

“The Importance of Playing the Two-Level Game: U.S. Domestic Politics and the
Road to a Separate Peace, 1977-1978”

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How and to what extent do domestic political factors influence American foreign policy? Are formulators of U.S. statecraft more or less free to operate as they please or does the political context at home impose real constraints on their decision-making freedom? More specifically, how limiting is public opinion as a check on presidential authority in the realm of international affairs? How important are the views of other domestic political elites such as influential members of Congress, the media, issue-specific experts, and special interest groups? And what role do these various influences play in shaping the manner in which the White House approaches policy choices in the particular case of the Arab-Israeli conflict?

According to political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, the answer is quite straightforward. In their view, it is the existence of a powerful Israel lobby in the United States, which they define as “a loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively works to move U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction,” that explains Washington’s policy as it relates to the Middle East dispute. “Were it not for the lobby’s efforts,” they write, “the strategic and moral arguments that are commonly invoked to justify unconditional American support [for Israel] would be called into question more frequently and U.S. policy in the Middle East would be significantly different than it is today.” Specifically, Mearsheimer and Walt contend that the United States would be much less reluctant to exert pressure on Jerusalem to reach a peace settlement with its Arab neighbors. “But,” they conclude, “this will not happen as long as the lobby makes it impossible for American leaders to use the leverage at their disposal to pressure Israel into ending the occupation and creating a viable Palestinian state.”¹

Unsurprisingly, these claims sparked a major a debate. “Although neither John Mearsheimer nor Stephen Walt speaks much Gaelic,” Douglas Little wrote in a review of their

¹ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007), pp. 5, 112, 346. For the authors’ original publication on the topic, see Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Israel Lobby,” *London Review of Books*, March 23, 2006, pp. 3-12.

book, “they touched off the academic equivalent of an Irish bar brawl.”² “Seldom,” L. Carl Brown similarly observed, “have just over 40 pages of text... kicked up such a storm.”³ The two scholars’ work, Gideon Rose commented, “produced the foreign-policy equivalent of a cable TV shout fest.”⁴

The controversy over this issue carries with it implications that are of fundamental importance for debates among scholars of international relations theory and U.S. foreign policy. The extent to which domestic political constraints influence strategic decision-making, of course, bears directly on the question of whether international politics is to be understood in essentially realist terms. Indeed, realism’s most basic assumption is that the anarchic structure of the international system generates strong pressures on leaders to make choices for power political reasons. Politics at home, in other words, should be of subsidiary significance.⁵

Of perhaps even greater importance, the Israel lobby debate affects profoundly arguments over *how* domestic political factors shape U.S. foreign policy. If correct, the idea that the actions of small, well-organized groups—rather than the contours of mass public opinion—determine outcomes, suggests consequences of a far-reaching nature both for democratic theory and for the way in which the United States conducts its foreign relations.⁶ More broadly, such a finding

² Douglas Little, “David or Goliath? The Israel Lobby and Its Critics,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 123, No. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 151.

³ L. Carl Brown, Review of “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2006, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2006-09-01/israel-lobby-and-us-foreign-policy>.

⁴ Deborah Amos, “Paper on Israel Lobby Sparks Heated Debate,” April 21, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5353855>.

⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument about the Israel lobby is, for this reason, somewhat surprising, as both scholars are prominent proponents of realist theory. See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁶ For Mearsheimer and Walt’s discussion of this point, see Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 111, 140; and Mearsheimer and Walt, Interview by Harry Kreisler, “A Conversation with History: Domestic Politics and International Relations,” September 21, 2007, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSXZNm2jGVE>, at 6:16-10:03. Mearsheimer and Walt derive this conclusion from the literature on collective action. In particular, see Mancur

would imply that domestic political structure affects, to an almost deterministic degree, the manner in which democracies behave in international politics.⁷

This issue, however, has not been adequately addressed in the political science literature. On the one hand, prominent American politics scholars like John Zaller assert that one cannot study this question effectively using case studies. There is little to be gleaned, he claims, from testimonial evidence, as leaders are unlikely to admit that their foreign policy decisions are “politically motivated.” And if politicians do talk about such factors, they will be sure to limit the discussion to their “closest aides, who would then remain loyally silent.” Social scientists are, he thus concludes, “properly skeptical” of studies that attempt to infer, via process tracing, that domestic political considerations affect statecraft, for they “rely on unsystematic data. It is too easy for someone with an active imagination and any talent for writing to spin out alluring stories.”⁸ Because it is so difficult to operationalize the “policy impact” of special interest group influence, Robert Trice similarly argues, studying this question “is likely to be a difficult if not impossible task given current social science methods.” The degree to which such organizations affect decision-making, he claims, “is very often impossible to measure.”⁹

Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁷ On the interaction between domestic political structure and international bargaining outcomes, see Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 427-460. The issue also has important implications for debates in the audience costs and regime type literatures. On this point, see Elizabeth N. Saunders, “War and the Inner Circle: Democratic Elites and the Politics of Using Force,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July/September 2015), pp. 469-473, 497-500. On audience costs, see James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994), pp. 577-592; and Marc Trachtenberg, “Audience Costs: An Historical Analysis,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (January/March 2012), pp. 3-42.

⁸ John Zaller, “Strategic Politicians, Public Opinion, and the Gulf Crisis,” in Lance Bennett and David Paletz, eds., *Taken by Storm: The News Media, U.S. Foreign Policy, and the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 254, 270. See also Zaller, “Coming to Grips with V.O. Key’s Concept of Latent Opinion,” in Michael B. MacKuen and George Rabinowitz, eds., *Electoral Democracy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), p. 320.

⁹ Robert H. Trice, *Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process: U.S. Policy in the Middle East* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1976), pp. 51, 72. Note also James Lindsay’s pessimism regarding the ability of researchers to investigate how presidents’ consideration of the “anticipated reaction” from Congress to their foreign policy proposals influences U.S. diplomacy. See Lindsay, “Congress and Foreign Policy: Why the Hill Matters,” *Political Science*

At the same time, Zaller has qualified significantly his initial beliefs about the viability of large-N observational approaches to the study of this issue. Scholars of public opinion, he points out, must pay more attention to the idea of “latent opinion” than he had at first acknowledged in his influential book, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.¹⁰ By this concept, Zaller means “opinion that might exist at some point in the future in response to the decision makers’ actions and may perhaps result in political damage or even defeat at the polls.”¹¹ Scholars who ignore this possibility, he wrote in a 2012 review of his own book, confront a glaring—and more or less insoluble—endogeneity problem. If political elites anticipate how their messages will affect their chances in the next election: “[O]bservational studies of the effects of [elite] cues in *Nature and Origins*, as well as [Adam] Berinsky’s more convincing *In Time of War*, might get systematically incorrect estimates of their effect.” Indeed, “Observational studies can examine only the effects of cues actually given, but these cues are unlikely to be a random sample of all cues that politicians might like to give. If politicians selectively take positions they believe can win over fairly large numbers of voters, but refrain when they expect to be ineffective, observational studies will systematically overestimate the power of partisan cues to shape opinion.”¹²

What, then, are those interested in the question of how political elites and public opinion affect foreign policy to do? Has the time come for scholars simply to throw up their hands? Has the study of this issue reached a sort of intellectual dead end?

Quarterly, Vol. 107, No. 4 (Winter 1992-1993), p. 615. On “anticipated reaction” and U.S. Middle East policy, see William B. Quandt, *Decade of Decisions: American Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), p. 20; and Dan Flesher, *Transforming America’s Israel Lobby: The Limits of Its Power and the Potential for Change* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2009), pp. 43-45, 97-100.

¹⁰ John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹¹ Zaller, “Coming to Grips,” p. 311. For the original formulation of the concept of latent opinion, see V.O. Key, Jr., *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1961).

¹² John Zaller, “What *Nature and Origins* Leaves Out,” *Critical Review*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2012), p. 588; and Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

One argument that has been used to dismiss case studies, it turns out, is unwarranted. It is a quite commonly held belief—even among international relations scholars who employ qualitative methods and some historians—that one is unlikely to find references to domestic political considerations in primary sources. “[C]ertain types of theories,” Elizabeth Saunders asserts, “may be difficult to test because the evidence required is not often found in textual or other records. Domestic political explanations, for example, are notoriously difficult to trace because politicians do not like to admit, even in private, that such calculations enter into national security decisions.”¹³ When one conducts sustained, careful research with primary documents, however, it quickly becomes clear that this objection cannot be sustained. U.S. Middle East strategists, in fact, discuss privately the domestic political aspect of the Arab-Israeli problem with tremendous frequency, oftentimes in great detail.

With this in mind, in this article I show how much insight into this issue one can get by examining the key case of President Jimmy Carter’s Arab-Israeli policy. The basic point that emerges from this analysis is that politics at home critically affected the way in which the Carter administration’s Middle East diplomacy ran its course, a fact that other scholars have highlighted previously, though usually not on the basis of primary source evidence.¹⁴ The more important finding—one that differs somewhat from standard accounts of this case—however, is that the way in which domestic politics influenced U.S. policy was in large part a function of the political strategy the administration employed at home. I argue that if Carter and his advisers had adopted

¹³ Elizabeth N. Saunders, “Transparency without Tears: A Pragmatic Approach to Transparent Security Studies Research,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October/December 2014), p. 693. See also Saunders, “War and the Inner Circle,” p. 484; Melvin Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy: The Impact of Domestic Politics on U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789-1994* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 165; Jerome Slater, “The Two Books of Mearsheimer and Walt,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January/March 2009), p. 13; and Fredrik Logevall, “Domestic Politics,” in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, Third Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), pp. 154, 163.

¹⁴ An exception is William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1986). This book remains the seminal work on the topic.

a different political approach to the issue domestically, the outcome of the peace negotiations might have been altered significantly.

The remainder of this paper is organized into three parts. In the first empirical section, I describe Carter's preference for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement, one that would have resolved the Palestinian aspect of the dispute, and highlight a series of key errors that the White House committed while trying to manage its political position on Middle East policy at home. In the following section, I outline the process by which the administration decided to convene the Camp David Conference in September 1978 and explain why such an approach was bound, given Carter's handling of the issue domestically, to result in a separate Egyptian-Israeli agreement, rather than in a more substantial settlement. Finally, I summarize my findings and discuss their theoretical and methodological implications in a brief conclusion.

