the entire Johnson era, fraught with crisis and controversy, (Bard, 1988, p. 55) with the Department of State (and, in the context of the sale of the F-4 Phantom fighter-bomber, the Pentagon as well) repeatedly attempting to prevent the transactions altogether or to link the supply of such weapons systems as the M-48 A tank, the Skyhawk fighter-bomber and the F-4 Phantom fighter-bomber, to certain Israeli commitments, concessions and reciprocal moves (in connection with the nuclear field and with the sale of American arms to Jordan), these heated debates invariably ended in the president's decision to authorize each sale on terms that guaranteed that vital Israeli security concerns and interests would not be jeopardized or compromised (Ben-Zvi, 2004).

Phase 3: 1967-1981

Although the regional groundwork for the establishment of the American-Israeli alliance had been laid almost a full decade before the 1967 crisis started to unfold, the Six Day War provided a major impetus for further accelerating this process of alliance-formation. The cumulative outcome of this phased, gradual development was the post-war establishment of a de facto security alliance between Washington and Jerusalem that was predicated upon "common political, ideological, security and strategic interests" (Bar-Siman-Tov 1998, p. 232).

Contrary to the coercive and punitive tactics that were used by the Eisenhower administration

vis-à-vis the Ben Gurion government during the 1956 Sinai Campaign, President Johnson, who shared the cultural and social premises that formed the core of the special relationship paradigm, ultimately acquiesced (despite his fears of escalation) in Israel's decision to preempt as soon as he realized that all diplomatic efforts to prevent war were doomed to failure (Shalom, 2007).

Similarly, in the immediate aftermath of the War, President Johnson - who was profoundly impressed with the performance of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in the War - repeatedly underscored the need to link any Israeli withdrawal from "her territorial gains" in the Six-Day War to tangible and meaningful "Arab diplomatic concessions" to Israel (Spiegel, 1985, p. 153).

It is clear, therefore, that the period following the War witnessed a full compatibility between the special relationship paradigm and the national interest orientation. This compatibility came with mounting indications of support for, and identification with, Israel in American public opinion converging with a strategic landscape that could now be defined in terms of a new patron-client relationship between Washington and Jerusalem (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1998).

Inspired by the magnitude of Israel's victory in the War, a variety of Jewish and non-Jewish groups as well as Israel's Congressional allies and supporters became increasingly assertive and outspoken. Their activities and actions during this period helped establish the basic institutional and organizational infrastructure of the special relationship paradigm (Ben-Zvi, 2004, p. 118). This growing willingness of the core representatives of the special relationship paradigm to openly support Israel was clearly manifested in the course of the difficult and protracted bargaining that took place between the Eshkol government and the Johnson administration over the sale of the F-4 Phantom fighter-bomber to Israel. In the face of fierce bureaucratic opposition to the sale, which originated primarily in the Pentagon and the Department of the State (Bard, 1988, p. 55), "the pro-Israeli forces mounted a campaign of their own in 1968" (Spiegel, 1985, p. 161). As Spiegel further observes, "A variety of non-Jewish organizations also endorsed the sale, including Americans for Democratic Action, the American Legion, and the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations]. ...AIPAC [American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee] was active. It obtained statements supporting the sale from every presidential candidate and successfully lobbied for favorable planks at each party convention" (Spiegel, 1985, p. 161). Concurrently, on the strategic level, the War dramatically reinforced the President's vision of Israel as a reliable bulwark in the American effort to contain the global forces of radicalism and their regional proxies. Thus, Israel was seen as a major asset to the West - a vision that was irreconcilably juxtaposed with President Johnson's image of President Nasser as "unreliable and untrustworthy" (Johnson, 1968).

An even more dramatic illustration of how consensual the American-Israeli framework had become, and of the extent to which the U.S. was now prepared to collaborate with Israel, is provided by an examination of the September 1970 Jordanian Crisis.

