

Commentary

Israel & America: The Eternal Return

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The relationship between the United States and Israel is fracturing. The president and his administration are pressuring the Jewish state to make painful concessions in return for vague agreements short of real peace. The crisis is the subject of commentary on television and in newspapers. America's involvement in a long and bloody counterinsurgency, a war not supported by most of its citizens, has weakened its standing in the world. Economic pressures wreak havoc on ordinary Americans. Israelis are still feeling the aftershocks of an unexpectedly difficult war, one that diminished public belief in the value of concessions and strengthened right-wing parties in the polls. Israel longs for the leaders of the past, and wonders how the paltry politicians running the country today replaced the titans of previous generations. The Palestinians are seeking to upgrade their status at the United Nations and enjoy breakthroughs in the General Assembly and UNESCO. And Israeli leaders worry that the support of a formerly reliable constituency—American Jews—is slipping away.

The year is 1975.

The parallel with the present may be eerie, but it is also instructive. The resolution of the 1975 crisis offers us a road map to how we might resolve today's difficulties between America and Israel, and in a way that would advance the interests of both countries and in a time when the threat to the good working order of the world is far greater than it was 37 years ago.

At the time the crisis erupted in 1975, Gerald Ford had ascended to the Oval Office only seven months before, following the resignation of Richard Nixon. In Jerusalem, Prime Minister Golda Meir had resigned in the wake of protests following the Yom Kippur War, and, two months before Ford's ascension, Yitzhak Rabin became Meir's successor by a narrow margin in an internal Labor Party vote. Heading a loose coalition, beset by political adversaries from all sides, Rabin was in an extremely weak position politically. Public support for his premiership dropped from 64 percent during his visit to Washington, D.C., in September 1974, to 32 percent six months later, when he sat down with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to negotiate a second postwar interim agreement with Egypt.

The Americans had saved Israel from defeat in 1973 with a massive airlift of weapons at a key moment in the Yom Kippur War. But there was a new president and a new goal. In addition to dealing with the economic effects of the Arab oil embargo begun in the wake of the 1973 war, Ford wanted to stymie Soviet designs on the region—especially after the regime of Anwar el-Sadat had a dramatic falling-out with the Soviets that led to the expulsion of all Soviet diplomats and military advisers from Egypt. This was seen as a historic opportunity for the United States, and many in government believed the best way to regain credibility and support in Egypt would be to deliver Israeli concessions on captured territory. Henry Kissinger undertook a 15-

day effort in “shuttle diplomacy,” carrying terms back and forth between Egypt and Israel in hopes of coming up with a grand bargain.

Kissinger conveyed President Sadat’s demand to Israel that the Jewish state withdraw from the critical Giddi and Mitla passes and the Um Hashiba alert station overlooking them in the Sinai. Rabin was willing to withdraw from significant portions of the Sinai won in 1967 and defended in 1973 in return for a non-belligerency agreement. But Sadat was willing to offer only “non-use of force,” not a peace treaty, and Rabin was not about to give up the strategic passes for such a tepid guarantee. Even so, he was ready to allow the Egyptians to advance to forward positions at the western entrances to the passes, and to give up the Abu Rodeis oil fields. The Americans, as declassified records of discussions between Kissinger and Ford show, supported Sadat’s position. Stalemate ensued. Finally, on March 22, 1975, after two weeks of commuting between Israel and Egypt, Kissinger gave up.

Before leaving Israel, Kissinger and Rabin met one last time. Rabin reminded Kissinger that his son was currently deployed on the Sinai front and refused the American terms. The two men attacked each other personally. Kissinger accused Rabin of failing the Jewish people, fuming: “You don’t understand, I’m trying to save you....You are making me, the secretary of state of the United States of America, wander around the Middle East like a Levantine rug merchant....Are you out of your mind? I represent America.” Kissinger boarded his plane, visibly upset, and informed his press team that Israel’s intransigence caused the breakdown in negotiations. State Department spokesman Robert Anderson made a dramatic announcement. “Unfortunately, the differences on a number of key issues have proven irreconcilable,” Anderson said. “We, therefore, believe a period of reassessment is needed so that all concerned can consider how best to proceed toward a just and lasting peace.”

