9

Policy Brief

s u m m a r y

In the post–September 11 context, Israelis hope that the United States—now a victim of massive domestic terrorism—will have more sympathy for them. On the other side, Palestinians hope that the United States will revive peace talks, and thus solidify Arab support for the war on terrorism.

Despite these high expectations, the United States should proceed cautiously, considering the history of its peace-making initiatives. It has effectively assisted contending parties that have already reached a basic agreement (as at Camp David in 1978 or after the 1993 Oslo accords) and intervened to stave off full-scale crises and encourage stabilizing steps (as during the 1973 Yom Kippur War). But most other U.S. efforts have failed because the countries in conflict have lacked the political will.

To prepare both sides for negotiations, U.S. policy should shift from conflict resolution to conflict management. Possible steps include demanding that Palestinians educate their people for peace, encouraging Saudi Arabia to organize an Arab solidarity fund for Palestine, and supporting Israel's unilateral disengagement to ease current tensions. ∎

A Realistic U.S. Role in the Arab–Israeli Conflict

Shlomo Avineri
Visiting Scholar, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

After months of inaction, the U.S. administration is ready to renew Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. The severe deterioration of Israeli–Palestinian relations during 2001—including the terrorist attacks in Jerusalem and Haifa—as well as the wider context of the war against terrorism, make U.S. assistance more urgent than ever. The current weakening of the Palestinian Authority in the wake of Israel's recent measures adds further complications.

Within the region, both sides are hoping that the post–September 11 context will encourage U.S. movement in a direction they favor. In the Israeli view, because the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington showed that Israel is not the only victim of Islamic extremism, the United States will perhaps have more sympathy for their situation. Arab representatives, conversely, have pointed out that it may be harder for the United States to mobilize support in Islamic countries for the war on terrorism if it does not try more energetically to revive the peace talks.

Both sides have a point. Yet the basic obstacles to achieving a meaningful agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority have not changed. And even the best agreement will not have a significant impact on the deeply embedded anti-Americanism in wide sectors of the Arab world, which goes back to the history of the Western presence in the Middle East.

Since the failure of President Bill Clinton's attempt in the summer of 2000 to achieve a final agreement at Camp David, both U.S. administrations have been—correctly—wary of setting expectations too high, because another failure could make things even worse. Moreover, reviving a failed peace process is even more difficult than starting a totally new one.

The renewed U.S. initiative thus should take into account these constraints, and its first imperative should be the political equivalent of the Hippocratic oath: "Above all, do no harm." In calibrating its policy, George W. Bush's administration should also learn from the clear pattern of

Shlomo Avineri joined the Carnegie Endowment as a visiting scholar in October 2001. He is a professor of political science and director of the Institute for European Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He also publishes widely on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. His publications include *Israel and the Palestinians* (Saint Martin's Press, 1971) and *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (Basic Books, 1981).

Mr. Avineri—a recipient of the Israel Prize, the country's highest civilian decoration—served as director-general of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the first administration of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and as head of the Israeli delegation to the UNESCO General Assembly. He has been a visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution and at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C.

previous U.S. initiatives in the Middle East. Both past failures and successes can guide U.S. policy makers.

When Peace Making Works—or Fails

When the United States seeks to help end a long-term conflict, it has the greatest capacity to facilitate peace under either of two scenarios:

■   The United States can be extremely helpful at a moment when the contending sides have the political will to achieve an agreement, have taken the major steps toward the agreement on their own, have made the main concessions bilaterally, and need help only in tying up the agreement's loose ends.

■   The United States can play an important role when war is imminent, or when a local conflict appears about to explode out of control.

If either scenario applies to the actual situation, U.S. power can be extremely persuasive. But if neither applies, U.S. efforts usually fail.

Helping to Tie Up Loose Ends

The first scenario for possible success—tying up the loose ends—can be discerned in two times of peace making: the 1977–1978 Israeli–Egyptian negotiations, and the 1993 Israeli–Palestinian accords in Oslo. In 1977, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem initiated a year of bilateral negotiations. Israel and Egypt agreed on a peace treaty that ended the state of war, Israel agreed to withdraw from all occupied Egyptian territory, and negotiations began on Palestinian autonomy—while Egypt normalized its relations with Israel, including full diplomatic recognition and free movement of people and goods between the two countries.