Stumbling Out of the Gate: Domestic Politics and the Breakdown of the Geneva Formula

Carter and his principal advisers took office committed to bringing about a comprehensive solution to the Middle East dispute. Several members of the new administration had taken part in the Brookings Institution's 1975 Study Group, which advocated for such an approach, and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had argued in favor of this type of policy in his published writings.¹⁵ On an early draft of a White House plan for resolving the conflict, Carter wrote in the margin that the basic elements of a solution were an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines with only insubstantial modifications, real peace from the Arabs, and a viable homeland for the Palestinians. The document added that the best solution to the Palestinian aspect of the

¹⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, François Duchêne, and Kiichi Saeki, "Peace in an International Framework," *Foreign Policy*, No. 19 (Summer 1975), pp. 3-17. For the Brookings report, see "The Brookings Report on the Middle East," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter 1977), pp. 195-205. See also David Ignatius, "Solving the Arab-Israeli Conflict," in Charles Gati, ed., *Zbig: The Strategy and Statecraft of Zbigniew Brzezinski* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 179-182; and Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), 1 May 1975, Zbigniew Brzezinski Folder, Box 1, Peter Rodman Files, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

dispute would be for the West Bank and Gaza Strip to be joined with Jordan in a loose confederation. Such an entity, the president added, ought to resemble “[a] little more than one of [the] United States.” In short, the administration felt that an overall settlement would require close to a full Israeli withdrawal and need to address directly the Palestinian question.¹⁶

As a result, the administration from the outset expressed its disagreement with Israeli representatives over the terms of a settlement. It was simply “illusory,” Brzezinski wrote in a memorandum to Carter on March 7, to think that peace would be possible if Israel demanded that it be able to keep any significant portion of the territories it had taken during the June 1967 Six-Day War, and insistence on such acquisitions “would be tantamount to precluding a peace settlement.”¹⁷ Although Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin liked to argue that United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 242 did not obligate Israel to withdraw fully from the lands it had taken in 1967, Brzezinski’s assistant on the National Security Council (NSC) staff William Quandt wrote at one point, the White House held precisely the opposite view. Begin, Quandt claimed, was “technically right, but the negotiating history preceding 242 makes it clear that major withdrawals on all fronts were understood as the counterpart to peace.”¹⁸

The administration’s disagreement with Jerusalem created a dilemma for the White House, for Carter and his advisers considered a comprehensive settlement a major national security objective. Even before the new president had taken office, American officials had prepared a detailed report on the problem that highlighted the U.S. requirement for diplomatic

¹⁶ National Security Council (NSC) Report for Carter, undated, Middle East—Possible Elements of a Solution (Proposal, ca. 2/77) Folder, Box 14, Geographic File, Zbigniew Brzezinski Donated Papers (BDP), Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia (JCL, or NLC if the document was located using the library’s Remote Archive Capture system).

¹⁷ Memorandum (Memo) from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: What Should Rabin Go Back With?” 7 March 1977, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, Vol. VIII, pp. 146-147 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers).

¹⁸ Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Briefing Memorandum for Prime Minister Begin’s Visit,” 14 July 1977, NLC-25-132-7-1-0. See also Summary Report, 2 February 1978, NLC-25-55-1-4-8; and Report, “Outline History of U.S.-Israeli Relations,” undated, NLC-133-132-9-21-5.

progress. Without at least some movement, it was likely that there would be another war in the Middle East by the end of 1977.¹⁹ To temporize or fail to deliver would potentially lead the Arabs to try to break the stalemate militarily and to exert economic pressure on the United States, as well as allow the Soviet Union to reestablish itself in the region.²⁰ With the dangers they had witnessed during the October 1973 War still fresh in their minds, White House strategists put a premium on achieving Arab-Israeli peace.

The Americans, the evidence indicates, tended to blame Jerusalem for the negotiating impasse. Israel's moderate neighbors, the report claimed, were "probably prepared to sign a formal agreement accepting the reality of [its] presence and to allow the Jewish State to continue as a fact, so long as they get back substantially all the territories they lost in 1967 and if the Palestinians receive at least minimum satisfaction of their 'rights.'"²¹ Whereas Israel, Carter believed, was "the most difficult government now," and the president had been "disappointed with [its] intransigence," he was, by contrast, "happy with the cooperation of the Arabs."²² "The present Arab leadership," Brzezinski similarly told a group of American Jewish leaders on May 16, "is the most moderate that has existed since 1947."²³

What this fundamental divergence of views meant was that at some point the White House would have to issue its own peace plan to break the deadlock. At a February 23 NSC meeting, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance argued that the United States would need to press Jerusalem to make concessions. "There is no question," he said, "that it will require nudging

¹⁹ On the shape that such a conflict was expected to take, see Stephen J. Rosen, "What the Next Arab-Israeli War Might Look Like," *International Security*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Spring 1978), pp. 149-173.

²⁰ Report, "Arab-Israeli Dispute," 14 January 1977, NLC-17-111-6-2-2.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Memcon, "Subject: Summary of President's Meeting with French Prime Minister Raymond Barre," 15 September 1977, NLC-7-35-5-10-0.

²³ Memcon Between Dr. Brzezinski and Leaders of the American Jewish Community, 16 May 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 263.

from us for a solution to be reached. The Israelis will not make decisions otherwise.”²⁴ Likewise, when the Policy Review Committee (PRC) met on April 19, Vance highlighted the necessity of establishing a negotiating framework. Brzezinski agreed: “I’m very much in favor of that approach. The parties will not reach agreement by themselves.” “In the end,” Secretary of Defense Harold Brown concurred, “we will have to say what we think.” How hard the United States could press Israel, Brzezinski and Undersecretary of State Philip Habib therefore concluded, was “an essential question.”²⁵

And it was clear, especially after Begin’s election in May, that if the administration chose to pursue this sort of policy, a major confrontation between Washington and Jerusalem would be inevitable. If the administration issued a peace plan that called for a restoration of essentially the 1967 lines and a viable solution to the Palestinian question, State Department analyst Harold Saunders wrote in a July 16 memorandum, most Israelis would rally to Begin’s side. The Israeli public and mass media, Saunders argued, would back the new prime minister completely, for the publication of an American plan “would be perceived as the beginning of the long feared confrontation with the US.”²⁶

The ability of the United States to prevail in such circumstances, therefore, would be a function of the “*intensity, duration, and firmness of US opposition to Israel’s position.*” Without a clear demonstration of steadfastness, Saunders emphasized, Jerusalem would not budge: “Crucial will be the Israeli perception of the extent of US determination and whether it has affected domestic US support for the Begin government’s position. Most Israelis, including the pragmatic Right... would have to be convinced that the US had the resolve and the staying

²⁴ Minutes of an NSC Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” 23 February 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 129.

²⁵ Minutes of a PRC Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” 19 April 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 195, 204.

²⁶ Department of State Briefing Memo from Saunders to Vance, “Subject: How Will Geneva Decisions Affect the Begin Government?” 16 July 1977, NLC-15-21-8-34-7.

power to maintain its position through long disagreement with Israel.” In other words, Washington would need to threaten credibly “*grave damage to the special relationship*,” a process that would require “heavy pressures” for perhaps as long as two years. Even then, the Americans would need to sweeten the deal by offering Israel a security guarantee and normalized relations with its Arab neighbors. “Nevertheless,” Saunders cautioned, “even the most efficacious combination of pressures, compensation, and Arab concessions may well not lead Israel to return to something like the 1967 lines; indeed, the effort might at some point be used by some as justification for a pre-emptive strike.”²⁷

One would think, given the history of how the United States had dealt with the Arab-Israeli dispute since June 1967, that Carter would have understood that his administration could not hope to sustain such a policy without a solid foundation of support at home. Indeed, it should have been clear from an examination of earlier U.S. attempts to achieve a settlement that the domestic political aspect of Middle East policy would be crucially important to the administration’s chances.²⁸

At the outset of his term, however, Carter essentially ignored domestic politics while formulating Middle East policy. In part, this was because his advisers felt that it would be preferable to work on the problem early on in the president’s term, when he would be strongest politically. It might be better, Brzezinski argued, for the inevitable clash with Israel to be “the first major issue rather than the second or third or the fourth (with some of your capital in the meantime expended).”²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Some high-ranking administration officials seemed to recognize this requirement. See Minutes of a PRC Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” 4 February 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 14. On the domestic politics of Middle East diplomacy during the Ford presidency, see Galen Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t: U.S.-Israeli Relations and American Domestic Politics, 1973-75,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 130-169.

²⁹ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: NSC Weekly Report #16,” 10 June 1977, NLC-15-125-8-1-8. See also Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster,

Thus, without adequately preparing the ground for a dramatic shift in U.S. declaratory policy, and at a time when his personal involvement was probably premature, Carter spoke publicly about the necessity for a Palestinian “homeland” and a full Israeli withdrawal with only minor modifications to the 1967 boundaries. Given how sensitive the Palestinian aspect of the Middle East dispute was in the United States at this time, as well as the fact that previous administrations had been extremely careful not to express publicly the U.S. position on the territorial question, instituting such a major change was bound to become controversial if not preceded by a significant effort to alter American public attitudes and to reassure Israel’s supporters in the United States that the administration’s strategy would not jeopardize Jerusalem’s security.³⁰ In any case, if Carter was determined to make this sort of policy adjustment, it would have been less risky in political terms to have had an official of lesser rank first pave the way for his involvement. It did not help matters that the president heaped praise on Arab heads of state and failed to afford Israel’s leaders similar treatment, while also referring to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian people more or less interchangeably.³¹ As Steven Spiegel writes, the president was “an unguided missile in public.”³²

1987), p. 100. Note also Quandt’s scholarship on the American electoral calendar. See Quandt, “The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 5 (1986), pp. 825-837; and Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 6-29.

³⁰ When considering a major shift in Middle East policy in the spring of 1975, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had been greatly concerned about the probable domestic reaction to involving Palestinian representatives in the negotiations. Taking such a step, Kissinger had said, could “start a revolution in the United States.” See Edward R.F. Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger: A Secret History of American Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: Reader’s Digest, 1976), p. 167. It was for precisely this reason that Brzezinski considered the issue “very explosive” and that Vance had been reluctant even to discuss it in private. See Minutes of a PRC Meeting, 19 April 1977, pp. 199, 206. Note also the observation made by one U.S. official that Carter’s positions on the Middle East and other foreign policy issues “represent major *changes and a new way of thinking for most Americans*.” See Memo from Landon Butler to Hamilton Jordan, “Subject: Foreign Policy Work Plans,” 25 June 1977, Foreign Policy Issues, Work Plan, 6/77 Folder, Box 34A, Hamilton Jordan Files, JCL (emphasis in original). Secretary of State William Rogers had issued a detailed U.S. peace plan in December 1969, but President Richard Nixon had refused to back him politically, in great part because the proposal had resulted in serious domestic opposition.

