

The Showdown That Wasn't: U.S.-Israeli Relations and American Domestic
Politics, 1973-75

Galen Jackson
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Political Science
University of California, Los Angeles

An enduring debate among scholars of security studies centers on the question of the extent to which domestic political considerations influence American foreign policy. How influential are such factors in shaping the U.S. approach to international affairs? Do ethnic lobbies and public opinion play a substantial role in impacting the choices made by American leaders? In particular, when it comes to Middle East policy does the domestic context in the United States affect significantly the manner in which U.S. strategists deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict? Or does the concern for advancing Washington's interests in the area dominate political pressures at home?¹

Major disagreements exist among experts when it comes to these crucially important and policy-relevant questions, as demonstrated by the reaction to the work of political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt on the issue. In 2006, Mearsheimer and Walt wrote that since the June 1967 Six-Day War, “[T]he centerpiece of US Middle Eastern policy has been [the United States’] relationship with Israel.” More controversially, they claimed that the U.S.-Israeli special relationship is not based “on shared strategic interests or compelling moral imperatives,” but rather “derives almost entirely from domestic politics, and especially the activities of the ‘Israel Lobby.’” It is, in their view, “the unmatched power of the Israel Lobby” that explains the depth and consistency of American support for the Jewish state during the past half century.² In short, Mearsheimer and Walt, who later expanded their thesis into a book, argue that were it not for the influence of this interest group, 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,” American statecraft in the Middle East, particularly toward Israel, would look very different.³

¹ For an important version of this argument, see A.F.K. Organski, *The \$36 Billion Bargain: Strategy and Politics in Assistance to Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

² John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Israel Lobby,” *London Review of Books*, March 23, 2006, pp. 3-12.

³ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), pp. 5, 112. Mearsheimer and Walt are by no means the only analysts to claim that the Israel lobby impacts U.S. Middle East policy, but they take the argument to a greater extreme than other scholars have by claiming that the lobby's political clout, largely on its own, so substantially affects how the United States formulates Arab-Israeli policy. For a sampling of other works on the subject, see Aaron David Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land: America's Elusive Search for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Bantam, 2008), pp. 75-124; George W. Ball and Douglas B. Ball, *The Passionate Attachment: America's Involvement with Israel, 1947 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992); Edward Tivnan, *The Lobby: Jewish Political Power and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Anatol Lieven, *America, Right or Wrong? An Anatomy of American*

The authors' writings on the subject set off a public, and at times intense, debate. According to Michael Massing, "Not since *Foreign Affairs* magazine published Samuel Huntington's 'The Clash of Civilizations?' in 1993 has an academic essay detonated with such force."⁴ Some scholars and commentators like Jerome Slater referred to the Mearsheimer-Walt book as "one of the most important foreign policy works of our times."⁵ On the other hand, Daniel Drezner wrote in a blog post that "[Mearsheimer and Walt] should be criticized for doing piss-poor, monocausal social science."⁶ People like Massing argued that their "thin documentation" and distortion of evidence "gives [their work] a secondhand feel," and weakened the robustness of its empirical foundation.⁷ Walter Russell Mead suggested that Mearsheimer and Walt had failed to explain clearly how they defined "the lobby," writing, "When it comes down to it, Mearsheimer and Walt do not seem to know who, exactly, belongs to his amoebic, engulfing blob they call the lobby and who does not."⁸ And, in arguably their book's most controversial section, many charged that Mearsheimer and Walt failed to provide compelling evidence for

Nationalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 173-216; Charles Mathias, Jr., "Ethnic Groups and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (Summer 1981), pp. 975-998; Cheryl A. Rubenberg, *Israel and the American National Interest: A Critical Examination* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 9, 14-17, 329-376; Robert H. Trice, *Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process: U.S. Policy in the Middle East* (Beverly Hills, Calif: Sage, 1976); Mitchell Geoffrey Bard, *The Water's Edge and Beyond: Defining the Limits to Domestic Influence on United States Middle East Policy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1991); and Connie Bruck, "Friends of Israel," *New Yorker*, September 1, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/01/friends-israel>. John Judis asserts that the "Zionist lobby" played a decisive role in altering President Harry Truman's approach to the Middle East dispute. See John B. Judis, *Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014). Jerome Slater has argued that newspaper coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the United States has been systematically less critical of Jerusalem's policies than in other countries, including in Israel itself. 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.

⁴ Michael Massing, "The Storm over the Israel Lobby," *New York Review of Books*, June 8, 2006, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2006/jun/08/the-storm-over-the-israel-lobby/?page=1>.

⁵ Jerome Slater, "The Two Books of Mearsheimer and Walt," *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January/March 2009), p. 4. For their response to this article, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "Is it Love or the Lobby? Explaining America's Special Relationship with Israel," *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January/March 2009), pp. 58-78.

⁶ Daniel W. Drezner, "A Follow-Up on the Israel Lobby," March 21, 2006, <http://www.danieldrezner.com/archives/002642.html>.

⁷ Massing, "The Storm over the Israel Lobby."

⁸ Walter Russell Mead, "Jerusalem Syndrome: Decoding the Israel Lobby," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 6 (November/December 2007), p. 162. In this respect, some scholars also criticized Mearsheimer and Walt for conflating public opinion with the influence of a special interest group. For an important article that attempts to disentangle these factors, see Michael J. Kopolow, "Value Judgment: Why Do Americans Support Israel?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April/June 2011), 266-302. See also Walter Russell Mead, "The New Israel and the Old: Why Gentile Americans Back the Jewish State," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (July/August 2008), pp. 28-46.

their claim that the Israel lobby was the driving force behind President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003.⁹ Mearsheimer and Walt at times added further fuel to the fire by using strong language of their own, as when they responded to a review of their book by Robert Lieberman by writing: "Lieberman's critique is more of a dust-kicking operation than a serious assessment of our work."¹⁰

Given the tremendous importance of the issue and the fierce debate that Mearsheimer and Walt initiated, one would expect that scholars would be eager to marshal all available evidence to buttress their claims about the influence of domestic politics on U.S. Middle East policy. Curiously, however, researchers on both sides have ignored primary source records in their efforts to determine the extent to which interest groups, or politics at home more generally, shape the U.S. stance on Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Most analysts seem to assume that this sort of historical data would not reveal much because, as Melvin Small argues, decision makers are able to convince themselves that their choices in international politics are unrelated to concerns about their domestic standing, and therefore, "[T]here is little *documentary* evidence to demonstrate the contrary."¹¹ Thus, in his review of the Mearsheimer-Walt book Slater wrote: "[T]he period under description, largely the last forty years, is mostly too recent to be included in declassified government documents, and in any case when the documentation becomes available it may not shed much light on whether or not a nongovernmental interest group privately exercised great power over the making of high foreign policy."¹² Consequently, those who have written about the connection between domestic politics and U.S. Middle East policy have for the most part contented themselves with relying on secondary and open sources, rather than on archival records and other primary documents.

⁹ Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 229-262; Massing, "The Storm over the Israel Lobby"; Mitchell Plitnick and Chris Toensing, "'The Israel Lobby' in Perspective," *Middle East Report*, Summer 2007, pp. 45-47; and Dennis Ross, "The Mind-Set Matters," *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2006, pp. 60-61.

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Blind Man and the Elephant in the Room: Robert Lieberman and the Israel Lobby," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June 2009), p. 259; and Robert C. Lieberman, "The 'Israel Lobby' and American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June 2009), pp. 235-257.

¹¹ 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 (emphasis in original).

¹² Slater, "The Two Books of Mearsheimer and Walt," p. 13. See also Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 20; and Trice, *Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process*, pp. 23-25, 51, 72.

Fortunately for scholars, however, there actually exists a great deal of declassified material from the period covered by Mearsheimer and Walt that contains discussions of the importance of politics at home. These sources are especially useful if the objective is to gain an unvarnished understanding of policymakers' motivations, given that much of the evidence provided in memoirs and interviews is often unreliable, and that those offering personal accounts may have incentives to misrepresent the truth. Indeed, if the goal is to truly understand how the American domestic context affects U.S. officials in their formulation of Middle East statecraft, it is absolutely critical to investigate what they say in private communications.

With this in mind, this article examines the case of the road to the 1975 Second Egyptian-Israeli Disengagement Agreement, often referred to as Sinai II, which relates directly to the question of how American domestic politics affect U.S. Middle East diplomacy.¹³ According to some analysts, politics at home effectively precluded President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger from exerting the necessary pressure on Israel to achieve their objectives in the Middle East. For instance, George Ball argues that by exploiting “a spectacular demonstration of political muscle achieved by the application of enormous pressure including threats of reprisal,” Israel’s American supporters forced the White House to adopt a less confrontational posture toward Jerusalem.¹⁴ On the other hand, both Ford and Kissinger deny in their memoirs that domestic forces impacted their choices, with Kissinger writing, “Though he faced

¹³ Most researchers, including Mearsheimer and Walt, argue that American domestic politics played less of a role in shaping U.S. Middle East policy during the Cold War than after, because Israel was considered by some to be a strategic asset during this period and pro-Israel interest groups have since grown stronger. One could therefore claim that the period examined in this article represents a “hard case” for proponents of domestic level explanations. See Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 15, 51-58.

¹⁴ George Ball, “The Coming Crisis in Israeli-American Relations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Winter 1979-1980), 240. See also Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East, 1776 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), p. 536; Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The United States and Israel: The Limits of the Special Relationship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 93-102; George Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 148-155; Tivnan, *The Lobby*, pp. 86-90; Mathias, Jr., “Ethnic Groups and Foreign Policy,” pp. 992-993; 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); Slater, “The Two Books of Mearsheimer and Walt,” p. 21; George Ball and Edmund Ghareeb, “American Policy on Trial: An Interview with George Ball,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1978), p. 19; and William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 164-166.

his own presidential election within fifteen months, Ford did not flinch when confronting... pressure groups at home capable of penalizing him in the forthcoming electoral contests.”¹⁵

To my knowledge, however, no study has examined these competing claims in light of the historical evidence. In this article, therefore, I seek to fill this gap in the literature. Did a powerful interest group or public opinion constraints affect the administration’s decisions? Based on a careful examination of the documentary record, I argue that domestic considerations played a key role in shaping the Ford administration’s approach to Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Ford and Kissinger at times evinced deep concern about opposition to their Middle East policy at home, with Kissinger remarking at one point, “I’m convinced the Jewish lobby is trying to defeat the President and emasculate me too. They’re going about it in some very subtle ways.”¹⁶ This does not mean, however, that the White House was necessarily forced to abandon its preferred policy in response to the political maneuverings of a narrowly focused interest group. The real story was far more complex and, indeed, much more interesting.

The remainder of this article is organized into three parts. In an opening empirical section, I describe the strategic background and domestic context prevailing in the United States during late 1974 and early 1975, prior to the Ford administration’s reassessment of its Arab-Israeli policy. Thereafter, I highlight the key events that took place and choices that were made which ultimately led the White House to back away from a major showdown with Israel over the Middle East conflict’s most contentious aspects during the spring and summer of 1975. Finally, I summarize my findings and discuss their policy implications in a brief conclusion.

Prelude to Confrontation: U.S. Strategy from October 1973 to March 1975

¹⁵ Both men, however, do discuss openly their awareness of the link between Middle East policy and American domestic politics. See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), pp. 447, 457; and Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 150, 308. For other works that claim that the effect of domestic politics was rather limited during this period, see Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America’s Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 297, 314; and Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, pp. 146-152.

¹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation (Memcon), “Subject: The Middle East,” October 16, 1975, in United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976*, Vol. 26: *Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974-1976* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 2012), p. 862. See also Memcon, June 23, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 738; and Memcon, September 26, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 852.

