

# THE UNITED STATES AND PALESTINE

Understanding Seven Decades of Failed American Policy

*By Rashid Khalidi*

As with many other unresolved issues in the modern Middle East, it was Great Britain rather than the United States that initially created the problem of Palestine. But in Palestine, as elsewhere, it has been the lot of the United States, Britain's successor as undisputed hegemon over the region, to contend with the complications engendered by British policy. And as elsewhere in the Middle East, in the end the United States significantly exacerbated the conflict over Palestine that it inherited from Britain. The outlines of the problem can be simply stated: with the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, Great Britain threw the weight of the greatest power of the age, one which was at that moment in the process of conquering Palestine, behind the creation of a Jewish state in what was then an overwhelmingly Arab country, against the wishes of its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Everything that has followed until this day in that conflict-riven land has flowed inevitably from this basic decision.

Woodrow Wilson was the first American president to support Zionism publicly, and his backing was crucial to the awarding of the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine to Britain. This in turn led to the inclusion of the text of the Balfour Declaration in the terms of the Mandate, committing the entire international community of that era to the establishment of a "Jewish national home." Wilson extended the United States' support to Zionism in spite of the results of the American King-Crane Commission, which discovered the majority Arab population of Palestine to be overwhelmingly opposed to the establishment of a Jewish national home—which they rightly feared would inexorably develop into an exclusively Jewish state in their homeland and at their expense.

Although the United States withdrew from active involvement in the League of Nations and from many other aspects of international politics soon afterwards, the impact on Palestine of these key post-World War I decisions in which the

▷ *Yasser Arafat and President Bill Clinton at the White House, Washington, DC, April 20, 2000. Tim Sloan/AFP/Getty Images*



United States played a crucial role was to be lasting. Under the protection of the British Mandate, and with its invaluable support, and with financing which largely came from contributions raised from American donors,<sup>2</sup> by 1939 the Zionist movement had created the nucleus of a viable, independent Jewish state. This American financing, from private and later governmental sources in the form of economic and military assistance, has been crucial to the success of the Zionist project and the state of Israel from the very beginnings and until the present day.

It was thus in keeping with what was to become an American tradition that a few decades after Wilson's original intervention, at another critical moment for the fortunes of the Palestinians and the Zionist cause, President Harry S. Truman overrode the views of most of his foreign policy advisors on the Palestine issue. He did so to decisive effect in supporting the Zionist movement when it came into confrontation with the British in 1946 over the issue of opening the doors of Palestine to immigration for Jewish displaced persons in Europe; in supporting a 1947 United Nations plan for the partition of Palestine that was exceedingly favorable to the Zionists;<sup>3</sup> and in extending American recognition to the new Jewish state immediately after it declared its independence on May 15, 1948. Justifying his position, Truman famously remarked: "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism; I do not have any hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."<sup>4</sup>

This sums up one aspect of the conundrum of American power as it has affected the Palestinians. Unable to appeal to the Bible for justification (although many of them are Christians), as could the Zionists, unable to claim that they had strategic value to the United States, as Israel was able to do, especially during the Cold War, and unable to marshal a powerful lobby to support them domestically, as Israel has been exemplary in doing, the Palestinians have consistently failed to gain a fair hearing for their cause in the United States. Their failure was partly a function of the continuing ignorance of the Palestinians' political leadership, from the 1940s until the present day, of how American politics worked, and their inability to make a persuasive case to American public opinion or politicians. It was also a function of the political ineffectiveness of a relatively small and largely first-generation Arab-American immigrant community that is only today beginning to make an impact on the American political system. The task of both Palestinians and Arab-Americans was made all the harder by the fact that they were up against a vivid narrative rooted in Biblical themes familiar to most Americans, and which took on added poignancy from the 1940s onward from the terrible, recent memory of the Holocaust.

For decades the way in which the United States has treated the Palestine question has had a powerful and enduring impact on how America was regarded by Middle Eastern public opinion. Most Arabs, Middle Easterners, and Muslims, as well as increasing

numbers of others in the rest of the world, have come to regard the consistently negative attitude of the United States government towards the Palestinians as an important standard by which the United States should be judged as a great power. By the same token, it must be admitted that over its many decades of unstinting and generous support for Israel, the United States has been remarkably successful in persuading most Arab governments that, all appearances notwithstanding, it was not completely biased in favor of Israel, or even if it was biased, that they should simply ignore this fact.

In recent years, as American policy has increasingly converged with that of Israel, this process of persuasion has grown more difficult for United States policymakers. Absent such persuasion, there have been increasing internal difficulties for Arab governments perceived by their own public opinion to be supine before a United States totally biased in favor of Israel. Moreover, in the wake of the murderous suicide attacks of September 11, 2001, on New York and Washington, the convergence between the policies of the George W. Bush administration and the Ariel Sharon government in Israel reached the point that they were virtually indistinguishable in a number of realms, notably as regards what had become their shared rhetoric on the topic of "terrorism." Palestinian militant groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad were lumped together with Al-Qaeda in the statements of the Bush administration and the Israeli government, and this approach has since become enshrined in American laws on terrorism.