Within days, Ford sent Rabin a scathing official letter: “I wish to express my profound disappointment over Israel’s attitude during the course of the negotiations....I have given instructions for a reassessment of United States policy in the region, including our relations with Israel, with the aim of ensuring that our overall American interests are protected.” This was the most threatening language an American president had used toward Israel since Dwight D. Eisenhower had flown into a rage over the 1956 Suez crisis.

Israelis closed ranks. Opposition leader Menachem Begin announced his support of Rabin’s suspension of the talks, and 92 out of the 120 members of the Knesset agreed. Meanwhile, at Kissinger’s urging, Ford froze the Israeli request for F-15 fighter planes and delayed the delivery of a promised shipment of Lance surface-to-surface missiles. “Every department should put Israeli activities at the bottom of the list,” Kissinger recommended. On March 31, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger declared the United States reluctant to enter new arms commitments with Israel.

In response to administration pressure, Israel launched a concerted campaign to appeal to American public opinion and to Israel’s allies in Congress. By March 26, days after the Rabin-Kissinger meeting, ambassador Simcha Dinitz of Israel appeared in front of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and held individual

“advocacy” meetings with all of its members. Diplomatic celebrities Moshe Dayan and Abba Eban joined the official effort and embarked on worldwide speaking tours. Representatives from the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations met in the embassy with Ambassador Dinitz and coordinated a plan of action.

The effort bore fruit. On May 22, 1975, 76 senators sent a letter to President Ford. “Within the next several weeks, the Congress expects to receive your foreign aid requests for fiscal year 1976,” they wrote. “We trust that your recommendations will be responsive to Israel’s urgent military and economic needs. We urge you to make it clear, as we do, that the United States acting in its own national interests stands firmly with Israel in the search for peace in future negotiations, and that this premise is the basis of the current reassessment of U.S. policy in the Middle East.” Senator Henry Jackson of Washington, a Democrat, followed the letter with an amendment to a defense procurement bill stipulating that Israel receive potentially unlimited supplies of American weaponry at low interest rates. The Senate’s message to Ford was stark.

There was a breakthrough in the diplomatic standoff in September 1975. According to former Israeli prime ministerial adviser Yehuda Avner, then Defense Minister Shimon Peres came up with the original and unexpected idea that American military personnel, called “technicians,” man key positions in the passes. For their part, the Egyptians conceded that Israeli “technicians” would remain present in Um Hashiba, overlooking the strategic passes. The Israelis consented to the American proposal that the technicians idea be presented publicly as an American proposition. These developments allayed Israeli fears and enabled Sadat to save face, and they kept the Soviets from bringing Egypt back into their sphere.

Israel leveraged several key concessions from the United States in a separate Memorandum of Understanding. America promised not to recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization until the PLO recognized Israel’s right to exist and accepted Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, pledged not to push Israel into a similar process with Syria, and agreed that the next agreement between Egypt and Israel would be a full peace treaty. As Abba Eban saw it, “Israel now had a security alliance in everything but name.” The Knesset ratified the Sinai II agreement on September 3, 1975, paving the way for the eventual peace treaty with Egypt in 1979—and transforming the U.S.-Israel relationship for all time.

Now flash forward to 2009. The Obama team had hardly settled into their new quarters before they were jousting with Israel over settlement construction. Within the first month and a half of Obama’s presidency, senior officials in the National Security Council and State Department relayed four official complaints of increasing concern regarding settlement activity in the West Bank and Jerusalem. By April it was widely speculated that the Obama administration would be putting pressure on Israel to freeze its settlement activities, and, speaking at an American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference on May 4, Vice President Joe Biden called on Israel to “not build settlements” and “dismantle outposts.” Then, in a meeting at the end of the month with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Obama reiterated his deputy’s remarks, saying: “Each party has obligations under the road map. On the Israeli side those obligations include stopping settlements.”

By the end of May, administration officials were discussing how to get Israel to comply with U.S. demands. These included public denunciations by President Obama as well as being less responsive to Israel's requests when critical resolutions come up in the UN Security Council. The next month, the Obama administration shocked Israel by declaring it would not be bound by the terms of a 2004 letter from George W. Bush, which assured Israel it would keep major settlement blocs in the event of a peace deal. Finally, in late November, Israel bowed to U.S. pressure and announced an unprecedented 10-month moratorium on settlement construction.

