

The Limits of Influence: Gerald Ford, Yitzhak Rabin and the Re-
assessment Period of 1975

by

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“We live under a system of tacit understandings. But the understandings are not always understood.”¹

This quote offers a sketch of the context to the strange and unique period of U.S.-Israeli foreign relations in early 1975, a period referred to as reassessment. As the previous chapters have discussed, the central figures were the leaders: Gerald Ford, president of the United States, his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and Yitzhak Rabin, prime minister of Israel. These men, how each understood each other, and the role their nations were to each other; meanwhile in this chapter how each were responsible for the resulting crisis is explained and crucial in explaining current U.S.-Israeli relations including the recently characterized frosty relationship between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government since 2009.

¹Low, Sidney. *The Governance of England*, rev. ed. (London: Ernest, Benn, 1914), p. 12 as quoted in Rose, R. (1989). *Politics in England*. 5th ed. Scott, Foresman and Company.

Part 1: Reassessment

In the discussion on the relationship between the U.S. and Israel there is scholarship that argues on its special nature, its strategic character, and with the publication in 2007 of James Mearsheimer and Steven Walt's *The Israeli Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, the relationship between the two nations reflects one that is more disadvantageous for the United States, more of a handicap. This assertion sparked an intense debate amongst International Relation scholars, Political Scientists and Jews living in Israel and in the Diaspora. The discussion was re-engaged in the spring of 2010 as U.S. President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu experienced a series of diplomatic incidents that made conservatives and liberals in both nations on the domestic-political scale question the 'strength' of the relationship.

The focus of this research is on neither of the scholarship mentioned above, rather the focus is a point in time considered the most dangerous in U.S-Israeli relations. In June 1974, United States Foreign Policy towards the State of Israel underwent a serious period of reflection, nominally referred to as *reassessment* after Secretary of State Henry Kissinger returned from his shuttle diplomacy between Israel and Egypt in defeat. While there many reasons for the reassessment approach, the public remarks to this fact, shook the foundations of U.S.-Israeli relations that had steadily grown since the Six-Day War of 1967 and as recently as the October War of 1973. From June 1974 to May 1977 the United States, principally its president, Gerald Ford and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Israeli Cabinet members struggled to define and then influence this new relationship. Many scholars recognize the 1970s as a watershed in world history.² The following book is about a specific time in that period of history and the struggle for influence linking the past as part of present neoclassical realist theory.

Much of the 1975 reassessment period rests in the basic misunderstandings of personality and interpretation of national politics. If, the "values, beliefs, and emotional symbols" that make up the political culture constitute what Sidney Low described as 'a system of tacit understandings' that make government... "safe, convenient, effective, and in the main, satisfactory"³ then President Ford, his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and

² See Charles Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *American Historical Review* 3 (June 2000): 807-31; and Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³ Ibid, pg. 127.

Yitzhak Rabin each tried to mold the political culture and influence each other in the process. Moreover, besides the misunderstanding there is a sense that “reassessment” was an expression of frustration over Kissinger’s failure after his previous “diplomatic dialogues” were viewed as initial achievements in Arab-Israeli relations.

When Rabin signed the second disengagement accord with Egypt in September 1975, Israel had an agreement that a future pact between Israel and Egypt was the final peace agreement and an assurance from the U.S. that in any forthcoming negotiations with Syria only minor territorial concessions would be pushed and the U.S. would not press Israel toward any partial treaty with Jordan. Moreover, this process and the stipulations that Israel was able to gain regarding them showed the direction Israel wished to go regarding its relations and the ‘regularizing’ of them with its Arab neighbors. Isolate Egypt from the rest of the Arab world, retain the Golan Heights regardless of the agreement to abide by Resolution 242, create a full peace with Jordan (though at this period of history, such a settlement would have been unacceptable to Jordan) that in fact would lead Israel to retain the West Bank and regarding other territories, except the Sinai, Israel would have a freedom to deal with them without fear of Egyptian military threat.⁴ This offered Prime Minister Rabin ‘breathing room’ to deal with his domestic concerns.

Yitzhak Rabin’s meteoric rise, less than a year after his return to Israel from his posting in the United States as Israeli ambassador was due to the Israeli Labor Party’s disarray following the Yom Kippur war and Gold Meir’s resignation. The party bosses looked for a, “fresh face, one unblemished by the war, and the by the process of elimination their gaze settled on him.”⁵ Rabin was until his elevation to Prime Minister largely seen as, “competent but bland technician”⁶ Several factors however conspired to help Rabin achieve the top position within Israeli politics. Rabin at the time of his appointment as Labor Party leader, thus prime minister, was the only Israeli politician untarnished by the Yom Kippur War. While this was reason enough for his selection, it had much to do with the fact that he was not Shimon Peres, “the one party figure [Meir] she’d longest despised,”⁷. There were two additional factors as well that supported his elevation to the premiership. The first, Rabin was both a former IDF (Israeli Defense Force) Chief of Staff and a highly effective ambassador to the United States, while second he was a *sabra*—born of the land—a point Israeli citizens liked because Rabin was the first native Israeli ascending to the prime ministership. For Labor leadership, particularly retiring Prime Minister Gold Meir,

⁴ See Matti Golan, *Secret Conversations*, pg. 229; and Quandt, *Decade*, pg. 261.

⁵ Avner, Y. (2010). *The Prime Ministers*. The Toby Press, pg. 261.

⁶ Slater, pg. 279.

⁷ Burkett, pg. 366.

the fact of reduced plurality since the December 1973 elections, 39.6 percent and fifty-one seats as opposed to 46.2 and fifty-six seats⁸

Foreshadowed Dispute

By the beginning of 1974, after the October 1973 war, the Israelis and Egyptians had been engaged in negotiations over the Sinai where Israeli troops had remained. Egyptian President Sadat demanded that Israel 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 unwilling to relinquish 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 records of discussions between Kissinger and Ford show, support Sadat’s position. That fact was what made the agreement in January 1974 so promising. It had assurances between the Israelis and Egyptians that if built upon, would demonstrate a corner had been turned in the Middle East in defiance of obstacles and was moving towards a final peace. Thus, when the diplomatic efforts collapsed in October of 1974 it was so disappointing and served as an opening footnote to the reassessment period between the U.S. and Israel.

During March, 1975 the attempt to create a Sinai II with Egypt by convincing Rabin to withdraw from the Sinai mountain passes of Gidi and Mitla, was rejected. The Middle East shuttle diplomacy that was so famed in producing the Egyptian-Israeli accord of 1974 and had potential for peace with other neighbors such as Jordan and Syria, hit a roadblock in the new Israeli government. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, according to a condescending Kissinger “went shivering in fear”⁹ every time Jordan was mentioned during previous meetings. Now, according to Kissinger, “Israeli actions had imposed on us a risk to our entire Middle East strategy making reassessment unavoidable.”¹⁰ The term, according to Kissinger, was part of a leak after Rabin had shared a letter written from Ford, to his cabinet. The day after Kissinger arrived back in Washington, D.C. Ford defi-

⁸ Smith, C. (1996). *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. St. Martin’s Press, p. 232. Also see, the statistics in Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *Israel in the Middle East Documents and Readings on Society, Politics, and Foreign Relations: 1948-Present* (New York, 1984), appendices (unpaginated). See also Eric Silver, *Begin, a Biography* (London, 1984), pp. 144-146.