It remains to be seen how much of an impact this American-Israeli convergence and the identification of the United States with Israel will have on the standing of the United States with public opinion in the Middle East, or with regional governments, or on these governments' standing with their own peoples. For most people in the Middle East insist on distinguishing between groups like Al-Qaeda, and what they see as legitimate Palestinian resistance to occupation. Even if they morally disapprove of the targeting of Israeli civilians, as many (but certainly not all) do, most believe that Palestinian violence against Israelis can only be understood in context. This context includes the expulsion of most of the Palestinian population from their homes in 1948, and the intense, systematic violence against Palestinian civilians of Israel's occupation regime, which has been in place since 1967. Middle Easterners understand, as most Americans do not, for example, that while civilians constituted a majority of the 1,000 Israelis killed in the second intifada, they also were a large majority of the over 4,500 Palestinians killed. In view of the United States government's almost exclusive focus on Palestinian violence directed against Israeli civilians, the perception among Middle Easterners that the United States cares about innocents only if they are Americans or Israelis, and pays no attention to them if they are Palestinians or Arabs, is hard to efface. In the eyes of many in the Middle East, it appears that some civilian lives have much more value than others in U.S. policy.



It has not always been thus. Indeed, during most of the 1950s and into the 1960s under the Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy administrations the American position on Arab-Israeli issues was relatively balanced, in spite of a deep American popular sympathy for Israel. Nevertheless, in addition to forcing Israel out of Sinai, during the 1950s the United States also repeatedly voted in the UN Security Council to condemn Israel for its savage reprisals, such as the October 1953 raid on Qibya in the West Bank, to avenge the killing of three Israeli civilians. In this raid, fifty-four Palestinian civilians were killed when they were pinned inside their homes with gunfire, after which soldiers of the infamous Unit 101, commanded by Ariel Sharon, dynamited dozens of structures over the heads of the victims. Indeed, until the mid-1960s, while the United States was always a dedicated ally of Israel, it certainly acted more even-handedly in the conflict than it has ever since then.

Through the mid-1950s there were in fact repeated initiatives to resolve the nascent Arab-Israeli conflict, mainly by the United States, but also by other mediators, on the basis of territorial compromise and the return of some of the 750,000 Palestinian refugees who were driven from or fled their homes in 1948. The principle of peace with Israel on the basis of these ideas was accepted at different times by several Arab governments, but was rejected by Israel, largely because of the refusal of Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion and his followers, such as Moshe Dayan, disagreed with a minority of Israeli leaders like Moshe Sharett in considering a large, strong Israel more important than peace on these terms. Notwithstanding these realities, which were soon forgotten by American public opinion, if it ever properly registered them, it was the Arabs alone who got a reputation as rejectionists when they refused compromise with Israel in the late 1960s. The United States, although it had advocated such a compromise in the 1950s, allowed the matter to drop when it was repeatedly rejected by Israel. This eventually constituted another pattern in U.S. policy: giving up on American initiatives when Israel raised objections.

### **Cold War Considerations**

Although from the outset the United States government provided Israel with considerable economic assistance (in addition to generous tax-exempt private donations), that aid did not become significant until the late 1960s, and only jumped to astronomical levels beginning in 1973. Starting in that year, U.S. military and economic aid to Israel went over a billion dollars annually, putting Israel ahead of all other American aid recipients. It has remained there ever since, with current annual aid levels well over \$3 billion. Moreover, the United States did not sell Israel significant quantities or the most modern kinds of arms until the 1960s, when Kennedy decided to provide the Jewish state with Hawk anti-aircraft missiles and President Lyndon B. Johnson thereafter

agreed to sell Israel Skyhawk fighter-bombers. Neither, however, was a top-of-the-line offensive weapon (the first of these, F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers, were first delivered to Israel in 1969, at the height of the War of Attrition along the Suez Canal). From the early 1950s until the 1967 war it was France rather than the United States that furnished the key weapons systems to the potent Israeli arsenal, as well as providing the where-withal for the building of the Dimona nuclear reactor, which thereafter enabled Israel to transform itself into a significant nuclear-armed power. The United States was thus not the foremost military or diplomatic backer of Israel until after 1967. It was the superimposition of Cold War rivalries on the Arab-Israeli conflict that revolutionized both the conflict and American relations with the entire region.

The Cold War had entered the Middle East much earlier, indeed from its very beginning, with the immediate post-World War II crises between the Soviet Union and Iran and Turkey leading eventually to the issuance of the Truman Doctrine in 1947. However, at the outset the Cold War mainly affected the region's non-Arab peripheries bordering on the Soviet Union. It was not until the mid-1960s that Egypt and Syria, the leading Arab states surrounding Israel, became increasingly identified with the Soviet Union as a result of their need for large quantities of weapons in light of their repeated military defeats by Israel. Thereafter, the United States began to offer significant military, and later economic, assistance to the Jewish state.