Through this accelerated process of consolidation, expansion and institutionalization of the American-Israeli alliance, which became increasingly evident during the post-1967 period, it was the Jordanian theater that continued to be the prism through which Israel's value in protecting and defending American interests in the region could be most clearly recognized. The post-war period provided the impetus for further upgrading and expanding the relationship. Specifically, following the massive Syrian invasion of Jordan in 1970, the Nixon Administration embarked upon new and unprecedented forms of security cooperation with the Israeli government of [Golda Meir](#). Together they intended to compel Syria to withdraw its troops from the occupied Irbid area.

Seeking once again to prevent the imminent collapse of the pro-Western King Hussein, Washington and Jerusalem quickly moved to upgrade the level of their bilateral strategic cooperation by inaugurating such measures as joint contingency planning, extensive and real-time intelligence sharing, and the pursuit, on the part of the [IDF](#), of a strong deterrence strategy on the Israeli-Syrian border along the Golan Heights.

This deterrence strategy was most clearly manifested in the massive mobilization drive, started by the IDF on September 18 that threatened to outflank the Syrian contingent in Jordan. The move contributed to Damascus's decision to begin its military disengagement from Jordan on September 22 (Ben-Zvi, 2007, p. 77). This mobilization effort was accompanied by a welter of strong American statements, warning both Syria and its Soviet patron that unless the Syrian contingent stopped its advance into Jordan, Israel would retaliate by launching both ground and air operations against the invading Syrian forces (Kissinger, 1979, p. 626; Ashton, 2008, p. 152).

Although, because of Jordan's successful counteroffensive, Israel was not needed to carry out the intervention, its role in the Crisis helped to further consolidate and reinforce, its image as a reliable and valuable strategic asset and an indispensable guardian of American interests in the region (Ashton, 2008, p. 155). In the words of Yitzhak Rabin, who was Israel's Ambassador in Washington during the Crisis :

Nixon and [Kissinger](#) came out of the Crisis with a new appreciation of Israel's willingness and capacity to act on behalf of common American and Israeli strategic interests in the Middle East. The availability of Israeli forces, when the adequacy of U.S. military capability was questionable, put new light on Israel's potential as a strategic asset (Rabin, 1979, p. 189. See also Dowty, 1984, p. 178).

Against the backdrop of the "Nixon Doctrine,"^[5] there was no feasible alternative to this reliance upon Israeli deterrence power and intervention threats as a means of "preventing the deterioration in Jordan and in blocking the attempt to overthrow the regime there" (Rabin, 1979, p. 189).

With the September 1970 Jordanian Crisis providing the opportunity for Israel to demonstrate its unwavering commitment to its embattled Eastern neighbor, there was no longer any need for additional proof of Israel's strategic value in the American effort to contain the forces of Arab radicalism and their Soviet patron. Thus, the American-Israeli alliance assumed a life of its own and could further develop and expand on its own intrinsic merits without needing to prove its continued viability and usefulness.

The new appreciation for Israel's strategic role in the region prompted the Nixon administration to increase the level of military and economic aid to Israel. The strengthening of these strategic bonds was accompanied by a reluctance to pressure Israel to soften its opposition to the peace initiative launched by Secretary of State William Rogers in December 1969. Rogers was also undermined by Kissinger who was convinced that, in the absence of any Arab willingness to compromise, the exertion of American pressure upon Israel could only benefit the Soviet Union. Kissinger preferred to delay any major diplomatic drive until the regional setting became more conducive to such efforts.

This pattern was finally modified in the aftermath of the October 1973 War when American diplomacy became focused on incrementally defusing the Arab-Israeli conflict. For Kissinger, one of the key changes in the environment was Egyptian [President Anwar Sadat](#)'s willingness to deviate from his predecessor's exclusive reliance upon the Soviet Union as a source of military and political support. This presented an opening to induce Egypt to upgrade and consolidate its relations with the United States at the direct expense of the Soviet Union

(Miller, 2007, p. 227).