³¹ On Carter’s handling of the issue domestically, see Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America’s Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), pp. 160, 185-187; Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge,

With this in mind, Brzezinski ultimately was forced to admit that part of the fault for the “very intense domestic reaction” to the White House’s approach “was of our own making.” The Palestinian question had been “introduced too early and without adequate care to keep it in perspective. This resulted in a loss of domestic support for our policy, which came at a particularly unfortunate time in terms of the peacemaking efforts.” The charge that the administration had failed in its “tactical execution,” Brzezinski acknowledged, was somewhat “justified.”³³ Thus, the White House’s initial approach expended a great deal of Carter’s political capital, which, in turn, damaged significantly its peacemaking prospects by eroding its ability to sustain support for its policy at home.

Eventually, the administration came to realize that it could not possibly achieve its objectives in the Middle East without taking into account the domestic side of the problem. There was no chance, Representative Stephen Solarz—who maintained close ties to many of Israel’s supporters in the United States—informed members of the NSC staff at the end of June, that Begin would moderate his policies voluntarily, “particularly since he believes that the Administration will not suspend arms shipments and that he has solid support in Congress and in the American Jewish community.”³⁴ It was important, Senator Charles Mathias, Jr. told Quandt at one point, “for the Israelis to know that they cannot appeal over the President’s head to the

1999), pp. 35-44, 194-195; Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 43, 49, 59-62, 77, 94-95, 167, 322, 336; and Tivnan, *The Lobby*, pp. 101-104.

³² Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 334.

³³ NSC Annual Report, undated, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 802; and Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: NSC Report for 1977: A Critical Self-Appraisal,” 12 January 1978, NLC-128-9-14-2-3. Vance also acknowledged later that Carter had more or less disregarded the domestic side of Middle East policy at the beginning of his presidency, though he did so in seemingly admiring terms. See Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), p. 163.

³⁴ Memo from Middle East Staff to Brzezinski, “Subject: Evening Report,” 29 June 1977, NLC-10-3-5-17-4. Solarz later noted that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) had given him “a near-perfect voting record.” See Solarz, *Journeys to War and Peace: A Congressional Memoir* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), p. 36.

Congress.” Quandt concurred, writing in a memorandum to Brzezinski’s deputy, David Aaron: “These strike me as sound points.”³⁵

As a result of the White House’s early failures domestically, Carter’s chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan, sent the president a closely-held memorandum in early June, which argued that he would face an uphill battle unless he improved his performance in selling his policies to the Jewish community in the United States and to key members of Congress.³⁶ American Jews, the document claimed, wielded considerable political influence, especially in the Democratic Party, through their “extraordinary voting habits” and political contributions. In addition, the memorandum argued that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) was a formidable advocate of Israeli interests, as its “*collective mobilizing ability is unsurpassed in terms of the quality and quantity of political communications that can be triggered on specific issues perceived to be critical to Israel.*” When coupled with the fact that there did “not exist in [the United States] a political counterforce that opposes the specific goals of the Jewish lobby,” it went on, it was “even questionable whether a major shift in American public opinion on the issue of Israel would be sufficient to effectively counter the political clout of AIPAC.”³⁷

There also existed, Jordan’s memorandum continued, strong support for Israel in Congress. On issues of importance to Jerusalem, AIPAC typically could rely on 65 to 75 votes in the Senate, and of those, 31 were considered major backers and seven served on the Foreign Relations Committee. The administration, Jordan informed Carter, had greatly compounded the

³⁵ Memo from Quandt to Aaron, “Subject: Meeting with Senator Mathias,” 27 March 1978, NLC-15-22-1-9-1. This view also prevailed in the Israeli press. See Untitled Report, “Other Developments,” undated, NLC-SAFE 17B-7-38-11-4. Mathias, Jr. subsequently authored an article in which he highlighted what he considered the deleterious influence of the Israel lobby in Congress. See Mathias, Jr., “Ethnic Groups and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (Summer 1981), pp. 975-998.

³⁶ Because he considered the issue “highly sensitive subject matter,” Jordan personally typed the document and made only two copies, one of which he kept in his office safe. See Memo from Jordan to Carter, June 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 279.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 284-288 (emphasis in original).

problem through its clumsiness. The American Jewish community had grown “extremely nervous” as a result of some of the president’s statements. If the White House was not careful, Jordan believed that it ran the risk of putting itself in an untenable position: “If the American Jewish community openly opposed your approach and policy toward a Middle East settlement, you would lack the flexibility and credibility you will need to play a constructive role in bringing the Israelis and the Arabs together.” Thus, “It would be a great mistake to spend most of our time and energies persuading the Israelis to accept a certain plan for peace and neglect a similar effort with the American Jewish community since lack of support for such a plan from the American Jewish community could undermine our efforts with the Israelis.... It is difficult for me to envision a meaningful peace settlement without the support of the American Jewish community.” Jordan, in conclusion, recommended that the White House launch a comprehensive consultation program with Israel’s supporters, journalists, and key members of Congress.³⁸

Given the administration’s awareness of the problem, one would think that Carter and his advisers would have tried to work closely with key elites who tended to support their policy objectives. White House strategists, after all, seemed to think that Begin’s election had created certain opportunities to shift the debate in the United States in their favor. “Let me make a ‘perverse’ observation,” Brzezinski wrote soon after the Likud Party’s victory at the polls. “The electoral outcome may not be actually all that bad.” Because a confrontation with Jerusalem would have been inevitable in any case, the national security adviser reasoned, Begin’s “extremism” could perhaps be beneficial to the White House, for the prime minister was “likely

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 288-295. For additional evidence of the administration’s belief that it would need to gain greater support in Congress and from Israel’s American supporters, see Minutes of a PRC Meeting, 19 April 1977, p. 196; Memcon, 24 May 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 270, 275; Minutes of a PRC Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” 10 June 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 298, 300; Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy,” 21 September 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 548, 554; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), p. 96; and Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 195-196, 198, 205, 209.

to split both Israeli public opinion and the American Jewish community.” Over time, opposition in Israel and from “responsible” U.S. Jewish leaders could rally to Carter’s side. Ultimately, Brzezinski surmised, Begin would be blamed “for unnecessarily straining the U.S.-Israeli relationship,” a development that would make it easier for the president to defend an independent American peace plan in both the United States and in Israel.³⁹

And Brzezinski, it seems, might have been on to something with this analysis. On May 25, Vance informed Carter that Senators Clifford Case, Jacob Javits, Howard Metzenbaum, Henry Jackson, Abraham Ribicoff, Daniel Inouye, and Hubert Humphrey had met to advise Senator Richard Stone on how to approach Begin during his upcoming visit to Israel. Ribicoff, Javits, and Jackson—all legislators with strong records of support for Israel—had characterized the new prime minister as “too right wing and inflexible” and advised Stone to tell him “in very strong terms” that “an inflexible posture will not sell with the Congress or the Executive Branch.” The group had also asked that Begin be encouraged to compromise on the territorial question, “especially on the West Bank,” and Javits had specifically requested that Stone “warn Begin that an uncompromising position will tear the American Jewish community apart because it is basically a moderate group.”⁴⁰

Indeed, the administration appeared to have important opportunities to build support for its position in Congress. Speaker of the House of Representatives Tip O’Neill, for instance, told Brzezinski around this time that if the White House clearly posed the choice between supporting

³⁹ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: NSC Weekly Report #13,” 20 May 1977, NLC-15-125-8-1-8. See also Memo from Robert Lipshutz to Carter, “Subject: Israeli Election and Related Matter,” 23 May 1977, Israel, 4-6/77 Folder, Box 34, BDP, Country File, JCL; Memo from Jordan to Carter, June 1977, pp. 284, 291-292; Memo from Robert G. Neumann through Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Urgent Political-Diplomatic Considerations after the Israeli Elections,” 16 June 1977, CO 1-7 Executive, 6/1/77-6/30/77 Folder, Box CO-6, White House Central Files (WHCF), Country Files, JCL; and Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Letters from Ambassador Robert Neumann,” 20 June 1977, CO 1-7 Executive, 6/1/77-6/30/77 Folder, Box CO-6, WHCF, Country Files, JCL.

⁴⁰ Memo from Vance to Carter, 25 May 1977, NLC-128-12-8-17-0. Note also Javits’s comments during his own meeting with Begin on July 4. See Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: Visitors to Israel,” undated, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 327.

Carter's policy or backing "the pro-Israel lobby, the country would clearly choose the President." Ribicoff similarly had urged Vice President Walter Mondale in late June to be "very, very tough" with the Israelis, and hoped that the president would "assert himself."⁴¹ "[A] number of senators," the administration had reason to believe, now felt that "the time has come to stand with the President on the Middle East." It would be critical, therefore, for Carter and Mondale to maintain frequent contact with Humphrey, Jackson, Ribicoff, Case, Javits, Stone, and Senators Edmund Muskie and Frank Church.⁴²

Certain members of the administration appeared to recognize that getting assistance from these individuals would be crucially important to the attainment of its goals. As Brzezinski had written Carter on June 3, the White House would need help from key lawmakers because it was "coming to a point at which a massive effort will have to be made domestically to garner support for the position that you have articulated."⁴³

The White House, thus, might have tried to coordinate its political strategy with elites who were sympathetic to its policy and whose views on the Arab-Israeli issue enjoyed credibility.⁴⁴ Although Javits, for example, tended to be "very supportive" of Begin in his public remarks, in private he was "critical" of the prime minister and therefore, Quandt believed, was "important and can be helpful."⁴⁵ Likewise, precisely because he enjoyed a reputation as a key

⁴¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 97.

⁴² Memo, "Work Plan—Middle East," 25 June 1977, Foreign Policy Issues—Work Plans, 6/77 Folder, Box 34A, Jordan Files, JCL.

⁴³ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, "Subject: NSC Weekly Report #15," 3 June 1977, NLC-15-125-8-1-8.

⁴⁴ According to the political communication literature, statements in support of the administration's Middle East policy from Israel's supporters in Congress would have been especially helpful. Conversely, because Israel was at this time primarily an issue in Democratic Party politics, the White House ought to have known that working with co-partisan legislators would be crucial, as opposition cues from fellow Democrats would be particularly damaging. See Matthew A. Baum and Tim J. Groeling, *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 17-45; and Robert F. Trager and Lynn Vavreck, "The Political Costs of Crisis Bargaining: Presidential Rhetoric and the Role of Party," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (July 2011), pp. 526-545.