When Ford became president on August 9, 1974, the basis for negotiations in the Middle East remained United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which, in its simplest form, called on Israel to relinquish territories it had occupied during the June 1967 Six-Day War in exchange for peace from the Arabs. For nearly six years, however, the two sides had failed to implement the resolution. The resulting stalemate convinced Egypt and Syria that a diplomatic solution to the conflict was not possible and, consequently, they launched a joint attack against Israel in October 1973, which led to a much greater degree of U.S. involvement in the peace process. After his brief convening of an international peace conference in Geneva in December 1973, which was chaired jointly by the United States and the Soviet Union, in January and May 1974 Kissinger conducted two rounds of “shuttle diplomacy” and ultimately achieved limited disengagement agreements between Egypt and Israel and Syria and Israel, respectively. This approach, also dubbed “step-by-step” diplomacy, aimed to make gradual progress in the negotiations and remained the secretary of state’s preferred tactic at the time of Ford’s assumption of the presidency.¹⁷

Upon taking office on August 9, Ford was well aware that the United States would need to push the Middle East peace process or risk another major conflict between the Arabs and Israelis.¹⁸ Ford and Kissinger, however, believed it wise to continue to proceed at a gradual pace for three reasons. First, moving too quickly could expose moderate leaders such as Egypt’s President Anwar el-Sadat to criticism from more radical elements in the Arab world. The White House was anxious to demonstrate its ability to gain concessions from the Israelis to ensure that their new relationship with Egypt, which the United

¹⁷ A detailed discussion of the 1967-1974 period is well beyond the scope of this article. For those interested in the topic, see Nigel J. Ashton, ed., *The Cold War in the Middle East: Regional Conflict and the Superpowers, 1967-1973* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Craig Daigle, *The Limits of Détente: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1969-1973* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012); Alexander L. George, “The Arab-Israeli War of October 1973: Origins and Impact,” in Alexander L. George, ed., *Managing U.S.-Soviet Rivalry: Problems of Crisis Prevention* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1983), pp. 139-154; Yigal Kipnis, *1973: The Road to War* (Charlottesville, Va: Just World, 2013); David A. Korn, *Stalemate: The War of Attrition and Great Power Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1967-1970* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992); Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001* (New York: Vintage, 2001), pp. 302-443; Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), pp. 236-334; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 118-283; Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 23-156; and Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 49-145.

¹⁸ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, pp. 33, 125.

States had recently won over to its side from its rival the Soviet Union, be consolidated.¹⁹ This task, they believed, would be made easier by focusing on relatively limited objectives. In Kissinger's view, this approach seemed to make the most sense because it would be difficult to persuade the Arabs and Israelis to negotiate seriously over the conflict's most contentious issues, such as the fate of the Palestinians, Jerusalem, and final borders.²⁰

A second consideration was the Ford administration's aversion to including the Soviet Union in the peace process. Since he had first taken office as President Richard Nixon's national security adviser in 1969, it had been one of Kissinger's main objectives to erode Moscow's influence in the Middle East.²¹ The secretary of state preferred to keep the Kremlin involved only "nominally," and claimed that including the Soviets and returning to Geneva would likely produce a stalemate.²² Moreover, as he told Ford, even if the administration ultimately did decide to pursue an overall solution, it might as well do so unilaterally, as it had nothing to gain from involving the USSR.²³

Lastly, events in the region in late 1974 made the need for rapid progress even more urgent. The decision of the Arab League to declare the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) the "sole, legitimate representative" of the Palestinians at the Rabat summit on October 28 not only "greatly complicated the task of engaging Israel in negotiations," but also made the overall regional situation much more dangerous.²⁴ An assessment of the situation delivered to Deputy National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft on November 1 noted that the U.S. intelligence community believed that the peace process had

¹⁹ Memcon, October 5, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 426; and Memorandum (Memo) from Kissinger to Ford, "Breakfast with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy," October 5, 1974, folder: Egypt (2), box 3, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁰ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 357, 361; and Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 615.

²¹ On Kissinger's "exclusionist" policy, see Abraham Ben-Zvi, *The American Approach to Superpower Collaboration in the Middle East, 1973-1986* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986), pp. 19-41. See also Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 180.

²² Memo from Kissinger to Ford, "Subject: Your Meeting in Vladivostok," undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16: *Soviet Union, August 1974-December 1976* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2012), pp. 297-300.

²³ Memcon, December 17, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 474; Memcon, December 18, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 476; and Memcon, February 25, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 520.

²⁴ Message from Kissinger to Ford, October 30, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 449. See also Terence Smith, "Mr. Kissinger Faces a New Middle East," *New York Times*, November 3, 1974.

reached “a critical stage,” and that without “positive diplomatic developments” there was a sixty percent probability that another war would break out within two months and a ninety percent chance within a year.²⁵

Ford and Kissinger, moreover, were especially interested in preventing another Middle East conflict, because they believed that the Soviets might be willing to run greater risks than they had during the October War. Since Moscow’s policy of détente had “been brought into question” because of the administration’s inability to convince Congress to afford the Soviet Union most favored nation status and the Kremlin’s strategic setbacks in the region over the course of the previous year, U.S. strategists evinced deep concern about such a possibility.²⁶ As Kissinger remarked as early as February 1974, the Soviets could argue that, as a result of détente, they had been “taken to the cleaners,” in part because the United States had “pushed them out of the Middle East,” and therefore might compete more forcefully in the area with the United States.²⁷ Moreover, Washington worried that renewed hostilities might be accompanied by a second crippling Arab oil embargo.²⁸ With these concerns in mind, Ford and Kissinger

²⁵ Memo from Arthur Houghton to Scowcroft, “Subject: Intelligence Community Meeting on Middle East War Indicators,” November 1, 1974, folder: Middle East—General (3), box 1, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. See also Interagency Intelligence Memo, “The Rabat Watershed,” November 27, 1974, folder: Middle East—General (3), box 1, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Memo from Houghton and Robert B. Oakley to Kissinger, “Subject: The Egyptian Perception of Settlement Prospects: 1971 and 1974,” December 19, 1974, folder: Egypt (2), box 3, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; “Recent Factors of Arab-Israeli Tension,” November 15, 1974, folder: Israel (2), box 15, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Cable from Ambassador Kenneth Keating to Department of State, “Subject: Israel—A Hard Year Ends, a Tougher One Begins,” December 1974, undated, folder: Israel—State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE—EXDIS, box, 18, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

²⁶ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Your Meeting with Foreign Minister Gromyko,” undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 100-101; and Memcon, “Subjects: Immediate Defense Needs; U.S.-Soviet Détente; Negotiating Strategy; Long-Term Arms Supply; PLO Vote in the UNGA,” October 13, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 154-155.

²⁷ Memcon, February 8, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 117.

²⁸ On the Department of State and Department of Defense’s concerns about another oil embargo, see CIA Director William Colby to Kissinger, “Potential Impact of an Arab Oil Embargo and Options to Lessen Impact,” January 15, 1975, folder: Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, January 14, 1975—Middle East (1), box 18, U.S. National Security Council (hereafter NSC) Institutional files, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Department of State Briefing Paper, “Arab Economic Actions,” undated, folder: Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, January 14, 1975—Middle East (3), box 18, U.S. NSC Institutional files, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. See also Jim Hoagland, “Middle East Remains Economic Tinderbox,” *Washington Post*, January 12, 1975.

focused on negotiating an interim agreement, which promised relatively quicker progress and fewer major risks than an overall approach.

Nonetheless, a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute remained the long-term goal of the United States, and U.S. officials were well aware that a break with the Israelis on the specific terms of a settlement would at some point be necessary. As Kissinger told Ford in early December during a discussion of how to respond to the Israelis' requests for aid, "I think it is dangerous to put them in that strong a military position; then they are sorely tempted to tell us to go to hell. A confrontation sometime down the road is inevitable."²⁹

Domestic constraints explain, to a certain extent, why the administration hoped to defer a clash with Israel until a later date. Because Kissinger recognized that major tensions with Jerusalem were likely in the not too distant future, he felt that the White House would have to begin working to gain more room to maneuver at home to conduct effectively Arab-Israeli diplomacy. As he wrote Ford toward the end of his visit to the Middle East in October, the months ahead would "inevitably be a period of strain in our relations with Israel," because only the United States could force Jerusalem to make the compromises necessary to avert another conflict. Therefore, Kissinger observed, "We must begin soon after our November elections to educate the American people and Congress to these realities."³⁰

A State Department briefing paper similarly highlighted the domestic considerations the administration would have to take into account as it navigated its way in the Middle East. Even though, the document pointed out, Israel's diplomatic, economic, and military "dependence on the U.S. is substantial and almost total, in theory," there were, in practice, "strong constraints on our use of any of our assets." In particular, the paper noted that the Jewish community in the United States was "active and informed in its support of basic Israeli interests," and in many cases was likely to support positions held by the government of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. "The American Jewish community," it asserted, "can and does mount effective campaigns against what it views as U.S. policies or decisions

²⁹ Memcon, December 9, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 466.

³⁰ Draft Telegram from Kissinger to Ford, undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 442.

harmful to Israel's interests or desires." Although the administration could perhaps dissociate itself from Jerusalem on minor tactical questions, "on basic strategic issues" such as final borders, American Jewry would "stand with Israel." The paper continued, "The community is expert at gaining support among a broad spectrum of American society, particularly on Capitol Hill." Aside from this group, the "long-standing respect and admiration" for Israel among the American public also "translated on Capitol Hill into overwhelming support for almost any measure on behalf of Israel." Relatedly, because of the United States' "basic commitment to Israel's continued existence as a sovereign nation," any "U.S. threat of total non-support for Israel would [not] be credible, nor would it be honorable or in our interests to be seen to abandon a long-time friend." Consequently, the national legislature would "remain a Congress inclined toward generosity and responsiveness to Israel's needs." This "liability," as the paper called it, "probably cannot be overcome," though the administration could work to mitigate it "by continuing, detailed explanations to Congress of our goals."³¹

Politics at home were especially relevant given the administration's concerns about the weakening of executive authority in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and Nixon's resignation in the wake of the Watergate scandal. As other scholars have observed, Ford's weakness as an unelected leader and the significant damage done to presidential power as a result of these events undoubtedly affected the White House's ability to exert effectively U.S. influence with the parties to the Middle East conflict. Whereas Kissinger at critical points during the first two disengagement negotiations had been able to call upon Nixon for presidential backing when dealing with the Israelis, the secretary of state no longer enjoyed the same leverage when working to elicit concessions from the Rabin government.³²

³¹ Department of State Briefing Paper, "U.S. Relations with Israel: Assets and Liabilities," undated, folder: Israel, unnumbered items—(5), September 9, 1974-September 10, 1974, box 18, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. The authors of the document also argued that the administration would have to be careful about how it timed its use of pressure tactics, as the Israelis would have much more success resisting such measures during certain critical points in the American election cycle, due to "the need of would-be Senators and Representatives to garner Jewish votes."

³² Quandt, *Peace Process*, pp. 155-156, 173, 467, n.56; Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 237-239, 281-286; and Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 151. See also Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 202; Memcon, July 30, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 390; Memcon, August 23, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 813-814; and Transcript, Joseph J. Sisco, Oral History Interview, March 19, 1990, by Michael Sterner,

Despite the erosion of executive power and difficulties involved in engaging in an open break with Jerusalem, U.S. policymakers did not believe there were barriers that they simply could not cross. To the contrary, the existence of such constraints meant instead that to surmount them certain tactics would have to be used. It would be much easier at the domestic level, Ford and Kissinger reasoned, to justify an assertive posture vis-à-vis Israel if the Arabs, particularly Sadat, were seen as reasonable negotiators and if the White House could demonstrate that Jerusalem's obduracy was the cause of the deadlock. The step-by-step method, in fact, was followed in part to fulfill this requirement. As Kissinger advised Ford in a set of talking points for his meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ismail Fahmy on August 14, the president needed to remind Cairo that the United States could only promise to help "produce gradual movement," as the administration had to "continue to move carefully in order to maintain the political support we have developed for gradually encouraging Israeli withdrawal."³³

Nonetheless, the general belief held by most U.S. policymakers was that, if the time for a showdown with Jerusalem came, the executive branch would enjoy the requisite support to implement its preferred course of action. Thus, when Kissinger assembled a meeting on November 28, 1973 of the so-called "Wise Men," former Secretary of State Dean Rusk observed that certain members of the American Jewish community were "misleading Israel" about the strength of its base of support in the United States. "[I]n the boondocks, away from Washington," he said, "there was no sentiment of all-out support for Israel." His former colleague McGeorge Bundy echoed this sentiment: "[W]hen the Secretary is ready, it should be possible to mobilize pressures in the U.S. to get Israel to implement the 1967 Resolution. The Jewish Community knows this is coming." Cyrus Vance and John McCloy, also present at the meeting, agreed with Bundy's assessment. Hence, although Kissinger acknowledged near the end of the consultation that the White House was "heading into a difficult period domestically with the Jewish community," it was the view of most U.S. officials and outside individuals experienced in conducting

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project,
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2004/2004sis02/2004sis02.pdf>.