An open rift between Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu erupted during Biden's March 2010 visit to Israel to help kick-start the moribund peace talks. The following day, the Israeli government announced plans for the construction of 1,600 new homes in Ramat Shlomo, a Jerusalem neighborhood east of the green line. The Obama administration felt blindsided and embarrassed and did not hesitate to retaliate. That evening, Biden issued a statement condemning the new housing plans, saying, "The substance and timing of the announcement, particularly with the launching of proximity talks, is precisely the kind of step that undermines the trust we need right now and runs counter to the constructive discussions that I've had here in Israel."

The same night, Biden kept Netanyahu waiting 90 minutes for their official dinner. When the two finally sat down together, Netanyahu tried to placate the vice president. He had had no prior knowledge of the housing plans, he said; they had been submitted three years earlier under the previous government, and their inconveniently timed approval was simply a bureaucratic oversight.

The next week, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, was summoned to the State Department and berated. The following day, Oren held a conference call with Israeli consuls-general, in which he declared that U.S.-Israeli relations were at their lowest point since Ford's reassessment. Netanyahu began standing his ground. In a speech to AIPAC, he stated: "The Jewish people were building Jerusalem three thousand years ago, and the Jewish people are building Jerusalem today. Jerusalem is not a settlement. It is our capital." He also pointed out in a speech to the Knesset that "no government in the past 40 years has limited construction in neighborhoods of Jerusalem."

On March 23, Netanyahu held talks with President Obama at the White House. Obama did not invite Netanyahu to dine with him and denied him a perfunctory photo-op at the end of the talks. In another departure from the norm, the leaders' meeting was closed to the media. On March 25, President Obama presented a list of concessions Netanyahu must make if he wished to de-escalate. When Netanyahu failed to acquiesce immediately, Obama left Netanyahu for an hour to eat dinner alone in the White House.

Relations between the two administrations remained low into the fall. Obama refused to back down, and Netanyahu was unable to mollify the president's frustration. Israel continued to reject the American demand that it extend its 10-month moratorium on settlement construction.

It is at this point that the parallels between the chilly relations of 1975 and today become plain. As in 1975, when 76 senators wrote to Ford in defense of Israel, in April 2010 76 senators sent a bipartisan letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, reminding her that we “must never forget the depth and breadth of our alliance and always do our utmost to reinforce a relationship that has benefited both nations for more than six decades.”

The United Nations also came to play a complicating role in both cases, all but compelling both the Ford and Obama administrations to ally themselves with Israel even though they might not have wished to. Only months before the 1975 crisis, UNESCO, a fiefdom within the UN, voted first to withhold UNESCO aid from Israel for “altering the historical features” of Jerusalem and then to exclude Israel from the European regional group. After the vote, Congress responded by suspending American contributions to the organization, depriving it of 25 percent of its budget. In October 2011, UNESCO members voted to admit Palestine as a full member. Again, U.S. contributions, this time 22 percent of its budget, ended abruptly. Still, the U.S. State Department is attempting to finagle funding for the organization into its 2012 budget. State has allotted nearly \$79 million for UNESCO—the same 22 percent of the organization’s budget that the U.S. was paying prior to the funding freeze last October—and has indicated its desire to work with Congress to obtain a legal waiver for the proposed allowance.

In the General Assembly, the Palestinians were looking to pressure Israel and achieve recognition. In 1974, against the wishes of the U.S. and Israel, the UN had passed resolution 3327, granting observer status to Palestine. In June 1975, right in the middle of the reassessment, the General Assembly passed the infamous “Zionism is racism” resolution, as well as initiatives to expel Israel from the UN. This led to UN Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s famous denunciation: “The United States does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.”

In 2011, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas went ahead with his campaign for recognition of statehood at the UN, which President Obama promised to veto. Abbas submitted his application in September 2011 and delivered his argument for recognition shortly thereafter, but it has not yet reached the Security Council for a vote. Abbas had agreed with the Quartet to put off any diplomatic maneuvers at the United Nations until after a Quartet-imposed deadline of January 26 in order to take one more shot at restarting direct peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. Unsurprisingly, such talks did not come to fruition, but there has still been no action on the part of the Palestinians in the UN. Also unsurprisingly, the vast majority of member states supported the bid. Israel, however, was able to convince a significant number of Western democracies to express serious reservations about unilateral Palestinian statehood. The Palestinians’ momentum seems to have petered out since the heady days of last October.