⁴⁵ Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski through Madeleine Albright, "Subject: Letter to Senator Javits," 18 April 1978, CO 1-7 Confidential, 1/20/77-12/31/77 Folder, Box CO-6, WHCF, Country Files, JCL.

supporter of Israel, yet seemed to favor the administration's position, Ribicoff's help would have been particularly useful.⁴⁶ Carter, Brzezinski later wrote, ought to have taken advantage of former Ambassador to the United Nations Arthur Goldberg's offer "to do anything the President asked." Goldberg, after all, was the self-proclaimed "father of UN 242," which would have made him a valuable political ally. And because he "basically agreed with the President on the question of borders," it is understandable that Brzezinski "always regretted that we did not involve him more actively in our Middle East venture."⁴⁷ Similarly, the President of the World Jewish Congress, Nahum Goldmann, who had helped found the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, had grown highly critical of Begin's policies and was urging administration officials in strong terms to take a firmer line with the Israelis.⁴⁸

The administration, moreover, had the option of taking its case to the U.S. public, something Carter's advisers recognized. Jewish Americans who supported the White House's policy, Brzezinski argued, were less organized than "the more hawkish groups" and had "been reluctant to speak out." Until greater progress had been made, he reasoned, it was "unlikely that the policy issue can be won within the Jewish Community alone." The administration, therefore, would need to expand the scope of its audience: "It follows that the case must be carried to the American people as a whole, including the Jewish Community. This means stressing that a settlement is good for Israel, but also emphasizing explicitly that the *national interests* of the

⁴⁶ Note Brzezinski's later characterization of Ribicoff as "a tower of strength" during one major battle over Middle East policy in Congress. See Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 248.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96. According to the Ford administration's internal deliberations, Goldberg had previously told the Israelis that "they should get peace for the [19]67 borders." See Memcon, "Subject: Middle East," 3 April 1975, in *FRUS*, 1969-1976, Vol. XXVI, p. 616.

⁴⁸ Memcon, "Subject: Soviet Jewry; Jewish-Arab Contacts; Middle East Peace," 27 October 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 730-732; and Tivnan, *The Lobby*, pp. 120-121. See also Nahum Goldmann, "Zionist Ideology and the Reality of Israel," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Fall 1978), pp. 80-82.

United States require a settlement.” It would be necessary, he added, to begin working on the “consolidation and education of the public.”⁴⁹

Whereas White House officials felt that getting help from the American Jewish community might prove difficult, Carter seemed to hold certain advantages with broad public opinion. A July 15 administration survey of attitudes on the Middle East had revealed large and systematic differences between Jewish voters and overall opinion. On almost every question, the document stated: “[T]he Jewish respondents in our study respond differently from the whole of the American public. They are always more definite in their opinions and as expected more likely to be ‘hawkish’ on territorial questions.” On the issues of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Palestinians, the survey similarly indicated “severe differences between Jewish respondents and other Americans.” Furthermore, while a plurality of Americans favored “some imposing of a ‘reasonable’ settlement by the U.S.,” Jewish voters “almost unanimously” supported the continuation of aid to Jerusalem “regardless of Israeli reaction to peace terms.”⁵⁰

With this in mind, the White House viewed public opinion as a potential tool to help sustain a firm policy toward Jerusalem. An informed observer, Brzezinski’s aides on the NSC staff reported at one point, had suggested that “public opinion was far ahead of the Congress on the Middle East issue.”⁵¹ The U.S. public, Quandt had written Brzezinski on May 18, was less likely to support a Likud-led government. The White House, as a result, might have “some room

⁴⁹ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, 10 June 1977 (emphasis in original). On the difficulties the administration faced in trying to get more vocal support from Jewish leaders who sympathized with its basic views, see Tivnan, *The Lobby*, pp. 128-130, 133.

⁵⁰ Memo from Patrick H. Caddell to Carter, “American Attitudes toward Israel: Jewish Attitudes toward Carter,” 15 July 1977, Middle East (5/77-12/77) Folder, Box 12, BDP, Geographic File, JCL.

⁵¹ Memo from Quandt and Gary Sick to Brzezinski, “Subject: Weekly Report,” 16 February, 1978, NLC-10-9-1-17-2.

for maneuver.” At the appropriate time, he concluded: “[W]e may be able to act without fear of a serious domestic backlash.”⁵²

Given the importance of the domestic side of the problem, the White House would have to undertake a major effort to mobilize support for its policy at home. As one State Department paper, written in preparation for the Camp David summit, argued, if Carter was to have any chance of prevailing in a confrontation with Begin, the administration would have “to develop Congressional and media support for our position.”⁵³ “We cannot,” the document stated, “hope to sustain an international effort of this magnitude without building domestic support.” The administration would have to make an “early and intensive effort with *key members of the Senate and House*,” specifically Javits, Stone, O’Neill, Representative Lee Hamilton, Church, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Clement Zablocki, and Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd. In addition, top White House officials would need to consult with certain leaders in the American Jewish community. A major television address by Carter would be the decisive capstone of this campaign. As the document stated: “Anything short of an effort of some magnitude would be unlikely to muster the support needed. Such a speech might be the only way to place the issue in a context which could contain special interest counterpressure.”⁵⁴

⁵² Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Israeli Elections,” 18 May 1977, Israel, 4-6/77 Folder, Box 34, BDP, Country File, JCL.

⁵³ On the media’s role in shaping the public’s views on foreign policy, see Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, “The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 11 (June 2008), pp. 39-65. Note also Jerome Slater’s argument that media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the United States is skewed in Israel’s favor and that this reportage affects U.S. Middle East policy in profound ways. See Slater, “Muting the Alarm over the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: *The New York Times* versus *Haaretz*, 2000-2006,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007), pp. 84-120.

⁵⁴ Paper Prepared by the Department of State, “Possible Courses of Action in the Event of Stalemate in the Egyptian-Israeli Negotiations,” undated, NLC-6-52-5-9-4 (emphasis in original). Note also some observers’ belief that Javits would be “absolutely crucial to determining the line which will be taken in response to Camp David.” See Memo from Sick to Brzezinski, “Subject: Incidental Notes on Israeli Politics,” 7 September 1978, NLC-25-112-6-2-1.

The administration, the document added, might well succeed if it launched such a campaign. The “shrillness and frequency” of the charges that Carter was jeopardizing Jerusalem’s safety were, State Department analysts claimed, “becoming a self-inflicted weakness of the pro-Israeli lobby; they have risked debasing their currency by turning up the volume too loud and too often for too many lesser issues.” The president would also have the upper hand when it came to the issues of Israeli settlement expansion and Jerusalem’s interpretation of Resolution 242. While the mobilization effort “would require careful planning, sustained commitment in the face of counterpressure, and perhaps above all, a nuanced sense of *timing*,” the White House nevertheless stood a chance. “The prospects for success in such an endeavor can never be clearly assessed,” the paper concluded, “but certain factors indicate that an effective effort is both possible and necessary.” In particular, “The U.S. domestic picture has changed: many American Jews are troubled by Israel’s policies and could support our effort; the Congress is feeling the new weight of pro-Arab interests and is increasingly impatient with the Israeli government’s position; and within Israel itself there recently have been signs of those who welcome our policy.” Perhaps most significantly, if the Begin government proved the intransigent party, Israel might come to be seen internationally as a “pariah” state.⁵⁵

Above all, if a confrontation with Israel were inevitable, the White House would need to hold the moral high ground domestically. In this regard, Begin’s commitment to settlement construction and his interpretation of Resolution 242 gave the administration an opening, a point Carter and his colleagues well understood.⁵⁶ “Israel,” he told Egyptian President Anwar Sadat at one point, “is most vulnerable to pressure from American Jews, from Congress, from the people, and from you and me, on [the issue of settlements].” The Likud government, Mondale added,

⁵⁵ Paper Prepared by the Department of State, “Possible Courses of Action” (emphasis in original).

⁵⁶ On the tension between settlement expansion and the moral basis of U.S. backing for Israel, see Dana H. Allin and Steven Simon, “The Moral Psychology of US Support for Israel,” *Survival*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 136-137.

had refused to acknowledge publicly that its interpretation of Resolution 242 did not obligate it to withdraw from the West Bank because it “would be seen as ridiculous. If that point were made, plus the settlements, Israel would not be in a popular position.” Begin, Carter concurred, was “quite vulnerable on this issue.... Israel can’t reject 242 and retain the support of the American people. This is also true on settlements. They will respond to pressure if we don’t get in a position of being seen as the obstacle to peace, and if we don’t threaten the security of Israel.”⁵⁷

What stands out from an analysis of the administration’s efforts during its first year, however, is the absence of any significant exertions to mobilize backing for its policy at home. Despite their awareness that certain key members of Congress seemed to approve of their substantive views, their perception of somewhat favorable trends in American public opinion, and their belief that their views on the issues of settlements and Resolution 242 commanded widespread support, Carter and his advisers did little to capitalize on such opportunities. The president, in fact, appeared to shy away from a public showdown with Begin, with Brzezinski later claiming that Carter had simply “felt that it would be too divisive and that it was not necessary at this stage.”⁵⁸ Instead, the White House directed its attention to the goal of convening a major peace conference at Geneva. Administration officials felt that assembling the conference would pave the way for the injection of Carter’s substantive ideas for a settlement, as the

⁵⁷ Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with President Anwar Sadat,” February 4, 1978, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 994, 998-999. See also Tivnan, *The Lobby*, pp. 118-119, 123-124.

⁵⁸ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 97. One must consider the possibility that Carter feared an anti-Semitic reaction if the debate over Middle East policy became overly heated in the United States. According to one account, the president later thought about giving a major televised address on the issue but was dissuaded by a group of Jewish leaders, who argued that such a speech risked “opening the gates of anti-Semitism in America.” Likewise, Vance later claimed in an interview that he had feared that attempting to “break” the Israel lobby might risk an anti-Semitic backlash. See Tivnan, *The Lobby*, pp. 121, 131. On this issue, see also Jackson, “The Showdown That Wasn’t,” pp. 166-168.

existence of a negotiating framework would, in theory, neutralize the charge that the United States had attempted to impose a solution to the conflict.⁵⁹

The White House, as a result, took great pains to avoid a premature showdown with Jerusalem. The administration needed to stay patient “on some of the issues in which the Israelis are living in a ‘dream world,’” Aaron argued in a September 15 memorandum, “but only so we don’t make that dream a reality by virtue of domestic backlash.” The White House, he felt, needed to focus its energies on convening Geneva and pressing Jerusalem to halt its policy of settlement expansion, while taking care to “[a]void confrontation with [the] Israelis on other differences.” It would be critical, Aaron believed, for the president to “not hand [the] Israelis issues or plans which they can use to attack or divert us.” Once they met at the conference, however, Carter would be better positioned to address the Palestinian issue.⁶⁰

It is not at all clear, however, why convening an international conference would have created a basis for the injection of American proposals for a settlement. The idea of exerting pressure on Israel, after all, had been ruled out precisely because Carter lacked the domestic political base of support necessary to pursue such a course. Under favorable circumstances, it is perhaps possible that issuing a U.S. peace plan during the conference would have shielded the administration from the accusation that it was attempting to impose a settlement at Israel’s expense, but to actually deliver would still have required the exertion of intense White House pressure on Jerusalem. Assembling the parties at Geneva would not have solved this dilemma.