³³ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, "Subject: Your Meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Fahmy—August 14, 1974," undated, folder: Egypt (1), box 3, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford, Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

American Arab-Israeli statecraft that when the time for a confrontation came, the administration would be able to do what was necessary to achieve an overall settlement.³⁴ As U.S. officials explained to their Chinese counterparts, even though the United States had “a complex domestic situation with respect to the Arab-Israeli dispute,” the White House was still committed to achieving a comprehensive settlement. It “would be a great mistake,” however, “to fight the battle prematurely, before we are organized, and on minor issues.”³⁵

The United States could not afford, however, to move too slowly, given the risk that the negotiations could grind to a halt. Unfortunately, the administration felt, even in the context of step-by-step diplomacy it would be difficult to move the Israelis, in great part because Rabin and his colleagues believed they could adopt an unbending position and still maintain the support of the American public. Kissinger suspected that Rabin had “wanted to pull with Nixon [prior to his resignation] what he did in 1971—produce a stalemate with abstract proposals and then rely on American public opinion.” Kissinger, however, told Ford that a deadlock was unacceptable: “We can’t stall till hell freezes over, like Israel wants.”³⁶ Likewise, in a meeting with Ford, Scowcroft, and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller in mid-September, he stated that the Israelis had “a Jewish community here which vicariously tries all the time to prove its manhood. The same people who were doves on Vietnam are hawks on Israel.” The secretary of state believed it was Jerusalem’s strategy to propose peace plans that appeared “very reasonable to Americans” but which were actually “unattainable,” adding, “The Israelis figure they can play the President and Vice President against me. It didn’t work before because of Nixon, and they couldn’t get to him.”³⁷

³⁴ Memcon, November 28, 1973, Document 00928, Kissinger Transcripts (KT), Digital National Security Archive.

³⁵ Paper on Chinese and U.S. Positions on the Middle East in November 1973, undated, NLC-26-29-6-26-7, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

³⁶ Memcon, August 12, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 20-21.

³⁷ Memcon, “Subjects: Visits; 40 Committee; NSC Meeting on Israeli Requests; Preparation for Rabin Visit,” September 6, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, pp. 76-77.

Given this context, Ford recognized that the United States could, if necessary, link its economic and military assistance to Jerusalem's negotiating behavior, referring to American aid as "a hole card."³⁸ Although when Rabin visited the White House in mid-September the administration elected to approve a large number of Israel's aid requests in order to encourage the prime minister to take greater risks for peace, the president clearly understood that linkage was a potentially powerful tool for influencing Rabin's bargaining behavior. The administration, then, was considering even at this early date the possibility that it might prove necessary to exert some pressure on Israeli leaders to get another partial settlement with Egypt.

Despite their inclination to move gradually, Ford and Kissinger grew increasingly frustrated with their inability to push the negotiations forward, and tended to blame the Israelis for the impasse. On November 26 Ford implored Rabin by letter to help restart the peace process. Noting that without progress the situation in the Middle East could rapidly deteriorate, the president wrote, "A stalemate on all fronts, therefore, cannot be accepted."³⁹ In spite of the president's sense of urgency, the negotiations remained totally stalled and, consequently, by early 1975 the White House began to ponder more frequently the idea of pursuing an overall solution, and took into account the American domestic context when doing so.

Kissinger articulated the executive branch's thinking at a January 14 meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG). In the midst of the consultation, he expressed his concern that the Soviets might intervene if hostilities once again broke out in the Middle East. Claiming that the United States would not be able to match the Soviet Union if the Kremlin chose to send forces to the region to push the Israelis back to the 1967 borders, and that the United States would "be dead" in the region under such circumstances, the secretary of state considered such a scenario his "nightmare."⁴⁰

³⁸ Memcon, August 12, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 405.

³⁹ Letter from Ford to Rabin, November 26, 1974, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 462.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the WSAG (Washington Special Actions Group) Meeting, "Subject: Middle East," January 14, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 486-487.

Why then, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff George Brown suggested, did Kissinger not “beat the Russians to the game” by getting a final agreement that forced the Israelis back to the 1967 borders himself? When the secretary of state replied that a diplomatic settlement might not be possible, Brown argued that the problem could be managed if the administration made an effort domestically: “We simply have to educate the Jewish community in the US.” Kissinger’s response, though somewhat ambiguous, reveals that domestic constraints made that option somewhat difficult. “Look, I meet with the Jewish leaders regularly,” the secretary of state replied. “It’s a very complicated problem. You may assume that we will do our utmost to prevent this from happening.” Similarly, when U.S. military planners informed Kissinger that they hoped to avoid having to launch another airlift to Jerusalem, as had been done during the October War, he responded, “I don’t want every Jewish leader heading for the President and accusing him of undermining the security of Israel.”⁴¹

Domestic considerations impacted how U.S. strategists thought about how they would respond diplomatically if another war broke out, as Kissinger discussed with Ford and Scowcroft on January 6. “If there is a war,” the secretary of state said, “we must keep the Soviets out at all costs and it is probably in our favor to have Israel win. But afterwards, we would have to impose ruthlessly a peace.”⁴² The administration would have to work swiftly, however, to prevent opposition at home from thwarting its efforts. As one State Department report put it, an imposed solution would require “utmost pressure on Israel, applied rapidly enough to prevent counterpressures being applied through U.S. public and Congressional opinion.”⁴³ The fact that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was well aware that the

⁴¹ Minutes of the WSAG Meeting, “Subject: Middle East,” January 14, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 484, 486, 488. Brown himself had been involved in a public controversy regarding the influence of the Israel lobby in Washington. See Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 221-222.

⁴² Memcon, January 6, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 16, p. 425.

⁴³ Department of State Briefing Paper, “Diplomatic Options in the Event of Middle East War,” undated, folder: Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, January 14, 1975—Middle East (3), box 18, U.S. NSC Institutional files, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Rabin government hoped “that the pressure from US policymakers for Israeli concessions might be countered by reverse pressures from US public opinion” only served to highlight this point.⁴⁴

By the spring of 1975 Ford and Kissinger had all but lost patience with the Israelis. As Ford later wrote, during this time he began to question the United States’ basic “philosophical underpinning” that generous levels of aid to Israel were a prerequisite for Jerusalem’s flexibility in the peace negotiations, and “wanted the Israelis to recognize that there had to be some quid pro quo.”⁴⁵ Kissinger, therefore, decided to make one last attempt to clinch a second Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement by travelling to the Middle East in March for two weeks of intensive shuttle diplomacy. He and Ford, however, if they had no other choice, were determined to confront Jerusalem. Having invested a great deal of time, energy, and prestige in the step-by-step approach, Kissinger seemed to think that the White House might finally need to change course and go for a comprehensive solution, whether Jerusalem favored such a strategy or not. In a March 16 report to Ford he asserted that if the negotiations bogged down, the administration “would have to think in terms of bold overall peace plans at the [Geneva] conference to protect our interests and to discourage resort to war.”⁴⁶

After making little progress during the negotiations, Kissinger evidently believed that unless the United States dramatically signaled its seriousness about the need for further progress by threatening the Israelis with a fundamental change in the nature of the special relationship, Jerusalem would not budge. Thus, the secretary of state requested that Ford write Rabin a blunt letter to persuade the Israelis to reconsider their position. On March 21 the president communicated to the prime minister his “deep disappointment over the position taken by Israel,” which he claimed would “have far-reaching effects in the area and on our relations.” He went on to inform Rabin that he had ordered “an immediate

⁴⁴ CIA Directorate of Intelligence Memo, OCI No. 0407/75, “Subject: Prospects in the Middle East,” January 7, 1975, folder: Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, January 14, 1975—Middle East (2), box 18, U.S. NSC Institutional files, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁴⁵ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, p. 245. See also Memcon, February 7, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 503-504; and Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Meeting with Yigal Allon, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Israel,” January 16, 1975, folder: Israel (5), box 15, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁴⁶ Report from Kissinger to Ford, March 16, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 542.

reassessment of U.S. policy in the area, including our relations with Israel, with a view to assuring that the overall interests of America in the Middle East and globally will be protected.”⁴⁷ With the negotiations at an impasse and the United States and Israel at loggerheads, the stage was set for the very clash that U.S. officials had been hoping to avoid since the days following the October 1973 War.

Reassessment and Domestic Pushback, March-September 1975

Contrary to the claims made by some observers at the time, the Ford administration’s reassessment of its Middle East policy during the spring and summer of 1975 was not a “charade.”⁴⁸ Although the White House ultimately persevered with the step-by-step approach, Ford and Kissinger took seriously the possibility of reconvening the Geneva Conference and publishing a comprehensive U.S. peace plan after the failure of the March talks—for a time, in fact, pursuing an overall approach looked like the administration’s favored course of action. Despite domestic political constraints, the administration still believed that such obstacles were not insuperable, and remained convinced that they would be able to exert real pressure on Israel if necessary, even in the context of a showdown. The two allies, then, appeared to be heading for a major confrontation. What, then, led Ford, Kissinger, and their advisers to make another effort for a second Sinai agreement, rather than for a comprehensive solution? Was it in fact the case, as some have argued, that domestic politics effectively precluded a more ambitious American effort at Middle East peacemaking?

Both Ford and Kissinger were furious with the Rabin government due to what they believed was shortsightedness on the part of Israeli leaders and because Jerusalem’s intransigence had seriously jeopardized U.S. interests in the Middle East. As Kissinger told Ford on March 24 after returning from the region, the impact of the shuttle’s failure was “devastating.... I have never seen such cold-blooded playing with the American national interest.... What they have done is destroy us.” The secretary of state argued that the White House would have to begin working on an independent peace plan that would call

⁴⁷ Letter from Ford to Rabin, March 21, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 553.

