The Impact of U.S. Policy in the Middle East

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One of the distinguishing characteristics of a superpower is that its perspective, policy, and impact are global rather than merely regional. But there are four basic interests that make the Middle East an area of special importance and special responsibility for American policymakers. First and foremost is the need to contain Soviet influence, check Soviet expansion, and limit the number of Soviet clients in the area. Second, and of growing significance since 1973, has been the need to preserve Western access to the oil of the Gulf, an area containing two-thirds of the world's known petroleum reserves. A third American interest is to limit Arab radicalism and sustain the moderate and pro-Western regimes in the Middle East and the Gulf. Last, but not least, is the long-standing and deeply felt commitment to Israel's security and well-being.

There is a high degree of consensus within the American foreign policy establishment on the importance of the first three interests, but there is much less agreement on how they relate to the fourth one. There is no clear understanding, let alone a consensus, on how to reconcile America's interests in relation to the Soviets, oil, and the Arabs with its commitment to Israel. Much of the ambiguity, abrupt shifts, and outright contradictions

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that have marred American policy toward the Middle East stem from these contradictory interests.

U.S. policymakers have found it immensely difficult, if not impossible, to devise a policy toward the Middle East that would serve the full range of U.S. interests. Since the first three interests are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing, it would be relatively easy to devise a strategy for furthering all of them simultaneously. The one interest that cannot be easily fit into an overall framework is the commitment to Israel. Ideological affinity with the Jewish state is reinforced by the argument, propounded by influential American Jews as well as non-Jews, that Israel constitutes a strategic asset, a bulwark against Soviet penetration and a cornerstone of regional order. Attempts have also been made to develop a comprehensive regional strategy for the United States with Israel as its linchpin. But none of these attempts has been successful in the long run since they were, in effect, attempts to square a circle. In view of the profound antagonism between Israel and the Arabs, America's identification with Israel was bound to arouse widespread Arab hostility toward the United States and drive some Arab regimes into the arms of Moscow.

Since America's four basic interests cannot easily be reconciled and since close identification with Israel has adverse effects on America's standing in the region, one would have expected American policymakers to establish a definite ceiling beyond which they would not be prepared to go in support of their ally. But in practice it has been equally difficult to establish some sort of balance between the different strands of American policy. The commitment to Israeli security, largely for domestic political reasons, has all too frequently outweighed the other considerations. As one observer has concluded:

The issue is essentially domestic—what it comes down to, in concrete terms, is that, owing to the unmatched influence of the Israeli lobby in American politics, Israeli security (or, more exactly, the conceptions of Israeli security held by incumbent Israeli governments) has been permitted to preempt other vital interests in American policy. This, rather than the undoubted complexity of the issues, or the strategic, economic, or moral stakes of one case as opposed to another, has been the root cause of a chronically unbalanced policy that, despite certain tactical successes, remains a strategic failure.¹

A brief survey of the evolution of the relationship between the United States and Israel since 1948 serves a double purpose. It both exposes the contradictions that plague U.S. policy toward the Middle East and illuminates the impact of that policy on the region.² Of the institutions
involved in the formulation and conduct of U.S. policy toward the Middle East, Congress is the most susceptible to the influence of the Israeli lobby, while the bureaucracy is the least susceptible; but it is the presidency that holds the key. American foreign policy can be understood only by studying the ideas, attitudes, and preferences of the men at the top, the president and his White House advisers.\textsuperscript{3}

The foreign policy of the Truman administration was a series of pendulum swings between the pro-Arab bureaucracy and the pro-Zionist White House. On all the salient questions—partition, trusteeship, recognition of the state of Israel, arms embargo, and disposition of the Negev—Truman, laboring under strong Zionist pressures in a presidential election year, took a consistently pro-Zionist line. On all these questions he either overruled or secretly undermined the position of the State Department. In the end, it was not only Truman's critics but even his loyal secretary of state, George Marshall, who charged that he had debased the presidency by playing politics with foreign policy, that he had sacrificed American interests abroad for the sake of electoral advantage.

Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, perceived Israel as a problem and an obstacle to the development of a global strategy for the containment of communism. The escalation of the military confrontation between Israel and Egypt provided the Soviet Union with the opportunity to leapfrog over the states of the "northern tier" and establish a foothold in the heart of the Arab world. The Eisenhower administration withheld arms from Israel, used the bait of a security guarantee, and pressed for Israeli concessions in a number of attempts to mediate between the antagonists, but all to no avail.

In 1956 Israel conspired with France and Britain, behind America's back, to attack Egypt. One of Israel's war aims was territorial expansion. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and the Israeli defense establishment were determined to keep the Sinai peninsula, and particularly the Straits of Tiran, in Israeli hands. Eisenhower was no less determined to force Israel to disgorge her gains. By threatening to apply economic sanctions, Eisenhower secured Israel's withdrawal from Egyptian territory. For his forceful leadership Eisenhower gained Arab respect and Arab cooperation within the framework of the doctrine that bore his name and offered U.S. assistance to any Middle Eastern state threatened by international communism. Israel was compelled to base her security not on territorial expansion but on deterrence. The result was ten years of relative stability on the Arab-Israeli front. The lesson to be drawn from the Suez affair is that a determined American president can use pressure to bring Israel to heel and that in doing
so he can effectively protect American interests without harming Israel’s basic security. It was a lesson and a policy that George Ball later encapsulated in the motto, “how to save Israel in spite of herself.”

The election of President Kennedy in 1960 ushered in a new era of better American-Israeli understanding. Like Eisenhower, Kennedy saw accommodation between Israel and the Arabs as essential for the success of America’s own efforts in containing the Soviet Union. Unlike his predecessor, Kennedy cultivated links with the nationalist and radical leaders in the Arab world, notably Nasir, and he embraced Israel. In the past Israel had been treated as an embarrassment and a liability. Kennedy accepted Israel as a positive force, consistent with American ideals and worthy of American support.4

Under President Johnson, America moved closer to Israel and, simultaneously, away from Nasir and closer to the conservative forces in the Arab world. Admiration by Johnson and other members of the presidential elite for Israel’s democratic way of life, pioneering spirit, social and economic achievements, and self-reliance played an important part in bringing about this shift. During the May-June 1967 crisis, American diplomacy, paralyzed by cross purposes, was unable to take bold action to force Nasir to rescind his blockade of Israeli shipping. But after the war American diplomacy swung firmly behind Israel’s demands for direct negotiations and a formal peace agreement incorporating secure and recognized boundaries. Believing that Eisenhower had made a mistake in letting Nasir off the hook prematurely after Suez, Johnson insisted that the Egyptian president sign on the dotted line before exerting pressure on Israel to withdraw from the newly conquered territories. Johnson also authorized arms supplies to Israel on a steadily growing scale. This policy placed America in the embarrassing position of appearing to support Israel’s hold on the occupied territories, while diminishing her leverage over her increasingly powerful ally. It was a special relationship in which Israel was the junior partner but also the principal beneficiary.

The attitudes of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to the Arab-Israeli conflict were determined largely by considerations of global strategy. Israel was accorded a special place in the context of the Nixon Doctrine, which was designed to protect American interests in the third world not by committing American troops—as in Vietnam—but by backing local allies. The deep-penetration bombing raids launched by Israel during the War of Attrition (1969–71) with the objective, among others, of overthrowing Nasir should have alerted Nixon to the dangers of upgrading Israel’s offensive capability without establishing control over Israel’s actions. For
instead of putting an end to Nasir and his influence, the Israeli actions fostered a mood of militant defiance and ultimately precipitated direct Soviet involvement in the defense of Egypt, an involvement which from the American point of view could have hardly been less welcome. It was the Jordan crisis of September 1970, however, which brought about a fundamental reorientation of American policy. The successful handling of this crisis, to which Israel contributed by deterring a supposedly Soviet-inspired Syrian intervention on the side of the Palestinian fida'iyyin against King Hussein, led to a revised understanding of the political dynamics of the region, in which the U.S.-Israeli relationship came to be seen as the key to combatting Soviet influence in the Arab world and to maintaining regional stability. In fact, as William Quandt has demonstrated, Nixon and Kissinger mistook a local crisis for a superpower confrontation. Henceforth, Israel was viewed, not as a liability, but as a strategic asset and accordingly began to receive American economic and military aid at an unprecedented level. The military balance was seen as the key to stability if not to peace. Arms to Israel and Jordan were given higher priority than new peace initiatives. Important regional trends such as mounting frustration in Egypt, Syria, and among the Palestinians were ignored.