The administration still hoped to reconcile this new peace-making effort with its preliminary vision of Israel as a valuable strategic asset. The fact that the desire to consolidate Washington's new strategic partnership with Egypt called upon Israel to make territorial concessions, however, became a major source of friction and strain between Washington and Jerusalem and the relationship was temporarily clouded.

In his quest to mediate an Egyptian-Israeli accord in the Sinai Peninsula^[6] in late 1974, Secretary Kissinger fully accepted the Egyptian position. This position demanded a unilateral Israeli withdrawal in the Sinai Peninsula without a reciprocal political move on Egypt's part as a precondition for reaching an agreement. Israel's refusal, however, to withdraw to the Mitla and Gidi passes without an Egyptian compensatory move was viewed as an impediment to the development of closer ties between Washington and Cairo. To pressure the Israelis, President Gerald Ford and Secretary Kissinger announced in March 1975 their intention to "reassess" relations with Israel. On the tactical level, the reassessment policy consisted of several measures that were intended to coerce Israel into signing an agreement with Egypt despite its asymmetrical nature. The ploy was undermined, however, when 76 U.S. Senators wrote a letter to Ford on May 22, 1975, reaffirming the importance of the U.S.-Israel relationship and opposing any withdrawal of support for Israel.

The United States' willingness, in the spring of 1975, to favor the newly established partnership with Sadat's Egypt over its relationship with Israel exposed a gap between the respective premises of the special relationship paradigm and the national interest orientation, albeit in a considerably more muted and mitigated fashion than the highly-charged 1956 episode. Indeed, whereas the 1956 Crisis unfolded against the depiction of the Ben Gurion government as a strategic liability by the Eisenhower administration, the reassessment policy of 1975 unfolded in a considerably more benign atmosphere and never threatened to either adversely affect the core of the special relationship or to escalate into a fundamental reassessment of Israel's overall strategic role in the region in the post-1973 environment.

Faced with a recalcitrant and angry Congress, the [Ford administration](#) was forced to abandon its reassessment policy and to compensate Israel for the unilateral concessions it was still called upon to make to Egypt. Indeed, the American-Israeli Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which accompanied the second Sinai Agreement on September 1, 1975, incorporated several far-reaching guarantees of a political and strategic nature to Israel, including the commitment not to recognize the PLO as long as it did not recognize Israel's right to exist and did not accept Security Council Resolution 242. It was these American commitments that convinced Prime Minister Rabin to eventually sign the Sinai Accord.

An effort by President Jimmy Carter on October 1, 1977, to compel Israel to understand that there could be no peace without the PLO^[7] fared no better than the reassessment initiative. As was the case in 1975, Carter's coercive drive, designed to force Israel to accept the PLO as a negotiating partner at the Geneva Peace Conference was unsuccessful. Specifically, seeking to convene the Geneva Peace Conference for the purpose of concluding comprehensive settlement before the end of 1977 (and faced with an adamant Israeli refusal to negotiate with the PLO, which was engaged in massive terrorist activity against Israeli civilians), the [Carter administration](#) embarked upon a new initiative, which was designed to confront the Israel government with a unified superpower position in the form of a joint statement on the parameters of regional peace in the Middle East. It was expected that the document, which called for "ensuring the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 114), would force Israel to face up to the "fact" that there could be no peace without the participation of the PLO (although the October 1 statement did not directly refer to the PLO, President Carter's well-known and frequently expressed-view was that it was the

only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people). The president's expectations failed to materialize. Faced not only with an unwavering Israeli refusal to comply with the Palestinian terms of the October 1 document, but also with an equally recalcitrant and defiant domestic public opinion (which was critical of both the administration's effort to coerce Israel, and the invitation to the Soviet Union - embedded in the collaborative superpower initiative - to reenter the Middle East as an equal sponsor of the peace process), the embattled administration quickly came to realize that it lacked the necessary support to exert effective pressure upon Israel to acquiesce and accept the PLO as a negotiating party at Geneva (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 115). As a result, American Middle East diplomacy was forced to shift gears and fundamentally revise the October 1 document in a way which stripped it of any coercive meaning or intention (Spiegel, 1985, p. 338).

