



Misunderstanding or Misinformation: Competing Narratives of Negotiations Over the Release of Jonathan Pollard at the 1998 Wye River Summit

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This article seeks to confirm the veracity of Binyamin Netanyahu's claim that Jonathan Pollard's release was promised by President Bill Clinton in exchange for agreeing to the Wye River Memorandum, an agreement between Israel and Palestinian Authority (PA) that, among other things, offered the withdrawal of Israel from 13% of the West Bank and the release of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the PA's increased cooperation with Israel in security matters and renunciation of all political violence. While no definitive answer can be found, as no transcript of the meetings exist, the lack of supporting evidence and strong counterclaims from other participants at the conference points towards Netanyahu either misunderstanding the President or intentionally spreading misinformation about the meeting. Part One discusses the events that led up to the Wye River summit to provide context for the negotiations. Part Two compares the autobiographies of Clinton and Netanyahu, as well as contemporary news coverage and government press releases, with the goal of determining whether Clinton did or did not promise to release Pollard. Part Three discusses Netanyahu's testimony in the context of his domestic political situation and fact-checks his claims regarding American interference in the 1996 Israeli General Election and the impact of CIA Director George Tenet's threatened resignation. Part Four discusses the testimonies of three members of the American delegation which, alongside the lack of similar testimonies from any members of the Israeli delegation, further strengthen Clinton's claim. Finally, Part Five discusses the differing perceptions of Pollard between the American and Israeli delegations, as well as potential confusion over the sentencing requirements for the Espionage Act, and discusses broader issues of poor communication in Israel-American diplomatic dealings.

Introduction

In October 1998, delegations from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the United States convened in Wye River, Maryland to negotiate the implementation of the Oslo Accords. While the Wye River Memorandum would be signed by the three nations' leaders and enacted by the Knesset, this was not a foregone conclusion. On the night before the signing of the Memorandum, the deal was nearly scuppered over the issue of Jonathan Pollard, an American-born naval intelligence analyst who had been sentenced to life in prison for committing acts of espionage against the United States on behalf of Israel. The release of Pollard, whose commitment to Israeli interests and harsh sentencing made him popular among Netanyahu's domestic base, was raised by the Prime Minister as a condition for signing the Memorandum. However, what happened next is a matter of historical debate. The Prime Minister would allege that Pollard's release was promised by President Clinton, but the promise was broken at the eleventh hour using the excuse of CIA director George Tenet's threatened resignation, to force Netanyahu into signing the Memorandum without any concessions to Israel. Clinton, for his part, would deny that any such promise was made, instead arguing that any agreement to release Pollard was conditional on the agreement of his foreign policy team, which included Tenet. Following the threat of Tenet's resignation, as well as the disapproval of Secretary of State Madeline Albright and National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, this condition was not met, voiding any potential promise. He would also allege that far from being an excuse, the resignation of Tenet would have severely impacted the implementation of the Oslo accords and Yasser Arafat's willingness to sign the Memorandum.

Unfortunately, no transcripts of the negotiations in Wye River have been made available to the public, making it impossible to know for certain which of Clinton's or Netanyahu's contradictory descriptions was accurate. To determine the likelihood of each

of the alternatives, this article analyzes the autobiographies of Clinton and Netanyahu, both of which cover the events of Wye River from their perspectives. This is by no means a perfect substitute for a true primary source, as autobiographies are inherently biased and self-motivated. However, by placing each leader's narrative in the context of his respective country's contemporary political circumstances and factoring in each leader's motivations for presenting the story in the manner they did, a picture begins to form.

It would appear that Netanyahu's claim of a broken promise was either the result of a misunderstanding of Clinton's position, or an intentional attempt to mislead the Israeli public and bolster a larger narrative of betrayal by foreign and domestic allies. This, paired with untrue statements from Netanyahu regarding the severity of Pollard's punishment compared to Soviet spies and an inability or unwillingness to understand the geopolitical ramifications of Tenet's resignation, points to Clinton's insistence that no promise was made or broken being the more likely claim.

Beyond debating the merits of Clinton and Netanyahu's respective narratives regarding the negotiations, this article also seeks to explore how the fundamentally different American and Israeli conceptions of Pollard, both in regard to his motivations and the extent of the damage caused by his actions, made conflict over the issue inevitable. Therefore, the debate over Pollard's release can be seen as a case study in how opposing narratives can derail negotiations even between close allies, and demonstrates the importance of mutual understanding to the continuation of America-Israel relations.