⁹ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, pp. 630-35.

¹⁰ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 424.

antly repeated the term “reassessment” though in fact it had been used by a State Department official at with the approval of Kissinger. Therefore, *Reassessment* ushered in a tense phase in American-Israeli relations. On one level, it stated a truism: whatever the label, the failure of the shuttle obliged us to take another look at our Middle East diplomacy. At the same time, the term could be read to imply that our basic relationship with Israel was up for review---which was not the American intention.”¹¹ Regardless of intention the ensuing row began in earnest in March, immediately following the time that Kissinger had visited with Rabin. When Kissinger talked to President Ford laying the blame on the Israelis.

An annoyed President Ford sent a cable to Jerusalem on March 21, “I am disappointed,” Ford wrote “to learn that Israel has not moved as far as it might.” The American president went further by threatening to reevaluate the U.S.’s entire Middle East strategy, including “our policy towards Israel.”¹² Such tough words from the American president “shell shocked” the new Israeli cabinet, but Rabin refused to be publically intimidated. On March 22, 1975, after two weeks of commuting between Israel and Egypt, Kissinger gave up. His shuttle diplomacy, an itinerary deliberately created for maximizing frenzy and time included first Egypt and then Israel and then back to Egypt, “choreographed with an eye to the psychological necessities and the margins for maneuver available to each side,”¹³ acclaimed in the American press now lay in tatters. While the Americans had hoped for an Israeli leader in the mold of the “warrior Golda Meir”¹⁴ writes Douglas Brinkley based upon Walter Isaacson’s memoir of Kissinger, they were left with Rabin. President Ford summarized the failure at a press conference:

“ Unfortunately, for reasons beyond our control, it did not turn out the way we wanted it. . . It is in the national, as well as the international interest that we do everything we can with the emphasis on peace. Although we have—on a temporary basis, hopefully—not achieved all that we had desired, I continue to be an optimist, that the good judgment, the wise decisions of all parties will result in the ultimate objective pace in the Middle East and its ramifications on a worldwide basis.”¹⁵

This official version then; what of private thoughts? They mirrored the publicly stated ones. Ford saw the negotiations as part of the final deal; meanwhile the approach by the Israeli Prime Minister was decidedly short term. The March negotiations were allowed to collapse, because of Rabin’s “belief that these could and would be picked up again before long without any undue damage and possibly with important benefits,” though the situa-

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 631.

¹³ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pg. 809.

¹⁴ Ibid, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 631.

¹⁵ Ford, *Public Papers, 1975*, pp. 396-97.

tion after March 22 showed the U.S. present a behavior that “castigated and penalized Israel and praised and supported” the Egyptian position causing the possibility of a further round of negotiations to be undercut, which meant that Rabin was give the position of seeking a limited agreement, “in favor another approach, or else of modifying what they wanted to achieve from a limited agreement in the light of what was possible.”¹⁶ Unable to find a compromise, stalemate ensued.

Fragile Egos

Before leaving Israel, Kissinger and Rabin had met one last time. This scene recreated by in Walter Isaacson’s biography of Kissinger shows the differences between them. 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, and being personally insulted: “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,” he fumed. Rabin was firm, “you know very well we have offered a compromise at every step along the way,” Rabin visibly angry continued, “you know we have agreed to adopt your language on the ‘non-use-of-force’, which means much less than a ‘termination of belligerency.’ You know we have agreed to hand over the Sinai oil fields. You know we have agreed, in principle, to pull back as far as the eastern end of the passes. You know we have agreed to allow the Egyptian army to advance from its present positions and occupy the buffer zone. And you know we have agreed that they may set up two forward positions at the western entrances to the passes. After all this display of goodwill and flexibility for the sake of the success of your mission—and at great risk to ourselves—to then accuse us of causing the failure of your mission, instead of laying the blame on Sadat’s intransigence, is a total distortion of the facts.”¹⁷ Kissinger boarded his plane, visibly upset, and informed his press team that Israel’s intransigence caused the breakdown in negotiations.

Henry Kissinger was never one not to play the dramatic, but this incredibly tense farewell, proved the point; exposed not only Kissinger’s faulty logic to Israeli negotiating position, but also Rabin’s ability to express the political reality he faced though his inability to influence Kissinger in a manner typified by his predecessor. The strained relations between Ford and Rabin, which never reached the level of warmth shared by their predecessors, Nixon and Golda Meir, was only a symptom of the diplomatic dispute.

¹⁶ Safran, *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, pg. 552.

¹⁷ Avner, *The Prime Ministers*, pg. 280.

Yitzhak Rabin and Gerald Ford could not understand each other. This, coincidentally is the key point of the crisis. President Ford thought that Rabin was inflexible. Rabin saw the \$750 million dollar military aid package negotiated with Kissinger and approved by Ford as a bribe to, “extract peace concessions” and furthermore, Rabin felt that “Ford did not exhibit Nixon’s passion for the concept of peace through strength; or harbor the ex-President’s appreciation for Israel’s courage and will to survive.”¹⁸ When it was apparent that the shuttle diplomacy had failed, Kissinger was upset stating to Rabin: “this will be a setback for me personally, certainly, but that’s not the point. The main thing is how the President perceived it. The Soviets will be happy, and there will be an immediate Arab-Soviet demand to reconvene the Geneva Conference. Under the circumstances, I can’t promise you anything about American policy.”¹⁹ It was more than semantics. It was also policy related.

The Ford Administration wanted to strike up an agreement between Israel and Jordan, and achieve progress with Egypt. Rabin was hard pressed to meet Ford’s wishes because of precarious domestic situation Rabin faced back in Israel with this Cabinet. Disagreement with long-time political rival Shimon Peres, his struggles with coalition partners in particular the National Religious Party ensured little room to maneuver. This unfortunately set the stage for the famously dramatic announcement by State Department spokesman Robert Anderson, on orders from Kissinger, “unfortunately, the differences on a number of key issues have proven irreconcilable...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.”²⁰ The announcement language was picked up by President Ford who in a scathing letter to Rabin wrote, “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’s verbal ‘barrage’ over the 1956 Suez crisis. To Rabin, reassessment, “an innocent-sounding term that heralded one of the worst periods of American-Israeli relations.”²¹ If Ford had hoped that his sternly written letter would cause his Israeli counterpart to become submissive he misjudged both Rabin and the political environment in the Israeli Knesset. While the Israeli Cabinet was ‘shell-shocked’ at the tone of the letter, it remained resolute in its support for the Israeli prime minister.

¹⁸ Dan Kurzman, *Soldier of Peace: The Life of Yitzhak Rabin*, pg. 311

¹⁹ Ibid, pg. 316.

²⁰ Isaacson, *Kissinger*.

²¹ Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs*, pg. 261.