⁴⁸ Bernard Gwertzman, “Jackson Sees a ‘Charade,’” *New York Times*, April 15, 1975. More recently, Aaron David Miller has stated that the policy reassessment was largely “theatrical.” Aaron David Miller, “Why America is Winning in the Middle East,” November 5, 2013, Talk Sponsored by the Center for Middle East Development, University of California, Los Angeles. See also Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, p. 152.

for an Israeli withdrawal close to the 1967 borders. “Step-by-step is dead,” he said. “We have to consider whether we and the Soviet Union shouldn’t make a global approach.” Ford appeared willing to follow such a course. The president was “mad as hell,” and made a point of meeting Kissinger personally on the White House lawn upon his return to Washington in order to underscore his support for the secretary of state’s efforts. Angered by the fact that the peace process had stalled and that the Israelis would attempt to outmaneuver the administration in the United States by taking their case directly to Congress and the American public, Ford declared that he was willing to take them on: “I have no hesitancy to bite the bullet.”⁴⁹

Early on in the reassessment, the administration appeared to enjoy a strong base of support on Capitol Hill. During a March 24 meeting with the congressional leadership, most of the lawmakers present backed the White House’s position. Speaker of the House of Representatives Carl Albert declared that Kissinger had “outdone himself,” while Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield argued that the United States had had no alternative to a reassessment, since the Israelis seemed to have “a death wish.... We need united support.... We here are united.” Likewise, Senator John Stennis observed that the only reason the Israelis had refused to budge during the negotiations was that they figured they could rely on Congress to resist the administration’s pressure: “If the leadership could get the message across that this was not the case,” he said, “if we made it very clear as to where we stood—it’s not only the President and Henry—that we are with the Administration no matter what.” Senator Hugh Scott also appeared willing to stand with the White House, saying, “This is a policy that has had bipartisan support and it is important to continue to have it.”⁵⁰ House Majority Leader Thomas O’Neill went even further in a meeting with Rabin during his visit to Israel the following month. Although he admitted “he had respect for the power of the Jewish lobby,” O’Neill argued that “this group would be operating in a changed and most difficult environment on the Hill if it attempts to take on the president and the secretary on Mid East policy.” When Rabin replied that going to Geneva would probably result in a stalemate, O’Neill responded that in

⁴⁹ Memcon, March 24, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 564-566, 568; and Ford, *A Time to Heal*, p. 247.

⁵⁰ Memo for the files, “Subject: President’s Meeting with the Secretary and Congressional Leadership—March 24, 8:00 a.m.,” March 24, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 570-571.

talking about such an outcome the prime minister needed to realize “that the entire world was against Isreal [*sic*] and now [it] had real problems in the United States.”⁵¹

As a result, when Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft, and Rockefeller met later in the day, the secretary of state called the leadership’s reaction “amazing,” and said the Israelis had “made [a] basic misjudgment.” Although he predicted Rabin and his colleagues would “mobilize the Jewish Community against us,” Kissinger was still confident enough to recommend that federal departments “be instructed to end the special relationships” with corresponding Israeli agencies and that the administration hold the delivery of certain sophisticated military items in abeyance. Moreover, he advocated that the White House begin preparing “a comprehensive plan for Geneva.”⁵² Administration officials, thus, seemed self-assured, as is evident from Kissinger’s comment to Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Joseph Sisco that he did not believe that the Israelis were “going to be able to unreas[h] the campaign I thought they were.”⁵³

The administration, however, would still have to contend with opposition to its policy in the United States. On March 26, Senator Jacob Javits met with Kissinger and told him in a “very threatening” tone, saying that if the administration “went after Israel, he and [Senator Abraham] Ribicoff would come after [Kissinger]. He said our interests were identical with Israel.” When Ford declared that such a maneuver was “stupid on the part of Israel,” the secretary of state replied, “We are in the position where three million Israelis and three million Greeks are running American foreign policy. We are giving aid to Israel at a rate which would be unbelievable for any other country.” Ford, however, indicated that he would not allow domestic obstacles to derail the White House’s policy. The president declared that U.S.-Israeli relations could not, as Kissinger put it, “go back to business as usual,” and stated that the United

⁵¹ Cable from Nicholas Veliotos to Department of State, “Subject: Congressman O’Neill’s Meeting with Rabin,” undated, folder: Israel—State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE—NODIS (5), box 19, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁵² Memcon, March 24, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 571-572. See also Memo from Ford to Kissinger and Schlesinger, undated, folder: Israel, unnumbered items—(8), January 13, 1975-April 2, 1975, box 18, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. On the specific military items that the United States delayed sending, see Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, p. 148.

⁵³ Telephone Conversation (Telecon), March 24, 1975, Document 13384, Kissinger Telephone Conversations (KA), Digital National Security Archive.

States would have to “move comprehensively.” In addition, he wanted work to begin on a major speech on Middle East policy to justify the administration’s position. It was necessary that they “stay steady,” the president said, for although the White House’s domestic opponents would “hit” them, “I kind of enjoy a fight when I know I am right.”⁵⁴

Kissinger agreed, telling Ford and Scowcroft the next day that because Israel had “treated us like no other country could,” the White House’s liaison to the American Jewish community Max Fisher would have to be told that the current period did not merely reflect “a friendly misunderstanding.” Moreover, he suggested telling Fisher that if Israel’s supporters in the United States decided to challenge the administration, “we will have to go public with the whole record.” In other words, the White House would demonstrate publicly, if necessary, that the responsibility for the breakdown of the negotiations rested with Israel. It is unsurprising, therefore, that when the National Security Council (NSC) met on March 28 to discuss Arab-Israeli policy, Ford and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger favored adopting a policy of greater “aloofness” toward Israel. Although the president claimed that “Israeli representatives float freely on Capitol Hill” and in a number of U.S. government departments, he remained determined to maintain an “arms-length” relationship with Jerusalem, and requested a complete record of what he considered the administration’s generous treatment of the Rabin government.⁵⁵

Indicative of Ford’s position was the fact that after meeting with the president that same day Fisher told Kissinger over the telephone, “I am sobered up.”⁵⁶ The White House, then, was girding for a domestic battle, and the time for a showdown appeared to have arrived.

Some in the administration, however, believed that it ought to move more carefully to avoid a backlash. For instance, after determining that it was Israel’s intention to mobilize its supporters and to try to battle the White House for the backing of Congress and American public opinion, Kissinger’s adviser Lawrence Eagleburger wrote the secretary of state that “a little duplicity, aimed at convincing the Israelis

⁵⁴ Memcon, March 26, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 573-574.

⁵⁵ Memcon, March 27, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 576-577; and Minutes of NSC Meeting, March 28, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 585-587.

⁵⁶ Telecon, March 28, 1975, Document 13404, KA, Digital National Security Archive.

that they ought to refrain from any public campaign against you,” might be in his interest. “If there must be a confrontation,” Eagleburger suggested, “let us at least postpone it until such a time as we have done what we can, particularly on the Hill, to build a body of support for our position.”⁵⁷ Similarly, on April 3 when Schlesinger requested guidance from the White House on which military deliveries the Defense Department was expected to delay during the reassessment, he suggested holding off on the announcement of a final policy until the administration had come up with a “detailed game plan.” Because linking arms to Middle East diplomacy could “be expected to become a major domestic and foreign policy issue,” the document noted that it might take several weeks to finalize any decision, “particularly since it involves tricky consultations with other governments and an internal confrontation with Israel’s ‘unofficial’ emissaries and supporters.”⁵⁸ Sisco was also worried, telling Kissinger on March 31 that the administration had “a big problem.” Expressing his concern that he was unsure of how to deal with “this damned public relations problem,” the undersecretary said: “I don’t think the right thing is to confront and yet they are going to get away with it.... You are damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”⁵⁹

These worries aside, the key officials in the administration were determined to press on and seemed to think that, because a confrontation with the Israelis was probably inevitable, the White House might as well make the focus of it the core issues of the Middle East dispute. In other words, if the administration was forced to have a showdown with Jerusalem that would almost certainly involve a major domestic effort to influence U.S. public opinion and win support from Capitol Hill, it made sense to expend its political capital only on the fundamentals of an Arab-Israeli settlement. The step-by-step approach, designed as it was to facilitate the Rabin government’s task of making concessions, had broken down. And as long as the Israelis, from the administration’s standpoint, were being intransigent, a debate

⁵⁷ Cable from Eagleburger to Kissinger, “Subject: Meeting with Dinitz,” April 5, 1975, folder: Israel—Items 63-68, April 5, 1975-April 22, 1975, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁵⁸ Memo from Oakley to Scowcroft, “Subject: U.S. Military and Economic Actions for Middle East Countries During the Reassessment Period,” April 3, 1975, folder: Middle East—General (7), box 1, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁵⁹ Telecon, March 31, 1975, Document 13416, KA, Digital National Security Archive.

over the nature of a comprehensive peace agreement seemed the most productive option. As Kissinger told Sisco on April 1, “I am getting more attracted with the idea of coming forward with a final proposal and seein[g] what can be done on that.... My worry is that in an interim settlement, we will spill so much blood they will say we did it for you and we will be forever responsible for it.”⁶⁰

Thus, during the first week of April when Kissinger held a series of meetings with his advisers, he indicated his willingness to abandon the gradualist strategy in favor of a more ambitious approach. Because a limited settlement would entail a confrontation with Jerusalem anyway, he argued, the administration might as well attempt to achieve a bigger deal. So, when Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Alfred Atherton suggested that the United States float its own plan for a second Sinai agreement, Kissinger replied: “They’ll kill us.... It will mean spilling much blood and it may not be worth it, especially if we make Israel accept an American plan and then go to Geneva.” Likewise, in response to Sisco’s idea that the administration make another effort for a limited Egyptian-Israeli agreement, Kissinger claimed that such an approach would require the expenditure of too much political capital, saying, “It just might give us a chance.... But where are we then[?] We have a massive problem with Syria in three months.... I think having driven us to this point and having gotten the Jewish community so upset, we should get more for it.”⁶¹

Although he acknowledged that he had originally hoped to avoid having to deal with the fundamentals of an Arab-Israeli settlement “for several years,” Kissinger seemed eager to pursue a more ambitious strategy in part because of his favorable reading of the White House’s domestic position. “We are in a good psychological position now,” he claimed. “The Jews are very nervous, they will go after me, and they’ll try to destroy me. But the President is ready, the Leadership is ready, and I just don’t think we should give that away for six kilometers in the [Giddi and Mitla] passes.” Kissinger added that he now saw a return to the Geneva Conference in 1975 as possibly being more consistent with U.S. interests, as another partial agreement would cost the United States heavily “in arms [and] memoranda of

⁶⁰ Telecon, April 1, 1975, Document 13417, KA, Digital National Security Archive.

⁶¹ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East,” April 3, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 612, 615.

understanding” for Israel. Though he readily admitted that he did not expect to make any tangible progress at Geneva, since reconvening the conference would still mean dealing with significant diplomatic challenges, the secretary of state nonetheless argued that the shuttle’s failure may have been “a blessing,” since it had “shaken the Jewish community” and given the United States an “opportunity to really stand for something.” Even when Ambassador to Egypt Hermann Eilts expressed concern that the strategy Kissinger was proposing was politically risky, the latter appeared unfazed: “Well, as DeGaulle said, the graveyards are full of the tombs of the indispensable people.... It’s going to be pretty hard to accuse a Jewish Secretary of State of anti-Semitism, though they will harass me.... It’s just the price we pay.” At the very least, he observed, the administration needed to consider a more substantial disengagement. Given that the White House was already “in a brawl,” the secretary of state thought the administration “maybe...should go for the bigger interim agreement.” Kissinger closed the meeting by asking for a range of policy options, adding, “Let’s discuss it from the point of view of what is right and not what is at this point politically feasible in this country.”⁶²

Similarly, when Kissinger assembled his aides to discuss Middle East strategy on April 8, he expressed the view that issuing U.S. proposals in a comprehensive context was probably the best approach available to the United States. Although he and Sisco worried that the Israelis were getting “their second wind” by spreading false stories about what had caused the breakdown of the March negotiations in the press, Kissinger was still optimistic: “This is not the normal Israeli-U.S. confrontation. The President, the Vice President and I are totally united.” When Sisco pointed out that the administration nonetheless had “to bear in mind the next campaign” and that the American Jewish community would “try to drive a wedge between you and the President,” Kissinger replied, “Well it can’t be done. With Nixon it was possible.” He added, “I warned [the Israelis] solemnly that we are determined to see it through and even if they win it will do so much damage to the Jewish Community here that it may never recover.” Moreover, Kissinger argued that if the United States pressed for another step in Sinai the result would “be total U.S. immobility in the Middle East. Is it worth it?” To make sure the point was clear, he

⁶² Ibid., pp. 616-620.

added, “There is no basis for support in this country for any interim agreement. It will be a hell of a battle with Israel or the Jews here or we will pay an enormous price.” Consequently, the meeting ended with Kissinger once again claiming that even though a comprehensive settlement could not be achieved in the near term, it would nonetheless be in the United States’ interest to focus on presenting overall proposals of its own at Geneva in 1975, which could then begin to be implemented more easily in interim phases.⁶³

Despite continued warnings that the application of White House pressure on Israel could result in opposition from Jerusalem’s supporters in the United States, throughout April and May the administration appeared willing to pursue the comprehensive approach. Although Fisher cautioned that a “feeling of separation between the U.S. and Israel is growing in the American Jewish community and this could have profoundly harmful domestic as well as foreign policy consequences,” Ford and Kissinger appeared unconcerned.⁶⁴ When Sisco expressed his worry to Kissinger over the telephone on April 9 about the White House’s tactical handling of the situation domestically, the latter replied, “You’re, in my judgment, much too sensitive.... You’re a little shell-shocked based on your Rogers experience.” Kissinger said he had spoken with Ribicoff that morning and did not believe that the administration was “in such bad shape domestically here,” adding, “I’m not worried about it.”⁶⁵ Thus, when Ford met on April 14 with his principal Middle East experts, a comprehensive strategy seemed to enjoy strong support. Noting that Eilts believed Sadat probably could not offer anything else to get a second Sinai agreement, Kissinger argued that unless Israel made a more forthcoming offer the interim approach was “dead.” To obtain a settlement of that sort, the United States “might have to pay a price of enormous economic aid [and] no demands for further withdrawal for three years.” Because that result would be far too costly and probably preclude a second Israeli-Syrian disengagement, he believed that it was probably “best to come up with a comprehensive plan. It would give us something to stand on with the Arabs. We would be taking on the

⁶³ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East,” April 8, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 622-624, 631-633.