Part One: Context for Wye River

In 1993, Israel recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate representative of Palestine following its renunciation of terrorism and its recognition of Israel's right to exist. This allowed Israel to enter into direct negotiations with the PLO,

which was previously illegal under Israeli Law, ultimately resulting in the signing of the first Oslo Accord (Oslo I) and the Gaza-Jericho Agreement one year later. These agreements created the Palestinian Authority which, alongside Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the city of Jericho, made a two-state solution appear possible for the first time since Israel's founding. This sense of optimism was reflected in polling. Sixty-four percent of Jewish Israelis either strongly or somewhat agreed with negotiating with the PLO (Roper Center, 1993) and 57% of Israelis supported the territorial withdrawals (Waxman, 2008).

Unfortunately, rather than being the prelude to a successful two-state solution, 1995 would be remembered as the beginning of the end. On November 4, Labor Prime Minister and leading proponent of the Oslo Accords, Yitzhak Rabin, would be assassinated at a campaign rally by a right-wing Israeli. While Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres, would attempt to carry out the late Prime Minister's vision, allowing the newly formed Palestinian Authority to hold its first ever elections, a series of suicide bombings by the Islamist terrorist group Hamas and the general feeling that Peres' invocation of Rabin was a cynical political stunt, would result in Binyamin Netanyahu being elected for the first time in 1996 on a staunchly anti-Oslo platform. Indeed, throughout the early to mid-1990s, Netanyahu had emerged as the chief critic of the peace movement, penning a New York Times op-ed opposing Oslo I (Netanyahu, 1993) and participating in rallies that called for Rabin's death, causing his political opponents, including Rabin's widow, to accuse him of inciting the assassination (Public Broadcasting Service, 2024).

However, while Netanyahu opposed the peace movement, he could not fully abandon it. 80% of Israelis still supported the implementation of Oslo (United Nations, 1998), and while Netanyahu was able to beat the Labor candidate to the post of Prime Minister, it is worth providing context to explain this result.

Firstly, Netanyahu's election was held in the brief period of time between 1992 and 1998 in which the Prime Minister was elected directly, rather than being chosen by the party with the most seats in the Knesset. While Netanyahu was allowed to form a government, his rightist Likud party would actually receive less of the popular vote and fewer seats in the Knesset than Labor (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1996). Rather than simply representing a rejection of Labor's policy towards the Palestinians, many attribute Peres' loss to a boycott of the vote led by Arab Israelis, who opposed the Prime Minister's military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon Operation Grapes of Wrath (Rekness, 1996). Low turnout among Arab voters, most of whom were expected to support Peres over Netanyahu, all but guaranteed the latter's victory in the 1996 general election.

However, while support for the peace process forced Netanyahu to continue aspects of it, such as withdrawing troops from 80% of Hebron in 1997, his first term in office would represent a massive departure from his immediate predecessors. On September 29, 1996, Netanyahu began excavation work near the Al Aqsa Mosque Compound, causing riots and a subsequent IDF crackdown. The Western Wall Tunnel Riots, as they would be called, would result in the deaths of 70 Palestinians and 16 IDF soldiers (Eldar, 2009). In 1997, Netanyahu would begin construction of the Har Homa settlement in East Jerusalem, greatly angering the Palestinian Authority and stalling peace talks.

To prevent the peace process from losing momentum, President Clinton proposed a summit between himself, Netanyahu, and Yasser Arafat at Wye River, in which further implementation of the Oslo accords could be discussed. While Netanyahu was opposed to this summit, and often cited the promise of Pollard's release as the reason for agreeing to attend, the reality is more complicated. Firstly, Netanyahu faced domestic pressure to join, with 82% of Israelis supporting his attendance (United Nations, 1998). Secondly, Netanyahu

was allegedly strong-armed into attending by the Clinton administration. While Clinton would never condition US aid to Israel, it would reach its lowest point in 1998, and the administration would reject a 1.2 billion-dollar construction grant requested by Netanyahu (Lasensky 2004). Furthermore, in a contemporary article by the Washington Post, Clinton's national security advisor Sandy Berger confirmed that he, alongside Albright, would publicly blame Netanyahu for the failure of the peace process in the event he failed to attend (Gellman, 1998).

For Clinton and Arafat, Wye River represented a last-ditch effort to save the faltering peace talks in the wake of Rabin's murder and the resurgence of Likud. For Netanyahu, it represented an opportunity to placate the majority of Israelis who supported negotiations with the PA while simultaneously pushing for terms that were most favorable to Israeli security interests and, in the case of Jonathan Pollard's release, his domestic political base. With this in mind, the use of heavy-handed negotiation tactics, such as Berger and Albright's ultimatum, Tenet's threat of resignation, and Netanyahu's threat to abandon the negotiations should Pollard not be released, can be easily understood. In the context of Israel-Palestine in the mid to late 1990s, the summit was viewed by all parties as an urgent last-ditch effort to salvage the stalling peace talks (or at least to gain the best possible terms before they fell apart completely), and all parties acted accordingly.