Opposition leader Menachem Begin publically supported Rabin's suspension of negotiations and Israelis closed ranks. Out of 120 member Knesset, 92 agreed with Rabin's decision. This indicated a phenomenon new to the American president, but not unlike the "old-school" Irish or Italian-styled family criticism plus solidarity dynamic. When it was clear that the letter had not had the intended effect, Ford issued orders to delay the delivery of promised Lance surface-to-surface missiles and froze the request for F-15 fighter planes. This all was done at the urging of Kissinger who viewed his status amongst the Israeli cabinet and the American administration as both indispensable and crucial to any treaty success. So, clearly the denial of weapons, the very things Israel needed most for providing its security, and negotiated under the Meir government was intended to cause maximum political damage to Rabin and force the Israelis to crawl back to the negotiating table. In response to administration pressure, Israel launched a concerted campaign to appeal to American public opinion and Israel's allies in the American Congress. "Mediation tempts the parties to advance extreme proposals and to blame the mediator for insufficient effort if they are rejected or to use him as an excuse for their failure to put forward what they know cannot be achieved. The Israeli cabinet was especially skillful in using outside mediation as a foil for its decision-making."²² When it was made public the division amongst the American Congress and the White House, Rabin gloated, "Ford and Kissinger won't like this one bit...we have to thank the American Jewish organizations for this, particularly AIPAC."²³ This demonstrated pressure applied by Israel to the U.S. was not only internal, but held a successful external component too.

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. In response, on March 31, the Americans doubled down on their pressure with Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger declaring the United States reluctance to enter new arms commitments with Israel. "March 1975 was a grim month for American foreign policy...Middle East diplomacy, heretofore a success story, stood deadlocked." Later Kissinger admits that "the collapse of the March shuttle brought us face to face with our gravest Middle East crisis since the Yom Kipper War. On the one hand, America's fundamental national interest had not changed. We still needed to isolate the peace process from a combination of Soviet, European, and Arab pressures. Our sup-

²² Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pg. 814.

²³ Avner, *The Prime Ministers*, pg. 288.

port for moderate Arab leaders, especially for Anwar Sadat, remained crucial.”²⁴ Kissinger and Ford saw the Israeli relationship with its neighbors as part of Egyptian peace. The Israelis disagreed, and now attempted to influence the process by applying pressure.

The Israeli efforts saw success. On May 22, 1975, 76 U.S. Senators sent a letter to President Ford. It was stark: “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.”²⁵ Senator Henry Jackson of Washington 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. This was a terrible blow to the president who had been in office less than 12 months and showed a tear in the cordial relations that Ford had enjoyed with Congress.

Yet, while Rabin could be happy he interpreted this as a victory of sorts against both Kissinger and Ford, the American political system was a bit more complex for a full understanding of Rabin. The letter was symbolic and its effect on the American-Jewish public was significant, but with the checks and balance legislative system and the American executive veto power, Ford was not really weakened. In fact, as explained in chapter 1, Ford continued to pursue negotiations via Egypt meeting Sadat in Europe. What angered the president, writes Evans & Novak, “was the presumption that pro-Israel publicists could sway public opinion and Congress against the Administration”.²⁶ Ford held Israel at arm’s length meanwhile trying to create dialogue with Egypt. The success that saw the treaty signing in September was in fact, a series of highly sensitive compromises. The location of the border, an Egyptian idea, was presented as an American one; while the idea of American military personnel in key positions in the passes was Israeli, though explained to the Egyptians as an American proposition. Still, the bruised egos of the main cast of characters: Ford, Rabin and Kissinger compounded a delicate matter with disbelief and misreading each other. In spite of attempts to break the impasse continued.

²⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 422.

²⁵ Berman & Sadot, (April 1, 2012) “Israel & America: The Eternal Return” *Commentary*.

²⁶ Rowland & Novak, (May 1, 1975). “Ford’s Tough Stance on Israel”. *Free Lance Star*.

One scholar has observed that “presidents’ styles, work habits, how they like to receive information, the people they prefer around them and the way they make up their minds are all key...”²⁷ This proved most acute as the new American president, Gerald Ford kept Henry Kissinger as his foreign policy advisor. Therefore for Ford, having a trusted advisor with experience was important and essential to his early foray into foreign affairs as an untested leader. Kissinger, who was familiar with Ford from his days in Congress and briefly as Vice-President, made himself available, the irreplaceable man. Ford’s personality fit within the context of Kissinger ‘the teacher’ and their dealings with difficult Israel.

According to Kissinger, the issue for President Ford was no much substantive disagreement as breaking faith with a friend. Ford explained this to the National Security Council on March 28: “Since I have been in office, we have worked with Israel to try and get a settlement. We acted in good faith and I assume they did, also, but when the chips were down they showed a lack of flexibility which was needed for an agreement...I admire them [the Israelis] and respect them. And I have never been so disappointed as to see people I respect unable to see that we are trying to do something for their interest as well as for our own. But in the final analysis our commitment is to the United States.”²⁸ Scholars Thomas Preston and Margaret G. Hermann write of how, “the need for power is a personality characteristic”²⁹ and while it has been extensively studied³⁰ seldom is it expressly connected to president or prime minister. For the period under review in this chapter, in fact this was of primary importance to the three antagonists. So we have a conflict of power personality too.

²⁷ Preston, T. & Hermann, M., “Presidential Leadership Style and the Foreign Policy Advisory Process,” in Wittkopf, E. & McCormick, J. (2004). *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy*. Rowman & Littlefield, p. 377.

²⁸ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 426.

²⁹ Preston, T. & Hermann, M., “Presidential Leadership Style and the Foreign Policy Advisory Process,” in Wittkopf, E. & McCormick, J. (2004). *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy*. Rowman & Littlefield, pg. 377

³⁰ See Winter, D. (1973). *The Power Motive*. Free Press; McClelland, D. (1975). *Power: The Inner Experience*. Irvington; House, R. (1990). “Power and Personality in Complex Organizations.” In *Personality and Organizational Influence*, edited by Barry M. Staw and L.L. Cummings. JAI Press.

Part 2: Imperfect men: imperfect process

The reassessment period contained truthful sentiment, wrapped in harsh words. While the Israelis may have claimed this was a new policy, and it was, the Israeli protest followed the same charge initially done by Israel. In the spring of 1974 Israel protested the public condemnation by the U.S. over the Israeli military response to an attack by Palestinian guerrillas operating from Lebanon on the northern Israeli town of Kiryat Shmona. At that time it too was publicly referred to as a “shift in policy”, though it was viewed by the U.S. as actions from a heightened beleaguered and insecure Israel.³¹ This does not mean the importance is anymore less than severe during the specific reassessment. Public and private differences could no longer be ignored or whitewashed.

During this difficult period, the ‘core reality’ of American-Israeli relations was stripped bare. The cavalier attitude that Americans disposed of territory perceived as part of Israeli survival could not be changed by the easy camaraderie and frequent declarations of friendship. In fact, Kissinger states the obvious in the final book of his White House memoirs: “[U.S. policy] our preferred solution and impose it on Israel by the threat of economic pressure and diplomatic isolation, thereby threatening its very existence.”³² This honesty brought the U.S. and Israel to the precipice.

When Ford and Rabin met on June 11, it was an attempt to defuse the tension built up by rhetoric but also a chance for both actors to make personal appeals of influence to the other. President Ford saw the meeting as an opportunity to ‘clear the air’ with the former Israeli Ambassador to America and stress his opinion on the crisis in relations. This was quintessential Gerald Ford.