Yet a number of issues remained open, and they threatened to upset the whole process. At that moment, President Jimmy Carter led a summit meeting at Camp David. He was able to find the language and work out the compromises that saved the whole negotiating process. But he took this initiative only after both Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin had already taken political risks in making momentous—and sometimes quite unpopular—concessions, had decided to pay the political cost of their moves, and had faced the possibility of further risks if the project should collapse.

A similar scenario unfolded in 1993 in Oslo, when Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization reached what then appeared to be a historic reconciliation, founded on mutual recognition. This was achieved bilaterally; the Norwegian hosts were not involved in the negotiations. Both sides were ready to cross the political Rubicon because all other routes had been blocked. But again, as in 1977–1978, a number of issues remained open. So President Clinton called Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat to a White House meeting, where both sides were able to make the necessary concessions to achieve a mutually acceptable agreement.

Crisis Intervention

The other scenario for possible success is that of an impending or unfolding crisis, when what is needed is a major, abrupt decision to stop open warfare, to call an immediate halt to hostilities, or to withdraw forces—not a lengthy process of peace making or reconciliation. The first example of such success is probably the U.S. pressure on Israel (as well as on France and the United Kingdom) to withdraw from Egyptian territory in the wake of the 1956 Sinai–Suez campaign.

An even more dramatic direct U.S. success was achieved in the closing days of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. After Israel suffered initial setbacks, it regained the initiative, and its armies crossed the Suez Canal and were about to encircle the Egyptian forces on the west bank of the canal, threatening Cairo itself. A crucial U.S. ultimatum to the Israelis made them call off the encirclement and allow food to be sent to the besieged pocket—saving Egypt from total defeat, and leading to several United States–brokered interim agreements and eventually to the process that culminated in Sadat's visit to Jerusalem four years later.

Another success was achieved during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. After

popular and military pressure to hit back, especially because U.S. promises to take out the missile launchers turned out to be more rhetorical than real. Such an Israeli response would have conceivably broken up or weakened the United States–Arab anti-Iraq coalition. Forceful U.S. pressure on Israel not to make such a move was instrumental in preventing military action by the Shamir government, which sat out the war while missiles continued to rain on Tel Aviv and its environs.

Anatomy of Success and Failure

From the 1970s to the 1990s, numerous other U.S. initiatives to facilitate an Israeli–Palestinian peace plan fell flat. The reasons are obvi-

The first U.S. imperative should be the political equivalent of the Hippocratic oath: "Above all, do no harm."

Syrian agents assassinated the Israeli-backed Lebanese president-elect Beshir Gemayel in September 1982, Israel prepared to occupy Muslim-held West Beirut, which likely would have led to direct Syrian military intervention and thus to a wider regional conflict. A curt ultimatum from President Ronald Reagan to Prime Minister Begin stopped Israeli forces from occupying West Beirut. Although the Lebanese conundrum has still not been solved, a major conflagration was avoided.

A final example of success could be culled from the 1991 Gulf War. When 39 Iraqi scud missiles hit Israeli towns during the war, the Israeli government, under Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, felt strong

ous. In the first success scenario, the countries directly involved, by already going out on a limb to achieve an agreement, have demonstrated their political will. What they need is an extra push. In the second scenario, what is needed is a onetime step: to get out of West Beirut, to not send aircraft against Iraq. But to succeed, a peace process requires the sustained good will of both players for a period of months and years. During that long period, U.S. attention will flag, and without the players' political will the process will be stillborn, as it has been numerous times.

Similar constraints on outside international capacity to stop hostilities or reach peace agreements also can be seen in the recent Balkan wars. It was possible to achieve the Dayton

agreement because all sides had the political will, which grew out of their own problems and dilemmas—and also because then–Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic feared the further use of force by the United States.

Nation building in Bosnia, however, is a different matter. It is a lengthy and exhausting process that keeps those directly involved busy 24 hours a day. Meanwhile, outsiders—especially the U.S. president—have other things to do. Kosovo is another similar situation. Ending the war was one thing, difficult as it was; the long and complex work of settling the future of Kosovo is another.

Can the United States Find a Useful Role?

Given these constraints, what can one reasonably expect the United States to do successfully? Clinton's attempt at Camp David in 2000 is proof that if neither of the two scenarios applies, even the tremendous clout of a U.S. president is not enough to bring the two sides to an agreement. In the summer and autumn of 2000, there was no imminent danger of war, nor did the Palestinians have the political will to respond positively to the framework suggested by Clinton and Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak. The situation after September 11, following the assassina-

> # The United States has the greatest capacity to facilitate peace under either of two scenarios: helping to tie up an agreement's loose ends or intervening when war is imminent.