In this highly-charged atmosphere, and against the backdrop of the storm of domestic protest, that greeted the October 1 superpower communiqué, the conclusion - on October 5, 1977 - of the American-Israeli working paper, can be viewed as a partial repudiation of the basic premises of the American-Soviet initiative. Above all, by virtue of stating that UN Resolution 242 (which addressed the Palestinian problem in humanitarian rather than political terms and was omitted from the October 1 document) remained the only basis for negotiations at Geneva, the working paper, with one stroke, stripped the October 1 initiative of any new political significance (Spiegel, 1985, p. 338; Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 120). Although the American-Israeli working paper still called for Palestinian participation at the Geneva gathering (which, in the end, was never convened), it specifically reconfirmed the 1975 MOU to Israel according to which any new participant at Geneva would have to be endorsed by all the parties, including Israel. Less than two months after the superpower document was released in Washington and Moscow, President Sadat's dramatic peace initiative came to overshadow Carter's energetic efforts.

Contrary to Secretary Kissinger's effort to predicate his peace-making drive in the Egyptian-Israeli sphere upon the notion of gradualism, President Carter adopted a considerably more ambitious and optimistic approach in an attempt to simultaneously tackle all the root-causes of the Arab-Israeli predicament. Carter did not wish to segment the various facets of the dispute into separate components. Rather, he emphasized the need to focus on the Palestinian problem as an integral part of the overall peace-making effort.

Despite the president's unbounded optimism and his conviction that even highly-charged and multifaceted disputes such as the Arab-Israeli conflict could be resolved with one stroke through his mediation skills, his failure to convene the desired multilateral peace conference, and his ill-fated effort of October 1, 1977, to involve the Soviet Union in the peace-making process, angered and frustrated President Sadat. The Egyptian president, who defected from the Soviet sphere of influence and embarked upon a pro-American posture, was deeply disappointed with Carter's attempt to turn the clock back by inviting the Soviets to reenter the Middle East diplomatic scene (and with the president's apparent inability to proceed toward peace). As a result, President Sadat decided to forgo the ineffective American mediation and, instead, to proceed unilaterally toward peace with Israel.^[8] His dramatic peace initiative, which was launched in November 1977, ultimately led President Carter to adopt Kissinger's step-by-step approach as the only viable method for proceeding toward peace between Egypt and Israel. While the president never abandoned his desire to use the Egyptian-Israeli peace process as an impetus for reaching a broader Palestinian-Israeli accord, he ultimately had to acquiesce in the face of Israel's irreversible refusal to proceed beyond the delimited boundaries of its November 1977 Autonomy Plan.^[9] Indeed, while Carter's relentless quest for comprehensive peace remained a constant source of tension in American-Israeli relations even after the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, this strain did not impact either the core of the special relationship paradigm or the national interest orientation

during Carter's tenure in the White House (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 121).

Phase 4: 1981-1991

[SU2] It was only during the Reagan era, beginning on January 20, 1981, that a gap between the two paradigms surfaced for the first time since the early 1950s.

The Reagan years (January 1981-January 1989) were characterized by an asymmetrical, twofold process within the American-Israeli framework. It became increasingly clear that at least a few of the components incorporated into the special relationship paradigm began to fade into the background in the wake of such events as the 1982 Lebanon War and the first *Intifada*; both of which exposed discrepancies between Israel's apparent *modus operandi* in these episodes, and the preexisting image of Israel as a small, courageous and democratic nation, trying to preserve its independence in the face of acute security threats. The bombing of West Beirut, and the killings in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian camps^[10] in the course of the Lebanon War, along with some of the military tactics Israel used in trying to suppress the first *Intifada*, precipitated an erosion in several (albeit not the most central) components of the special relationship paradigm during the 1980s (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 157).