Part Two: Clinton's Alleged Promise

Before exploring the differing accounts of the Pollard negotiations, it is worth establishing the facts that are included in both versions. Neither Clinton nor Netanyahu deny that Pollard's release was put forward as a condition for the signing of the Wye River Memorandum, nor do they deny that this condition was withdrawn following the threatened resignation of CIA Director Tenet. Rather, the disagreement comes in the form of whether or not Pollard's release was promised by Clinton, and therefore

whether the President acted dishonestly to gain Netanyahu's signature. In his autobiography, *Bibi: My Story*, Netanyahu emphatically advances this claim, writing,

Clinton agreed to release Pollard in the days leading up to Wye. This was designed to be an added incentive for me to do the deal. Now, in the concluding hours of the conference, as the final communique was being drafted, he asked to see me. "Bibi," he said, "I'm sorry to drop this on you. But I can't release Pollard. I'm getting enormous pushback from the Pentagon and CIA. George Tenet threatened to resign. I just can't do it." I was stunned. Here was the president of the United States, whose officials constantly berated me for not having the courage to make difficult decisions that involved the security of my country and that could topple my government, backing away from a solemn commitment because of a bureaucratic hurdle that in no way threatened his presidency (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 306).

The repeated use of promissory language such as "agreed" and "solemn commitment" make Netanyahu's message clear: Clinton had promised to release Pollard in order to get the Prime Minister to sign a deal that was disadvantageous to Israel, before withdrawing that promise. This allegedly forced Netanyahu to sign a deal without concessions to Israel, or leave and be blamed for the deal's failure.

Clinton's portrayal of the discussions over Pollard in *My Life*, however, is more nuanced. While Clinton acknowledges that he did not dismiss the Israeli request out of hand, writing "In fact, I had told the prime minister that if that's what it took to make peace, I was inclined to do it," he directly follows this statement with "but I would have to check with our people." This is the

closest thing to a promise Clinton made regarding Pollard, and it is exceptionally noncommittal. The wording implies that should “his people” reject the release, Clinton would be unable to make the promise. This pattern of agreeing, but conditioning his agreement on the approval of staffers and agency heads is continued in the same chapter, with Clinton writing:

I told Netanyahu that I would review the case seriously and try to work through it with Tenet and the national security team, but that Netanyahu was better off with a security agreement that he could count on than he would be with the release of Pollard (Clinton, 2004, chap. 49).

While perhaps not inspiring confidence in the President’s willingness to commit to agreements, it is also categorically not a promise. Clinton, in line with the previous discussion between himself and Netanyahu, implies that the promise would only be made on the condition that his staff agrees. This condition was not fulfilled, due to dissenting opinions from Berger and Albright and the threatened resignation of Tenet. Therefore, the decision not to release Pollard was entirely consistent with Clinton’s previous statements and cannot be characterized as a broken promise.

The President concludes the section on Wye River by discussing the concessions Netanyahu demanded in lieu of Pollard’s release, writing:

Finally, after we talked again at length, Bibi agreed to stay with the agreement, but only on the condition that he could change the mix of prisoners to be released, so that he would free more ordinary criminals and fewer who had committed security offenses (Clinton, 2004, chap. 49).

While initially opposed to this change, Arafat was willing to acquiesce following a meeting with

Albright and Middle East coordinator Dennis Ross (Clinton, 2004, chap. 49). This seemingly implies that Netanyahu understood the highly conditional nature of the agreement over Pollard and pivoted to a new demand (i.e. a change in the type of prisoners released), and was willing to agree to the deal following that concession being granted. It also cuts against Netanyahu’s portrayal of the Memorandum as having been signed while he “gritted his teeth” due to a lack of concessions from the Palestinian Authority. Indeed, in his autobiography, Netanyahu specifically mentions Arafat’s demand that Israel release prisoners who participated in terror attacks as a major sticking point in negotiations (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 306). Rather than being forced into a corner by Clinton and Arafat, as Netanyahu sought to portray the situation, he was able to extract a valuable security concession in exchange for the dropping a demand that offered little tangible benefit to Israel.

It is also worth noting that Clinton’s claim that he had not promised to release Pollard was not merely an attempt to rewrite history in the self-promotional medium of autobiography, but the official stance of the United States at the time. In a Washington Post article published eighteen days after the Memorandum was signed, White House officials reiterated that, while Netanyahu may have believed or hoped otherwise, no formal commitment to release Pollard was made by the president (Pincus & Gellman, 1998). The article quotes an anonymous official involved in the negotiations, who said, “I know some Israelis claim vehemently that he promised, but I don’t have any evidence from any discussion that I had with the President that he told the Israelis he would release Pollard.” Furthermore, in a series of letters of assurance written by American ambassador to Israel, Edward Walker Jr. and Dennis Ross, which have been made available by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pollard’s release is never mentioned nor promised (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

2023), This implies that even if Clinton had personally guaranteed Pollard's release, which the President vehemently denies to this day, it was not the official position of the United States Government, nor was it expected or requested by the Israeli foreign service.