Magnified misperceptions

Upon becoming president, Ford already knew the Israeli prime minister, who had previously been Israel’s ambassador to the United States. This could have been perceived as a

³¹ Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* pg. 1049

³² *Ibid*, pg. 428.

positive and indeed for Israeli lobbyists it was accepted as such. However, with Ford's decision to keep Kissinger in his double role as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, what personal role the president would play in future negotiations was uncertain. Though Ford wrote in his memoirs that foreign policy was a chief concern, in particular the situation in the Middle East, initially the relationship between the new president and the domineering Kissinger was presented as the president as pupil and Kissinger the teacher. President Ford inherited a strong foreign policy strategist in Henry Kissinger. While, Ford was widely considered not to have firm opinions on foreign policy, in relation to Israel and possible peace with its neighbors, however the president was specific. It helped to have Kissinger offer opinion and analysis.

Therefore, President Ford was able to begin the process of creating a friendship, or at the very least, a working relationship with the Israeli prime minister immediately upon taking office. It should be noted the relationships created by world leaders, begun in its embryonic stages, relied heavily upon analysis and memos from advisors. Kissinger, due to his status amongst the Israeli Cabinet, and his shuttle diplomacy between the Arab capitals and Jerusalem easily filled this role. Prime Minister Rabin therefore even before officially meeting Ford fit into the sketch that Kissinger had drawn for the president.

Prelude to Reassessment

The first chance was at the state dinner on September 12, 1974 Rabin said, "we have taken risks for peace,"³³ but did not explain them, instead indicating that concessions would not be readily available. The meeting at the White House was an attempt to see what and where Israel was willing to compromise in its dealing with Egypt over the Sinai. After two days of meetings, no significant progress had been made between the U.S. and Israel.

In October 1974, Ford sent Kissinger back to the Middle East to try again. When this round of diplomacy proved unsuccessful and the negotiations between Egypt and Israel stalled, Ford became frustrated. This frustration had a foundation in equal measure exasperation and misreading the man who held the executive job in Israel. It was not a personality clash as much as a fundamental misunderstanding of the motivations behind the words and actions of Prime Minister Rabin. This in turn led to the tension between the U.S. and Israel and the period known as reassessment. To get to that point, however, Ford had to believe that Israel was not being flexible. As he states in his biography, "Negotiations between Israel and Egypt about the return of the Sinai had reached a dangerous stalemate. For the past twenty-five years, the philosophical underpinning of U.S. policy toward Israel had been our conviction—and certainly my own—that if we gave Israel an ample supply of economic aid and weapons, she would feel strong and confident, more flexible and more willing to discuss a lasting peace...the Israelis were stronger militarily...yet peace was no closer...so I began to question the rationale for our policy. I wanted the Israelis to recognize that there had to be a quid pro quo. If we were going to build up

³³ Ford, G. (1979). *A Time to Heal*. Harper and Row, p.183.

their military capabilities, we in turn had to see some flexibility to achieve a fair, secure and permanent peace. What we wanted most was new momentum diplomatically.”³⁴ Therefore, according to Ford, that momentum was being impeded by Rabin in his public statements and the Israeli negotiating team.

In his autobiography, Ford writes that he expressed these sentiments in interviews to Time and NBC-TV. During his interview with Time he stated, “there was a substantial relationship at the present time between our national security interests and those of Israel” adding however, “but in the final analysis, we have to judge what is in our national interest above any and all other considerations.”³⁵ While Ford knew that Israel was opposed to the Geneva Convention Kissinger and Ford agreed that Geneva was for the purpose to ratify previously negotiated bilateral agreements. This was part of Ford’s overall strategy to influence the Israelis into negotiations with the Egyptians. To assist in showing his seriousness, in his interview with NBC, Ford used blunt language, “the U.S. would be “forced” to abandon our step-by-step approach, and we would have no alternative but to turn to a comprehensive approach via a Geneva conference.”³⁶ Clearly, President Ford was creating a rhetorically hostile environment. Which side would signal first a willingness. It was a strategy filled with risk and seemingly out of character with the ‘nice-guy’ persona that President Ford had built as a member of Congress. But the Ford who had been in Congress and the Ford who was president, in this sense, were arguably different men. President Ford didn’t have to wait long.

The strategy appeared to be working, because within days after the public remarks were made signals from both sides that they were moving to a position where they would at least talk about progress. In February, Kissinger went for 10 days to the middle east and achieved reasonably encouraging results; Egyptian president Anwar sadat was flexible and accommodating to Israeli concerns about their security. The Israelis were tough in their demands. Rabin held a thin majority in the Israeli Knesset giving him little room to negotiate. In March, Kissinger resumed shuttling between Cairo and Jerusalem and a framework was agreed upon for a new accord. Israelis would pull back about thirty-five miles from the eastern bank of the Suez Canal, and the new dividing line between the two adversaries would be in the vicinity of the strategic mountain passes of Gidi and Mitla in the Sinai desert. The Israelis would return the oil fields at Abu Rudeis on the Gulf of Suez, and the Egyptians would be able to use a road that linked those fields to the rest of the country. Both Rabin and Sadat knew this was a first step. However, further negotiations were difficult for Ford since the crests of Gidi and Mitla were unable to be defined on a map or where the oil field road lay. Rabin became less flexible. Ford was surprised,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ford, G. (1979). *A Time to Heal*. p.245.

³⁶ Ibid.

writing “he fought over every kilometer. I wouldn’t call it nitpicking—I don’t doubt for a minute that he really wanted peace, and I recognized that the Israelis had a fundamental reluctance about giving up any territory in return for what they saw as only promises of good will—but he didn’t seem to understand that only by giving do you get something in return.” Again, we return to Ford’s misunderstanding of Rabin’s position and his own belief in the triumph of compromise. It was interpreted as stalling. Ford writes as much along with his own feelings towards the Israeli attitude: “The Israelis kept stalling. Their tactics frustrated the Egyptians and made me mad as hell. Both Henry and I had received firm assurances from Rabin that a line could be drawn that would be acceptable to Israel.

But Rabin now seemed afraid of his Cabinet’s response.” Kissinger returned to the U.S. on March 23 1975, deeply disappointed by the Israeli attitude. In this instance we see pattern of American dealings with Israel that has been replicated up to the present twenty-first century. In the context of this reassessment period, now, as then is the hubris of American thinking on the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Disappointment in Israeli leaders i.e. Prime Minister, not listening to the advice of American diplomats and lacking the follow-through on policy change and decision making recommended by the United States.

A War of Words: test of wills

Meeting in the Oval Office on March 27th, President Ford told Fisher, who was also chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel and had helped bridge misunderstandings in the past that it was “imperative that we see new momentum toward peace in the Middle East, that my comments about reassessing our policies there weren’t just rhetoric. I was not going to capitulate to pressure, and if the impasse continued, I might have to go public on where we stood and why.”³⁷ Fisher advised Ford to meet with American Jewish community leaders. It is clear from his comment that Ford was preparing for a test of wills. The president was also preparing himself to counter any negative media spin. The ‘war or words’ had begun.