⁵⁹ Attempting to impose a settlement would have resulted in significant opposition from Congress. See Letter from Nine Senators to Carter, 28 June 1977, CO-1 Executive, 7/1/77-7/31/77 Folder, Box CO-6, WHCF, Country Files, JCL; and Letter from Representative Benjamin Rosenthal to Carter, 22 June 1977, CO 1-7 Executive, 6/1/77-6/30/77 Folder, Box CO-6, WHCF, Country Files, JCL.

⁶⁰ Memo from Aaron to Brzezinski, “Strategic Scenario for Middle East,” 15 September 1977, NLC-133-214-8-14-3 (emphasis in original). On the issues of reconvening the conference and settlements, Aaron added, the administration enjoyed “broad U.S. support.” See also Report, “Alternative Strategies for Middle East Foreign Ministers Talks and Beyond,” undated, NLC-133-159-5-3-0; and Memcon, 21 September 1977, pp. 552-554, 558.

Furthermore, the administration stumbled badly even as it sought to implement this approach. Carter, it is clear, had failed to improve his standing among Israel's American supporters. On September 19, former AIPAC President Edward Sanders had warned the White House of a "growing crisis over Israel policy which is boiling just below the political surface" and could result in "a political explosion." "A general and serious malaise," Sanders wrote, "has spread like wildfire throughout the Jewish community based on the fear that the Administration's Middle East policy is a failure and Israel will be faulted for perceived impatience." The president, he had added, was considered insensitive to Jerusalem's concerns and now had a major "credibility problem," for there was a perception that he had violated his campaign pledges on the issue.⁶¹

More importantly, the White House's decision on October 1 to issue a joint statement with the Soviet Union calling for the convention of the Geneva Conference undermined its own political strategy.⁶² Although the text of the U.S.-USSR declaration was, in Quandt's view, "innocuous," Carter ought to have recognized that Israel's supporters in the United States would intuit that it prefaced a major White House effort to exert pressure on the Begin government.⁶³ According to White House aide Mark Siegel, the joint statement had "had a devastating effect in the American Jewish community." Carter's standing with the group had been driven

⁶¹ Memo from Sanders and Roger Lewis to Jordan and Lipshutz, "Subject: Reasons Why the Jewish Community and Other Israeli Supporters are Disturbed by Administration Actions and Inactions Since the July 6 Meeting," 19 September 1977, Middle East, 1977 (2) Folder, Box 35, Jordan Files, JCL. See also Memo from Jordan to Carter, "UN Resolution on Illegal Settlements," 26 October 1977, Middle East—Israeli Settlements Folder, Box 35, Jordan Files, JCL. Carter had in fact made statements supportive of Israel during his campaign for the presidency. See Patrick Tyler, *A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East—from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), p. 183; and Tivnan, *The Lobby*, p. 98.

⁶² For the text of the joint statement, see Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 343-344.

⁶³ William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 189. Brzezinski later admitted that the White House had erred in not consulting its domestic advisers about the likely reaction to the declaration and Quandt acknowledged that this move had probably been the "least carefully thought out, part of the U.S. strategy." See Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 110; and Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 187. See also Tivnan, *The Lobby*, pp. 119-120. My own view of the joint statement is somewhat at odds with Quandt's. Although the actual text of the agreement was, to be sure, uncontroversial, it signaled that the administration would soon be exerting pressure on Jerusalem.

“substantially below any U.S. president since the creation of the State of Israel, and I’m including in that statement Eisenhower’s stock after he forced Israel to withdraw from Sinai in 1956.” “The talk in the American Jewish community is getting very ugly,” Siegel added. “The word ‘betrayal’ is being used more and more.”⁶⁴ At a crucial moment, the White House had left itself vulnerable to serious criticism at home.

The result was that Carter was forced to retreat. In a testy meeting on the night of October 4-5, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, in Brzezinski’s words, “in effect blackmailed the President” by threatening to start a public campaign against the administration unless it met certain of the Begin government’s demands.⁶⁵ When the president agreed to back away from the substance of the joint statement, the Geneva scenario collapsed, as the key Arab leaders lost confidence in the White House’s ability to deliver acceptable peace terms.

The latter point is of crucial significance, for it relates directly to the question of whether there was really anything that the Carter administration could have done to salvage its strategy once Sadat had chosen to pursue an independent course by suddenly announcing that he would go to Jerusalem to negotiate with the Israelis bilaterally.⁶⁶ It is certainly true that the Egyptian leader’s actions ultimately led to the derailing of the Geneva formula, but it is at least questionable whether Sadat’s decision had resulted from his principled opposition to this approach. His initial reaction, in fact, had been to dub the U.S.-Soviet statement a “brilliant

⁶⁴ Memo from Siegel to Jordan, “Subject: Middle East,” 3 October 1977, Middle East, 1977 (1) Folder, Box 35, Jordan Files, JCL. See also Memo from Jordan to Brzezinski and Aaron, “AIPAC’s Critique of US-Soviet Statement,” October 1977, Middle East, 1977 (1) Folder, Box 35, Jordan Files, JCL; Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, p. 191; and Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 117-120.

⁶⁵ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 108. For the minutes of the meeting, see Memcon, “Subject: Summary of the President’s Meeting with Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan of Israel,” October 4, 1977, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. VIII, pp. 652-676. Carter admitted to Dayan during the meeting that his plan was to attempt to mobilize public opinion to build support for a policy of pressuring Israel. The U.S.-Soviet statement, however, had put the administration on the defensive and, as a result, Dayan succeeded in persuading the president to accept a joint American-Israeli “working paper” on how to convene the Geneva Conference.

⁶⁶ I thank Arthur Stein and an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the importance of this point.

maneuver.”⁶⁷ Indeed, he had considered the declaration “‘marvelous,’ because he believed that it opened the framework for peace negotiations.”⁶⁸

What this implies is that Sadat’s behavior was largely the consequence of his perception that Carter lacked the political will to maintain his stance on the Middle East dispute. “It was not the U.S.-Soviet communiqué that disillusioned him,” Quandt later wrote, “it was Carter’s apparent inability to stand up to Israeli pressure, coupled with evidence that Carter was tired of spending so much time on an apparently intractable problem.”⁶⁹ Sadat, in fact, seems to have drawn the conclusion that the president’s decision to distance himself from the joint statement indicated that the White House lacked the domestic support it needed to deliver a settlement. As he later explained: “I took the [Jerusalem] initiative because Carter was under attack from the Jewish lobby and also in the Arab world.”⁷⁰ Sadat’s perception of the administration’s domestic political weakness, it seems, had been an important factor influencing his bold decision.

⁶⁷ Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 189.

⁶⁸ Memcon, February 4, 1978, p. 989.

⁶⁹ Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 189.

⁷⁰ Memcon, April 9, 1980, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. IX, p. 1141. For additional evidence that supports this interpretation, see Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 123-125; Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, pp. 220-221; Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, p. 171; Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage, 2001), p. 448; Vance, *Hard Choices*, pp. 190-193; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 109-110; Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East*, pp. 235, 240; Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, 28 October 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 741 n. 2; Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, “Subject: Sadat’s November 9 Speech: Geneva or Bust,” 10 November 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 753; Telegram from Vance to the White House, “Subject: Sadat Visit to Israel and Message for Sadat,” 12 January 1978, NLC-16-41-4-28-5; Memo from Situation Room to Brzezinski, “Subject: Information Items,” 10 December 1977, NLC-1-4-7-6-3; Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, “Subject: Sadat on Ismailia Summit,” 27 December 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 902; and Memcon, February 4, 1978, p. 992. It is worth noting that other Arab statesmen drew similar conclusions from Carter’s decision to back away from the U.S.-USSR communiqué. See Memcon, “Subject: President’s Meeting with Prince Saud ibn Faisal al-Sa’ud, Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs,” 25 October 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 721; Memo from Quandt to Aaron, “Subject: Briefing Material,” 7 October 1977, CO 1-7 Confidential 1/20/77-12/31/77 Folder, Box CO-6, WHCF, Country Files, JCL; Telegram from the Embassy in Syria to Brzezinski, “Subject: Syrian Perceptions Threaten Settlement Process,” 18 November 1977, NLC-16-40-6-9-5; Telegram from Warren Christopher to Brzezinski, “Subject: Mid-East Peace Process,” 18 November 1977, NLC-16-41-1-17-0; and Telegram from the Embassy in Jordan to Brzezinski, “Subject: Zaid Rifai-Asad Visit,” 23 November 1977, NLC-16-41-3-21-3. There is also evidence to suggest that Sadat made his decision based on the mistaken belief that the Israelis were willing to withdraw to the 1967 boundaries, which would imply that the Egyptian president had not initially set out to reach a separate agreement with Jerusalem. See Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: The Dramatic Story of the Struggle for Peace* (New York: Vintage, 2014), pp. 49, 77.

In short, Carter had, more or less from the beginning of his time in office, failed to devise a domestic political strategy to build support for an assertive Arab-Israeli policy. To be sure, taking a firm line with Jerusalem and pursuing a policy of self-determination for the Palestinians would likely have been controversial politically in any case, but the White House had compounded the problem through its suboptimal management of the issue. Unsurprisingly, by the fall of 1977, the president had little to show for his efforts, his tremendous expenditure of political capital notwithstanding. It was only Sadat's decision to journey to Jerusalem in November that pulled Carter back from the brink of failure and gave the administration a second chance.

The Road to Camp David

Sadat's dramatic visit to Jerusalem presented the White House with new opportunities. To be sure, the administration was not especially enthusiastic about the Egyptian leader's move at first.⁷¹ It soon became clear to top U.S. officials, however, that Sadat's initiative could assist them in their efforts to mobilize domestic support by putting the Israelis on the defensive. The Syrian leadership, Brzezinski told Damascus's Ambassador in Washington, Sabah Kabbani, needed to "show the same political imagination that President Sadat has shown." Begin, the national security adviser stressed, now appeared as the intransigent party. Sadat, he added, had been "the first Arab leader to recognize the importance of public opinion in both the United States and Israel.... It is important to learn to play a political psychology game. Begin himself is a master of this art. But Sadat has now put him on the defensive."⁷²

⁷¹ As one observer has written, Sadat's Jerusalem initiative was, in Carter's eyes, an "inconvenient miracle." See Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, p. 176.