Part Three: Netanyahu's Narrative of Betrayal

To accuse the President of the United States of lying to force Israel into a disadvantageous deal, especially if the accusation is false, would be a risky action for the Prime Minister of Israel to take. Therefore, it is necessary to explain what motive Netanyahu had in portraying the negotiations over Pollard in this way. The descriptions of the Wye River Conference in Netanyahu's autobiography appear to be part of a larger media strategy, designed to portray the Prime Minister as the victim of conspiracy between Labor Party leader Ehud Barak and President Clinton, to remove him from power.

In the chapter on Wye River, directly following his descriptions of the negotiations, Netanyahu describes the political turmoil he faced at home, seemingly in an attempt to link the two events. By signing the Wye River Memorandum, Netanyahu risked provoking a revolt by religious parties in his coalition. Netanyahu's government, therefore, was dependent on Ehud Barak's Labor Party, which promised allegiance in exchange for signing the Memorandum. However, following the approval of the Memorandum, the Labor party withdrew their support, forcing Likud to preemptively call for elections. This decision by Barak, Netanyahu claims, was done at the behest of the Clinton administration, and his autobiography attempts to prove both means and motive.

Netanyahu claims that the Clinton administration, believing that Netanyahu's unwillingness to make concessions was the chief obstacle to a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, sought to oust the sitting Prime Minister in favor of one more amenable to compromise. He writes:

When I failed to deliver the far-reaching concessions that he thought were necessary for a final peace settlement, he put all his chips on Barak and helped him defeat me. Soon after Barak's victory, Clinton invited him to a gala dinner at the White House. They embraced ecstatically before the cameras. A guest swears he heard them say, "We did it." (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 311).

The Prime Minister's allegation of American intervention in Israeli elections is further evidenced by Netanyahu's claim that the Clinton administration admitted to aiding the Peres campaign (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 310). While all of Netanyahu's evidence is anecdotal, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Clinton administration would have rather conducted negotiations with an Israeli Prime Minister who shared similar foreign policy positions to those of Washington, and thus Netanyahu arguably succeeds in establishing motive.

However, when attempting to prove the means by which Clinton ousted Netanyahu from power, his case as laid out in the autobiography is significantly weaker. The Prime Minister cites the fact that the Barak campaign hired key Clinton allies James Carville, Stan Greenberg, and Bob Shrum as consultants, a move Netanyahu describes as Clinton "putting his thumb on the scale of an Israeli election." Furthermore, the Prime Minister alleges that the hiring of Carville, Greenberg, and Shrum was done at the President's request, with Netanyahu describing the trio as "sent" by the President (2024, p. 309).

While the impact of Carville, Greenberg, and Shrum on the Barak campaign has been widely reported and accepted, Netanyahu fails to provide evidence that Clinton was involved in their appointment or to disprove the considerable evidence that he was not. Firstly, while Carville and Greenberg were close Clinton allies, by the 1999 Israeli elections the

men had already established themselves as political consultants independent of the Clinton administration, having pivoted to international politics. Carville had been involved in successful election campaigns in Latin America, while Greenberg had helped elect Nelson Mandela in South Africa (Greenberg, 2013), and Tony Blair in the United Kingdom (Kolbert, 1999). Indeed, insofar as any head of state can be accused of having “sent” the consultants, there is more evidence that such an order came from Blair than Clinton, with a contemporary report by the Washington Post describing Greenberg’s hiring by the Barak campaign as having been done, “On the advice of British Prime Minister Tony Blair” (Hockstader, 1999). Moreover, Carville, during an interview with the Jewish Telegram Agency, denies that his involvement with the Barak campaign was even known by Clinton until being informed of it by Netanyahu during negotiations (Stein, 1999). While Carville has a motivation to protect his former client by downplaying Clinton’s involvement, no evidence to the contrary has been produced, and therefore the onus is on Netanyahu to prove Clinton’s involvement, not on Carville to prove his lack thereof.

Secondly, while Carville and Greenberg can both accurately be described as Clinton allies, Bob Shrum had never worked for the President in any capacity. Thirdly, both Greenberg and Shrum had reasons to involve themselves in Israeli politics beyond loyalty to President Clinton. Shrum had reportedly visited the country approximately twelve times to conduct amateur archeological and historical research, while Greenberg had lived in Israel during the 1970s, working as a political science professor at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In light of Greenberg and Shrum’s considerable interest in the State of Israel, the implication that their work in Israeli politics was wholly or primarily motivated by a desire to aid the Clinton administration appears weak.