The October War shattered the two major assumptions underlying the Nixon-Kissinger policy: that a strong Israel would deter the Arabs from going to war and that the status quo in the Middle East could be maintained indefinitely in Israel's favor. While the war was still in progress, Kissinger began to develop a new policy toward the Middle East, a policy which, for the first time, had not just an Israeli component, but also a significant Arab component. This policy committed America to an active and more even-handed role in mediating between Arabs and Israelis and to a step-by-step diplomatic process.

When Israeli intransigence led to the breakdown of the talks for an interim agreement with Egypt in March 1975, President Ford ordered a reassessment of American policy. The purpose behind this reassessment was to extract Israeli concessions as a quid pro quo for American arms. "Hardware for software" was the name of the formula: trading American military hardware for Israeli diplomatic software. The Israeli government turned this linkage to its own advantage, extracting far-reaching American commitments as the price for showing some flexibility toward Egypt. In a sense, as George Ball quipped, Sinai II of 1975 amounted to "a vast real estate deal in which the United States bought a slice of the Sinai Desert from Israel for a huge financial and political consideration and then paid Egypt for accepting it."
Jimmy Carter had the dubious privilege of being the first American president to deal, not with the Labor Zionists, but with the right-wing and ultra-nationalist government headed by Menahem Begin—a government that rejected territorial compromise and claimed Jewish sovereignty over the whole "Land of Israel." Much of the credit for the Camp David Accords and for the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty goes to Carter. But whereas Carter and Sadat saw the Camp David Accords as the first step in a process that would lead to a comprehensive peace between Israel and her neighbors, Begin saw the peace with Egypt as the end of the road. He was convinced that in return for relinquishing Sinai at Camp David he had secured Israel's right to retain the West Bank. Carter, for his part, was equally convinced that Israel must return to the 1967 borders because the Arab confrontation states were ready for peace, because the Palestinians deserved a homeland, and because a "Greater Israel" would generate perpetual instability in the Middle East. In short, he believed that Israel could not have both territory and peace. Carter's inability to induce the Begin government to honor its commitment to seek a solution to the Palestinian problem discredited the Camp David Accords in the eyes of many Arabs, isolated Egypt, and undermined America's credibility as a peacemaker.

When Ronald Reagan entered the White House he immediately emphasized the East-West axis of all international conflicts and embarked on a new policy toward the Middle East based on four main assumptions. The first assumption was that the threat to the security of the oil-producing countries of the Gulf constituted the central problem facing the United States. Second, it was assumed that the Arab-Israeli conflict had become less acute and less significant and that it could therefore safely be left on the back burner. A third assumption was that the Arab-Israeli conflict area and the Gulf are two very distinct areas, each having its own dynamics and its own rules, making it safe for America to neglect one and concentrate on the other. The fourth assumption was that, above all, the states of this area needed defense against the Soviet threat. This was an interesting and internally coherent set of assumptions, but it was somewhat at odds with the political realities of the region. Be that as it may, the operational conclusion drawn from this set of assumptions was that the United States should organize all her allies, whether Arab or Israeli, in a defensive framework designed to check Soviet advances and to protect the oil producers of the Gulf and Western access to the oil. This was the so-called policy of "strategic consensus" of which much was heard in the early days of the Reagan administration.
Events quickly forced the administration to recognize that all the conflicts in the Middle East are important, that they are interconnected, and that the complex pattern of international politics in the region cannot be reduced to a simple East-West equation. The Lebanon war was the great eye-opener in this respect.