According to Kissinger, Ford’s latent irritation was brought to the surface when Israel protested a ‘off the cuff’ Ford statement actually intended to reassure Israel that there had been no policy change. In his statement, the president had used the word ‘survival’, rather than the usual ‘sacramental statement’ endorsing Israeli security. The Israeli objection while having semantic merit saw a rare display of anger from the president in an NSC meeting of May 15:

“I have used survival and security interchangeably and synonymously. But they have now chosen to make a distinction, not I. I will therefore use survival and I do not want anyone

³⁷ Ford, p.248.

else to paraphrase or explain away what I say.”³⁸ In an interview with a team of CBS reporters on April 21, President Ford summed up the options for American policy:

“Now, there really are three options. You could resume the suspended negotiations without making a commitment to go to Geneva. You could go to Geneva and try to get an overall settlement, which is very complicated matter—many people advocate it however. But while you were going through this negotiation for an overall settlement, as a third option you might have an interim negotiated settlement between two of the parties, such as Israel and Egypt. We have not made any decision yet.”³⁹ The president was trying to play hardball without fully understanding the point of view of his new opponent.

To refute the specific allegations that the reassessment of US policy towards Israel was anti-Israel or anti-Semitic, a direct suggestion about the president’s attitude towards the Jewish state, Ford told them:

“In all my public life, I have never wavered in my support for a free and secure Israel. There was never one vote or one speech that could be interpreted other wise. All of my life, I have had great respect for the Jewish people. I feel that way today, and anyone who says I don’t doesn’t know me at all. It is because of my affection and admiration for the Jewish people and the state of Israel and I am so concerned about the lack of progress toward peace in that part of the world. We must have progress soon if we are to avoid another war, the fifth in thirty years. Quite frankly, Israel’s leaders have not been as quick to recognize this as I had hoped they would be. They have not been as forthcoming as I wanted them to be. Now, I have always believed in maintaining the national integrity of Israel, but always within the context of maintaining world peace and—above everything else—within the context of protecting the national interests of the United States. What this means is that the leaders of Israel and the American Jewish community here simply can’t hold up a legitimate settlement and expect me as President to tolerate it”⁴⁰

President Ford was not alone in efforts by the Israelis to garner support to them and against the American administration. Throughout April 1975, the Israelis engaged in a subtle, but significant campaign to discredit Kissinger. These attacks came to contain a question as to Kissinger as a Jew: “the Israeli hardliners said, he was bending over backward to be “fair” to the Arabs. He was “out-Gentiling the Gentiles”; he was “sabotaging” Israeli interests. The charges were utterly false, of course. No one had worked harder to

³⁸ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 427.

³⁹ Interview with Walter Cronkite, Eric Sevareid, and Bob Schieffer of CBS News, April 21, 1975 in Ford, *Public Papers*, 1975, pg.227.

⁴⁰ Ford, pg.286.

achieve a just and lasting peace in the Middle East than Henry Kissinger, and to see him attacked was reprehensible.”⁴¹ Only a year previous, Kissinger had been considered the savior of Israel with his efforts to end the Yom Kippur War, that resulted in Israeli victory, but the idea that Kissinger was ‘leaning too hard on Israel’, cost him support in the American Jewish community. In the media, there were attempts to damage his credibility by using the recent Watergate scandal such as when, former assistant of his NSC staff, Morton H. Halperin, filed a civil suit against him, that claimed Kissinger had approved wire-taps by the FBI on seventeen individuals telephones during the Nixon years. This inevitably brought up the question of Kissinger's personal integrity. While this may not have been the intended aim by the Israeli leadership, Rabin clearly accepted the benefits associated with the attempt to influence the American Secretary of State.

Within the Israeli Cabinet and in public Prime Minister Rabin took a determined and combative posture in the face of the American pressures, insinuating that if American viewed Israel actions as intransigence and the cause of the failed talks then a counter campaign in the U.S. to refute the allegations took place with the public position that Israel was not afraid to participate at oft-cited Geneva conference, while also calling upon Israel’s friends in the American Congress to support its basic position and needs. as to his own sentiment toward Kissinger, Rabin said, “though personal feelings are not preferred tools for managing an international negotiation that is both rigid and demanding, I still had a special regard for this unusual man. He felt that he was working for the benefit of Israel, even when we had doubts about it.”⁴² “Rabin had, in many ways, the most difficult role to play. Rabin had more at stake than Ford and was far less in control of his domestic situation than Sadat, and above all, that his country’s margin of survival was by far the narrowest of any of the participants in the peace process. Battered by his domestic opposition, assailed by competitors for leadership within his cabinet, press by his American allies to move faster, Rabin held to his determination to bring about some progress toward peace and not simply a new military arrangement.”⁴³ Israel’s reaction to Kissinger’s failed shuttle in early 1974 played out domestically on two levels.

First, the Israeli Knesset approved the government’s stance in the negotiations, showing solidarity with their leader, a signal to the opposition party as well as silencing critics. Second, by universally favorable comments on it in the media and opinion polls. “Since the end of the October War, Israelis had again and again heard their government solemnly vow to stand firmly on this or the issue only to see it repeatedly back down after an American intervention, intercession, mediation, or whatever. This time, the government took a strong position and, for once, stuck to it and dared to say NO to Kissinger. That pleased them immensely and the Prime Minister responsible for taking that stand, hither-

⁴¹ Ibid, p.287.

⁴² Rabin, *Memoirs*, pg. 258; Golan, pg. 241.

⁴³ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 458.

to viewed as a dullard and a fumbler, became a national hero overnight.”⁴⁴ That national hero now had support overseas.

With efforts to influence Kissinger, the Israeli’s gained additional support surprising from the American Congress when on May 21 1975, Ford received a letter signed by seventy-six Senators urging him to “be responsive” to the Israeli request for \$2.59 billion dollars in military and economic aid. While Ford, publicly welcomed the letter, privately he fumed, stating that it “really bugged me...there was no doubt in my mind that it was inspired by Israel. We had given vast amounts of military and economic assistance to Israel over the years, and we had never asked for anything in return.”⁴⁵ This comment from Ford best sums his personal opinion of the U.S.-Israeli relationship. While for the Israeli government having this gesture by the American Congress, however symbolic it may be, was according to the president poorly timed, ‘jeopardizing’ the opportunity for peace. This episode offers a glimpse at a tactic replicated by the U.S. since: withhold weapons until Israel follows the wishes of America.

This sentiment from President Ford existed because of the private strategy Ford and Kissinger had been planning. Since, the public dispute was first aired, the president assisted by his Secretary of State had been implementing a strategy of using American influence to pressure the Israelis to create new ideas for a Sinai settlement. The hope before the letter was made public had been to take those ideas, created under pressure, to the Egyptian leader, Sadat, when Ford intended to meet him in June. Sadat, it was hoped would be forced to offer his own ideas and with the U.S. playing mediator the negotiations between Israel and Egypt could resume. With the letter President Ford saw the letter as reversing the roles; giving Israeli confidence in American Congressional support and Rabin remained unwilling to be flexible or in President Ford’s expression, ‘budge’ on offering any new ideas for peace, privately Ford thought “the Israeli’s were overplaying their hand.”⁴⁶ So, for the rest of May and until Ford met Sadat in June there was stalemate. Coincidentally, the “test of wills”⁴⁷ between the U.S. and Israel expressed how friends disagreed. Public and private pressures had been employed. As the Israelis saw the press campaign in the U.S as well as that in Congress not produce the end result they wished by July Rabin began to soften his approach to the negotiations. It was at this time that the Egyptian (American) idea was offered.