The deepening American involvement in Vietnam in the late 1960s contributed to the imposition of Cold War patterns on the Middle East, as American policymakers came to see the alignment with the Soviet Union of several Arab states, notably Egypt and Syria, through Cold War lenses. Especially after it routed the Arabs in 1967, and as the war in Vietnam turned uglier, a potent Israel came to be attractive to the United States as a proxy stick with which to beat Soviet clients in the Middle East. Ironically, there is much evidence that most of the leading Arab states were not interested in confrontation with Israel before 1967. It is now known that they were dragged into such a confrontation during the spring of that year by attacks on Israel by Palestinian groups based in Syria and the zeal of the radical neo-Baath regime in power in Damascus.<sup>5</sup> They thereafter were incapable of escaping this confrontation after Israel's occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank and Gaza Strip in June 1967. Once the Arab states and Israel, and their respective super-power patrons, had been thus involved, there was no getting out of the rigid symmetries imposed by the Cold War.

This began what might be called the classic phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict, one that concluded only with the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. This phase encompassed the 1967 war, the War of Attrition along the Suez Canal ending in 1970, the 1973 war, and the 1978 and 1982 Israeli invasions of Lebanon. The Arab

parties engaged in the conflict, notably Egypt and Syria, the newly established Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), as well as Iraq and Algeria, were seen as aligned with the Soviet Union, which was perceived as calling the shots. This idea of Soviet manipulation of the Arabs was false in every respect,<sup>6</sup> but it was the product of an era of distorted perceptions when American policymakers saw Vietnam and China as proxies of the Soviet Union. The Soviets posed as the disinterested and generous patrons of the Arabs, although there was much evidence of deep and bitter rifts between the two sides over the rigid limitations the Soviet Union placed on its military and economic support, out of fear of being dragged into uncontrollable confrontations with the United States by what Moscow saw as irresponsible Arab governments.

Although the United States backed a broad range of Middle Eastern states, including Iran, Turkey, and several Arab countries, its support for Israel from the late 1960s onwards was increasingly both quantitatively and qualitatively different from that it extended to any other country in the Middle East, or indeed elsewhere. U.S. aid to Israel came to include advanced weapons systems no other client or ally, even NATO partners, received.

By 1970, at the height of the War of Attrition, the conflict had grown much more intense, with an increasingly salient role for the superpowers. As U.S.-supplied Israeli F-4 Phantoms bombed targets deeper and deeper inside Egypt, Israeli pilots were shooting down the most advanced interceptors in the Soviet arsenal, Egyptian MiG-21Js, flown by Soviet pilots, while 20,000 Soviet military personnel were stationed in Egypt in advisory and combat roles. Soviet-supplied SAM-2 and SAM-3 anti-aircraft missiles were being installed closer and closer to the Suez Canal, threatening to establish a no-fly zone for Israeli planes over Israeli positions on the east side of the canal. Losses of men and material among both Egyptian and Israeli forces were increasingly heavy. Finally, by August 1970, the number of Israeli F-4 Phantoms shot down by Egyptian anti-aircraft guns and missiles became greater than the United States' ability to replace them, given how stretched production of these cutting-edge aircraft was due to the Vietnam War. At this stage, the United States made a determined effort to lower the level of violence: Secretary of State William Rogers managed to obtain a ceasefire along the canal, which lasted for three years, although the political element of the Rogers Plan, involving negotiations between Egypt and Israel, became a dead letter because Israel refused to enter into serious negotiations.

The end result was a temporary calming of Israel's Egyptian front, at the expense of an explosion on the eastern front, for the Rogers Plan provoked fierce divisions between the Arab parties that accepted it, Egypt and Jordan, on the one hand, and the Arab parties that rejected it, Syria, Iraq, and the PLO. In the end, the fractious PLO paid the highest price for its rejection, being eliminated from Jordan by the Jordanian

army in a series of campaigns beginning with the bloody Black September fighting in Amman in 1970 and continuing until the battles in Jarash and the north in the spring of 1971. A coup in Syria in November 1970 led by Hafez Al-Assad against the wing of the Syrian Baath Party that had most strongly supported the Palestinians, and the elimination thereafter by Ahmad Hassan Bakr and Saddam Hussein of those Iraqi Baathist leaders most sympathetic to the Palestinians left them in a weak position, isolated in Lebanon, and without significant Arab government support. The PLO had nevertheless succeeded in reestablishing Palestinian nationalism, which had been in eclipse since the 1948 war, as a regional force to be reckoned with.