⁶⁴ Max Fisher’s Notes on His Israel Trip, April 9, 1975, folder: Max Fisher, box 1, NSA Presidential Name file, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Ford, *A Time to Heal*, pp. 247-248.

⁶⁵ Telecon, April 9, 1975, Document 13450, KA, Digital National Security Archive. See also Telecon, April 25, 1975, Document 13558, KA, Digital National Security Archive.

Israelis, but for something more significant. . . . It would make the interim stages easier under an overall umbrella.”⁶⁶

The group also discussed the politics of maintaining support at home for an overall approach. Ambassador to Israel Kenneth Keating echoed Kissinger’s sentiments: “We are in trouble with the American Jews whatever we do. If we pursue interim measures I think we will get the same eventual flak as we would with the ’67 borders modified.” For his part, Atherton stated that while he had “grudgingly” come around to the idea of a comprehensive approach, the Israelis had “sold the idea for eight years that the ’67 borders are insecure.” After listening to these remarks, Ford indicated that he believed he enjoyed support for his Middle East policy both in Congress and with the American public: “My impression of the public reaction in the U.S. is it would be like the reaction in the leadership meeting when Henry came back. All the focus was on Israel’s lack of realization of a different attitude in the United States.” Thus, although Keating cautioned that Representative Lee Hamilton was “doubtful” the administration could “hold the line when the pressures come,” the president nevertheless stated forcefully that he would not allow the legislative branch to torpedo the White House’s strategy. “I have a reputation as being pro-Israel. The situation in Congress is totally different now,” Ford observed. “Until we get progress there will be no request for Israeli aid. If Congress tries to force it, I will veto it.” Meanwhile, Keating claimed that the president had reason to be confident, as he believed that Congress “couldn’t override a veto.”⁶⁷ Without concessions, then, the president was unwilling to maintain the normal state of American-Israeli relations and seemed to be leaning towards the comprehensive approach.

As a result of these discussions, Kissinger sent Ford a nineteen-page memorandum on April 21 in which he laid out three policy options. The secretary of state felt it necessary to remind the president that

⁶⁶ Memcon, April 14, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 636-637.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 640-641. See also Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Reply from Prime Minister Rabin,” April 14, 1975, folder: Israel—Items 63-68, April 5, 1975-April 22, 1975, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Memcon, April 11, 1975, Document 01570, KT, Digital National Security Archive. For evidence that the Israelis were relatively unconcerned about the repercussions of the policy review, see Cable from Veliotos to State, “Subject: Israel Hunkers Down,” undated (c. April 1975), folder: Israel—State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE—EXDIS (1), box 18, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

if he decided to adopt a strategy that dealt “openly with the issues that must be resolved if there is to be a settlement,” the White House would “have to take into account the additional factor that the Jewish leadership in the United States will add a vocal and highly organized voice in support of what will be firm Israeli opposition to this course.” Ford’s first option was a return to step-by-step diplomacy prior to reconvening the Geneva Conference. The problem with this approach, however, was that to bring about another deal the United States might have to put out its own plan, pay a heavy price in economic and military aid to Israel, and have trouble maintaining the momentum of the negotiations. Only if the parties were to change their positions in a way that allowed Ford to preserve his freedom of action would this option be worthwhile. Alternatively, the president could elect to try for a bigger interim agreement, with Egypt offering Israel a pledge of non-belligerency in exchange for a more substantial withdrawal in the Sinai. Kissinger argued that that idea was even worse than the first, as it would further expose Sadat, require an even steeper price, and leave Cairo with no bargaining chips for future talks.

Ford’s final choice, then, was a comprehensive solution. To be sure, Kissinger recognized that this course of action would face major obstacles, as the Arabs and Israelis would be forced to finally deal with the conflict’s most fundamental issues and Sadat would be unable to move unilaterally. The United States would also encounter significant difficulties with its allies in Jerusalem, because the Rabin government’s attitude toward an American peace plan would be extremely negative. Consequently, an overall strategy would also mean dealing with severe domestic opposition, and the White House “would have to develop firm Congressional and public support in the U.S. for this course, which Israel may attempt to slow.” Indeed, Kissinger continued, “This approach would unleash the strongest negative reaction from Israel’s supporters in the United States.” Thus, “It would take a substantial effort to develop widespread public support for a position which would be vigorously opposed by some elements in the

U.S.” Although there was “a strong case to be made” that a comprehensive plan offered “the best hope of survival,” he pointed out, “a highly efficient lobby will be arguing the opposite.”⁶⁸

Nonetheless, Kissinger concluded that “the greatest advantage seems to lie with trying for an overall settlement.” Since step-by-step diplomacy would achieve “too little at too great a cost” and Israel and its American supporters would oppose the administration anyway, the comprehensive approach seemed relatively more attractive. The president, however, would have to work to counteract Israel and its backers in the United States, who had already begun pressing the idea on Capitol Hill, in the media, and with public opinion that the 1967 borders were indefensible. Kissinger ended by noting that the president would have to make a major public address to justify his actions, as a presidential speech would “be essential in establishing a focal point for support.”⁶⁹

The administration continued to maintain this stand well into the following month. During a meeting of the National Security Council on May 15 Ford was adamant that domestic opposition would not sway his decision. Although the president claimed “that the professional members of the American Jewish Community have undertaken a certain nationwide campaign to paint the picture that the reassessment is a change of heart toward Israel,” he declared that such “inequitable, unfair pressures are exactly the wrong way of trying to change my views.... I will tell certain people directly if this continues.” To be sure, the White House had not ruled out the possibility of resuming negotiations for an interim agreement but, as Kissinger argued, the administration would have to “be firm with [the Israelis] and impress upon them the need to come up with some new substantive proposals,” especially because U.S. officials believed that Jerusalem was looking to “sit tight, wait until elections come next year and do nothing.”⁷⁰

If the White House was going to continue along a confrontational path, however, it would have to work with Congress and attempt to sway public opinion to try to link U.S. aid to Israel’s negotiating

⁶⁸ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Discussion of Middle East Strategy,” April 21, 1975, folder: Middle East—General (8), box 1, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁶⁹ Ibid. See also Memcon, April 25, 1975, Document 01594, KT, Digital National Security Archive.

⁷⁰ Minutes of NSC Meeting, May 15, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 643-644.

posture. Fulfilling this requirement would be no easy task. As early as the previous August during a meeting with Schlesinger and Scowcroft at the Pentagon, Kissinger had pointed out that cutting off all deliveries of military assistance to Israel was “not realistic.” Because presidential authority had been severely weakened by Watergate and the Israelis could “roll any aid bill through the Congress,” he told Schlesinger that they instead needed to come up with “some technical excuses” to delay the provision of the requested items. Otherwise, the United States would “reverse [Jerusalem’s] incentive.”⁷¹ Similarly, on May 6 Kissinger sent Ford a memorandum in which he highlighted the difficulties involved in attempting to directly relate American aid levels to the peace process. The secretary of state observed that U.S. material support was “an issue on which Israel has been able to generate considerable public and Congressional emotion.” The Israelis would resist “fiercely” this type of pressure, and “Congress would probably not permit the Administration the flexibility of an adjustable assistance program, and would tend to support Israel against the Administration were it to be applied and acknowledged.” In short, the White House would have to undertake a major effort in order to rally support for a firm linkage policy in public opinion and on Capitol Hill, as the effect of American largesse had “been negative, or at best neutral,” and Kissinger therefore believed that the United States could not afford to continue offering the Israelis “unlinked, generous assistance.”⁷²

Kissinger suggested, therefore, that the United States inform the Rabin government that only the precise extent of its aid was connected to Israel’s negotiating position. In other words, the administration would take the position that it was “*not prepared to finance a strategy which hurts its own interests.... In the context of real progress toward an overall settlement, the U.S. would be ready to work with Israel in the context of a long-term military plan, but only in this context.*” Hence, the administration was not willing to advocate for “boundaries much beyond the 1967 borders, but... would provide all possible support for Israel’s security within such boundaries.” Otherwise, the United States would continue to

⁷¹ Memcon, August 2, 1974—Kissinger, Schlesinger, NSA Memoranda of Conversations, 1973-1977, Nixon Administration, box 4, Gerald R. Ford Digital Library.

⁷² Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Economic and Military Assistance Levels for Israel,” May 6, 1975, folder: Israel—Items 69-73, April 23, 1975-May 14, 1975, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

offer “a basic level of economic and military supply but will not be able to provide the extraordinary amounts now being discussed.” Even this more modest attempt at pressuring the Rabin government, however, would mean mounting “a carefully prepared campaign to gain support for it from the Congress,” as the Israelis would “move quickly to try to reverse the Administration’s position by appealing directly to the Congress and to the U.S. public.”⁷³

In addition, after roughly a month and a half of the administration’s reassessment, opposition to the White House was beginning to coalesce in the United States. On May 3 Marilyn Berger reported that Rabbi Israel Miller, the chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, had put Sisco and Atherton on notice. “We didn’t say it overtly,” Miller claimed. “But there could be major attacks on the administration if this continues.”⁷⁴ Still, as April ended journalists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak were able to claim that “in the battle between Mr. Ford and the Israeli lobby for control of Congress... the President now holds high cards,” and that if opposition continued, the White House would only get “tougher.”⁷⁵ As one observer with contacts inside the administration later wrote, for the moment the comprehensive approach “seemed to have a chance.”⁷⁶

This assessment soon appeared overly optimistic when, in the midst of the policy review, Ford received an unwelcome challenge from Capitol Hill. On May 21 a group of seventy-six senators sent the president a letter essentially telling the White House to back off of the Israelis. The message, which according to most accounts had been inspired by the Rabin government and drafted by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), urged the administration to adhere to the position that the Middle East conflict could be settled only “on the basis of secure and recognized boundaries that are defensible, and direct negotiations between the nations involved.” The letter argued that Israel constituted “a most reliable barrier to the domination of the area by outside parties,” and that it was “imperative that we not permit the military balance to shift against Israel.” Withholding military assistance to Jerusalem,

⁷³ Ibid. (emphasis in original)

⁷⁴ Marilyn Berger, “U.S. Charges of Israeli Intransigence Are Protested by Jews,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 1975.