⁴⁴ Safran, pg. 551.

⁴⁵ Ford, p.287.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ford, p. 308.

Ford, Rabin, Kissinger: Side-stepping towards agreement

President Ford's ability to deal effectively with parties was a psychologically determinant in how he viewed his future dealings with both the Israeli's and the Arabs. It also served as an indicator to how much preference Ford would offer Israel. The political career that Gerald Ford had created was one of agreement. He sought compromise. As Minority leader he could be tough if the situation demanded it and there were a few stories, but Ford's reputation as a genial colleague endeared him to his peers and was the base of what he wished his public appeal would be as president. Prime Minister Rabin saw the meeting as a chance to sit down face to face with the former Vice-President and Minority Leader. It offered him the time to press upon the new president the difficulty as a new prime minister he faced, to clear the misunderstanding between them and apologize for the leak to the Israeli press Ford's letter to Rabin. After the niceties of official photographers were dispensed with, in the Oval Office, Ford bluntly told Rabin that if Israel altered its March position, that had sent Kissinger home in failure, then Israel could count on continued American assistance and support. Ford spoke openly, "our reassessment was not intended to penalize Israel, yet after the United States had made supreme effort to achieve an agreement in the Middle East and failed to do so, we had to reconsider our policies. I have reached my conclusion, but I thought it would not be fair to finalize them before giving you a chance to offer your opinion. I tend toward favoring an overall Middle East settlement to be achieved at the Geneva Conference..." but Rabin knew that Ford was 'twisting his arm' and replied, "we must have defensible borders and those are not the same as the June 4 lines. And we will defend this position at Geneva, if the conference is convened."⁴⁸ So, while both men kept to the talking points an easing of tension had nevertheless started with Ford's remark on American intentions though much work remained.

The tension was high and showed that it was impossible to 'synchronize' Israeli and American decision-making. "Ford was at every stage in a position to make decisions. Rabin was on a short leash; he had to clear every change, however minor, with his cabinet. Ford's private and official views were identical."⁴⁹ Ford expressed his disappointment and disillusionment and threatened to propose his own comprehensive peace plan, including borders, presenting it publicly within 'weeks'. Rabin avoided references to the past, apologized for the leaking of the President's letter and expressed that Israel wanted peace. It was an impasse. But the meeting did have value.

The impact of Rabin's presentation was important. For the first time, an Israeli explained to him Israel's subliminal worries instead "bickering over arms supplies or abstract lines

⁴⁸Kurzman, *Soldier of Peace*, pg. 321.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pg. 439.

the desert,”⁵⁰ and this truth was even more key to potential influence over the president, because it came directly from the prime minister to the American leader. The dilemma according to the Israeli’s were prolonged deadlock that would lead to tension that would lead to war. The recent war in 1973 still fresh in the mind. To the Israeli leader, and consequently to Israeli leaders since 1975, the dilemma is one not of absolutes, but rather balance “between security conceived as a military balance and security including a political and psychological component.”⁵¹ The failure on the part of the American leader was to recognize this.

According to President Ford, the American perspective was refined as a set of practical decisions:⁵²

“The problem is how much longer can the status quo be maintained without political movement? It is a volatile situation. Either we have an interim settlement in a quick period of time—within two or three weeks—in which there would not be a lot of shuttle back and forth; it would be necessary to firm up things, to move fast, which would give us another span of time. Either we move in this way, or my choice—with all of its pitfalls as you suggest—is to move toward an overall settlement. The only way to bring about continued stability in the Middle East and keep all parties reasonably satisfied, to give all the parties some hope of a permanent settlement being possible, would be to move in this way. Your thoughts have been helpful. If we were to move in the direction of an interim agreement, we would have to do so rapidly, otherwise we lose that option and I would have no alternative but to go to an overall settlement.”

From that meeting between Ford and Rabin, Rabin met with Kissinger the following morning at breakfast and reached tentative agreements on how to proceed. In the proceeding meeting with Ford, Rabin summarized: Israel would move its defense line east of the passes, ask for a guarantee from UN on peacekeepers and Israel would have uninterrupted access to the oil fields. However, Rabin in his meeting with Kissinger coupled the agreements with a “shopping list”⁵³ for military and economic assistance and veto over proposals from the U.S. if a Geneva conference occurred. However, Rabin had taken the wrong impression from his meeting with Kissinger, believing the Secretary of State in tacit agreement with Israeli wishes. This was something that Kissinger was unwilling and unable to guarantee.

Moreover, as President Ford deftly turned aside those requests pointing to what Ford saw as his main influential point: Israel had to gain an atmosphere of trust, not an exemption from the U.S. judgment that would then reduce the intensity the U.S. would insist on them. Here is the clearest signal of the level of misunderstanding, division, and mistaken influence that President Ford thought he, through Kissinger, had.

⁵⁰ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 442.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 443.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

As Kissinger wrote, “each side put forward the most complete and frank statement of its real views and then work on reconciling differences. Verbal maneuvers based on ambiguous assertions are the most certain path to an explosion—particularly for Israel, so dependent on the United States for material, diplomatic, and psychological support...verbal gymnastics about what constituted the end of the passes were more relevant to Israeli domestic politics than to objective dangers...definitely not the way to deal with Ford.”⁵⁴

On June 15 when informed of the Israeli negotiating team’s interpretation of the phrase “eastern end of the passes” Ford picked up the phone and called Rabin. Rabin said he would have to consult with his cabinet. Ford was upset, expressing his “disappointment”⁵⁵ to Kissinger in their meeting that afternoon. Not the first or last time an American president was at the mercy of Israeli Cabinet government.

On June 27, President Ford sent a letter to Rabin summing up all the previous misunderstandings after the personal talks with the prime minister and asked Israel to reconsider its latest position before July 11 when Kissinger was scheduled to meet the Soviets. The Soviet Union had been pushing for negotiations based in Geneva with their involvement. Based on the Israeli reply, Ford would decide whether the U.S would continue to block a comprehensive approach or reassemble the Geneva Conference. The letter to Rabin was rather undiplomatic and arguable, “explicit”:

“With the formulation of your latest position and President Sadat’s reply, we are now at a point where fundamental decisions must be made. I do not regard standing still a realistic choice. It runs an unacceptable risk of leading to another war and to a coalescence of the same international forces which Israel faced in 1973 and early 1974. Since such a situation would jeopardize fundamental U.S. interests—most of which are also of deep concern to Israel—the U.S. cannot be expected to underwrite such a course of action...we must reserve our course on next steps, and explain to our people the administration’s appraisal of our national interest in this manner.”⁵⁶

Here is the clearest evidence of President Ford’s attempt to influence Rabin. The president might have wished to scare Israel. It worked. Kissinger correctly points out in *Years of Renewal* how these abrupt remarks had not been made since President Eisenhower. Because the letter gave Rabin the evidence needed to show to the Israeli cabinet that Ford meant what he had said to Rabin in their June meeting and to the Israeli ambassador over the previous nine months, Ford was effectively influencing Rabin’s behavior towards a final settlement terms.