The Reagan administration was an accomplice in the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and it, therefore, has only itself and its ally to blame for the stunning sequence of reverses and disasters that it suffered in the wake of that invasion. To obtain American support for his plan of creating “a new political order” in Lebanon, the Israeli defense minister, Ariel Sharon, emphasized that the proposed Israeli move would have the effect of weakening the pro-Soviet forces in the Middle East: Syria and the PLO. Alexander Haig’s strong anti-Soviet views, his tendency to view Middle East issues from a globalist perspective, and his conception of Israel as a strong and dependable strategic ally, all facilitated Sharon’s task. At their meeting in mid-May 1982 there was no overt collusion, but Haig indicated that the United States would not oppose a limited Israeli military operation in Lebanon, provided there was sufficient justification for it. Sharon concluded that he had received the green light from the U.S. secretary of state for military intervention in Lebanon.9

America’s high-risk approach to the Lebanese crisis stood in marked contrast to Soviet prudence, caution, and reluctance to take unnecessary risks. Whereas the U.S. had presented Israel with a blank check, the Soviet Union limited its commitment to the defense of Syrian territory against attack, leaving no room for hope that it might intervene on the side of Syrian forces in Lebanon. And whereas the U.S. deployed troops in Beirut and a naval armada offshore under the guise of a peacekeeping force, the Soviets shunned direct military involvement. America’s Shi’i and Druze opponents treated the so-called peacekeeping force like any other local militia, and 240 American marines were killed when their headquarters was blown up. It was a heavy and an unnecessary price to pay for ignoring the indigenous political, religious, and ethnic sources of tension and looking for a Soviet shadow behind every tree in Lebanon. Moreover, once the price of the proudly proclaimed intervention in support of the Maronites had become apparent, the Reagan administration simply cut and run, thereby dealing a terrible blow to America’s prestige in the Arab world and leaving the Soviets to reap the benefits.

The Lebanon war provided conclusive proof that the Arab-Israeli dispute could not be safely left on the back burner. A belated product of this realization was Reagan’s peace plan of 1 September 1982, which called for
the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Lebanon and the establishment of self-government by the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza in confederation with Jordan. Begin’s government predictably and emphatically rejected the Reagan Plan. The whole purpose of invading Lebanon was to destroy the PLO and to weaken Palestinian nationalism so as to facilitate the absorption of the West Bank into “Greater Israel”. The Begin government used the festering crisis in Lebanon to prevent American-sponsored negotiations on the future of the West Bank from getting under way.

To settle the Lebanese conflict, George Shultz negotiated the 17 May 1983 accord, which gave Israel the rights it demanded but totally ignored Syrian interests. When Syria denounced the accord and sponsored attempts to topple Lebanese President Amin Jumayyil, Shultz concluded that Syria was the chief troublemaker in the area. However, the Reagan administration was split in so many ways that its factionalism began to resemble that of the Middle East. The secretary of state advocated the use of force in order to pressure Syria while the secretary of defense expounded the virtues of diplomacy. Shultz argued that Syria would listen to America only if it was made clear that America and Israel stood together. In other words, he saw Israel as a strategic asset. The rival school of thought, led by Caspar Weinberger, regarded Israel as a liability. According to Weinberger, the goodwill of the Arab moderates is essential to protect America’s interests in the Gulf, and in particular access to oil, and this goodwill is jeopardized by close military and economic links with Israel.

President Reagan ruled in favor of the first school of thought, largely for domestic political reasons. National Security Decision Directive 111, signed by Reagan on 29 October 1983, reflected Shultz’s conviction that the United States must reaffirm its relationship with Israel in order to achieve anything in the Middle East.