⁷² Memcon, "Subject: Summary of Dr. Brzezinski's Meeting with Syrian Ambassador Sabah Kabbani," 5 December 1977, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 792-793.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the Egyptian president's move, administration strategists seemed to think that the domestic debate was trending in their direction. There was a chance, Brzezinski reported to Carter on December 8, that several American Jewish organizations would now back publicly the White House's Arab-Israeli policy, including its stance on the Palestinian issue. "I sense," he wrote, "that we are now in a position to gain broad domestic support for our approach to the Middle East, provided, of course, that the Egyptian-Israeli dialogue moves in the direction of a peace agreement."⁷³ Likewise, after speaking with a Congressional delegation headed by Zablocki on January 17, Vance informed Carter of his impression that "it was clear that this important cross section of the House strongly supports the active role you have directed that we play in the current negotiations. They are overwhelmingly impressed by the mood for peace they found in the Arab countries they visited and with a few exceptions believe that Israel must do more to help keep the momentum alive." Of even greater significance, Vance observed, the group had felt that "a way must be found through an interim process to return the West Bank and Gaza to Arab authority and create a Palestinian entity linked to Jordan."⁷⁴

The White House, then, appeared to be in position to capitalize on what Sadat had done by focusing attention on Begin's settlements policy and conception of Resolution 242. With public and Congressional opinion moving in their favor, and with some of Israel's supporters expressing sympathy for the administration's policy, the time to make a major effort domestically appeared auspicious.

With this in mind, the Carter team centered its efforts on a strategy of close coordination with Sadat, who now enjoyed great prestige in the United States. White House officials stressed repeatedly to the Egyptian president that it was imperative that his image remain untarnished

⁷³ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, "Subject: Information Items," 8 December 1977, NLC-SAFE 17B-6-31-9-5.

⁷⁴ Telegram from Vance to the White House and the Department of State, "Subject: Jerusalem Political Committee Talks—The First Day," 17 January 1978, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 950.

among Americans to facilitate their efforts to portray more effectively the Begin government as the intransigent party and to shift the nature of the public debate at home. In a memorandum for Brzezinski, which he titled “The Approaching Moment of Truth,” Quandt recommended that the administration pursue a “Machiavellian” approach to the matter. The White House, he argued, needed to urge Sadat to make a public statement that was “perhaps even a bit tougher than his real position, at which point we could intervene with an initiative to break the deadlock, which he would then accept.” The idea, he emphasized, would be to try to highlight to the greatest extent possible the contrast between Sadat’s efforts for a peaceful solution and Begin’s reluctance to make concessions. At that point, Quandt concluded, Carter would have a “fireside chat” with the American people, aimed at altering public attitudes in the United States.⁷⁵

Carter and Brzezinski, at least initially, were impressed by this logic.⁷⁶ When the president and his advisers met with Sadat at Camp David in early February, they laid great stress on the need for the Egyptians to maintain a moderate line. “I won’t mislead you,” Carter told Sadat, “but without you and your support in American public opinion, I can’t force Israel to change. With your support, I can put pressure on Israel to change.” While it would be difficult, Carter believed, for American Jews not to back Begin in a “showdown,” it was the president’s hope “that some key Congressional leaders and American Jewish leaders could join me to press Begin on a settlement.” But without a clear demonstration of moderation from Sadat, this would be impossible. It was therefore crucial that Sadat’s “image as a courageous leader be maintained.... I don’t object to pressure, and I’m not afraid of a confrontation or a showdown

⁷⁵ Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: The Approaching Moment of Truth,” 12 January 1978, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 928.

⁷⁶ Carter and Vance were probably less committed to this strategy than were Brzezinski and Quandt, which perhaps contributed to the president’s decision later on to jettison the approach. The evidence, however, suggests that when Quandt first recommended the idea in early 1978, Carter accepted and pursued it. It was not until the White House suffered a further erosion of political capital in the spring as a result of several missteps, discussed below, that he reversed course. I thank an anonymous reviewer for his/her detailed discussion of this issue.

when the right time comes. But it should be clear to the world that the breakdown of progress is not due to Washington, but to Begin.”⁷⁷

The two sides, in the end, agreed to the sort of “Machiavellian” scheme that Quandt had devised. Carter declared that the United States would eventually put out its own plan to break the impasse, but insisted that this could not be done in a totally straightforward way. The president would first have to meet with Begin to avoid the appearance of U.S.-Egyptian “collusion” against Israel. Later in the spring, however, Carter was confident that the issuance of a U.S. peace plan would command “worldwide support.” Moreover, Brzezinski argued that Sadat would first have to put out “an Arab plan. Israel will probably reject it, and then we can come up with a plan to break the deadlock.... Your plan should even go further than our view.”⁷⁸

The approach Quandt had recommended, and which Carter initially elected to pursue, had a persuasive political logic to it. Sadat, after all, was by far the most popular Arab leader, both in the United States and internationally, and it therefore made sense to make him the focus of the White House’s domestic political strategy. And when one considers that the PLO had not yet accepted Resolution 242 or even recognized Israel’s right to exist, discussing the Palestinian question directly was bound to be far more controversial domestically than would be focusing attention on the Egyptian leader.⁷⁹

In addition, portraying Sadat as a bold and moderate leader was not incompatible with a political strategy designed to focus attention on Begin’s settlements policy and conception of Resolution 242. This, in fact, was a key aspect of the approach that the Americans and Egyptians had discussed. In conjunction with the “Machiavellian” scheme and Sadat’s pledge to exhibit

⁷⁷ Memcon, February 4, 1978, pp. 994-998.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1000-1001.

⁷⁹ It was for precisely this reason that the administration had expended a great deal of time and energy throughout 1977 attempting to convince PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat to make these critical concessions.

moderation in his public statements, the White House would underscore Begin's refusal to recognize that Resolution 242 applied to the West Bank and Gaza, as well as focus greater attention on Israeli settlement expansion. In short, the administration would be fighting its battle for domestic support on the ground where it was strongest.

By the early spring, the White House's new approach seemed to be enjoying some success. On March 24, the NSC staff reported that it had received information that a group of Jewish leaders would be meeting with Louis Harris to discuss his public opinion data on the Middle East and would "get the cold bath of their lives." Recent surveys had indicated "a massive falling off of American public opinion with respect to Prime Minister Begin and a very substantial shift of opinion away from Israel towards Egypt and toward a policy of even-handedness."⁸⁰ Likewise, Brzezinski received a report on April 12 that some Jewish leaders were on the verge of publicly backing the White House's interpretation of Resolution 242 and that several intended to inform Begin that his West Bank and settlements policies were "costing Israel support."⁸¹ Thus, following the prime minister's visit to Washington in March, the U.S. Ambassador to Egypt, Hermann Eilts, was directed to tell the Egyptians that "things are going according to the plan we outlined to President Sadat." Carter, the message stated, felt that "there is increasingly clear public and Congressional understanding of where we now stand. He has been gratified by the expressions of support from key members of Congress whom he has briefed."⁸²

⁸⁰ Memo from Middle East Staff to Brzezinski, "Subject: Evening Report," 24 March 1978, NLC-10-10-2-1-6.

⁸¹ Memo from Middle East Staff to Brzezinski, "Subject: Evening Report," 12 April 1978, NLC-10-10-6-6-7.

⁸² Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Egypt, "Subject: Report to Sadat on President's Talks With Begin," 24 March 1978, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 1098. See also Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 246-247. Note also Carter's comments on his February 8 dinner with Jewish leaders. See Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), p. 171. The strategy that the Americans and Egyptians had agreed upon in February would perhaps have worked to an even greater degree if Sadat had played his part more effectively. On this point, see Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 175-176, 182, 203-204; Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 196;

To be sure, for the Americans to have intervened in the negotiations directly at this point would have been counterproductive. The perception had not yet developed, the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Samuel Lewis, wrote Vance in April, that an American plan was needed to break the deadlock and, as a result, it would be ill advised to “throw all our dice on the table now.” Doing so, he asserted, would create “a situation in which the Israelis and their American supporters will credibly be able to accuse the administration of gross unfairness.” The Begin government, Lewis believed, could then attack the president for trying to develop an “American-imposed solution.”⁸³

Nevertheless, the White House was using the positive domestic trend it observed to pave the way for an eventual confrontation with the Israelis, the climax of which would be a major address by Carter. The president, Brzezinski had written Quandt and Aaron on March 27, wanted a draft of a “fireside chat” composed that would explain the administration’s policy to the American people. The “[b]asic theme” of the speech, he indicated, would be that Israel was entitled to complete security and acceptance in the Middle East. “However,” Brzezinski continued, “permanent security cannot be based on the retention of territory and the forcible control of a hostile minority.” The United States, Carter would say, was “not committed to the incorporation of the West Bank within Israel nor to permanent Israeli control over Palestinian Arabs.”⁸⁴ Sometime in mid-May, Vance advised the president in another memorandum, the White House would need to put out its own plan, which would require administration officials to “think carefully through the implications of [a] protracted standoff between ourselves and the Israelis if they refuse our offering.” “Begin,” the secretary of state asserted, “will not accept our

Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 252; and Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, *The Camp David Accords: A Testimony* (London: KPI Limited, 1986), pp. 158, 161, 178, 383-384.

⁸³ Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, “Subject: Next Steps in the Middle East Peace Process,” April 1978, 4/78 Folder, Box 35, BDP, Country File, JCL.

⁸⁴ Memo from Brzezinski to Quandt and Aaron, “Subject: Fireside Chat on the Middle East,” 27 March 1978, Middle East, 1-3/78 Folder, Box 50, BDP, Country File, JCL.

proposal until he tests the measure of our determination, if then, and we can of course expect him to take the matter directly into the public arena. With this in mind we have agreed upon a major speech by you to set forth the proposal and rationale for our action.”⁸⁵

By early May, the White House looked like it would soon be ready to move. In a memorandum to Brzezinski, Quandt referred the national security adviser to a report by State Department Policy Planning Staff analyst David Korn, whose comments Quandt considered “thoughtful, and I think, quite close to the mark.” Although he was “generally believed to be quite sympathetic to Israel,” Korn thought that the Begin government was “not interested in security arrangements and guarantees for the West Bank if given in the context of the return of Arab control (sovereignty) over the area.” The prime minister’s plan for the territory was at best “an impossibly utopian dream” and at worst “a cynical scheme for perpetuating Israeli control,” which meant that the time had come “to make decisions.” The United States, he added, now faced a “very crucial, even historic” choice and, in his view, Carter’s only option was to propose in the near future a plan that Sadat and the other Arab moderates would find minimally acceptable.⁸⁶

The White House, however, then made a critical misstep. In order to overcome opposition to its proposed sale of F-15 aircraft to Saudi Arabia, the administration decided to link the transaction to the sale of planes to Israel and Egypt, a move that was deeply unpopular with Israel’s American supporters. Carter had approved the decision even though he had previously been warned that moving forward with the sale would shift the nature of the debate over Middle

⁸⁵ Memo from Vance to Carter, “Subject: Middle East Strategy Over the Next 4-6 Weeks,” undated, NLC-6-50-6-29-3. See also Memo from Vance to Carter, “Subject: The Begin Visit and Beyond,” 9 March 1978, Israel, 1-3/78 Folder, Box 35, BDP, Country File, JCL.