On July 1, 1975, the Israeli Ambassador Dinitz told Kissinger that Rabin was determined to proceed toward an interim agreement. But, the Israeli ambassador told Kissinger that since neither the Israelis nor Egyptians could afford to fail again, Rabin needed to assure

⁵⁴ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 444

⁵⁵ Ibid, pg. 445

⁵⁶ Ibid, pg. 446

himself of American precise views. Moreover, the Israeli Ambassador offered a proposal from Defense Minister Shimon Peres that four American sensor-warning stations supervised by American military personnel be placed in the passes. This would be important for Israeli domestic politics. Rabin was under pressure in the Israeli press, in the Knesset by opposition leader Menachem Begin and Rabin's coalition partner, the National Religious Party. The proposal if coupled with the Gidi and Mitla passes withdrawal lines marked a breakthrough, in principle, to both the U.S. and Egyptian wishes for a settlement and Israeli concerns over national security as defined as borders.

In speaking with President Ford on this development, Kissinger was able to effectively point out the merit of having Peres in favor of the settlement and that the concept of the warning system was good for the consensus of the Israeli cabinet that mollified Ford's fear that they could create a potential hostage situation. While in Europe to meet with the Soviet Foreign Minister, Kissinger also met with Rabin at Schloss Gymnich on July 12. The two of them went through the proposed settlement "like mountain climbers setting out on a particularly difficult ascent"⁵⁷ along with a review of access routes to the Abu Rudeis oil fields. Just at the point of success, the impasse broken, actual agreement in sight, it all appeared to disappear.

Nothing can be considered complete in a Middle East negotiation; Kissinger after the July 12 meeting had passed along the proposal to Egyptian president Sadat. The Israeli cabinet appeared to be heading toward resolution and approval of the settlement plan indicated by an increase in leaked information and cabinet members talking of victory. This victory was false, since it rested on the construct that the U.S. had rejected Egyptian proposals and were now backing Israeli views, which appeared designed to publicly humiliate Sadat. Moreover, a senior Israeli asserted that Israeli armed forces would still be within the passes. While astute observers of the domestic situation in Israel could understand this language for what it was, the Americans did not take it at face value. President Ford on August 4 sent out a telegram from *Air Force One* to Rabin that Kissinger has categorized as 'blistering':

"The President has given the Egyptians his word, based on Israeli assurances that the Israeli line is out of the passes. He will live up to that word and the Prime Minister should have no misapprehension about that."⁵⁸ The text indicates that very little had changed in Ford's view since the June meeting with Rabin. Ford did not understand Israeli concerns over security. The national security of Israel, defined by its borders, had newly moved in the aftermath of the 1973 war had placed 'Israel' within the Sinai. To prevent another surprise attack like that of October 1973 meant controlling not only intelligence of enemy-neighbor military movement, but controlling the initiative. The insensitivity by both

⁵⁷ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 449.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 451.

Kissinger and Ford in this regard is astounding when placed in Kissinger's earlier success and Ford's record as a legislative negotiator.

Rabin reacted to the Ford telegram with restraint, suggesting a trusted aide to work with Israeli officers and agree on entrances. Once the positions seemed close, the American's discussed having Kissinger travel and conduct another shuttle. With Kissinger suggesting it and the President offering support Kissinger underwent his seventh shuttle between Egypt and Israel. Before Kissinger left the mood in Israel was particularly ugly against the United States and President Ford called expressing his concern while wishing luck:

Ford: It is ridiculous, Henry. I hate...to send you over there in that atmosphere.

Kissinger: I think it helps a little bit in this country. In this country, it makes it clear. In the Arab world, it helps. It shows the Arabs we have been extending ourselves. It will be a great help with Sadat.

Ford:...Take care of yourself and Nancy...Keep in touch. I have nothing but the highest faith that you will do what is in the best interest of the country.⁵⁹

One observes then from this recording the length of both men's thinking on Israel and Egypt. President Ford, after months of frustration was again letting Kissinger gamble on his persuasive negotiating skills. This took place on August 20 1975.

President Ford approached problem solving with the same ideas that he had when the Minority leader and freshman Congressman. Find the reasonable solution, maybe not the best, but the best for that particular situation, work with like-minded people and delegate if necessary to those trusted subordinates that can deliver. Despite earlier public efforts to influence Kissinger and private hostility between Kissinger and Rabin, Henry Kissinger was still the only acceptable intermediary to both the Israelis and the Egyptians. Therefore, Kissinger was successful in convincing Sadat that Israel really wanted peace because Israel agreed to disengagement plan offered by Kissinger.

First, however, two concessions were granted between the U.S. and Israel. "The first was a written promise-a MOU-that before the U.S. moved in any direction affecting the future of the region, we would notify [Israel]."⁶⁰ The second was the amount of money the U.S offered to Israel in military equipment. Originally, the agreement was "for \$1.5 billion dollars in arms. They would have to pay us back half that amount; the rest would be a loan with an understood forgiveness clause."⁶¹ The money guaranteed security for Israel. Security had been since 1948 the overriding concern of every Israeli government. One could draw the line of logic from security guarantees to peace negotiations. This misun-

⁵⁹ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 452.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.308.

⁶¹ Ibid, p.308.

derstanding by both Ford and Kissinger early on might just have caused the previous months very public discord.

When Israel agreed, the negotiations between it and Egypt began focused on minute details, in particular where the mountain crests were. Once charts were able to pinpoint the location of the crests of Gidi and Mitla, progress continued between Kissinger, Rabin and Sadat. Between 100 and 150 U.S. civilian technicians were to be stationed in the buffer zone to monitor activity in the vicinity of the passes. On September 1, 1975, Kissinger called Ford with the news of success, a peace settlement. Ford's response was positive, "[this] a great achievement"⁶² was stating the obvious if not also an indicator of his personal relief.

Ford told his old friend from Michigan, Max Fisher: "I don't think I have ever been so disappointed as when I heard Henry was coming back without a settlement [1974-5]. It was a low as I have been in this office. The impression I had after my meetings with Allon twice, with Rabin, with Golda, etc. was that we had been working so closely that when the chips were down they would see how deeply this would affect the prestige of the United States."⁶³ That disappointment was palpable and provided the kind of cover for President Ford to remain hopeful but not entirely optimistic. So it was with relief that this time, Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy worked.

⁶² Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 309.

⁶³ *Ibid*, pg. 425.