The close strategic cooperation between the U.S. and Israel and the joint policy of toughness vis-à-vis Syria yielded effects opposite to those expected by its proponents. Basically, the American view that there was a Soviet-Syrian-PLO-Druze-Shi’i front that could be checked only by means of an American-Israeli-Maronite front was too simplistic, not least because of the great diversity of interests at play within each coalition. By insisting on the 17 May accord, the Reagan administration inadvertently helped to isolate and weaken President Jumayyil and strengthen his Druze and Shi’i opponents. By taking military actions against the Druze and the Shi’a, the administration made the latter more dependent on Damascus and helped President al-Asad to emerge as the real arbiter of Lebanese politics. Furthermore, by treating the Lebanese civil war and Syria’s role in it as a
local manifestation of the East-West conflict, the administration forced President Asad and his allies ever more deeply into Moscow's embrace. In short, the Reagan administration's handling of the Lebanese crisis was not simply a chapter of accidents but had the elements of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Reagan's own desire to place the whole sorry saga behind him is understandable. But the lessons concerning the American role and impact on the Middle East are too striking to be obscured and too important to be forgotten. In the first place, the Lebanon war showed Israel to be not a bastion of stability but a source of regional turmoil and violence; not a strategic asset for America but a serious liability. Secondly, for all its concern to promote order and stability in this volatile area, by its own actions, the U.S. contributed to the destruction of the Lebanese state and to the collapse of the precarious regional order. The third, and most significant, lesson of the war in Lebanon is that America's uncritical support for Israeli security, as defined by the Israeli government of the day, seriously damaged America's broader interests in limiting the influence of the Soviet Union and its allies and expanding its own cooperation with moderate Arab states.

A new chapter in U.S.-Israeli relations opened with the formation of a Labor-dominated government headed by Shimon Peres following the 1984 elections. The new national coalition government, which included the Likud, carried out the withdrawal from Lebanon and displayed a genuine interest in reactivating the Arab-Israeli peace process. In office, the Labor party adhered to its traditional policy of territorial compromise over the West Bank with Jordan, the so-called "Jordanian option." In the Arab world, including the mainstream of the PLO, the general trend was toward accommodation with Israel. Capitalizing on this trend, King Hussein launched his initiative for an international conference at which the Palestinians would be represented, not by the PLO, but by a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

The U.S. government welcomed Hussein's initiative. But one sticking point has been Hussein's insistence on an international forum that would involve the Soviet Union, rather than direct talks with Israel. Another sticking point has been the American refusal to recognize or hold talks with the PLO until it is clearly on the public record that the PLO has accepted UN resolutions 242 and 338, is prepared to negotiate peace with Israel, and has renounced terrorism. Repeated American assertions that the Palestinians are the heart of the problem lack credibility when no U.S. official can talk to their representatives. Repeated American declarations in favor of
direct Jordanian-Israeli negotiations, on the other hand, lack substance when no serious American pressure is brought to bear on Israel to halt the policy of creeping annexation of the occupied territories and to give minimal assurances on the final status of the West Bank and Gaza. As long as the United States cannot obtain for Hussein an assurance of Israeli withdrawal from the bulk of the occupied territories, it is unrealistic to expect him to engage in bilateral negotiations with Israel and risk the wrath of the entire Arab world.

Congress has added insult to injury by suspending arms deliveries to Jordan, recommended by the executive branch, until there is concrete evidence of progress toward peace with Israel. Such insensitivity toward the security concerns of one of the most moderate and pro-American regimes in the Middle East calls into question America's credibility as a mediator in the Arab-Israeli dispute. King Hussein may be forgiven for concluding, as he said in an interview to the Washington Post, that American diplomacy is crippled by Zionist pressures, and for turning to Moscow in search of the defensive weapons that have been so offensively denied him by Washington. The United States cannot be held solely or principally responsible for the failure to invigorate the peace talks, but it bears at least a share of the blame for the current stalemate. This failure is all the more regrettable given the propitious conditions for progress on both sides of the Arab-Israeli divide and the high probability that in the absence of progress it will be the hard-liners, the extremists, and the rejectionists who will begin to set the tone on both sides.