Until this point, the United States had ignored the Palestinians, focusing instead on its relations with the Arab states, and preeminently on its rivalry with the USSR. The United States at best engaged in conflict management in the Arab-Israeli conflict, as in its interventions of 1956 and 1970, which both reestablished the *status quo ante bellum*, or pursued a policy of benign neglect, as in 1967, when it gave what amounted to a covert green light to Israel's preemptive attack on Egypt, Syria, and Jordan.<sup>7</sup> Henry Kissinger, who soon after 1970 had taken control of American Middle East policy, pursued the benign neglect approach until the 1973 war.<sup>8</sup> Only then did the Egyptian-Syrian attack on Israeli forces in the occupied Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights oblige him to devote his attention to the Middle East, although he assiduously ignored the Palestine problem. Once again, the solution chosen was to focus primarily on obtaining strategic advantage vis-à-vis the USSR rather than peacemaking *per se*. The main American aim was to win Egypt into the American camp and away from the Soviet one, while separating Egypt from its Soviet-aligned Arab allies via a separate peace with Israel. Kissinger largely achieved this objective with a series of disengagement accords that ultimately, under the Carter administration, led to the Camp David agreement and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979.

The secretary of state meanwhile paid the minimum of attention necessary to the Syrian-Israeli front, where the post-1973 crisis was defused by a disengagement accord that is still in force over forty years later. Throughout, Kissinger generally disregarded Jordan and the Palestinians, having strongly supported the former against the latter during the fighting of 1970–71. President Jimmy Carter and his advisors eventually followed the same approach of disregarding the Palestinians, although this was not their initial intention. In 1977, Carter attempted to initiate comprehensive Middle East settlement negotiations involving the Soviet Union and all other parties and including the Palestinians, made a pioneering statement about the need for a Palestinian homeland, and initiated direct contacts with the PLO. Carter soon drew back from all of these initiatives, under intense pressure from an enraged Israeli government, backed by the powerful Israeli lobby. It was not U.S. policy, but rather Anwar



Sadat's initiative of traveling to Jerusalem, and his decision to accept a separate peace with Israel at the expense of his Arab allies and the Palestinians, that eventually led to Camp David and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979.

### **Coming of the Neoconservatives**

The Ronald Reagan years saw an unprecedented American warming to Israel, with the rise in official positions of muscular nationalists like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld and intensely pro-Israel neoconservative figures like Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith. Under such influences, American benign neglect of the Palestinians became increasingly malignant, as the Reagan administration supported Israel's 1982 war on the PLO and Lebanon and turned a blind eye to its aggressive settlement policies. This had become a critical issue beginning in 1977 with the advent to power in Israel of right-wing Likud governments, led by Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir. In service of their ideology of a "Greater Eretz Israel," these leaders were committed to keeping control of what they called "Judea and Samaria" (the West Bank to the rest of the world). In order to make this a reality, they began a settlement building campaign to make sure this would happen that has never slowed significantly since then. This has brought the number of Israeli colonists in illegal settlements in the West Bank and occupied Arab East Jerusalem from 10,000 in 1977 to nearly 200,000 by the end of the 1980s. There are 600,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and occupied Arab East Jerusalem today, amounting to over one in ten Jewish Israelis.

Beyond this, the Reagan administration secretly gave a green light to Israel's invasion of Lebanon and its expulsion of the PLO from Beirut in 1982, and thereafter helped Israel to create a puppet Lebanese government that was brought to sign a short-lived peace treaty on Israeli terms.<sup>9</sup> The only concrete result of this ill-fated foolish American initiative, besides the expulsion of the PLO from Beirut, was to alienate the overwhelming majority of Lebanese, and to provoke a series of lethal attacks on American Marines, diplomatic facilities, and academics in Beirut. Although Reagan's last secretary of state, George Schultz, opened up direct, public contacts between the U.S. government and the PLO for the first time, after the Palestinians met a number of American conditions, in the end this initiative did little to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Toward the end of the Reagan years, in December 1987, the first Palestinian intifada erupted, producing a powerful positive effect on Israeli and American public opinion. It was partly in response to this unprecedented Palestinian popular upheaval that the George H. W. Bush administration launched the first serious multilateral effort to resolve the entire Arab-Israeli conflict in the wake of the U.S. war to expel Iraq from Kuwait in 1991.

Starting at Madrid in the fall of that year, Secretary of State James Baker managed an achievement unprecedented since the Balfour Declaration. This was to seat virtually all

parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and all the relevant international actors, around one table, albeit only for one short plenary meeting. Thereafter the proceedings broke up into bilateral negotiations in Washington, between Israel and Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians, as well as multilateral sessions bringing in most Arab countries and several others. Bilateral Palestinian-Israeli negotiations went on in Washington for the next twenty some months, until June 1993. Unfortunately, the United States, acting under Israeli pressure, imposed ground rules for the functioning of these talks that were highly disadvantageous to the Palestinians. This nullified any advantages they had achieved through the United States including them for the first time in negotiations on their fate. These ground rules also affected the subsequent talks between the two sides that started secretly at Oslo in 1993 and resulted in the Oslo accords of that year.