⁷⁵ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “Israel’s Battle for Congressional Opinion,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 1975.

⁷⁶ Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 168.

therefore, was “dangerous,” and the senators asked that Ford be “responsive to Israel’s urgent military and economic needs” when he submitted his foreign aid requests for 1976 to Congress.⁷⁷ In the days that followed the message’s publication, some observers concluded that the White House’s reassessment had been effectively thwarted, with journalist Tom Braden going so far as to write, “The senatorial letter makes Kissinger nothing more than an errand boy and assures the Arab states that he is powerless to arrange a deal.”⁷⁸

To my knowledge, however, no scholar has ever examined this assertion in light of the relevant primary source evidence. To be sure, as previous research has noted, the White House was upset about receiving such a blunt message about its Middle East policy from Capitol Hill. As Ford would later write, the letter “really bugged” him, and Kissinger, for his part, advised the president to communicate his “extreme outrage” over Israel’s recent actions and Rabin’s response to the senators’ message in the days that followed its public release.⁷⁹ In addition, the administration could not have been pleased to learn from U.S. officials in Jerusalem that the Israelis had received news of the letter with “great joy” and now viewed the president’s upcoming meetings with Sadat and Rabin as mere “sideshow,” as Israeli leaders considered Congress a “surrogate for Israel in [the] policy review” and believed that Capitol Hill’s opposition had put it “well ahead on points in [the] late rounds of reassessment.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Quoted in Telegram From the Department of State to Secretary of State Kissinger in Ankara, May 22, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 647.

⁷⁸ Tom Braden, “The Negotiations Are Over,” *Washington Post*, June 3, 1975. See also “Poor Judgment by Senators,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 1975; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “The Senate’s Foreign Policy Punch,” *Washington Post*, May 26, 1975; “The President’s Mideast ‘Reassessment,’” *Washington Post*, June 1, 1975; David Binder, “The Israel Lobby in Washington is Small and Effective,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1975; Tom Braden, “Israel’s Lobby,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 1975; and Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 173-176.

⁷⁹ Ford, *A Time to Heal*, p. 287; and Telegram from Kissinger to Scowcroft, May 27, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 649. See also Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 434; and Telecon, May 8, 1975, Document 13645, KA, Digital National Security Archive.

⁸⁰ Cable from Veliotis to Department of State, “Subject: Impact of Senate Letter and UNDOF Extension,” undated, folder: Israel—State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE—EXDIS (1), box 18, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. See also Cable from Veliotis to Department of State, “Subject: Allon Comments on Israeli-Egyptian Negotiations,” undated, folder: Israel—State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE—NODIS (5), box 19, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The Ford administration's frustration notwithstanding, a closer examination of subsequent events is necessary to more fully understand the extent of the senators' impact on U.S. policy. A detailed examination of the documentary record shows that domestic political considerations did shape the thinking of U.S. strategists in important ways. With the knowledge that pursuing a tough linkage policy would require a not insignificant effort with Congress and a presidential election year looming in 1976, the White House decided to move cautiously for the remainder of 1975. Although Ford and Kissinger would continue to warn the Israelis that further intransigence would force the United States to reconvene the Geneva Conference and announce an independent peace plan, talk of a comprehensive settlement ended up being used primarily as an instrument for putting pressure on the Rabin government, and a second interim agreement with Egypt was once again the focus of American officials. And, contrary to the claim later made by Kissinger—who evidently desired to minimize the extent of the shift in U.S. policy—the White House had contemplated a major change in strategy in the spring of 1975 before ultimately backing off.⁸¹

This adjustment in the administration's approach became visible soon after the White House received the senators' letter, and is evident from the minutes of Sadat's June 1 meeting with Ford and Kissinger in Salzburg. The president began by downplaying the significance of the senators' letter, saying that its importance had been "distorted out of proportion" and that its impact was "negligible." After Sadat replied that he hoped to maintain Cairo's new alignment with Washington but that he needed progress in order to do so, Ford reiterated his determination to stay the course. "There has been typical pressure in the Congress," he said. "I don't intend to capitulate to this kind of pressure.... The Israelis have misjudged American public opinion and me." Ford added that when he met with Rabin later in the month he would "lay it on the line." If the Israelis refused to budge, the president said, the United States

⁸¹ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 427-428. See also 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. 182.

would be willing to reconvene the Geneva Conference and promised to coordinate a negotiating position with Egypt prior to doing so.⁸²

What stands out from the minutes of this meeting, however, is that Ford and Kissinger now seemed much more inclined to push for another interim agreement than they had just a few weeks earlier. Indeed, Kissinger asked whether Sadat could make any further concessions to break the deadlock. The administration, he declared, would then present any new ideas as part of a U.S. interim plan and if the Israelis still refused, the White House would then be in a much stronger position in terms of public opinion, meaning the issuance of a comprehensive proposal that could begin to be implemented after the 1976 election would be more feasible. On the other hand, if the Israelis accepted the deal, the president argued, it “would keep U.S. domestic problems from festering,” and the United States could then try to reconvene the Geneva talks by December, with implementation beginning in 1977. Although the following day Kissinger acknowledged that proposing substantive ideas at the end of 1975 would “produce an explosion in America,” he asserted that Ford would be able to handle the pressure “based on the interim agreement” and once the election was over the U.S. position at Geneva would “have created a moral basis for a big move in 1977.” Consequently, Sadat agreed that if the United States was willing to independently monitor another partial deal using its own personnel, he might be willing to support another Sinai disengagement.⁸³

Still, Ford and Kissinger recognized that in their upcoming talks with the Israelis they would have to leave the Geneva option on the table to keep the pressure on Jerusalem. Thus, when the two spoke on June 5 Kissinger suggested that Ford “hit Rabin between the eyes” and threaten to reconvene the conference if necessary.⁸⁴ Unlike in April and May, however, a return to Geneva was no longer the White House’s first preference, and the comprehensive option was now only a useful tool for influencing the Israelis. Even still, Kissinger remained concerned about merely using the overall approach as a threat, writing Ford that the tactic had to “be handled with great care,” because the prospect of serious U.S.

⁸² Memcon, June 1, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 650, 653-654.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 655-656; and Memcon, June 2, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 659-660.

⁸⁴ Memcon, June 5, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 664.

pressure could cause the Israelis to dig in and mount a “massive campaign” against the White House for trying to “impose an unsafe settlement on Israel.”⁸⁵

When the two leaders finally met on June 11, Ford attempted to signal toughness to Rabin. He informed the prime minister that if an interim agreement proved impossible and the Geneva Conference reconvened he “would intend to be more definite and specific than past Presidents.” Ford was clearly seeking to indicate that the United States would express its support for a full Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories to essentially the 1967 borders. Rabin had to recognize, the president added, that although another Sinai step might be “a better gamble,” failure to achieve a deal of that sort would force him “to take the other route.”⁸⁶ It was clear to everyone present, however, that another disengagement with Egypt was now the Americans’ focus.⁸⁷ Despite Ford’s implied threat, Rabin yielded little ground.

As a result, in the aftermath of these consultations U.S. officials remained extremely frustrated. Scowcroft summed up nicely the administration’s disappointment with Rabin’s performance during the June meetings when he said, “I really think we’ve been had.”⁸⁸ Kissinger was even more direct with former Nixon aide Leonard Garment, telling him that he was “disillusioned,” and warning of the potential for a battle between the White House, on the one hand, and the Israelis and American Jewish community, on the other, over the comprehensive approach.⁸⁹

Despite Washington’s resentment of Israel’s bargaining behavior, the administration was not eager for a confrontation, hoping to put one off until it was in a better position politically. To be sure, the White House still believed that if a clash could not be avoided it might as well be over the Middle East dispute’s core issues, with Kissinger reiterating on June 16 that the United States “shouldn’t spill too much blood over an American interim plan. If you have to cram it down their throats, it may be better to

⁸⁵ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Subject: Your Meetings with Prime Minister Rabin—June 11,” June 10, 1975, folder: Israel—Items 74-76, May 17, 1975-June 10, 1975, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁸⁶ Memcon, June 11, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 683.

⁸⁷ Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 262-268; and Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 298. Not surprisingly, Ford’s recollections are rather different. See Ford, *A Time to Heal*, pp. 291-292. See also Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 439-443.

⁸⁸ Memcon, “Subject: The Middle East,” June 14, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 695.

⁸⁹ Telecon, June 17, 1975, Document 13755, KA, Digital National Security Archive.

go all the way.” Then again, as he told Ford several days later, putting out a comprehensive proposal entailed serious risks “because we would have to ride that for a year and a half.” Although his determination to avoid another Middle East war, fear of losing the Egyptians, and not insignificant hesitations about the negotiating context at Geneva certainly contributed to this assessment, Kissinger implied that he was also concerned with the domestic repercussions of a delay. If the United States could achieve a relatively “painless interim solution,” he said, Ford “could get through our elections and go for a settlement after the election.” He added, “Next year is not a good one for you to be in a brawl with the Jews.” Putting out a comprehensive plan, after all, would require Ford to make the politically unpopular move of holding U.S. aid levels to Israel to only \$700 million. It would be better for the president, therefore, to try for a limited Sinai settlement and, following the 1976 election, the administration could begin pressing hard for an overall solution. For Kissinger, this was the “ideal scenario.” And, as Ford noted, if the administration put forward ideas for an interim plan and failed yet again, the president could then at least say “we did our best.”⁹⁰ Thus, partly as a result of electoral calculations and domestic tactical considerations, the comprehensive solution would have to wait.

Still, even though Ford and Kissinger believed that the Rabin government was engaged in “a crass effort to undermine our foreign and domestic policy” by coming after the administration in the United States, they would continue to threaten the comprehensive scenario, while hoping it could be put off until a later date.⁹¹ Thus, on June 27 Ford informed Rabin by letter that their two countries had reached “a point where fundamental decisions must be made.” The United States, the president wrote, could not afford to jeopardize its interests by permitting continued stagnation in the peace process. “If your Government does not feel able to do this,” the message stated, “we must reserve our course on next steps, and explain to our people the Administration’s appraisal of our national interest in this matter.”⁹² In

⁹⁰ Memcon, June 16, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 723; and Memcon, June 20, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 724-725.

⁹¹ Memcon, June 25, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 740.

⁹² Letter from Ford to Rabin, June 27, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 748-749. See also Memo from Kissinger to Ford, “Meeting with Ambassador Dinitz,” June 27, 1975, folder: Israel—Items 91-96, June 25, 1975-

other words, the president was attempting to put pressure on Jerusalem to make concessions for another interim agreement with Egypt in such a way that, if it succeeded, the White House would retain political capital for subsequent Syrian-Israeli talks and, more importantly, an overall approach in 1977. If Rabin continued to delay, the administration would at least be able to claim that it had made every effort to achieve an interim step.

That the upcoming electoral contest influenced the White House's thinking in significant ways during this critical point in the negotiations is especially evident from the minutes of the president's July 2 meeting with former Senator J. William Fulbright. Prior to this appointment Kissinger advised Ford to discuss the domestic complications involved in the diplomatic process. The president needed to point out "that the Israelis, and therefore their supporters in the Congress and elsewhere, will strongly oppose any formulation of US views on an overall approach as prejudicing the shape of a final settlement" and that "this argument has proved in the past to be a strong one with Congress."⁹³ This message came out clearly during the former senator's visit. In response to Fulbright's advice that Ford issue a comprehensive plan, the president replied that he preferred to first try for another interim deal, partly to cover his domestic flank. "In the next months or year, we have to lay out a comprehensive plan," Ford told him. "Now I think there is an advantage to an interim agreement. The chances are against it, and if there is no interim agreement, we have to go for a comprehensive plan. You know the Jews will attack me but if we posture it right, we can say we tried an interim and we just couldn't get it. I will have 208 million people with me against 6 million Jews. You may disagree with what we are trying to do on an interim. But that will put it on the back burner for six months or perhaps through the election." The president postulated that Israel's base of support in the United States was not "as strong as it was before" and declared, "within the next year or so, we must come out with a comprehensive plan. There is no question after the election. It's just

June 27, 1975, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 446.