Israelis worried about their country’s reputation in the United States during both crises. At an ambassadors’ conference in July 1975, Foreign Minister Yigal Allon enumerated to his personnel the challenges of Israeli advocacy: “Sadat is perceived as peaceful and moderate, and we as occupiers, which poses a problem especially

amongst the youth. We are losing the image of ‘pretty Israel,’ becoming more isolated, and are working with a new generation who does not know the history of World War II.”

Other prominent Israelis fretted about losing the support of American Jewry. Amnon Rubinstein, future Israel Prize laureate, wrote in *Haaretz* in September 1975, “American Jews feel deeply disappointed from certain aspects of the Israeli government. Israel reveals in her laws and ways grave religious and conscientious intolerance, part of which is aimed directly against the liberal Jewry of the United States. The idea of religious exclusivity, purity of breed...and discrimination of women...are a natural enemy to the American Jew. [For years they have] avoided openly criticizing Israel, but that has changed after ’73, and now for the first time questions are openly being asked about the relationship with Israel.”

Today, the same concerns keep Israelis and their American supporters up at night. “In sharp contrast to their parents and grandparents,” reported a 2010 study, “non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders.” “Six times we have brought Jewish youth together as a group to talk about their Jewishness and connection to Israel,” pollster Frank Luntz explained. “Six times the topic of Israel did not come up until it was prompted. Six times these Jewish youth used the word *they* rather than *us* to describe the situation.”

On the face of it, the 1975 scrap was significantly more dangerous for both countries, since a real divergence of interests drove the tension. But, because it was a substantive fight over urgent interests, there was a desire and a way to find a compromise, one that fit the interests of the three parties involved. With the 1973 weapons airlift to Israel, the United States had directly influenced the outcome of the Yom Kippur War in Israel’s favor. Arab countries retaliated with the oil embargo on the United States, intended to increase their political clout. Further, some Arab members of OPEC, most notably Saudi Arabia, began nationalizing their oil supplies, further improving their petrodollar-fueled windfall. Because the Arab members of OPEC made the end of their oil embargo contingent on an equitable peace between Israel and Egypt, the United States needed Israeli concessions to win over the Gulf states while peeling off Egypt from the Soviet Union for good.

When Gerald Ford came into office, the main card Kissinger could play to woo the Arabs was pushing Israel to make concessions. Of course, withdrawing from key passes and oil fields, for no guarantees of non-belligerence or peace in return, was more than the Israelis could give so soon after the trauma of 1973. Vulnerable economically and diplomatically, the Israelis were willing to retreat only so far.

Precisely because there were real issues at play that could be negotiated, and serious consequences if they were not, a solution was attainable. None of the three players wanted the Soviets strengthened in Egypt or the region. But American support of Israel was a sticking point the Soviets might try to use to swoop in and claim important Arab allies in the Middle East. Ford did not want the Soviets to gain influence over oil and peace in the Middle East, and Rabin understood the deleterious implications Soviet influence would have as well. Sadat knew that if the Soviets returned in force to the Middle East, he would find himself quickly removed from power. Bridging the gap after initial tensions proved much easier because Ford, Rabin, and Sadat shared a mutual interest.

The Obama-Netanyahu hostility was and remains far more trivial. But it has proved more difficult to navigate because it is *not* about any core American interest. The decline in the relationship came about not because of any daunting gap in interests, but because Obama gave artless public statements, early in his presidency, on the need for a settlement freeze with no clear plan in mind and Netanyahu was unable to smooth over the situation. True, in Obama's worldview the Israeli-Palestinian conflict festered at the heart of the region's woes, and settlements were and are a prompt for Palestinian anger. To Netanyahu, a prohibition on building in Jerusalem was an affront to Israeli sovereignty. But these differences need not have precipitated a major quarrel. They have been largely set aside but not smoothed over. And unlike 1975, while there has been close military and intelligence cooperation, there was no progression to a stronger political relationship between the countries and no progress on peace negotiations.