Under these ground rules at Madrid and in Washington, the Palestinians were not allowed to choose their own representatives freely—thus no one associated with the PLO, from Jerusalem, or from the Palestinian diaspora could take part—and initially they were obliged to accept the fiction of a Jordanian-Palestinian joint delegation. More seriously, they were forced to accept what ended up being an indefinite deferment of the negotiation of all the most important “final status” issues: an end to occupation, sovereignty, statehood, final borders, settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, and water. And most significantly, all the Palestinians were allowed to negotiate with the Israelis, whether in Washington or later on during the Oslo talks, was an interim self-government accord, whose contours were almost identical to the “autonomy” proposals put forward by Menachem Begin at Camp David in 1978.<sup>10</sup> This process in the mid-1990s ultimately produced the Palestinian Authority (PA), which eventually obtained extremely limited control over less than 20 percent of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, divided into dozens of small islands, all isolated from one another by swathes of Israeli-controlled territory and dozens of military checkpoints. These arrangements gave Israel ultimate authority over security, thereby enabling it to maintain full control of the occupied territories, which it retains until this day. Most importantly, all the while, Israel was able to continue expanding its illegal settlements and the strategic roads that connected them, a process which has never been interrupted, in spite of a “peace process” that has proceeded fitfully ever since then.

The highly respected head of the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid and Washington negotiations, Haidar Abdel Shafi, said that it was a grievous mistake for the Palestinians to continue to negotiate while Israel’s closure of Jerusalem to West Bankers and its unceasing expansion of its colonial settlement enterprise in the occupied territories continued devouring the very land that was supposed to be subject to negotiation. He added that the Palestinians should have withdrawn from the talks when the United States failed to insist that Israel respect the terms of reference for the entire Madrid

process, and in particular when the Americans failed to honor the commitments contained in their Letter of Assurances to the Palestinians. This letter committed the United States to oppose any actions that were “prejudicial or precedential,” would “make negotiations more difficult or preempt their final outcome,” or that would “predetermine” final status options. Seeing the American failure to do anything about Israeli actions that contravened these basic guidelines, the entire Palestinian delegation agreed with the position of Abdel Shafi, only to be overruled by Yasser Arafat and the PLO leadership.<sup>11</sup>

### **Dishonest Brokers**

The negotiations that started at Madrid went on fruitlessly for ten rounds in Washington. Eventually, after the election of Yitzhak Rabin at the head of a Labor government in 1992, Israel decided to start indirect, and later direct, back-channel negotiations with the PLO itself in Oslo and elsewhere. While this meant that a major Palestinian demand—direct negotiations with the PLO—had been met, it had an important downside. Now, the negotiations were no longer in the hands of an increasingly competent delegation of West Bankers and Gazans, with intimate knowledge about the situation under occupation, and with a popular constituency back home they had to report to periodically. This group over time had developed a level of expertise in negotiating with the Israelis—and with the American “dishonest brokers,” who were often harder to deal with than the Israelis themselves. Instead, the negotiations were now carried out in secret by a group of PLO officials chosen primarily for their loyalty to Arafat, with limited knowledge of English (the language of the negotiations), no legal background, no first-hand knowledge of the situation in the occupied territories, no negotiating experience with Israelis, and no direct knowledge of how the twenty months of Madrid and Washington discussions had gone.

These weaknesses of the Palestinian negotiating team were reflected in the disappointing terms for the Palestinians of the resulting Oslo accords, the basis for the Israeli-PLO Declaration of Principles signed on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993, in the presence of Yasser Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin, and President Bill Clinton. As fleshed out by a series of subsequent interim agreements, these accords eventually produced the misshapen map of scores of isolated islands of territory over which the newly established PA ruled, and the political, legal, and diplomatic strait-jacket within which the Palestinians have found themselves ever since.

While most people the world over naturally thought that peace had been achieved with the ceremony on the White House lawn in September 1993, for ordinary Palestinians the Oslo accords began a process that went downhill almost for the beginning. By the Oslo accords, the PLO formally recognized the state of Israel (it had in fact already done so once before, as part of the Palestinian Declaration of Independence

in 1988). While Israel now formally recognized the PLO as representing the Palestinians, it did not formally recognize the right of the Palestinian people to statehood, self-determination, or sovereignty, or that they had the right to secure borders, or where those borders were. While in consequence of Oslo, Israel got acceptance and recognition from the the Arab World, and developed commercial or political or indirect relations with a majority of Arab countries, by contrast the Palestinians were forgotten by their many of supporters in the Arab World and elsewhere, who mistakenly thought they had finally achieved their national objectives.