Concurrent with this development, however, it became increasingly evident during the 1980s that "strategic cooperation between Washington and Jerusalem developed on a separate path from the diplomatic relationship. " This alternate path of cooperation helped to counterbalance the adverse impact that the partial erosion of the special relationship paradigm might have had upon the very core of this dyad (Gold, 1988).

With the traditional propensity of most Americans "to cite primarily moral and emotional reasons for their support of Israel" (Blitzer, 1985, p. 72) progressively diminishing in this relationship, it was thus the strategic dimension that increasingly emerged during the 1980s as the dominant basis of the American-Israeli alliance.

Among the major milestones of the continuously expanding security ties between Washington and Jerusalem were the October 1983 NSC Directive 3 (NSDD-3), which reinstated and further expanded forms of strategic collaboration after the November 1981 Memorandum of Understanding; the November 1983 American-Israeli agreement on the establishment of a formal Joint Political Military Group (JPMG) to discuss such strategic issues as combined planning, joint exercises, and requirements for placement of American equipment in Israel; the May 1986 decision of the Reagan administration to include Israel in the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) research and development program; and the December 1987 MOU that formally designated Israel as a major non-NATO ally (Gold, 1992).

Derived from Reagan's initial desire to contain and challenge Soviet influence in the Middle East, this willingness to incorporate Israel into Washington's overall strategic designs in the region reflected the president's vision of a basic compatibility and convergence between the special relationship paradigm and the national interest orientation, despite the partial gap between them, which became manifested during the Lebanon War and the *Intifada*. As a result, unwilling to weaken and alienate a major strategic asset, President Reagan limited his disapproving reaction to some of the Israeli actions in the course of the Lebanon War to a few largely symbolic sanctions involving a few selected weapons that were particularly open to domestic criticism, such as cluster bombs^[11] Meanwhile, the administration did not interrupt the flow of most military equipment to Israel or seek to inflict substantial damage upon Israel's economy or overall military capability (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 147).

Indeed, the fact that American-Israeli relations were still characterized during the Reagan era

by a broad spectrum of compatible elements, helped to ultimately defuse the crises that occasionally strained this framework, particularly in the context of the Lebanon War. After all, it was clear that President Reagan shared most initial Israeli war objectives in Lebanon, including the destruction of the PLO's strongholds and military infrastructure in Southern Lebanon and Beirut; the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon and the establishment of a stable and viable pro-Western government in Beirut, along with the subsequent weakening of the PLO's grip on the [West Bank](#) and the [Gaza Strip](#).

In conclusion, the crises that occasionally strained and clouded the scene of American-Israeli relations in the 1980s developed in an essentially benign and harmonious environment. This reality guaranteed that the punishment inflicted upon Israel would not threaten to undermine the core of the relationship since Israel was continuously looked upon as an important strategic asset. Furthermore, when the special relationship paradigm began to lose part of its broad public appeal, the stage was set for proponents of the national interest orientation to fill the vacuum by providing a set of compelling strategic arguments as the main justification for solidifying the posture of supporting Israel politically, economically and militarily. The effort to predicate the American-Israeli partnership upon a cluster of purely strategic premises was successful over the course of the 1980s. Closely patterned on President Reagan's initial bipolar confrontational world view, this perception of Israel as a bulwark and a military offset to the Soviet Union emerged as the administration's dominant perspective. It culminated in a series of bilateral memoranda of understanding on strategic cooperation and the overall proliferation of security ties between Washington and Jerusalem. Fully and irrevocably committed to the premises of the special relationship paradigm and to the vision of Israel as an important strategic asset, the strongly pro-Israeli Reagan was determined not to allow specific disagreements and disputes with Israel to adversely affect the very core of the relationship.

Although [President George H.W. Bush](#) did view Israel as a strategic asset and was highly appreciative of its continued pursuit, during the first Gulf War, of a low profile strategy of restraint despite the Iraq's launching of SCUD missiles on its population centers, he resorted to pressure tactics in February 1992 in an effort to soften Prime Minister's [Yitzhak Shamir](#)'s approach to the settlements issue.