Such national conflicts, in the Balkans as well as in the Middle East, involve issues of memory, identity, and history, which are crucial to the affected countries but may be incomprehensible to outsiders. For instance, because the Temple Mount involves three thousand years of history for Jews, and almost a millennium and a half for Muslims, an outside solution imposed by people for whom it is merely a quaint piece of real estate is sure to fail—unless Jews and Muslims have the will to readjust their belief systems, their cognitive maps, and their own relationship with their history. Relations among Croats, Muslims, and Serbs in Bosnia, and between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo, are similarly burdened.

tion of Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Zeevi and the recent terror attacks in Jerusalem and Haifa, may be moving dangerously toward the second scenario—and then, paradoxically, there may be more of a chance for a successful United States–led initiative, perhaps with aid from the European Union.

Yet two considerations should be paramount for the United States. First, it should not aim too high. When the political will is lacking, for the United States to pursue a broad, inclusive peace agreement may be self-defeating—and, as Camp David in 2000 has shown, even dangerous.

The 2000 failure at Camp David, and the ensuing intifada, caused the collapse of Barak's Labor-led Israeli government and the

election of Ariel Sharon. Certainly, the Sharon government—regardless of outside pressure—will not offer the Palestinians more than Barak was ready to offer; and Arafat is not likely to accept an Israeli offer that is less far-reaching than Barak's. Furthermore, after a year of the intifada, numerous suicide attacks against Israeli civilians, and the brutality of some Israeli responses, the bitterness on both sides is much deeper and mutual trust is much weaker. If Israelis would have—albeit reluctantly—gone along with what Barak was ready to offer in 2000, their willingness to do so now is almost totally gone.

to achieve an unequivocal cessation of terror from the Palestinian side, along with Israeli restraint and the freezing of settlements. The dismantling of terrorist organizations like Hamas would also be crucial. Such an effort would garner not only European support, but also Russian backing—and, if one listened carefully to Iranian president Mohammad Khatami's recent speech at the United Nations, perhaps even tacit approval from Iran.

Such an effort should be accompanied by an explicit demand that the Palestinian side must begin to educate its population for peace; that the Israelis, though an adversary,

When the political will is lacking, for the United States to pursue a broad, inclusive peace agreement may be self-defeating— and even dangerous.

What can perhaps be achieved is a stabilization framework, and this is rightly the focus of the current Bush administration approach: not an overall agreement, but several steps aimed at confidence building. As U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell has pointed out, such a road map was envisaged in the plan proposed by the Mitchell Commission earlier this year, and was supplemented by U.S. director of central intelligence George Tenet's recommendations on how to get there. Former U.S. senator George Mitchell, with a number of international leaders accompanying him, realized that after the debacle at Camp David and the outbreak of the intifada, the most important aim should be to stabilize the situation:

should not be dehumanized; and that there should be no more statements like that made by Arafat at the U.N. Anti-Racism Conference in Durban that Israel is the last outpost of colonialism, which Israelis see as still denying the very legitimacy of their polity. The strategists, military leaders, and legal experts who are usually responsible for framing peace agreements tend to overlook such "soft" issues as education. But these issues are crucial in any attempt to anchor peace in people's hearts and minds. The lack of such an attempt to change perceptions about Israel in Egypt, despite the peace treaty between the two countries, has been the fertile ground in which the demonization of Israel—and the West generally—has continued

to grow, egregiously erupting in the Egyptian press after September 11.

Without these normative elements, it will be extremely difficult to change the hard-line positions that have taken over Israeli public discourse since the breakdown of the 2000 Camp David talks and the outbreak of the intifada. It is here that some of the moderate Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, can be helpful. To be viable, the Palestinian Authority and a future Palestinian state need economic and financial support to develop an economic infrastructure. This support cannot—and should not—come exclusively from the United States or the European Union; it should be part of an Arab solidarity drive to help the Palestinians in an hour of historical opportunity.

that Israel can be persuaded to make far-reaching concessions when it feels relatively secure—free from threat or outside pressure. The historic Israeli concessions, in 1978 to Sadat and in 1993 in Oslo, grew out of an internal Israeli conviction that concessions were the only way out—and that, at those moments, Israel was secure enough to make them. When Israelis perceive pressure, however, they tend to circle the wagons. This is why President Bush's post–September 11 statement about a Palestinian state, though not novel, was perceived by many Israelis as the beginning of pressure; their reaction, including Prime Minister Sharon's outburst, expressed their sense of siege. Inevitably, such tactics elicit Israeli outrage and defiance rather than concessions.