Even more seriously, the lives of most Palestinians got considerably worse after Oslo. After having enjoyed virtually complete freedom of movement in Israel and the occupied territories for the first two decades of the occupation, following the Oslo accords and the creation of the PA, most Palestinians found themselves in a situation where their movement was more and more restricted by Israeli checkpoints, security barriers and “closures.” An extensive network of so-called “bypass roads” was built after the Oslo accords to connect Israeli settlements to one another and to Israel, together with a massive security barrier to wall off Israel and Jerusalem from the West Bank. These two developments had three devastating effects. Firstly, they cut off adjacent Palestinian areas from one another; secondly, they enabled Israel to separate more Palestinians from their lands, as most parts of the wall/barrier, and all the bypass roads, were built on Palestinian land inside the occupied territories; and thirdly they demonstrated to Palestinians that Israeli military occupation and the ever-expanding Israeli settlements were there to stay, and that their dreams of statehood and sovereignty were not going to be realized. Meanwhile, Palestinian GDP per capita declined and unemployment rose as labor flows were interrupted because the movement of Palestinians to work inside Israel was more and more restricted. On top of these problems created by Israel and the Palestinian-Israeli accords, the newly established Palestinian Authority proved unable to improve the situation of ordinary Palestinians. Over the years, angry mass dissatisfaction with declining standards of living and with the PA’s incompetence, inefficiency, corruption, and poor performance in negotiations with Israel grew in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, to the point that the popularity even of the national leader, Yasser Arafat, began to suffer.

Soon after Oslo, negotiations between the two sides bogged down. When there still might have been a slim possibility of transforming the Oslo accords into a basis for independent Palestinian statehood, in the mid-1990s, American diplomacy failed to resolve the basic differences between Palestinians and Israelis. Instead of pressing for the immediate launching of conclusive “final status” negotiations to put a definitive end to Israeli occupation and settlement, the Clinton administration indulgently allowed the Israeli government to drag out the negotiation and implementation of

further interim self-government accords. After endless rounds of fruitless negotiations, by 2000 the Palestinians were no nearer their objectives of ending Israel's occupation and settlement of their land, and creating a viable, independent, sovereign Palestinian state. Indeed, many of them realized they were further away from it than they had been after the first intifada when negotiations started in 1991.

Not surprisingly in view of these results, despair and anger spread among ordinary Palestinians as their daily life grew harder, and the high hopes of the early 1990s evaporated. From here to the explosion of the second Palestinian intifada in September 2000 was but a very short step. This took place after the Clinton administration let most of its eight years in office go by without making any substantive effort to begin detailed negotiations on the "final status" issues between the Palestinians and Israelis.

### **Clinton's Blunders**

Although the president's own advisors and the Palestinians had warned him that none of the extensive necessary preliminary groundwork had been done to prepare for a summit meeting, Clinton succumbed to the importuning of the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and convened Barak and Arafat at Camp David in July 2000, just four months before the 2000 presidential elections. Taking place with utterly inadequate preparation (normally top leaders only meet to finalize details of accords subordinates have largely worked out), the summit was doomed to fail, and duly did so. However, after Clinton having forced the Palestinians to attend a summit they argued had been insufficiently prepared for, and after he promised that he would not blame any party if it did not succeed, instead of Clinton and Barak sharing the responsibility for its failure both leaders wrongly placed all the blame on Arafat.

At Camp David, Barak had made a stingy take-it-or-leave-it offer to Arafat that was predictably rejected.<sup>12</sup> The offer, which would have divided the West Bank into three disconnected segments, and would have given Israel complete control over the borders of a "state" that would thereby have been much less than sovereign, was ludicrously described in the ensuing Israeli-American mythology as "generous." As elections loomed in the United States and Israel, Barak obtusely seemed to be doing the work of the Israeli right wing parties for them by decrying Arafat for being "unwilling to make peace." In fact, although Arafat showed little adroitness in responding imaginatively to Barak's thoroughly unsatisfactory offer, the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators continued serious talks during the ensuing months.

Ironically, during several weeks of negotiations at the Egyptian resort of Taba in January 2001, senior Palestinian and Israeli negotiators, working from an improved version of the proposals discussed at Camp David that was put forward by Clinton in December 2000, made significant progress on many of the key issues. The two sides



came very close to agreement on some questions, and somewhat narrowed the gap on others. But it was already far too late by this point: George W. Bush had already won the November 2000 elections; Barak had already lost his majority in the Knesset and was about to suffer a resounding defeat in the February 2001 elections to Sharon; and Arafat, who had won over 80 percent of the vote for the position of president of the PA in a reasonably fair election in 1996, had over five years lost the confidence of most Palestinians, with his popularity according to reliable polls declining to well below 30 percent. Most importantly, the much-tried patience of Palestinian public opinion had finally given out, and all that was necessary to ignite it was a spark. Once Ariel Sharon had provided that spark by his provocative visit to a Muslim holy site in Jerusalem accompanied by a huge phalanx of security personnel, demonstrations and confrontations with Israeli occupation troops soon gave way to the second intifada.

This intifada started as an unarmed, popular mass protest against Sharon's visit to the Haram Al-Sharif, but this visit only provided the trigger. After nine years of disappointment with a negotiating process that had produced mainly negative results for most Palestinians, and which had delegitimized Yasser Arafat himself, as well as the PLO and the PA, the situation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip was primed for an explosion. When it took place, stone throwing by unarmed Palestinian youths was met for several weeks by Israeli lethal automatic weapons fire that killed as many as ten demonstrators a day, and maimed dozens. Little attention was paid in the American media to the horrendous casualties inflicted daily by Israeli troops on these unarmed Palestinian demonstrators in the weeks before the Israeli civilian casualties. In time, armed Palestinians joined haphazardly in the one-sided fighting, provoking and justifying an even higher level of organized Israeli repression against unarmed Palestinian demonstrators, and making it possible to grossly misrepresent the conflict as one where two equal military forces were battling it out. This Israeli escalation in turn led Palestinian militant groups to launch attacks on Israeli civilians.