Seeking to take full advantage of the fact that significant segments of the Jewish-American leadership were highly critical of Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank, President Bush demanded that Israel unconditionally agree to indefinitely freeze all settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as a precondition for receiving the much needed \$10 billion in housing loan guarantees that the Israeli government requested to accommodate the wave of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. ^[12] This new linkage strategy further aggravated a situation in American-Israeli relation, which had already been fraught with tension and controversy. This tension resulted from the administration's determination to extract from Israel significant political concessions in the Palestinian sphere in return for the loan guarantees. Not only was Israel called upon to negotiate (in the Madrid Middle East Conference, which the administration convened in October 1991) with Palestinians who did not reside in the West Bank but who nonetheless were included in the Palestinian working committees on refugees and economic cooperation, but the Shamir government had to cope with expressions of harshness and irreconcilability on the part of President Bush and his outspoken and bellicose Secretary of State, James Baker. A major landmark along this confrontational road was President Bush's press conference of September 12, 1991, which most clearly and quintessentially exposed his belligerent attitude toward Israel. In his remarks, the president argued that Israel's supporters on Capitol Hill were exclusively motivated by a narrow and particularist cluster of domestic political considerations which, in his view, were incompatible with the American national interest. By drawing this dichotomy between "American security" and "the powerful political forces," with which he was

confronted, president Bush clearly attempted to question the very legitimacy of the lobbying activity in favor of the Israeli request for loan guarantees, and thus to turn the clock back to the Eisenhower era (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 204).

At the end of the day, unwilling to confront the president over the highly controversial issue of Israel's settlement activity, most representatives of the special relationship paradigm in the Jewish community and in the Congress either openly supported or quietly acquiesced in Bush's new linkage posture. The result was that the Israeli government found itself deprived of much of its traditional base of support in American public opinion which had, in the past, effectively constrained Washington's margin of maneuverability in the Arab-Israeli sphere.

Indeed, Shamir's last-ditch effort to secure at least a portion of the requested loan without complying with the new American precondition proved futile and he ultimately remained empty-handed, with the entire issue temporarily suspended. Ultimately, while the "freezing strategy" did not precipitate any change in Shamir's long-standing, deeply-held approach the settlements issue, it significantly exacerbated his domestic difficulties on the eve of the June 23, 1992, parliamentary election, as the Israeli prime minister appeared incapable of adequately addressing the most urgent needs of the new immigrants. There is no doubt that his defeat in the election can be attributed in no small measure to the de-facto American intervention in the campaign, which played into the hands of his opponent Yitzhak Rabin. It was only with the formation of a Labor government in the wake of the Israeli parliamentary elections of June 1992 and the subsequent inauguration of a more selective settlement policy by the new Rabin government that the Bush administration decided to approve the Israeli request for loan guarantees without insisting on the complete suspension of all building in the West Bank, but did deduct from the guarantees the cost of construction in the settlements above a specified ceiling (Ben-Zvi, 1993, p. 206).

Phase 5 :1991-2001

During the early phases of the Cold War, the overriding American desire to forge an inter-Arab coalition for the purpose of containing Soviet penetration led the Eisenhower Administration to adopt a highly reserved policy toward Israel. Fearing that any effort to make Israel a strategic ally was bound to drive major Arab powers into the Soviet Bloc and thus jeopardize the containment enterprise, American policy tilted toward the Arab position on a variety of issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict and its resolution. Four decades later, in a vastly revised global and regional setting, it was no longer essential to solicit the goodwill of the Arab world to promote the objective of containment. Likewise, the umbrella of Russian support and backing of such actors as Syria eroded markedly and no trace was left of this initial vision, from which specific courses of action and policies toward Israel were delineated in the early 1950s. The end of the Cold War left the United States in a position of undisputed dominance in the Middle East. This new hegemonic reality was manifested - in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict - in October 1991, when the Bush administration convened the Madrid Conference, which was intended to set in motion an accelerated peace process on both the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian tracks.