⁹³ Memo from Kissinger to Ford, "Meeting with Senator J. William Fulbright," July 2, 1975, folder: J. William Fulbright, box 1, NSA Presidential Name file, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

a question of timing.”⁹⁴ Hence, on July 8 Ford told Kissinger that the United States had to at least offer to independently monitor an interim agreement at four different warning points, “to show the American people we made an effort.”⁹⁵

The American domestic context was thus an important part of the White House’s calculus. With the 1976 presidential contest approaching, Ford chose to make a maximum effort for a limited Egyptian-Israeli deal. In part because moving comprehensively would mean undertaking a major effort to gain domestic backing, which could prove politically difficult, the White House decided to play it safe and wait until 1977 for an overall approach. Building support at home, after all, could be a challenge—as one legislative aide put it, even though many members of Congress may have viewed Sadat as a world leader “of imposing stature,” it was doubtful “that many of them will be very vocal in their assessments for fear of the Jewish reaction back home.”⁹⁶ And, in Kissinger’s view, unless the administration was “willing to go 15 rounds” with the Israelis, it made little sense to have a showdown.⁹⁷ The White House, it seems, reasoned that having an interim solution would at least buy it some credibility with the Egyptians, allow the United States to sustain its control over the peace process, and keep the Middle East quiet until after the 1976 presidential campaign, at which time it would be in what Ford and Kissinger thought was a better position to pursue an overall approach, with electoral considerations out of the way and the lingering impact of Watergate less of a factor. Thus, although the administration would have been willing to issue independent U.S. peace proposals if the disengagement negotiations had once again collapsed, and likely would have moved comprehensively after 1976 if Ford had won the election, it is questionable whether U.S. officials would have felt it necessary to proceed so cautiously in the absence of such considerations.⁹⁸ As journalist Edward Sheehan later wrote, Ford and Kissinger probably decided to

⁹⁴ Memcon, July 2, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 768-769, 771.

⁹⁵ Memcon, July 8, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 774.

⁹⁶ Memo from Vern Loen to Scowcroft through John O. Marsh, “Subject: Congressional Visit with President Sadat on August 9, 1975,” August 18, 1975, folder: Middle East—General, box 22, John Marsh files, 1974-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

⁹⁷ Telecon, June 13, 1975, Document 13741, KA, Digital National Security Archive.

⁹⁸ Ford promised Sadat after the signing of Sinai II that the United States would make a push for a comprehensive solution after the election. See Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy*, p. 183. Kissinger also claims in his memoir that the

reserve the comprehensive option for a later date, “when the President was stronger [and] when his prospects were more auspicious....”⁹⁹

The Sinai II agreement that was ultimately concluded during the first week of September was not an ideal outcome for the United States. Washington would not only have to forgo the comprehensive option but also make a number of other concessions to secure the Rabin government’s agreement. Kissinger was keenly aware of these realities. He pointed out on July 18 that the “only value” of the interim arrangement was that it got the administration “a settlement and a year and a half,” and admitted that he had come to favor another partial agreement only “reluctantly,” because it would help put Ford in “good shape in foreign policy.” Similarly, prior to his August shuttle that ultimately sealed the Sinai II deal he was still debating whether or not the White House was giving away too much. The United States would have to move the negotiations into a comprehensive framework “in a foreseeable time” anyway, he told Sisco on August 19, and he therefore was not sure whether the administration was “not making a mistake.” Kissinger actually seemed to be having second thoughts, asking, “Do you think we’re doing the right thing or would we have been better off going for an overall?”¹⁰⁰

The United States, after all, ultimately did have to provide the Israelis with what William Quandt correctly calls “a very impressive list of American commitments.”¹⁰¹ Aside offering a generous package of economic and military assistance, Kissinger promised Israel that Washington would not recognize or

administration was planning to move forward on all fronts in 1977, as President Jimmy Carter later would. He is critical of Ford’s successor, however, for attempting to negotiate full peace treaties between the parties, rather than merely pacts of non-belligerency. See Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 1057-1058. A document the administration prepared as it was leaving office, even though it did not decisively answer the question of how to proceed and highlighted a number of risks involved in moving comprehensively, suggests that Ford administration officials favored such a strategy. See “Arab-Israeli Dispute,” January 14, 1977, NLC-17-111-6-2-2, Jimmy Carter Library, Atlanta, Georgia. See also Memcon, October 27, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 863-864.

⁹⁹ Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, p. 176. One could argue that the extent to which domestic factors influenced the administration’s strategy is particularly striking because Kissinger, an archetypal realist, by mid-1975 appeared to no longer view Israel as a major strategic asset to the United States. As he told a group of American Jewish leaders in June, “The strength of Israel is needed for its own survival but not to prevent the spread of communism in the Arab world. So it doesn’t necessarily help U.S. global interests as far as the Middle East is concerned. The survival of Israel has sentimental importance to the United States, but believe me it is not easy to maintain this.” See Memcon, June 15, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 713, 719.

¹⁰⁰ Memcon, July 18, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 788-789; and Memcon, “Subject: The Middle East,” August 19, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 798, 801.

¹⁰¹ Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 168.

negotiate with the PLO until the latter accepted United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, a pledge that seemed inconsistent with Kissinger's determination not to provide the Israelis with a "veto over [U.S.] policy."¹⁰² That the administration of Ford's successor, Jimmy Carter, would later encounter tremendous difficulties when trying to involve the PLO in the peace process, largely as a result of this promise, suggests that it proved a significant concession.¹⁰³ And Kissinger himself recognized that such an approach was unsustainable, saying during a meeting in late November, "We will come to a point where we cannot go on like this. We can't refuse forever to talk to the PLO." He added, "The Israelis better get me out of office. I'll tell you, the next time I'll finish them. A great power cannot be treated this way. What U.S. national interest is served? We could co-exist with the PLO. It is indeed historically inevitable."¹⁰⁴ Likewise, Ford's assurance to Rabin that if the United States ever developed a position on where the final borders between Israel and its Arab neighbors should be, it would "give great weight to Israel's position that any peace agreement with Syria must be predicated on Israel remaining on the Golan Heights," undercut Washington's leverage for future talks between Jerusalem and Damascus.¹⁰⁵ Thus, even though Kissinger would later downplay the importance of these side agreements, writing that they merely constituted "a formal statement of existing American policy," they undoubtedly complicated the task of his successors.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Memcon, August 21, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 803.

¹⁰³ Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, p. 302.

¹⁰⁴ Memcon, "Subject: The Middle East," November 28, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 871. See also "Talking Points," April 21, 1975, folder: Israel—Items 63-68, April 5, 1975-April 22, 1975, box 17, NSA Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

¹⁰⁵ This component of the deal would continue to have an impact on U.S. Arab-Israeli diplomacy well into the 1990s. See Daniel C. Kurtzer et al., *The Peace Puzzle: America's Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace, 1989-2011* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 456. Some U.S. strategists also expressed concern that by agreeing to use American personnel to enforce the agreement the United States had potentially compromised its "guarantee trump," which was considered a key tool for achieving a comprehensive settlement. See Memo from Oakley to Scowcroft, "Subject: Guaranteeing an Interim Sinai Agreement," July 10, 1975, folder: Israel (12), box 15, Presidential Country files for the Middle East and South Asia, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Kissinger also promised the Israelis that in the future Washington would consult with Jerusalem prior to presenting its own peace proposals, a concession that ultimately affected the 1978 Camp David negotiations. See William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1986), p. 220. For the full text of the Sinai II deal and its accompanying side agreements, see *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 825-840.

Sinai II, therefore, was by no means cheap from a U.S. perspective, especially when one considers its limited scope.¹⁰⁷ Although the importance of the disengagement agreement should not be underestimated, as it laid the groundwork for the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, it nonetheless exacted a heavy price and meant delaying the overall approach. But, as Kissinger reportedly explained to Sheehan in late 1975, it was unfair to criticize him and Ford for not having achieved more, in part because the conflict was so intractable and the available options were far from ideal, but also because they had obtained what was “attainable—given our prevailing domestic situation.”¹⁰⁸

This outcome does not mean, however, that if Ford and Kissinger had concluded that an interim Egyptian-Israeli deal was impossible or would have severely undermined future U.S. efforts, they would have been deterred from getting into a showdown with Jerusalem. Despite their desire to delay such a scenario until after the presidential election, the president and secretary of state thought they could make a strong case to the American public that a confrontational posture was justified, and therefore had confidence that they could prevail in a battle for public opinion and congressional cooperation in the United States. The White House had received, on several occasions, information that supported this assumption. For example, in the weeks following the senators’ May 21 letter, Kissinger spoke with the White House’s congressional liaison, Bryce Harlow, who told the secretary of state: “Go on television to explain it and you would get overwhelming support.” Likewise, when they met on June 9 Kissinger informed Ford that he believed the administration was “in good shape for a comprehensive settlement,” noting that Ribicoff had told him that “the Jews couldn’t stand against you if you went on TV stating an American position.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ On this point, see Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 190-194, 204; Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “The Cost of Kissinger’s Triumph,” *Washington Post*, August 30, 1975; Ball and Ghareeb, “American Policy on Trial,” pp. 27-28; and Ball, “The Coming Crisis in Israeli-American Relations,” pp. 241-242. See also Salim Yaqub, “The Weight of Conquest: Henry Kissinger and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” in Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds., *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 244-245; and Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East*, pp. 152-153.

¹⁰⁸ Sheehan, *The Arabs, Israelis, and Kissinger*, pp. 201-202 (emphasis in original). Sheehan claims that in response to his observation that the Israel lobby constituted the “greatest constraint upon our policy,” one of the secretary of state’s aides declared, “Of course. And the constraint becomes the determinant.”

¹⁰⁹ Memcon, June 5, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 665; and Memcon, June 9, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 666.

Of perhaps even greater importance, the May 21 letter from the seventy-six senators did not represent the views of all of its signatories. As Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations Robert McCloskey pointed out in a memorandum to Kissinger, the message was not to be taken as a precise indicator of the legislative branch's position on Middle East policy. To be sure, McCloskey observed that there was "still widespread reluctance to publicly back down from all-out support for Israel," and that Ford and Kissinger could not expect Congress to endorse "a radical cutback in our support for Israel." Nevertheless, the memorandum argued, even though the seventy-six signatures were "a sharp reminder of continuing solid support for Israel in the Senate, it does not negate the fact that a sea change has started in Senate attitudes against providing Israel with a blank check this year." A number of senators, McCloskey wrote, had signed only "reluctantly," and it was his "judgment that a number of the key members of the 76 would be receptive to negotiating with the Administration on a compromise level which would endorse a reduced amount of assistance for Israel."¹¹⁰

Similarly, during a meeting on June 26 with Kissinger and the new U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Malcolm Toon, Ford argued that the Senate's message did not mean that a comprehensive solution was now out of the question. Although he recognized that failing to get an interim deal would cause problems "both with Israel and with the Jewish Community here," the president declared that he was nonetheless "willing to take them on because I am disillusioned with how they behaved in March and now." Ford added, "If the record gets published, the zealots will be shocked. It is a record that our government can be proud of." The president actually seemed self-assured, in part because he considered the May 21 letter a manageable obstacle. While Ford still hoped to avoid a confrontation and Toon pointed out that Capitol Hill was growing "uneasy" over the reassessment, the president was still confident enough to observe, "I think Israel is totally misreading the letter from the [seventy-six] senators. Several of them have written qualifications, and it doesn't really commit them to any specific proposals. When it gets to dollars, many

¹¹⁰ Memo from McCloskey to Kissinger, "Middle East Reappraisal: The Javits Letter," undated, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 668-669. Sentiment in the House of Representatives, McCloskey noted, mirrored that in the Senate.

of them will have a different attitude.”¹¹¹ Thus, while Congress was still not willing to get overly tough with Jerusalem, public opinion and attitudes in the House of Representatives and the Senate appeared to be shifting. Ford and Kissinger, therefore, believed they would be able to defend their actions to the American people by revealing the record of their exchanges with the Rabin government. In other words, Edward Tivnan’s contention that the senators’ letter had “exploded [Kissinger’s] efforts to reassess U.S. policy” and led the administration to conclude “that a presidential speech was now politically out of question,” seems incorrect.¹¹²

What this analysis suggests is that the administration’s decision to reverse course cannot be explained by pointing solely to the White House’s domestic political and electoral concerns. White House officials were not sure they wanted to reconvene the Geneva Conference in order to proceed comprehensively, because that path would involve reintroducing the Soviet Union into the peace process and mean risking a dangerous stalemate through 1976 over the Arab-Israeli conflict’s most fundamental aspects. The United States would likewise have faced the difficult task of dealing with the more rigid negotiating stance of the Syrians and needed to consider how to deal with the question of Palestinian participation at the conference. Of perhaps even greater importance, having only recently succeeded in managing a major transfer of alliances by winning Sadat away from Moscow, and concerned that the Egyptian president might conclude that the United States was incapable of delivering Israeli concessions, the administration believed it was critical to demonstrate the ability of the U.S. to achieve tangible progress relatively quickly. As Kissinger had told Sisco on June 13 when the negotiations appeared to be in jeopardy of breaking down, “We have to be careful Sadat does not think we are just nice guys but can’t deliver. At some point he will turn on us.”¹¹³ In short, a number of factors unrelated to the domestic political scene contributed to the final outcome.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Memcon, June 26, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 742-743.