To defuse tensions, it would be extremely helpful for the Saudis to organize and generously finance an Arab solidarity fund for Palestine.

Saudi support for the Palestinian cause thus far has been primarily rhetorical and diplomatic. To defuse tensions, it would be extremely helpful for the Saudis to organize and generously finance an Arab solidarity fund for Palestine. It could give a major boost and much credibility to a regional effort to stabilize the situation. This fund should not depend on a final agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Indeed, it should accompany any resumption of meaningful negotiations, and it should be part of the dialogue between the Saudis and the United States.

The second paramount consideration for the United States is to pay attention to internal Israeli perceptions. Experience suggests

The Unilateral Israeli Alternative

Last and not least, if a stabilization framework proves elusive, one should not rule out the possibility of unilateral steps by Israel, such as disengagement. These steps would not be a solution. But they might help to de-escalate the present tension; minimize friction; and, by stabilizing the situation, perhaps prepare both sides for negotiations. The example of Cyprus comes to mind. Although there is no accepted solution and there has not been any real progress in negotiations, violence has been avoided for three decades.

What would unilateral Israeli disengagement mean? It would entail dismantling some of the more isolated, indefensible

Jewish settlements on the West Bank and especially in Gaza and evacuating about 20,000 Jewish settlers. And it would mean consolidating the rest of the settlements into contiguous areas, adjacent to Israel, that would probably geographically cover less than 3 percent of the West Bank.

Israeli disengagement would also allow the Palestinians to consolidate the areas under their control on the West Bank, which are at present impossibly gerrymandered, into a cohesive territory. For the time being, it would also mean keeping the status quo in Jerusalem, including de facto Muslim control of the mosques on the Temple Mount, because any tampering with this would rile extremists on both sides. Finally, Israel would need to accept a Palestinian declara-

The Real Choice

Despite the conventional wisdom, the choices in the Middle East are not only peace or war. There are always alternatives in between. The decade since Oslo has been dominated by a vision of conflict resolution. Although this approach showed significant results up to Camp David, it reached the end of the road when the final issues—Jerusalem, refugees, borders—were raised. U.S. policy should now move from conflict resolution to conflict management. This may be a difficult cognitive shift, but it is the only approach that now holds some hope.

It would be helpful for the United States to undertake a well-calibrated initiative—conscious of the limits of what outside powers can do, and attentive to the fears of both

U.S. policy should now move from conflict resolution to conflict management—the only approach that now holds some hope.

tion of independence, even if the state's final borders were not yet delineated.

This stabilization would be far from satisfactory. Yet, barring a chance for a negotiated settlement, it might be preferable to the present mayhem. It might even help bring about a national consensus in Israel, because such disengagement has both dovish and hawkish elements. One could understand Palestinian unhappiness with such a stopgap nonsolution. But even they and their leaders would, one hopes, realize that in the absence of an agreement, it would still be better than today's situation. After all, unilateral Israeli disengagement would put an end to most—though not all—Israeli occupation.

sides and the political leeway available to their leaders. But if U.S. policy makers overlook these constraints, Israeli–Palestinian negotiations will once again become a dangerous exercise in futility. ∎

Related Resources
from Carnegie Endowment

Visit www.ceip.org/pubs for these and other publications.

An Arab Marshall Plan, Shlomo Avineri, in the *Jerusalem Post* (November 14, 2001)

A Democratic Deficit, Shlomo Avineri, in the *Jerusalem Post* (October 22, 2001)

Lessons from the Debacle, Shlomo Avineri, in *Internationale Politik* (German Society for Foreign Affairs, December 2000)

Fighting Terrorism: Lessons from the Cold War, Anatol Lieven (Carnegie Policy Brief 7, October 2001)

Point of No Return: The Deadly Struggle for Middle East Peace, Geoffrey Kemp and Jeremy Pressman (Carnegie Endowment, 1997)

www.ceip.org