Finally, Netanyahu’s argument that the hiring of Democratic-party aligned campaign

consultants constituted foreign intervention is further weakened by the fact that Netanyahu had hired an American political consultant of his own, Republican strategist and Reaganally Arthur Finklestein, during the 1999 Israeli election, as well as in his successful 1996 campaign (Sontag, 1998). The Prime Minister neglects to mention these in his autobiography, likely to avoid allegations of hypocrisy.

Whether or not Netanyahu sincerely believed that his loss in the 1999 Israeli general elections was caused by Clinton’s intervention is beyond the scope of this article. However, if the Prime Minister is taken at his word, it appears that his preoccupation with domestic political issues negatively influenced his ability to understand Clinton’s motivations. Consider the quote referenced in Part One of this article, in which the Prime Minister emphasizes the fact that his signing of the Memorandum had the potential to topple his governing coalition, while Tenet’s resignation did not similarly threaten Clinton’s presidency. While this is technically accurate, it ignores any motivations, other than losing control of government, that might justify the President’s decision to keep Tenet at the expense of Pollard’s release. Clinton explains these motivations himself in his autobiography, writing:

Security and commitments by the Israelis and Palestinians to work together against terror were at the heart of the agreement we had reached. Tenet had helped the sides to work out the details and had agreed that the CIA would support their implementation. If he left, there was a real chance Arafat would not go forward. I also needed George in the fight against al Qaeda and terrorism (Clinton, 2004 chap. 49).

In other words, the focus on maintaining political power inherent in Netanyahu’s narrative of betrayal, precludes him from acknowledging

other factors that did not conform to this narrative. While it is possible, or even probable, that this narrative represented an attempt to reframe his concessions regarding Pollard rather than a sincerely held belief, the Prime Minister—intentionally or unintentionally—misleads the reader and the Israeli public on the nature of the deal.

Furthermore, Netanyahu minimizes the level of pushback the Clinton administration faced in releasing Pollard. Besides internal opposition in the form of Sandy Berger, Madeline Albright, and Ross, the entire security apparatus of the United States had closed ranks behind CIA Director Tenet. Both FBI spokesman Peter Scafidi and Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon issued statements indicating their respective organizations' opposition to Pollard's release, as did the Senate Intelligence Committee in the form of ranking member Senator Richard Shelby and his vice-chair Senator Bob Kerrey (CBS Interactive, 2003). Both Ross and Tenet also claim that speaker of the House and de-facto leader of the Republican Party, Newt Gingrich, was outraged that Pollard's release was even discussed, let alone promised (Ross, 2008, p.457). Had Pollard been released, the President's ability to pass legislation would likely have been seriously stymied. Therefore, Netanyahu's claim that Clinton's presidency would not be threatened had he released Pollard, ignores the very real political pressure applied to the President.

Part Four: Other Relevant Testimonies

Of course, the Wye River conference was not merely a meeting between Clinton and Netanyahu, but between the American and Israeli negotiating teams. While much of the discussions regarding clemency for Pollard were held in private between the President and Prime Minister, their delegations were regularly briefed on the details of these private meetings and can thus corroborate or refute their respective leader's narratives.

Two members of Clinton's delegation, Dennis Ross and George Tenet discuss the negotiations over Pollard in their respective memoirs. Both men write that Clinton denied making the promise to Netanyahu, although Tenet claims that he "had all but walked up to that point" (Tenet & Harlow, 2008, p. 69), and interestingly, both claim that if Clinton had made such a promise, they would be reluctantly willing to release the spy. Ross writes

The President asked what I should do. I asked him, "Did you make a commitment to release Pollard. If you did, you have to release him." The President swore he had made no promises, he'd said he would see what he could do, but he made no promises. I then said, "If you did not make a promise to him, you should not give in to this. This is Bibi's problem and it is not tenable. Is he going to forego a deal that enhances Israel's security, breaks the stalemate on peace, and gives the process a major push so he can have Pollard? That is not sustainable in Israel. He can't do it and you can't give in to this kind of bullshit" (Ross, 2004, p. 455).

While not providing definitive proof of Clinton's claim that he made no promises regarding Pollard, it at least confirms that the American delegation was operating under the assumption that Pollard's release was not promised. Clinton's assertion that no promise was made is further supported by his notetaker Aaron David Miller, who, in an op-ed in Time Magazine, wrote:

Clinton gave it serious consideration and was inclined to agree. CIA director George Tenet, also at Wye and immersed in the Israeli-Palestinian security part of the talks, threatened to resign if Clinton agreed to spring Pollard. The President was lobbied

hard also by Secretary Albright to reject the Pollard release. He backed off, and we got the deal without Pollard (Miller, 2014).