Part III: Sinai II & the end of Reassessment

As explained, reassessment often took several forms, the most important of which was restriction of arms supply and suspension of consideration of economic assistance. “The United States had often used this kind of informal sanction in the past to induce Israel to take some specific action; this time, however, the sanction appeared to be almost purely vindictive since it came after the fact. Moreover, the action was particularly painful and potentially damaging to American-Israeli relations because it came only a short time after Kissinger had committed the United States to *increased* and more regular military assistance to Israel in connection with the conclusion of the first Egyptian agreement...”⁶⁴ Moreover, since the review of concepts and policy was necessary, one may claim, normal, part of policy making there then was little significance of declaring a “reassessment”. However, since Kissinger most likely needed time to reconsider available options and seek advice from President Ford, the unfolding “test of wills” as Ford mentions in his memoirs was meant to serve, “the purposes of gaining time and putting psychological pressure on Israel to soften it up for whatever next move might be made.”⁶⁵ It did not require the theatrics, leaked information, stories, the articles, and advice seeking of scholars. However, this episode offers a prologue to the kind of personal relationships Israeli and American leaders would experience in the decades since and nowadays the standard tactics utilized to influence each. In fact, involvement of partisan politicians, long-hours of negotiations often conducted to maximize personal strengths and egos at the detriment of other parties has become the standard operational procedures in the alliance between the United States and Israel.

The shuttle succeeded with the eastern entrance to the Giddi Pass finally agreed upon, the American warning presence, and the Abu Rudeis oil fields transferred to Egypt. The “ebb and flow” of the negotiations demonstrated the “incongruity between the mechanics of bargaining and the movement of history, between the passions of the moment and the ultimate fate of nations.”⁶⁶ Least to forget the misunderstandings in language, bruised egos between friends, the imperfect process of negotiation, and the lengths to influence the leaders took.

The Sinai II agreement was finally initialed on September 1, 1975. “Sadat promised not to join a war if Syria attacked Israel, while Israel assured Egypt that Israel would not attack Syria and the U.S. agreed to a commitment not to deal with the PLO until it recog-

⁶⁴ Safran, N. (1981). *Israel: The Embattled Ally*, pgs. 548-549.

⁶⁵ I bid, 549.

⁶⁶ Ibid, pg. 453.

nized Israel's right to exist and accepted Security Council Resolution 242 and 338."⁶⁷ Egypt turned towards a separate peace with Israel. When the historic Camp David Accords were signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979 the wars between Israel and an Arab neighbor since 1948 finally ended. The agreement also highlighted the importance of the Israeli-American relationship, in particular that between the chief executives. But, the Camp David Accords could not have occurred without the Sinai II agreement occurring which in turn would have been impossible if not for the tireless efforts of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, U.S. President Gerald Ford and his secretary of state. The agreement in September also closed the reassessment period, the most intense period of animosity between Israel and the United States up to that point in the history of the two nations. Israel focused on legally binding assurances. President Ford was 'elated' and Kissinger writes in *Years of Renewal*, "under his aegis, we had concluded the most significant Middle East agreement of both the Nixon and Ford Administrations. Ford's persistence had been a major factor in bringing about what became the decisive step toward Israeli peace agreements first with Egypt and later with Jordan."⁶⁸ Kissinger's comments were graceful, but belied the hard truth behind the crisis: personality clashes and misunderstandings between Ford and Rabin and Kissinger over the previous five months.

Officially, the Sinai II Agreement allowed several things to occur. Prime Minister Rabin closed "the hectic diplomatic movements triggered by the Yom Kipper War,"⁶⁹ and touched upon Israeli yearning for peace in his telephone call with Ford, "we really hope that it will be the beginning of something which we have not yet experienced in this area, and we hope that the other side, the Egyptian side, feels the same."⁷⁰ Sadat generously spoke along similar nonbelligerent lines: "Let us create a new atmosphere...and let us reach the state of non-belligerency officially and with guarantees."⁷¹ Hinted at in Rabin's remarks was a sigh of relief that he had survived the first major diplomatic test with President Ford and the crucible of his Cabinet. And in the highest praise possible from an aged diplomat on a former Israeli leader, Kissinger wrote, "Rabin was a significant strategist. His gradualist approach moved his fractious cabinet and wary public to the breakthrough that made the Camp David Accords of 1978 possible."⁷² High praise indeed.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pg. 456.

⁶⁸ Ibid, pg. 454.

⁶⁹ Avner, *The Prime Ministers* pg. 286

⁷⁰ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pg. 454.

⁷¹ Ibid, pg. 454.

⁷² Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*. pg. 458.

President Ford served as the moral guarantor of Egyptian and Israeli assurances to each other. Sadat took the decisive turn not only towards non-belligerency, but a turn away from the Soviet Union. Simply, he was tired of war and tired by Soviet promises. For Rabin, his role in the Sinai II agreement was possibly the most difficult. His abrasive style reflected the reality of his domestic situation. He had to “pace his own fragile political base” while holding onto his determination to bring progress towards peace. As Kissinger writes, “had he moved too quickly, his cabinet would have fallen apart, and new elections would have had to be held; had he moved more slowly, he would have risked the American alliance.”⁷³ Rabin was a strategist and was successful in moving, through his gradualist approach, his fractious cabinet and wary public to peace.

American goodwill was a historic fact of life for Rabin, Israel had earned a claim on America’s support by their suffering in the Holocaust and their democratic system of government. This provides a small explanation as to the degrees that Israel was willing to go to try to influence the United States, risking the relationship in this period of re-assessment.

The diplomatic standoff and its conclusion showed the mutual creativity and innovativeness involved in Arab-Israeli negotiations. Such a conclusion held also a strategic objective for Ford and Kissinger and Rabin. The treaty allayed Israeli fears and enabled Sadat to save face, and they kept the Soviets from bringing Egypt back into their sphere of influence. For the president and his secretary of state, it affirmed their decision to maintain unilateral diplomacy, Ford writes, “Kissinger had achieved significant success in easing the Soviets out of the Middle East. I thought they didn’t want a bona fide settlement there and that their only aim was to promote instability, so I wanted to keep them out. Gromyko, of course, complained about this. But I decided that we could accomplish more unilaterally by working with Israel and each of its Arab neighbors.”⁷⁴ Israel and Rabin had further success from the United States in a separate Memorandum of Understanding, including key concessions. “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.

It was a security alliance in all but name, as Richard Valerian of NBC News quipped, “the best agreement money could buy.”⁷⁵ The Knesset ratified the Sinai II agreement on September 3, 1975, paving the way for the eventual peace treaty with Egypt in 1979—and

⁷³ Ibid, pg. 458.

⁷⁴ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, pg. 183.

⁷⁵ Brinkley, *Gerald R. Ford*, pg. 117.

transforming the U.S.-Israel relationship for all time.⁷⁶ However, just how it has been transformed is still very much open to discussion. Likewise, if from this period there can be seen a victor? As *Haaretz* reported then, Israel used American desire for peace to ‘squeeze’ further aid⁷⁷ thereby achieving the strategic goals Rabin and his Cabinet had held before the reassessment period took place. The Americans used Israel and Egypt to block creeping influence of the Soviet Union in the region. And the reassessment period showed the cracks that have grown larger over the decades as American presidents and Israeli prime ministers have each tried to influence the other using public and private means.

⁷⁶ Berman & Sadot, (2012, April). “Israel & America: The Eternal Return”. *Commentary*.

⁷⁷ *Haaretz*. (2006, December 28). *Gerald Ford, the U.S. president who reassessed policy toward Israel, dies at 93*.

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