⁸⁶ Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Assessment of Dayan Talks,” 2 May 1978, Israel, 5-6/78 Folder, Box 35, BDP, Country File, JCL; and Memo from Korn to Atherton and Saunders, “Subject: Some Thoughts on the Talks with Dayan,” 28 April 1978, Israel, 5-6/78 Folder, Box 35, BDP, Country File, JCL. See also Quandt’s lengthy May 17 memorandum to Brzezinski, in Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 191-194.

East policy domestically.⁸⁷ Carter's Arab-Israeli diplomacy, Sanders had written the president on March 6, had already "resulted in the most widespread Jewish disenchantment that I can recall" and there was "a widespread conviction that the Administration is deliberately provoking an open conflict with the American Jewish community." With this in mind, Sanders was "deeply disturbed" by the proposed triple arms package and cautioned that it would only impede the peace process by precipitating "a heated debate at home." Consequently, he had recommended that Carter delay presenting the legislation to Congress: "A failure of action will be materially harmful to the chances for peace and for success of the Administration domestically. We feel that unless the situation is defused, the Administration may become involved in a potentially irreversible confrontation with the Jewish community (which, among other things, may hurt Democratic candidates in the November Congressional elections)."⁸⁸

Although the White House ultimately succeeded in ramming the legislation through Congress, the key consequence of the deal was that Carter's leverage in the peace negotiations

⁸⁷ To be fair, the administration might have suffered unfavorable consequences in the Arab world if Carter had not approved the sale. The planes had been promised during the Ford presidency, and U.S. officials believed that it would be difficult to ask Riyadh to be patient much longer. The White House, moreover, felt that it could not justify proceeding with the transaction without also doing something for the Israelis, and believed that the easiest way to get the legislation through Congress was to link the three transactions. The White House also believed that its ability to prevail in this matter might prove crucial, for it had become a "major test of our resolve and our consistency." See Memo from Middle East Staff to Brzezinski, 12 April 1978. In addition, U.S. intelligence estimates suggested that, if anything, the sale would probably shift the Middle East military balance further in Israel's favor. See Memo Prepared by the Office of Strategic Research and Coordinated with the Defense Intelligence Agency, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, National Security Agency, and Air Force Intelligence, "Subject: US Aircraft and the Middle East Military Balance," 7 March 1978, NLC-25-1-7-3-3. The decision to move forward with the sale, in other words, was a difficult one. I thank an anonymous reviewer for explaining how delicate administration officials considered this issue. At the same time, one must acknowledge, given Carter's priorities in the Middle East, that making the sale was a questionable decision. The White House, after all, had received indications that if it delayed proceeding with the transaction until after the Egyptian-Israeli negotiations had met with success, it could avoid a messy fight over the issue in Congress and receive assistance in pressing Begin on his interpretation of Resolution 242. See Memo from Stuart Eizenstat to Carter, "Subject: Middle East Arms Sale," 13 April 1978, Middle East (1/78-9/78) Folder, Box 12, BDP, Geographic File, JCL; and Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 188

⁸⁸ Memo from Sanders to Carter and Mondale, March 6, 1978, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 1031-1035. Siegel decided to resign in early March, in part because he felt that his advice warning that the sale would undermine Carter's peacemaking efforts was being ignored.

was substantially eroded.⁸⁹ The administration's mistake could not have come at a worse time. At precisely the moment that Carter was supposed to be bringing matters to a head with the Israelis, the president was, as a result of the aircraft controversy, sorely lacking for political capital. As a May 30 strategy paper argued, a U.S. proposal was still required to break the deadlock, one that had to "appear as reasonable as possible to Israel's supporters in the U.S., and more broadly to U.S. public opinion generally, so as to sustain support for the Administration's position and maintain the pressure on Begin's policies from this quarter as well." In the wake of the aircraft sale, however, the perception in Congress was that something now needed to be done "for Israel... rather than asking more from Israel. There will therefore be a reluctance to back the Administration in yet another showdown with the Israelis." Whereas in the spring "the Begin Government carried the burden not only of appearing to endanger the peace process but of damaging U.S.-Israeli relations as well," the triple arms package had distracted "attention from the core issues on which the Begin Government was heavily on the defensive."⁹⁰ Equally if not more problematic was the fact that members of Congress from Carter's own party were now beginning to urge the president to take a less confrontational line with the Israelis in order to repair the political damage they believed he had done to the Democrats.⁹¹

Carter, however, was nearly out of time. The White House, Quandt wrote on July 5, would soon reach the "very crucial moment" at which it would have to decide whether or not to

⁸⁹ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 346-353; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 247-249; Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 191, 195, 204, 325-326; and Tivnan, *The Lobby*, pp. 124-126. Note also Quandt's claim that the administration wasted precious time during April and May trying to clarify further Begin's views on the issue of Palestinian autonomy. See Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 196. One could argue that the administration's ultimate success in getting the sale approved by Congress demonstrates the impotence of the White House's domestic opponents on Middle East policy. It is important to note, however, that Carter was forced to expend far more political capital to get the legislation passed than he otherwise would have if the proposed sale had not been met with such great resistance. As it was, the administration prevailed by only the narrowest of margins and, more importantly, the debate over the aircraft package undercut significantly the momentum of its peacemaking efforts. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

⁹⁰ Discussion Paper, "Middle East Strategy," 30 May 1978, NLC-6-50-7-14-8 (emphasis in original).

⁹¹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam, 1982), pp. 315-316.

make an all-out effort for a settlement, “with due consideration given to political factors.”⁹² Brzezinski was even more blunt in his assessment of the situation. The issue was “coming to a head,” he wrote Carter on July 18, and “basic choices” would now have to be made. “How,” the national security adviser asked, “are we prepared to deal with an Israeli rejection of our proposal? Do we have the political strength to manage a prolonged strain in U.S.-Israeli relations? What kind of forces can we marshal and in what manner in order to prevail?” Calling these “the central questions,” Brzezinski argued that Carter needed to determine whether he was “prepared to see this matter through to the very end.” He added: “This will mean not only major domestic efforts, but some advance decisions regarding our international reactions if Israel decides to reject or stall our proposals.”⁹³

Carter’s decision to invite Sadat and Begin to Camp David must be viewed in this context. In theory, the conference would help set up the White House for a confrontation with the Israeli prime minister. Because the administration could not afford a failure, Brzezinski wrote the president, Carter would need to “be really ready for a showdown.”⁹⁴ If Begin rejected the U.S. proposal, Vance told Egyptian Foreign Minister Muhammad Ibrahim Kamel on July 18, Carter would then give a major address and brief Congress. “The objective,” he said, “will be to get congressional and American public support, including from leading members of the American Jewish community.” The immediate Israeli reaction would of course be “negative,” Vance observed: “But if there is a strong body of support in the United States for the US proposal, he hoped that the Israelis will eventually come around.”⁹⁵

⁹² Memo from Quandt to Brzezinski, “Subject: Middle East Group Meeting, July 6, 1978, 9:00 a.m., Situation Room,” 5 July 1978, NLC-6-51-2-3-4.

⁹³ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 250 (emphasis in original).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁹⁵ Memcon, 18 July 1978, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, p. 1223.

Thus, in preparation for the summit, White House strategists began devising ways in which the United States could exert pressure on the Israelis in the likely event that the negotiations deadlocked. Begin, Brzezinski wrote Carter on August 31, would have to be warned that the White House would be willing to “[g]o to the American public with a *full explanation of US national interests in the Middle East*.” The Israelis, the president would say, had received roughly ten billion dollars in American aid since 1973 but were nevertheless “unwilling to reciprocate by showing flexibility in negotiations.” To avoid the perception that Carter and Sadat had colluded, which would make the situation “politically awkward” for the president, “*the timing and circumstances [in which Sadat accepted the administration’s proposals] should be very carefully coordinated.*”⁹⁶

It was clear, however, that this sort of approach stood little chance of succeeding outside of the Egyptian-Israeli bilateral negotiating context. The White House had done little to rectify its domestic problem on Middle East policy—in many ways it had actually exacerbated it—and even if the Egyptians agreed to meet for face-to-face negotiations with the Israelis, it was far from obvious why Carter would then be able to defend the injection of U.S. ideas for a viable Palestinian solution domestically.

With this in mind, it is unsurprising that U.S. officials were pessimistic about Carter’s prospects for building domestic support at Camp David for a comprehensive settlement. If the administration were to put forward at the conference proposals minimally acceptable to the moderate Arabs, a State Department paper drafted by Korn observed: “[T]he Israelis will be

⁹⁶ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: Strategy for Camp David,” 31 August 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. IX, pp. 62-63 (emphasis in original). Quandt discusses this “speech that never was” in his book and notes that it was only to be used as “a last resort,” in great part because giving it would have been “politically painful” for Carter. See Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 240-241. See also Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, “Subject: Camp David,” 17 August 1978, in *FRUS, 1977-1980*, Vol. IX, p. 32; and Paper Prepared by the Department of State, “Possible Courses of Action.”

unhappy and the Administration will be attacked by Israel's supporters in Congress and various Jewish organizations."⁹⁷ Although he believed that the White House's proposals would "be seen as reasonable to a broad spectrum of US public opinion, and ultimately to a significant body of Israeli opinion as well," Ambassador Alfred Atherton felt, even if Carter were to make an all-out effort, that he would have only an "outside chance" and would confront "difficult decisions."⁹⁸ "[V]ery few' members of the American Jewish community would understand," NSC officials were informed in the midst of the conference, "if President Carter should take a tough line with respect to Israel after a summit failure. Instead, they would rally to Begin and leave him feeling that he had won." The "real bellweather [*sic*]" of this group would, therefore, be the Congress, and it had "not been by accident" that Solarz had begun taking a harder line in recent days.⁹⁹ "If you fail we're done," Mondale reportedly warned Carter warily. "We will sap our stature as national leaders. We've got to find some less risky way of trying to find peace [in the Middle East]."¹⁰⁰ The president also, Brzezinski later wrote, had serious doubts, as he confided to his national security adviser on the eve of the conference his "sense of uneasiness about the prospects for success."¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Paper Prepared in the Department of State, "Planning for Camp David," undated, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. IX, pp. 14-15.