Miller's use of the phrase "serious consideration," followed by the President "backing off" in response to negative feedback from Tenet and Albright implies that the promise was never made, which is consistent with Clinton's claim. As notetaker, Miller's testimony carries additional weight, as he was likely privy to information which the rest of the delegation, excluding Clinton, were not. The article's explicit anti-Pollard stance likely precludes it from use as an unbiased source, but when considering the corroborating evidence from Clinton, Ross, and Tenet, his claim is likely accurate.

Interestingly, Ross's conclusion is that Netanyahu was largely acting in good faith, genuinely believing that Pollard's release was promised to him by Clinton due to a miscommunication. In a meeting with Netanyahu's delegation, Ross claims he said,

It is clear to me there is a misunderstanding: the President is adamant that he made no promise to release Pollard; it is clear that Bibi believes he had such an assurance. We can't settle that, but let's be honest with ourselves what you are going to face. Whatever the immediate political gains of holding out for Pollard now, where will Bibi be next week when it is clear he has sacrificed an agreement that served Israel's security interests; that he can now go only backward with the Palestinians; and that he will have destroyed his relationship with the President? (Ross, 2004, p. 457).

Notably, no members of the Israeli delegation have publicly claimed that President Clinton promised to release Pollard. While absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, the fact that

Netanyahu was the only person directly involved with the negotiations to claim that Clinton had promised Pollard's release is noteworthy.

Indeed, the main proponent of Netanyahu's claim was Pollard himself, who claimed in a blog post responding to Ross's memoir that Clinton had reneged on the deal to release him, implying a promise (Pollard, 2005). However, Pollard's claim cannot reasonably be used to argue for the Prime Minister's account of events, even before one considers the spy's inherent bias and incentive to do so. Firstly, Pollard was obviously not present for the negotiations, instead receiving updates from Netanyahu. Secondly, while Pollard may support Netanyahu's claim that Clinton made and broke a promise, the rest of his testimony goes against Netanyahu's narrative, as it implies that the Israeli government had no actual intention of negotiating for his release. Instead, Pollard claimed that he was used as a bargaining chip to bolster support for deals viewed as deleterious to Israeli interests, such as withdrawing from Hebron or dividing Jerusalem, without losing public support, writing,

Over the years...the Government publicly raised the hope that I would be released as a reward for making these terrible concessions. Each time the Nation comforted itself, thinking, well at least we will get Pollard... But it was a lie. Even at Wye, the bid for my release was simply to be the fig leaf to sell a bad deal to the Israeli public. As Dennis Ross puts it (page 455): "[The Prime Minister] said he couldn't do the deal without it. He said that he'd made concessions on the prisoners based on the assumption that he would have Pollard and on that basis he could sell the prisoners [release], indeed, could sell the whole deal." But like anything expendable, I was dropped from the agenda when the Americans reneged on their commitment to free me. And

Israel released the Arab murderers and terrorists all the same (Pollard, 2005).

This implies that while Pollard believed Clinton had lied, he also believed that Netanyahu and his delegation was not sincere in their attempts to release him, contradicting the Prime Minister's claims.

Part Five: Differing Conceptions of Pollard between America and Israel

Regardless of whether Clinton or Netanyahu's recollection of events is correct, it is worth asking why negotiations over the release of Pollard were viewed as having high enough stakes to justify both Tenet and Netanyahu risking the failure of a major foreign policy achievement such as the implementation of the Oslo accords. This points to a fundamentally different conception of Pollard among the Israeli and American delegations, as well as their respective publics.

The Israeli position towards Pollard was one of sympathy, if not approval. While Netanyahu disavowed Pollard's actions, he also criticized the American government for sentencing Pollard to life, writing, "His thirty year prison sentence was much longer than those meted out to soviet spies who had actually spied against America and damaged US security" (Netanyahu, 2024, p. 306). This claim is false, as in the same year that Pollard was arrested, two soviet spies would receive the same sentence after being charged with the same crime (FBI, 2016). However, it represented the mainstream pro-Pollard position that spying on an ally is less damaging than spying on behalf of an enemy nation, and should result in a more lenient sentence. However, the American perception of Pollard was far less favorable, especially within the intelligence community, as illustrated in the CIA's 1987 damage assessment report, which lays out two major factors that justified his continued imprisonment.