Deadlock on the peace-making front has intensified the struggle in Washington between the proponents of two rival doctrines. The doctrine that American interests in the Middle East can be best protected by extending full support to Israel is vying for mastery over American foreign policy with the doctrine that calls for an evenhanded approach. According to the proponents of the "Israel first" doctrine, the Arab world is so weak, so divided, and so endemically volatile as to preclude the possibility of a durable peace. In these circumstances, the best available option for the U.S. is to maintain Israel's superiority over its adversaries through regular infusions of money and arms so as to enable it not only to deal with threats to its own security but also to fend off challenges to U.S. interests from radical, Islamic, and Soviet-backed forces. Complaints from the moderate Arab countries about America's partiality toward Israel are dismissed as being of no practical consequence given the dependence of these countries on the United States for security against internal opposition and external aggression. These countries, so the argument goes, need America much more than America needs them.
The evenhanded school, in the words of one of its proponents, suggests that unstinting American support for Israel in its present form—occupying the West Bank, eastern Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights and controlling a border zone in southern Lebanon—does not serve America's many important interests in the Arab Middle East and the Islamic world. The frustration that this "Greater Israel" generates provides opportunities for the Soviet Union to make inroads as it encourages Arab regimes to look for a superpower counterweight to the United States. . . . Lavish and largely uncritical American support for an enlarged Israel turns Arab opinion against America and thus threatens United States access to Arab oil and markets.¹⁰

The "Israel first" policy, according to the evenhanded school, places great strains on Arab regimes like Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which rely on the United States for military and economic assistance. One of the main consequences of "Greater Israel" and United States support for "Greater Israel" has been the growth of radical Islamic fundamentalist movements that threaten even the personal security of Americans in the Middle East. From this perspective, American support for a just solution to the legitimate political grievances of the Palestinian people would improve decisively the position of the United States throughout the Arab world, the Islamic world and the third world. Recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and American willingness to discuss the establishment of a Palestinian state . . . would, in this view, provide genuine momentum for a peace process. The "evenhanded" school warns that continued American one-sidedness will eventually so alienate Arab public opinion that "moderate" regimes will fall, pro-American elites will be displaced, United States access to Arab resources and markets will be restricted, and Soviet influence will spread.¹¹

Even if it is conceded for argument's sake that Israel is indeed a strategic asset as the "Israel first" school claims, it is still the case that America has to pay a heavy price for this asset in terms of strengthening the radical forces in the region and undermining the legitimacy of the conservative and pro-Western regimes. As Michael Hudson argued in a seminal book, the central problem of government in the Arab world is political legitimacy. A crucial element in the legitimacy, and hence stability, of Arab regimes is the extent to which they effectively promote a set of core concerns: social justice, Pan-Arabism, and the liberation of the entire Arab homeland, and especially Palestine, from foreign influence. Palestine, Hudson believes, is the foremost Arab core concern and the Palestine issue is, therefore, of immense importance for the politics of legitimacy in the Arab world. It imposes obligations on all Arab leaders that can either enhance or destroy their political legitimacy, depending on how successfully they are met.¹²
As the country that broke ranks and signed a separate peace treaty with Israel, Egypt is a particularly handy scapegoat for the frustrations generated by Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The argument that by getting back Sinai Egypt forfeited the right to press for a solution to the Palestine problem has never enjoyed popular support in Egypt itself. Most Egyptians deeply resent the way in which Israel exploited the freedom afforded it by the peace treaty with Egypt in order to assert itself against all its other neighbors. Continuing impotence on the part of the regime in dealing with the Palestinian problem can further erode its legitimacy to a point where its very ability to survive could be called into question. Revolutionary forces are unlikely to gather sufficient momentum to overthrow the regime by force. But an embattled and insecure regime in Cairo is only too likely to appease the domestic opposition by reverting to a militant anti-Israeli and anti-American posture.