⁹⁸ Telegram from the Embassy in Egypt to the Department of State, "Subject: Where Do We Go From Here in Light of Sadat's Decision," 31 July 1978, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 1272-1273. Note also Atherton's later comments on the domestic aspect of Middle East policy. See Atherton, Interview by Harry Kreisler, "A Conversation with History: The Peace Process in the Middle East," February 28, 1986, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, <http://www.uctv.tv/shows/The-Peace-Process-in-the-Middle-East-with-Alfred-L-Atherton-Conversations-with-History-9148>, at 12:12-14:09.

⁹⁹ Memo from Sick to Brzezinski, 7 September 1978.

¹⁰⁰ Wright, *Thirteen Days in September*, p. 59.

¹⁰¹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 254. Note also the admission by both Vance and Saunders to the Egyptians one month prior to the conference of the administration's hesitance to precipitate a showdown with Israel. See Memcon, 7 August 1978, "Subject: Summary of Meeting with Secretary Vance and Foreign Minister Kamel," in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. VIII, pp. 1298-1299. Although written after Camp David, note also Lewis's October 30 message. See Telegram from the Embassy in Israel to the Department of State, "Subject: U.S. Strategy Options on Settlements Problem," 30 October 1978, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. IX, pp. 389-394.

What this meant was that Carter went into the conference primarily focused on achieving a bilateral Egyptian-Israeli agreement.¹⁰² Begin, after all, came to Camp David far stronger politically than either Carter or Sadat. The prime minister knew, Brzezinski observed, that Carter could not recover from the political consequences of a breakdown but he, by contrast, “*probably believes that a failure at Camp David will hurt [Carter] and Sadat, but not him.*” In fact, Brzezinski surmised: “He may even want to see Sadat discredited and you weakened, thus leaving him with the tolerable status quo instead of pressures to change his life-long beliefs concerning ‘Judea and Samaria.’”¹⁰³

Consequently, Carter chose to play it safe and try for a separate Egyptian-Israeli deal instead of a more ambitious program. Whereas a Palestinian solution would have required a massive effort at home that would have hurt politically—and might or might not have succeeded—peace between Cairo and Jerusalem was certain to be popular in the United States and could potentially help Carter revive his troubled presidency.¹⁰⁴ As the president reportedly admitted to Sadat on September 15, he simply did not have the political capital to attempt a comprehensive solution. Only after his reelection, Carter had told the Egyptian leader, would he be able to deliver on the Palestinian issue. Being more specific about the West Bank and Gaza would not be possible, he had said, because it would “cost me my job.” Or as Vance put it, the Camp David accords were certainly flawed, but the president still felt “a strong obligation to do

¹⁰² This was clearly Carter’s priority at the conference. See Quandt, *Camp David*, p. 228. It is worth noting that some U.S. officials, particularly Brzezinski and Quandt, believed that a bilateral Egyptian-Israeli deal might ultimately complicate the task of achieving an overall settlement. See Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 187-188 n. 16; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 112, 276; and Ignatius, “Solving the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” pp. 185-186.

¹⁰³ Memo from Brzezinski to Carter, 31 August 1978, p. 60 (emphasis in original). See also Ignatius, “Solving the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” pp. 186-187.

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, p. 181.

something for the Palestinian people and believes he will be in a position to do so once he is re-elected.”¹⁰⁵

Had the administration pursued a different political strategy, it might have enlarged significantly the scope of its success at the summit, for it would have had a better chance to hold the line at home on the issue of Israeli settlements. Carter’s inability to get Begin to agree to a freeze in this area was, in Spiegel’s words, “his greatest error of the conference.”¹⁰⁶ Without an Israeli commitment to halt settlement expansion, there was little chance that the Jordanians, Saudis, or moderate Palestinian elements could be drawn into the Camp David process. But because the White House had not done enough to exploit its advantages on this issue, its message was less potent in the aftermath of the conference than it otherwise might have been.¹⁰⁷

In sum, the Carter administration’s inability to achieve progress outside of the Egyptian-Israeli bilateral context was in no small part a result of its suboptimal handling of domestic political strategy. To be sure, following Sadat’s Jerusalem initiative and the U.S.-Egyptian consultations in early February, the White House appeared to prioritize its management of its political base at home to a much greater degree and, in fact, enjoyed some success in mobilizing backing for its policy. Carter’s decision to proceed with the triple arms sale in May, however, reversed these gains and left the president with little remaining political capital. And while convening Sadat and Begin at Camp David led to a significant breakthrough on the Egyptian-

¹⁰⁵ Kamel, *The Camp David Accords*, pp. 366, 371, 377. See also Ezer Weizman, *The Battle for Peace* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 372; and Quandt, *Camp David*, pp. 239-240 n. 4. U.S. documents from the post-Camp David phase of the diplomacy strongly support the conclusion that Carter’s concerns about his reelection prospects led him to put off a more ambitious effort for Arab-Israeli peace until after the 1980 presidential campaign.

¹⁰⁶ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 362.

¹⁰⁷ Carter believed that he had succeeded at Camp David in gaining Begin’s agreement to a settlements freeze. See Note Prepared by President Carter, “Settlements in West Bank and Gaza,” undated, in *FRUS, 1977-1980, Vol. IX*, pp. 192-193. The key point, however, is that when Begin denied having made such a commitment and later continued to approve the construction of additional settlements, the president was unable take concrete steps to oppose him effectively.

Israeli front, Carter's failure to achieve a settlements freeze eliminated the possibility that the other Arab moderates would join the negotiations. The result, thus, was a separate peace.

Conclusion

What are the implications of these findings for debates over the influence of domestic political considerations on U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East? For starters, the idea that international relations can be understood in purely power political terms is overly generalized. The American domestic context clearly constrained the Carter White House in its efforts to achieve an Arab-Israeli settlement. The structure of the international system, in other words, certainly generated powerful pressures on the administration to behave in realist terms, but politics at home were nevertheless of fundamental importance to the diplomatic outcome.

But if it cannot be said that systemic forces at the international level were the sole factor influencing Carter's Middle East policy, neither would it be accurate to claim that the American domestic political structure made the administration's inability to achieve any of its objectives apart from the Egyptian-Israeli agreement a foregone conclusion. Contrary to Mearsheimer and Walt's claim that the combination of the U.S. political system and the influence of Israel's supporters in Washington has essentially locked the United States into a policy of unyielding backing for Jerusalem regardless of its actions, the conclusions presented here suggest that the degree to which such factors affect the White House's freedom of maneuver is intimately related to the type of domestic political strategy and tactics the president chooses to employ. To be sure, the Carter administration's quest for a comprehensive settlement, and its aim of settling the Palestinian aspect of the Arab-Israeli dispute in particular, would have required U.S. strategists to confront opposition at home in any case. What is also clear, however, is that the White House compounded its difficulties through a series of critical errors, each of which siphoned off the

president's store of political capital. Had Carter and his colleagues proved more skilled as political operatives, the result might have been different.

What this analysis highlights above all, then, is the crucial importance of domestic political strategy and tactics for effective statecraft. Although vastly underestimated in the scholarly literature on the subject, which tends to emphasize to a much greater degree the significance of structural and institutional factors at the state level, the way in which the White House deals with Congress, handles interest group pressure, manages the media, and works to shape public opinion can critically affect foreign policy. Carter's disregard for domestic political considerations at the outset of his term and consequent quick alienation of Israel's supporters; failure to use more effectively Begin's unpopular settlements policy and interpretation of Resolution 242 to his advantage; and decision to submit the triple arms bill to Congress at an important juncture in the peace process, all detracted from his ability to sustain support at home for his conception of Middle East peace.

It is worth asking, however, whether, in the end, Carter's performance domestically really made any difference. If the president had handled the issue with greater political deftness, could his administration actually have achieved more than it did? Some well-informed and perceptive analysts claim that Carter's mistakes mattered only marginally, and that forces that were largely beyond his control were primarily what led to the outcome. Moreover, the agreement reached at Camp David represented a substantial achievement in its own right.¹⁰⁸

To be sure, the White House had confronted several major challenges, which were in no way tied to its handling of the matter domestically. Most importantly in this regard, Carter could not possibly have justified putting significant pressure on the Begin government to withdraw at a

¹⁰⁸ This is the view held by one anonymous reviewer of this article, whose comments I found both extremely helpful and interesting.

time when the PLO was still refusing to accept Resolution 242 or to recognize Israel's right to exist. The Arabs, with the exception of Sadat, simply had not done enough to assist the White House in its peacemaking efforts.

Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to conclude that Carter might have succeeded in keeping the path to a broader settlement open by putting greater pressure on Israel to suspend its settlements policy. As the president and his advisers recognized, this was the issue on which its support in Congress, from the U.S. public, and with a number of Israel's American supporters was strongest. The administration's shortcoming in this area was what ultimately closed any chance that the other moderate Arabs would accept the Camp David accords and, consequently, meant that its success would be confined to a strictly bilateral Egyptian-Israeli agreement. In this area, then, a different political strategy at home might have made a real difference.

In methodological terms, my findings underscore the widespread misperception that one cannot study effectively the interaction between domestic politics and foreign policy decision-making using documentary evidence. To be sure, Zaller is correct to assume that government officials will not disclose publicly or in personal accounts that political considerations influence national security strategy. Carter, for instance, denied in a 2006 interview that politics at home had affected his Middle East policy: "I understood that [there would be adverse political consequences], and I just finally said to hell with it. I did what I think was best."¹⁰⁹

But the potential, or perhaps likely, unreliability of memoirs and testimonials does not mean that this topic cannot be studied systematically. Leaders will, on occasion, attempt to cover their tracks, as U.S. officials might in fact have done during the Camp David negotiations.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, p. 184. Note also Brzezinski's dubious claims on this point. See Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, pp. 35, 521.

¹¹⁰ The editors of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volume on Camp David note that there exists a "dearth of official documentation" from the Camp David summit and that there are "significant gaps in the official record."

Even so, contrary to some scholars' pessimism about the likelihood that top officials talk about domestic political considerations in private, this article demonstrates that American strategists discuss such factors with regularly, and in great depth. Rather than lament the impossibility of investigating these issues directly, therefore, it seems likely to be more productive to examine these matters through careful, sustained research in the archives.

This may have been intentional. In the file of working papers from the conference, an unsigned note reads: "These papers need to classified (or destroyed). Susan Clough says the President wants them 'sealed' for a very long time." In addition, Carter's personal notes of these meetings, to which he makes reference in his memoir, have yet to be located. See the Preface and Editorial Note, in *FRUS*, 1977-1980, Vol. IX, pp. VIII, 79-81.