Firstly, the American government and public viewed Pollard's actions as heavily motivated

by financial gain. This is not to say that the spy's motivations were entirely monetary. Indeed, the damage report includes numerous examples that contradict Pollard's mercenary reputation. According to testimony collected by the CIA, Pollard's commitment to Israel was longstanding, beginning at age twelve after being inspired by Israel's victory in the Six-Day War and further strengthened after attending a science-based summer camp in Israel that featured heavy encouragement to make aliyah (National Security Archive, 1987). However, the report also demonstrates the lucrative nature of Pollard's arrangement. According to the report, in February of 1985, the wages paid to Pollard by Israel were raised to 2,500 USD per month (National Security Archive, 1987). While accepting payment whatsoever undercuts the claim that Pollard was primarily motivated by support for Israel, it is especially damning when one adjusts for inflation. The 2025 equivalent of what Pollard earned reaches a total of 74,300 USD, not including the eight months of espionage he conducted at an unknown pre-raise rate. A cursory glance at current wages for Naval Intelligence Analysts suggests a yearly salary of between 65,000 and 100,000 USD (Glassdoor, 2025). Assuming Pollard was paid somewhere within this range as an analyst, his espionage work would represent a significant boost in income.

Secondly, the CIA did not agree with the Israeli position that, due to Israel's status as an ally, American information falling into Israeli hands did not constitute a major security issue. Rather, the CIA claimed that the information provided to Israel would not necessarily stay in Israel, but could instead be provided to third party countries (National Security Archive, 1987). The report states:

The unauthorized disclosure to the Israelis of such a large and varied body of classified material poses risks of severe kinds to US intelligence sources and methods, analytical capabilities

and intelligence exchanges, and foreign-policy interests, including the possibility of extended compromise of some of Pollard's material to third countries (National Security Archive, 1987).

This goes a long way to explaining the disconnect between American and Israeli perceptions of Pollard. To the American intelligence community, Israel was the first, not final, stop for the information he provided.

Moreover, even if the information provided by Pollard was not seen or utilized by any country other than the US-allied State of Israel, Pollard would still have been in breach of the 1917 Espionage Act, with which he was charged. Specifically, 18 US Code § 794 - Gathering or Delivering Defense Information to Aid Foreign Government, makes no distinction between providing to an allied or enemy nation:

Whoever, with intent or reason to believe that it is to be used to the injury of the United States or to the advantage of a foreign nation, communicates, delivers, or transmits, or attempts to communicate, deliver, or transmit, to any foreign government, or to any faction or party or military or naval force within a foreign country, whether recognized or unrecognized by the United States, or to any representative, officer, agent, employee, subject, or citizen thereof, either directly or indirectly, any document, writing, code book, signal book, sketch, photograph, photographic negative, blueprint, plan, map, model, note, instrument, appliance, or information relating to the national defense, shall be punished by death or by imprisonment for any term of years or for life (Cornell Law School, n.d).

Netanyahu's claim that Israel's status as an American ally should result in a more lenient sentence for Pollard does not comport with the law as written, as "to any foreign government" implies that the law does not consider whether a spy acts on behalf of a friendly or hostile nation. This reading of the law was all but confirmed in 2010, when the Terrorism and Homeland Security subcommittee of the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, stated that Pollard's motive of aiding an ally rather than intentionally hurting the United States did not factor into his sentencing. In the transcript, Senator Jon Kyl (R-Arizona) says:

And with regard to the question of motive...[Pollard] had a very good motive. He did not want to hurt the United States at all, but he did want to help his country of Israel. He is serving life in prison because motive in that case did not matter. It was the effect of the leak of the secrets to another government that was the problem (US Government Publishing Office, 2010).

While it is unclear whether Netanyahu was unaware of the Espionage Act's lack of differentiation between spies working on behalf of enemy or allied nations, his self-portrayal in *Bibi*, as well as the widespread sympathy for Pollard among Israelis, points to this conclusion. If this was the case, it points to a wider issue in diplomatic dealings between Israel and Washington, namely an inability or unwillingness to clarify the beliefs and narratives of each party and work towards a common understanding of the facts before beginning negotiations. In this sense, both Clinton and Netanyahu share blame. While Netanyahu likely should have understood the broad nature of the Espionage Act and communicated it to the Israeli public, Clinton should have clarified this to ensure negotiations over Pollard's release would not

be hindered by such misunderstandings. For an alternative example that demonstrates how diverging narratives and understandings can be bridged in diplomatic dealings with Israel, consider the conversation between US President George Bush Sr. and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir during the first Gulf War, in which Israel was asked to refrain from retaliating against Iraqi SCUD attacks (Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, 1989). This request flew in the face of traditional concepts of deterrence and risked undermining Israel's reputation as a country that would defend itself when threatened. However, in their discussion, the President effectively communicated his reasoning, namely that Israeli retaliation could create the impression that the Gulf War was a war between "the West" and "the Arab World," rather than a war against Iraq specifically, which may cause other Arab states to not cooperate in fighting Saddam Hussein. The American led coalition would successfully repel the Iraqi army from Kuwait, in part due to the cooperation of Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and Iraq's threat to Israel would be significantly reduced. Had Washington been less effective in explaining their position to Israel, or not attempted to whatsoever, it is possible that Arab cooperation against Iraq would have been withdrawn and Israeli security would be further imperiled. Overall, the successful talks between Shamir and Bush Sr. demonstrate the value of communication and shared understanding to diplomatic negotiations.