Domestic opposition to the Saudi regime will similarly be magnified by continuing failure to resolve outstanding issues in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Like the other conservative monarchies in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia is under attack from popular Islam on the one hand and revolutionary Islam from Iran on the other. As long as Jerusalem, the third most sacred shrine in Islam, remains under Jewish rule, the Saudi regime, as the defender of the holy places, is bound to put its weight behind the efforts to change the situation. If these efforts totally fail to change the status quo, the House of Sa'ud may either suffer a relaxation of its grip over power or, more likely, itself move in a more radical direction. Israeli actions such as the annexation of the Golan Heights, the bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor, and the invasion of Lebanon have deepened the Saudi sense of being encircled by hostile forces and have contributed to the massive increase in Saudi military expenditure and Saudi firepower. The acquisition of AWACs in the face of fierce opposition from the Israeli lobby in the United States has turned Saudi Arabia, for the first time, into a frontline protagonist in the confrontation with Israel. It is sometimes argued by advocates of the "Israel first" policy that fear of the Soviet Union will keep the regime in Riyadh on the straight and narrow path of collaboration with the United States, regardless of Israeli actions on the West Bank or even beyond its borders. But the Saudis do not distinguish all that clearly between the Soviet threat and the threat emanating from Israel. They perceive Israel as a tacit ally in Moscow's attempt to weaken, subvert, and radicalize the Arab world. Therefore, if faced with the choice of preserving their credibility or persisting in their pro-American orientation,
it is not a foregone conclusion that the Saudi rulers will always choose the latter course.

Since the Palestinian problem is so central to the politics of legitimacy in the Arab world, it follows that the United States cannot acquiesce in permanent Israeli control over the occupied territories without running the risk of unwelcome political repercussions throughout the region. To reduce this risk and to safeguard her own diverse interests, the United States ought to modify its policy so as to induce Israel to relinquish the occupied territories in the context of a peace settlement.

Many Israeli moderates, like former Foreign Minister Abba Eban, favor withdrawal from the West Bank, not as a favor to the Arabs or Palestinians, but as a measure for preserving the democratic and Jewish character of the state of Israel. Some Israeli moderates would actually welcome a bit of help from their American friends in the struggle to save Israel in spite of itself. But even if the U.S. cannot persuade Israel to give up the occupied territories, it can at least limit the damage to its own interests in the Middle East by creating a firm impression that it is really opposed to the absorption of the occupied territories into “Greater Israel” and that it is prepared to go beyond hollow verbal reprimands and take forceful steps to prevent it.\(^{14}\)

Fears that American pressure on Israel might be ineffective, counter-productive, or illegitimate are all equally misplaced. As Nahum Goldmann, one of the most farsighted Zionist leaders, observed, America has not only the right but the duty to put pressure on Israel:

International politics are based on permanent interference and pressures. . . . America, by its reluctance to influence Israel and through having given in to too many Israeli demands . . . not only failed to help Israel but harmed it in the long run. With greater American interference, peace could have been brought about long ago. . . . Experience has shown that the Arabs and Israelis, left alone, will not achieve an agreement. The conflict is, in a certain way, a family affair between two Semitic peoples, who are characterized by stubbornness and lack of flexibility. The United States, which has intervened in many other conflicts and helped to bring about settlements, should not only have the right but the obligation to use all its influence in the Arab-Israeli issue, which has occupied the headlines of the world for thirty years.\(^{15}\)

It is of course true, as the advocates of the “Israel first” policy never tire of pointing out, that a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute, even if possible, will not be a panacea for all the ills of the region, nor will it guarantee the achievement of America’s major objectives. It will not eliminate the threat of Soviet encroachment, it will not ensure the political stability of the Middle East and the Gulf, and it will not solve the energy
problem nor prevent future Arab oil embargoes. Yet a settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute will ameliorate all these problems even if it cannot solve them. It will remove one important source of instability and a major factor in the polarization of the area that has always harmed the U.S. to the Soviets' benefit. Conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq war will not be ended by a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict and new inter-Arab wars will erupt from time to time. Other sources of regional instability, whether social or economic, ethnic or religious, will not disappear overnight. But a solution to the Palestinian problem will ease the tensions, facilitate the management of related problems, and help to remove the basic contradiction that has so persistently plagued the American approach to the Middle East.

4. Ibid., chapter 4; and Mordechai Gazit, *President Kennedy's Policy towards the Arab States and Israel* (Tel Aviv University: Shiloah Center for Middle East and African Studies, 1983).
11. Ibid.