¹¹² Tivnan, *The Lobby*, p. 89.

¹¹³ Telecon, June 13, 1975, Document 13741, KA, Digital National Security Archive. See also Telecon, June 24, 1975, Document 13779, KA, Digital National Security Archive.

¹¹⁴ I thank Steven Spiegel and Deborah Larson for highlighting the great importance of these points to me.

It remains unclear, however, whether these international considerations on their own would have deterred Ford and Kissinger from pursuing an overall approach in 1975. Given how frustrated the president and secretary of state were in the wake of the latter's failed March shuttle, as well as what seemed to be their genuine belief that a comprehensive strategy was the United States' best choice, it is somewhat surprising that the White House abandoned the effort. It seems probable, therefore, that some other element also factored into the administration's calculus, beyond electoral considerations and the hazards associated with following an ambitious course, to steer Ford and Kissinger away from more decisive action.

Indeed, it appears that U.S. officials, especially Kissinger, harbored considerable anxieties about the potentiality that a public showdown with the Israelis could stoke an outbreak of anti-Semitism in the United States. Since Ford and Kissinger believed that a critical aspect of the administration's effort to prevail in a confrontation with Jerusalem over the Arab-Israeli conflict's most basic issues would be a major presidential address and the publication of the full record of the administration's dealings with the Rabin government in order to offset domestic opposition, they worried about causing an anti-Semitic backlash. Put differently, it was thought that the battle for public opinion could get out of hand, with devastating consequences. The possibility that a messy battle at home over the direction of U.S. Middle East diplomacy could release anti-Semitic forces in the United States was likely an important contributing factor to the White House's decision to back off, and could hardly have escaped Kissinger's attention, given his personal background as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany.¹¹⁵

Thus, the secretary of state warned of such a disaster at various times during the reassessment. For instance, upon his return to Washington in the wake of the failed March negotiations, Kissinger put great emphasis on the point during a meeting with a group of American Jewish leaders, saying: "Quite frankly I fear the possibility of anti-Semitism in this country which I worry about quite a bit." The secretary of state informed them that he had spoken with former Texas Governor John Connally several

¹¹⁵ For Kissinger's recollections of how his background impacted him personally when dealing with Middle East policy, see Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 203.

weeks earlier and had been told that “if [he] were advising somebody on how to sweep the midwest and the southwest in the next election, [he] would recommend an anti-Semitic campaign. And this he told me before the negotiations broke down.” Kissinger added, “If the Jewish community attacks the President you will see for the first time an American President attacking Israel and this could unleash the most profound consequences. If they attack me, the President may come to my support too. I can survive it.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, during a conversation with Ford in mid-June the secretary of state said Israel was assuming “a confrontational position. They are hitting the Jewish community. My children will suffer. They are gambling on being able to take us domestically.” Kissinger noted that Rusk had received “tremendous applause” for saying that “if what is presented in this country is Semitism, then the only counter is anti-Semitism. If it is true that Israel is not a satellite of the U.S., neither is the U.S. a satellite of Israel.”¹¹⁷ On yet another occasion, Kissinger informed Ford that at a gathering of Jewish leaders he had said: “Jewish groups take the position that the U.S. is never right and Israel always is, and that is laying the basis for massive anti-Semitism here.”¹¹⁸

Kissinger’s deep concern that a showdown with Jerusalem could lead to tragic repercussions in the United States came out especially clearly during a June 20 strategy meeting with his chief Middle East advisers. “Sadat has played this perfectly,” he asserted. “No U.S. President has ever been this ready to move on the Israelis.” Kissinger claimed that Ford thought “that an all-out brawl is better now because otherwise they would try to get him out in 1976. If he had to decide in the next half an hour what to do, he would go on television against the Israelis. He would say that there is no more time to horse around and that the United States cannot contribute any longer to the growth of Israeli capabilities.” Kissinger

¹¹⁶ Memcon, March 31, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 600-601.

¹¹⁷ Memcon, June 25, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 740. See also Memcon, “Subject: Secretary Kissinger’s Report on His Trip to the Middle East and Europe,” February 19, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 516; and Memcon, January 27, 1976, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 898.

¹¹⁸ Memcon, June 16, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, p. 723. See also Telecon, March 24, 1975, Document 13387, KA, Digital National Security Archive; and Henry Kissinger, “The Challenges of Peace,” *Worldview Magazine*, January 1, 1979, p. 4. One participant in the Brookings Institution’s 1975 study group on U.S. Middle East policy also informed me that concerns about anti-Semitism were the subject of discussion at various times during its meetings. Telephone interview by author with member of the Brookings Institution’s 1975 Study Group, September 23, 2014. For the Brookings study, see “The Brookings Report on the Middle East,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter 1977), pp. 195-205.

continued to press the point, saying, “These guys are determined, but they are underestimating the President. They cannot defeat him. [Former Prime Minister] Golda [Meir] would not have made this mistake.” At this point, the secretary of state expressed his great fear about what might happen if the administration ultimately did have to confront Israel and its supporters in the United States by taking its case to the American public: “I know that the Jews cannot survive if they oppose their government. This will bring out centuries of latent hatred.” Having listened to Kissinger’s presentation, Sisco could only respond, “It is horrible to think about.”¹¹⁹

That the administration may have held back from engaging in an open clash with Israel for fear of sparking an anti-Semitic backlash is admittedly a somewhat speculative claim. After all, President Dwight Eisenhower had successfully pressured Israel publicly to withdraw from the Sinai after they had captured it from Egypt in the 1956 Suez War without any such consequences.¹²⁰ Moreover, one must consider the possibility that Kissinger, during his discussions with Jewish leaders, was merely raising the specter of anti-Semitism as a tool to moderate their potential opposition to the administration’s policies. On the other hand, because Kissinger repeated his concerns on the matter on multiple occasions to Ford and his advisers privately, they cannot be discounted. And, for his part, the president would not have desired to be responsible for such a catastrophe by delivering a major public speech that would openly challenge the Israelis. In short, the fact that White House officials several times expressed fear that an outbreak of anti-Semitism could result because of the Middle East impasse, especially if Ford decided to give his speech, probably informed its decision to forgo the comprehensive approach.¹²¹

Conclusion

¹¹⁹ Memcon, “Subject: Middle East Strategy,” June 20, 1975, in *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. 26, pp. 726-727. U.S. officials from other administrations have also worried that a public confrontation with Israel could stoke anti-Semitism. See Tivnan, *The Lobby*, p. 131; and Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 381.

¹²⁰ On Eisenhower’s diplomacy during this crisis, see Tyler, *A World of Trouble*, pp. 51-63; and Spiegel, *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict*, pp. 71-82.

¹²¹ Relatedly, Kissinger was also probably genuinely concerned about breaking “Israel’s back psychologically,” as he later wrote in his memoirs, especially because a showdown would involve the exertion of brutal pressure by the United States. See Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 1138-1139; and Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, p. 428.

What are the implications of this article's findings for the debate over the impact of American domestic politics on U.S. Middle East statecraft during the 1975 reassessment? Did a powerful lobby persuade Ford and Kissinger that they could not prevail against the Israelis and did the administration choose to back down for this reason? Were there certain boundaries the White House simply could not afford to cross because of the existence of influential domestic opposition groups?

Based on a close reading of the historical record, politics at home did influence the decisions of policymakers in Washington in ways that were more than trivial. The fact that such factors, to a great degree, informed the White House's decision to delay more substantial action until 1977 indicates that domestic forces were of considerable importance, and universally recognized as such by members of the Ford administration. Ford and Kissinger, who believed that once the 1976 election had passed they would be in a better position for bold action, and who could not simply disregard the potential political consequences of moving comprehensively, were therefore operating under not insignificant constraints.

Nevertheless, the whole idea that the "unmatched power" of the Israel lobby put clear and insurmountable limits on what the U.S. government could do is not supported by an analysis of these events. To the contrary, this article's conclusions imply that the Mearsheimer-Walt thesis about the power of the Israel lobby in the United States is overly simplified. Although Israel's ability to mobilize its American supporters and the influence of special interest groups such as AIPAC did at times seriously concern Ford, Kissinger, and their advisers, the White House would not have been deterred from engaging in a battle for American public opinion over Arab-Israeli policy if a showdown could not have been avoided. The president and secretary of state had reason to believe that, if such a confrontation proved necessary, they would prevail, and it is clear that the May 21 letter from the seventy-six senators, which seemingly undermined the White House's ability to continue to exert pressure on the Rabin government, did not represent the signatories' true position. Had Ford and Kissinger decided to bring things to a head with the Israelis, they in all likelihood would have carried the day by relying on the administration's record of its handling of the peace process. With this in mind, the White House's concerns about stoking an anti-Semitic backlash probably also contributed to the final outcome.

In terms of policy relevance, these conclusions suggest that domestic political constraints can limit the White House's ability to push the Middle East peace process. If anything, most experts who study this issue believe that since the 1990s the obstacles at home confronting any president who is serious about resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have only grown larger.¹²² If the 1975 reassessment is taken as a useful case for the study of this issue, however, it is clear that White House officials can utilize certain tactics to help overcome such constraints and mobilize public opinion to back their positions. Ford and Kissinger, for instance, believed it important to wait until the right moment to move forcefully, to ensure that they would have the maximum political leverage available to justify a confrontation.¹²³ More important, they engaged in an early form of what President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker would later refer to as "dead cat diplomacy." Ford and Kissinger were careful to structure their conduct of Arab-Israeli peace negotiations so that they could effectively blame one side or the other for stalling progress—a tactic Bush and Baker likened during their time in office to leaving a dead cat on the doorstep of the party responsible for the impasse—as a way to justify their subsequent actions to the American public.¹²⁴ The step-by-step approach was, partly, designed to serve precisely this function. There are methods available, then, that permit U.S. officials to influence public opinion, even when confronting an ally as valued and admired in the United States as Israel.

¹²² Kurtzer et al., *The Peace Puzzle*, p. 276.

¹²³ On the importance of this tactic, see *ibid.*, p. 275; and Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 419.

¹²⁴ Miller, *The Much Too Promised Land*, pp. 197, 202, 219.