Israeli civilians only began becoming casualties, after the intifada had been raging for over five weeks, during which time Palestinian civilians had suffered horrendous losses. Thus, twenty Palestinians were killed on the first two days of violence at the end of September, and another 121 in October, almost all of them unarmed civilians, before the first Israeli civilian was killed by a Palestinian attack on November 2, 2000. There was thereafter scant mention in the U.S. media of the devastating impact of Israel's use from the outset of battlefield weapons like tanks, missiles, helicopters, and fighter-bombers in heavily built-up Palestinian civilian areas. The second intifada was perceived in the United States and Israel as having resulted primarily in Israeli civilian victims of Palestinian suicide attacks in Israeli urban areas, while the extremely high Palestinian civilian casualty toll received little or no attention. In fact, over the course of the first

three years of the intifada, the number of Palestinians killed and wounded (26,053) was nearly four times the number of Israelis (6,752). Not surprisingly, especially after the shock of the 9/11 attacks, which had disturbing but superficial similarities, this false image, assiduously cultivated by Israel and its backers, had a profound impact on the U.S. media, public opinion, Congress, and the administration.

### **Washington's War on Terrorism**

The dominant neoconservative elements in the George W. Bush administration, some of them having served earlier under Reagan, were already predisposed to accept a hard-line Likud analysis that said that Oslo was a mistake, Arafat was irredeemable, the PA was a nest of terrorists, and thus that overwhelming force was the only possible response. The logical conclusion to such a line of thinking was shared by the Bush administration and Sharon's new Likud government in early 2001: given that in principle force was the only way to deal with terrorists, the Israeli army was fully justified in all that it did, even against the PA and Palestinian civilians. The ideological convergence over terrorism in the wake of 9/11 clinched the argument being made by these neocons, who called for enthusiastic support for the line of blind military repression coupled with an obstinate refusal to negotiate seriously that was followed by the Sharon government.

It was only after nearly three years of carnage in Palestine and Israel that had thus been tacitly sanctioned by the Bush administration, and in the aftermath of the capture of Baghdad in the spring of 2003, when Washington felt the need for some evidence to show the Arabs and the rest of the world that it was not totally hostile to Arabs and Muslims, that a change in policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict became manifest. This took the form of belated administration support for the "road-map" produced by senior representatives of the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations, the so-called "Quartet," but mainly reflecting the views of its American drafters. Originally prepared for presentation in mid-2002, it was repeatedly delayed at the behest of the Sharon government. The Israeli government's objective was to gain more time for its army to impose a military solution, in pursuit of the mirage of a "defeat" of the entire Palestinian people, via the imposition of draconian collective punishment on the whole population of more than four million people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

By 2003, however, something had changed. Both Palestinian militants and Sharon and the Israeli army high command were operating under new constraints. Public opinion on both sides was weary of the unending violence, and most could see that their own side's violence had failed to bring their opponents to their knees: instead it had more strongly unified both peoples, and made them more resistant to making concessions. This was the environment in which it at last became possible for the Road Map to be formally put forward and accepted by both sides, initiating a three-month ceasefire.

The resulting lull was a function of all of these factors, as well as of the state of exhaustion on both sides. But this was no more than a temporary respite, since no progress was made thereafter, whether under George W. Bush or his successor Barack Obama, toward resolving the underlying issues between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Instead, during round after round of frustrating American-brokered negotiations during both administrations, based as always on Israeli preconditions and demands, thousands more hectares of Palestinian land were confiscated and hundreds of kilometers of settler-only roads were built. Meanwhile, the Israeli settler population in the occupied territories has tripled, from 200,000 when negotiations first began in 1991 to 600,000 today. In these circumstances, it was not surprising that there were repeated outbreaks of violence in the years that followed. These included massive Israeli attacks on Lebanon (which Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice grotesquely called “the birth pangs of a new Middle East”) in 2006, and on Gaza in 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Beyond its whole-hearted support for Sharon’s repression of the second intifada and for Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Gaza, the Bush administration took one other major initiative regarding Palestine. This was the president’s endorsement of the Israeli position on two crucial aspects of the conflict via a letter to Sharon on April 14, 2004. In it Bush recognized Israel’s territorial aggrandizement and the permanence of major Israeli “settlement blocs” in the occupied territories, stressing the impossibility of “a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949” and the irreversibility of “new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers.” The letter also endorsed the Israeli contention that Palestinian refugees cannot return to Israel proper.<sup>13</sup> In taking these unprecedented positions, the Bush administration undermined a number of fundamental tenets of American Middle East policy ever since the occupation of 1967, including the principle, anchored in UN Security Council resolution 242 of that year, of “the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war.”