[Bill Clinton](#) was elected as president one year after the Madrid process had been inaugurated and initially approached the Palestinian predicament with relative equanimity against the backdrop of the new unipolar setting (which minimized the danger that regional disputes and crises would escalate into acutely-threatening global conflagrations). He became a strong supporter of both the September 1993 Oslo Accords and the October 1994 [Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty](#) (both of which originated in the region rather than in Washington) (Dowty, 2005, p. 142).

Furthermore, when it became evident that the Oslo Accords, which for the first time

established a framework for comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians (including Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza) (Dowty, 2005, p. 142), could not be easily implemented (particularly as a result of the fact that the PLO - which recognized Israel in the Oslo Accords - nevertheless refused to amend the [Palestinian Covenant](#), which called for the destruction of the Jewish state), the Clinton administration was forced to intensify and expand its role as mediator and guarantor in subsequent years. Indeed, in the negotiations which led to the conclusion, in September 1995, of the Palestinian-Israeli Interim Agreement (Oslo II); to the signing, in January 1997, of the Hebron Agreement between Israel and the [PLO](#); and to the conclusion, in October 1998, of the [Wye Accords](#), the American role was crucial. In all three instances, the commitments and guarantees that the administration provided to Israel as compensation for the unilateral concessions that it was called upon to make to the PLO in proceeding toward a permanent Palestinian settlement, supplemented the agreements as indispensable "positive sanctions."

Viewing Israel as a strong and reliable asset in the intensifying confrontation against the Islamic forces of radicalism, President Clinton was clearly reluctant - throughout his eight years in the White House - to resort to tactics of pressure and punishment in his quest to modify Israeli positions in the Palestinian area, even on those occasions when he disagreed with specific Israeli actions. Instead, the president continuously preferred to use the tactics of persuasion and compensation in negotiating with successive Israeli governments (Ben-Zvi, 2000, p. 14).

The last instance of American involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute during the Clinton era, which exposed an acquiescent pattern of behavior in the face of inflexible and irreconcilable Palestinian positions, was the [Camp David Conference](#) of July 2000. With his tenure approaching its end, President Clinton - who fully supported the far-reaching Israeli proposals (initiated by Prime Minister Ehud Barak) to reach a final and comprehensive settlement with the Palestinians (which would allow for the establishment of a Palestinian state in no less than 97 percent of the West Bank) - nonetheless remained passive in the face of Yasir Arafat's intransigence and refusal to reciprocate Barak's accommodative approach and sweeping concessions (Dowty, 2005, p. 154).

Phase 6: 2001-2008 : Concluding Remarks

American policy toward Israel during [President George W. Bush's](#) tenure (January 2001-January 2009), derived directly from the traumatic experience of September 11, 2001. These terrorist attacks provided a major impetus for further strengthening and solidifying the strategic, as well as cultural and ideological bond, between the two allies, which were threatened by different agents of the same axis of terror. Indeed, the fact that both the Bush Administration and an overwhelming majority of the American public continued to view Israel - throughout the second *Intifada* - as a victim state that, like the U.S., confronted the challenge of international terrorism, helped to reinvigorate the U.S.-Israel partnership and reinforced the image of two democracies under siege in this very real, highly-menacing clash of civilizations.

Under these circumstances, with the emergence of a large segment of the Christian Evangelist community as a new and powerful representative of the special relationship paradigm, a vision of harmony between the ideological and strategic sources of support of Israel came once again to dominate the landscape of American-Israeli relations, overshadowing any sources of friction and tension in this overwhelmingly consensual framework.