Conclusion

As a tool for historical research, autobiographies are inherently flawed. However, in cases where true primary sources such as meeting transcripts are unavailable, they can provide otherwise unknowable information that, when checked against the autobiographies of other involved parties and relevant documents such as contemporary news coverage, can help clarify the historical record. The negotiations over Pollard's release at the 1998

Wye River Conference is one such example. When presented with two mutually exclusive narratives, Netanyahu's claim and Clinton's denial of a broken promise, comparing the two accounts of events is essential in understanding the true nature of the negotiations.

With this in mind, it would appear that Netanyahu's claim that Clinton promised to release Pollard before abruptly reneging, to force the hand of the Prime Minister, either represented a misunderstanding on Netanyahu's part, or was presented in an intentionally misleading way to strengthen a wider narrative that was politically beneficial to the Prime Minister. His account of negotiations is contradicted by Clinton's autobiography, official statements by the White House, and contemporary reports, all of which support the premise that the Clinton administration, while not immediately dismissing Pollard's release, had not promised it either.

It is impossible to truly know whether Netanyahu sincerely believed the claims made in his autobiography, but certain facts point to the contrary. Firstly, the framing of negotiations within the larger context of the Prime Minister's perceived betrayal by the Labor Party and Clinton himself create the impression that Netanyahu's telling of the Pollard negotiations were intended to fit a narrative of being hampered by disloyal allies. Secondly, the omission of key details from said narrative, such as Arafat's concession over prisoner releases, signal a pattern of intentional deception. While other omissions and errors can be chalked up to misunderstanding, ignorance, or even a difference of opinion—such as the lack of differentiation between allies and enemies in the Espionage Act, or Bob Shrum's lack of connection to Clinton—, the omissions of the concession and consultant can both reasonably assumed to be intentional. If this is the case, it casts significant doubt on the trustworthiness of Netanyahu's account.

Even if the statements made in the autobiography were indeed the Prime Minister's genuine understanding of the events as they

transpired, this points to a perhaps equally unfavorable charge for Netanyahu of paranoia induced by a desire to maintain power. Statements regarding the departure of the CIA director not hurting Clinton's presidency, if sincerely believed, demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to consider factors outside of political longevity, which blinded Netanyahu to the strategic ramifications of such an event coming to pass. Meanwhile, allegations that Clinton colluded with the Labor Party to oust the Likud from power, despite lacking material evidence of such collusion beyond two of Barak's consultants previously working for Clinton and a second-hand rumor from an unnamed White House Gala attendee, create the impression that Netanyahu viewed Clinton not as a fellow leader with differing beliefs, but as an active opponent, further undermining the Prime Minister's ability to view the negotiations as held in anything but bad faith.

However, while Netanyahu's version of events is worthy of criticism and should not be relied upon as a wholly accurate retelling, two caveats remain. First, while lacking the clear errors and omissions found in Netanyahu's biography, Clinton's autobiography, as is inherent to the medium, is predisposed to excuse or smooth over facts inconvenient to the President, and should be read with close scrutiny. Likewise, statements to the press issued by the White House and quotes from former employees share this incentive to protect Clinton and the office of the Presidency more generally. They are included in this paper simply for their negative claims regarding the existence of a promise to release Pollard and Clinton's involvement in the Ehud Barak campaign of 1999, but their accuracy should be questioned in the event that evidence supporting the contrary positive claims comes to light.

Secondly and finally, the belief that Pollard was treated unfairly due to his espionage being conducted on behalf of a United States ally is not unique to Netanyahu, nor did it originate with him. Even if we assume that Netanyahu's

claims were made in bad faith, this does not change the fact that the Israeli public and government viewed Pollard in a very different way to their American counterparts. With this in mind, the failure of the American delegation to communicate the facts of the matter, such as the wording of the Espionage Act and the CIA's risk assessment, demonstrates a larger issue in Israeli-American diplomacy in which differing narratives are not addressed before negotiations begin. Bridging such gaps in understanding will be essential to the continuation of Israeli-American relations, and, by extension, Israeli security.

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