The personalities involved added to the outcomes of the crises. Henry Kissinger's realpolitik drove his decision-making. Kissinger was willing to threaten a weak Israel. But the players on the Israeli side knew and trusted Kissinger and were willing to negotiate under fire until they hammered out a solution. Rabin describes him in his memoir as "one whose great contribution to the safety of Israel will someday be told." It is hard to imagine Netanyahu coming up with comparable praise about Obama or Hillary Clinton. The trust is missing.

The fact that 76 senators signed a letter in support of Israel in 1975 and did so again in 2010 is a fascinating bit of historical repetition—and an instructive one. It demonstrates that despite major changes in the world over the past three and a half decades, certain facts about Israel's relationship with America and the international community persist. Popular support for Israel in America is unchanged; indeed, it is even stronger in many ways than it has ever been. Still, a major shift has occurred. In the 1970s, liberals generally led the pro-Israel community in America, and foreign-policy realists represented the faction who saw Israel as a strategic burden on the United States.

Now Israel faces an increasingly hostile political left. During Operation Cast Lead in 2008 and 2009, House Resolution 34 expressed support for Israel against Hamas. Of the five members who voted against it, four were Democrats. They also constituted 29 of the 37 abstentions. A letter signed by 54 congressmen, all Democrats, in February 2010 asked Obama to pressure Israel to lift the blockade on Gaza. A poll taken the same month showed 85 percent of Republicans supporting Israel, compared with only 48 percent of Democrats expressing the same position. Israel occupies a unique place in the hearts of Americans, even though who those Americans are and which political party they follow have changed dramatically.

And just as alarmist predictions from the 1970s about the rise of a destructive divide between the diaspora and American Jewry got it wrong, comparable arguments are wrong today. It is conventional wisdom now, especially on the left, that Israeli policies have alienated young American Jews. They feel good about discussing Israel's shortcomings, we are often told. If Zionism would focus less on Israel's achievements, the moral behavior of its soldiers, and the resilience of its democracy, and more on the occupation, discrimination against Israeli Arabs, and the mortal threat the nationalist right poses, then liberal American Jews would more readily

identify with Israel. But Israelis worried about the same trends 35 years ago, before widespread settlement in the West Bank or the first non-Labor government. American support for Israel did not collapse then; it did not collapse after the first Lebanon War in 1982 or the first Intifada in 1987; and the fractious policy problems of the present moment won't break the ties that bind either.

If anything, Israel is in a much stronger position today vis-à-vis the United States than it was in 1975. It is far less susceptible to pressure. It is not facing invasion from conventional forces and has managed to build effective diplomatic and security relationships with powerful countries. Its vastly improved economy has made it more confident as well. The economic situation in Israel was dire after the Yom Kippur War, when inflation averaged 50 percent during Rabin's tenure and the deficit skyrocketed under the strain of military reconstruction. National morale was low, and newspapers frequently ran articles on emigration from Israel. Today, Israel's economy is the envy of much of the West. It emerged from the global financial crisis with hardly a scratch and enjoys a record low rate of unemployment. The discovery of massive natural-gas deposits only adds to its economic power. In short, Israel is no longer the needy client it was in 1975. Indeed, the fact that the Obama-Netanyahu tensions are considered a crisis at all shows how much closer the countries have become since 1975.

And yet a serious crisis is looming. If Israel decides to strike Iran without coordinating with the United States, it is possible that Obama will decide America is best served by publicly distancing himself from the attack. Some in the Obama administration will urge him to condemn Israel, leading to an explosion of public debate over the appropriateness of current levels of military aid to Israel.

But as the Israelis learned in 1975, crises can be opportunities. Both countries came out of the 1975 spat with a valuable strategic accomplishment. The Memorandum of Understanding bound America to support Israel's redline positions before the United Nations and the Palestinians. The shared underlying interest in keeping the Soviets out of Egypt led to the ultimate agreements between Israel and Egypt and drew America and Israel closer together.

Today, Iran can play the role of the Soviet Union in bringing Israel, America, and Sunni Arab states together. Sunni Arab states, especially in the Gulf, are as concerned as Israel is about Iranian influence and its nuclear-weapons program. Their shared concern about Iran gives them something to work toward. If Netanyahu and Obama can put aside their personal differences, Israel and America can move past bilateral tensions over Iran with a closer, more balanced relationship and can put into motion a new Middle East, freed from the shadow of Iranian Shiite madness and open as never before to true American leadership.

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