The presidency of Barack Obama has not thus far resulted in any major change in the bias of U.S. policy in favor of Israel. This is in spite of high hopes among many, and unfounded fears in Israel and among its supporters, that the new president would take new initiatives on Palestine. Like all of his predecessors going back to Jimmy Carter (except for George W. Bush), Obama recognized that the gross imbalance in its policy in favor of Israel harmed the United States and hindered the prospects of a resolution of the conflict. But like them, once faced with the determined opposition of an Israeli government backed by its formidable lobby in Washington, Obama eventually backed down. Thus, like many of his predecessors, he originally called for Israel to accept the 1949 armistice lines as the basis for its borders, and demanded a halt to Israeli settlement expansion while negotiations proceeded. Israel refused, and as usual paid no price for defying the wishes of the U.S. government. Neither systematic, routine Israeli violence

against Palestinians under occupation—since 2000, over 1,400 Palestinian children aged 16 or under have been killed in the occupied territories, an average of two every week—nor massive Israeli assaults on Gaza in 2008–09, at the beginning of his presidency, and in July 2014, provoked condemnation from the Obama or his administration. Most importantly, the military aid that provided lethal weapons for suppression of the Palestinians, and the tax-free “charitable” donations to support the settlement project kept flowing, and the United States continued to defend Israel in international forums.

All of this has happened in spite of the beginnings of a profound shift in some sectors of American public opinion towards the Palestine question. Young people, especially university students and younger members of the American Jewish community, seem more open-minded and less biased than their predecessors, and campus activism in support of Palestine has increased over the past several years. Meanwhile major American churches, such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterians, and some foundations, are more willing to consider sanctioning Israel for its violations of Palestinian rights, by supporting aspects of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Apparently unaffected by these shifts, like many of his predecessors Barack Obama has ended up engaging in conflict management in the Middle East, and in treating the Palestinians with malign neglect. In 2013–14, his secretary of state, John Kerry, undertook a futile round of diplomacy that in no way departed from the bankrupt and biased previous approach of American policymakers, based as always on Israeli desiderata. Kerry’s failure was followed by violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and then by a massive assault on Gaza. To achieve a serious transformation of the situation, however, much more is necessary than simply bringing a temporary halt to this spike of violence, or the next one after that. As long as Israeli settlements continue to expand, as long as the basic structure of the Israeli military occupation remains in place, as long as Israel refuses to allow the Palestinian people to enjoy self-determination and equal rights, and as long as the United States is not willing to impose a fixed timetable for Israel to halt these and other violations of international law, no progress towards a real settlement of the conflict over Palestine can take place. In the seventh year of the Obama administration, more than six decades since the United States inherited the British imperial mantle in the Middle East, and with it stewardship over the Palestine problem, there is no sign of such progress.

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- 1 Over 92 percent of the population of Palestine was Arab at the end of World War I: see Justin McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine: Population Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1990).
- 2 For details, see Walid Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest: Readings in Zionism and the Palestine Problem until 1948*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1987), Appendix V.
- 3 Although the Jewish population was only 31 percent of the total, according to the UN partition plan, the Jewish state was to get 56 percent of the country, less than 7 percent of which was Jewish-owned at the time. Through conquest, Israel ended up controlling a total of 78 percent of Mandatory Palestine by the time of the 1949 armistices.
- 4 William A. Eddy, *F.D.R. Meets Ibn Sa'ud* (American Friends of the Middle East, New York, 1954).
- 5 See Rashid Khalidi, "The 1967 War and the Demise of Arab Nationalism: Chronicle of a Death Foretold," in *The June 1967 War: Origins and Consequences*, eds. Wm. Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 264–284.
- 6 This was demonstrated by Alvin Rubinstein, an American political scientist and a Cold War hawk, in *Red Star on the Nile: the Soviet-Egyptian Influence Relationship since the June War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
- 7 The relevant documents can be found in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–68*, vol. 19, and in *The Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967*, ed. Harriet Schwar (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004). They do not fully elucidate the "green light," although they reveal much else. For the latest conclusions on the topic see the different chapters in *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*, eds. Louis and Shlaim.
- 8 The full extent of Kissinger's neglect of this matter in the period leading up to the 1973 can now be examined on the basis of the public American diplomatic documents for the period: U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–76*, vol. 25, and *Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1973*, eds. Nina Howland, Craig Daigle, and Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).
- 9 For details of new revelations in the regard from the Israel State Archives, see the new preface to R. Khalidi, *Under Siege: P.L.O. Decision-making During the 1982 War*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, January 2014).
- 10 For details, see R. Khalidi, *Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), ch. 3.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 For the best account of the Camp David fiasco of 2000, see Clayton Swisher, *The Truth about Camp David: The Untold Story about the Collapse of the Middle East Peace Process* (New York: Nation Books, 2004). See also Charles Enderlin, *Le rêve brisé: Histoire de l'échec du processus de paix au Proche-Orient, 1995–2002* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).
- 13 For the text, see <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/04/20040414-3.html>