The combination of the war on terror with Bush's belief that engaging in Middle East diplomacy would be ineffective, and a solution to the conflict unlikely, led him to initially

assign a low priority to the Palestinian issue. Unlike the reserved - and occasionally highly-critical approach toward Israel (particularly in connection with the Palestinian issue) - that characterized his father's tenure as president, George W. Bush openly and vigorously backed Israel in its military operations against [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon (in 2006) and [Hamas](#) in Gaza (in 2008). On those occasions when the president was drawn into the peace-making process, he invariably attempted to steer it in a direction that was compatible with his preexisting attitude toward Israel.

A clear illustration of this approach was evident on April 14, 2004, when the president, in a letter to Israeli Prime Minister [Ariel Sharon](#), asserted that any permanent Palestinian-Israeli settlement should reflect the current demographic realities in the West Bank; namely, the existence of both urban and agricultural blocs of Israeli settlements in the area. While fully compatible with the notion of territorial trade-offs between these pockets of Israeli settlements and certain territories inside the "green line," Bush's position represented a dramatic break with previous American peace initiatives, such as the [Rogers Plan](#) of December 1969, which was predicated upon the notion of a near-total Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in June 1967 as a necessary precondition for permanent peace. Combined with the Bush Administration's supportive course during the second [Lebanon War](#) in 2006, this about-face of the traditional American approach to the Palestinian situation injected new life into the American-Israeli alliance.

It remains to be seen whether the [Obama administration](#) will continue to be fully and irrevocably committed to the consensual premises of this relationship and whether he will seek to broaden his administration's margin of maneuverability in his quest to accomplish the elusive goal of permanent peace between Israel and the Palestinians. It similarly remains to be seen whether President Obama's emphasis on diplomatic rather than military means and tactics will lead him to seek accommodation with Iran and Syria at Israel's expense, thus inaugurating a significantly less harmonious chapter in the history of the American-Israeli alliance.

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[1] The French-Israeli alliance was strictly based upon a short-lived compatibility in terms of the mutual desire to contain the resurgent and recalcitrant forces of Nasserism but faded into the background as soon as the tension between France and Egypt had abated (following the termination of the Algerian War),

[2] Truman made his decision despite the irrevocable opposition of Secretary of State George Marshall and his entire foreign policy entourage, including Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett, and the head of the Near East Division in the Department of State, Loy Henderson.

[3] The plot was led by Ali Abu Nuwar, the Chief of the Jordanian General Staff, who joined hands with several Syrian army officers with full Egyptian backing.

[4] The Jordanian Crisis gradually subsided as King Hussein slowly managed to regain control of his Kingdom

[5] The "Nixon Doctrine" was predicated upon the notion that local allies rather than American troops will carry the main burden of challenging Soviet proxies in third-area crises and wars

[6] Kissinger looked upon the conclusion of such an agreement as the panacea for accomplishing a wide-range of both regional and global objectives, including the strengthening of American-Egyptian ties and the concurrent undermining of the overall strategic standing in the region.

[7] The PLO was incorporated into the 1 October joint American-Soviet statement on the Middle East as an official organization representing the Palestinian people.

[8] When President Sadat launched his unilateral peace initiative, he already knew that, in return for peace, Israel would be willing to return to Egypt the entire Sinai Peninsula. In November 1977, against the backdrop of President Carter's apparent weakness, this unilateral approach became more attractive for him than the multilateral Geneva option, which ruled out the possibility of a separate Egyptian-Israeli settlement by insisting on the simultaneous resolution of all components of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Spiegel, 1985, p. 340).

[9] The Autonomy Plan was incorporated into the Palestinian component of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1977.

[10] Israel was held responsible for these killings by virtue of the fact that it controlled the area.

[11] In July 1982, Regan suspended the scheduled transfer to Israel of 4,000 155 mm shells of cluster-bomb units because their use in areas where military units intermingled with the civilian population could have caused a high civilian death toll.

[12] This demand constituted a reversal of the Bush administration's initial policy of demanding that the loan guarantees should not be used-directly or indirectly-for settlement activity in the West Bank.

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