

# It's the 'Special Relationship', Stupid: Examining Israel-US Relations through the Prism of Israeli Territorial Withdrawals

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## Introduction

'Obama administration officials described (Israeli Prime Minister) Netanyahu (...) as recalcitrant, myopic, reactionary, obtuse, blustering, pompous, and "Aspergery".<sup>1</sup>

The above quote was written in October 2014, by Geoffrey Goldberg, a journalist with unprecedented access to American President, Barak Obama. Goldberg ominously warned that 'profound changes in the relationship may be occurring',<sup>2</sup> alluding to a possible paradigm shift in the unprecedented assistance Israel receives from America. Currently, Israel receives around \$3 billion in US aid annually, rising with inflation. Israel is the third-largest customer for US weaponry, purchasing \$36.2 billion in arms since 1950.<sup>3</sup> America guarantees Israel a 'quantitative military edge' over all other regional actors. Simultaneously, political assistance has been invaluable: from 1946-2012, the US vetoed 42 resolutions hostile to Israel in the United Nations Security Council.<sup>4</sup>

This study argues that the so-called 'special relationship' between the US and Israel is primarily the product of an American willingness to reward and incentivise Israeli territorial withdrawals. This study employs a historical approach to trace the evolution of bilateral ties in five periods: (1) the build-up to

the 'Suez Crisis of 1957; (2) the period 1957-1973; (3) the US's role in the Sinai I and II disengagements, 1974-1976; (4) the Camp David talks and the development of ties and (5) the Gaza withdrawal of 2005. This study suggests that Israel has previously responded positively to both American pressure and incentives to withdraw from occupied territory. This study refrains from arguing 'for' or 'against' the 'special relationship', instead contextualising US-Israel relations as a product of conflict and territorial withdrawal.

## Israel: Burden or Blessing?

Frequently, debates constructed around US-Israel relations ignore the determining influence of Israeli territorial withdrawals. Walt and Mearsheimer's now-infamous *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* generated unprecedented debate on the utility and scope of Israel-US relations. The study claims that 'the overall thrust of US policy in (the Middle East) is due almost entirely to (...) the activities of the "Israel Lobby"<sup>5</sup>'. In contrast, supporters of this 'special relationship' emphasize shared ideological and practical cooperation, framing Israel as the front-line of the global war between liberal democracy and Islamist terrorism.<sup>6</sup> At no point in Walt and Mearsheimer's paper, nor in the notorious rebuttal by Dershowitz, is the evolution of US-Israel ties traced, with both sides fixated on whether contemporary Israel is 'good' or 'bad',

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Goldberg, 'The Crisis in US-Israel Relations is Officially Here', *The Atlantic*, 28 October 2014, online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/the-crisis-in-us-israel-relations-is-officially-here/382031> (last accessed 30 October 2015).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Miller, 'Evangelicals, Israel and US Foreign Policy', in *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2014), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Amnon Cavari and Elan Nyer, 'From Bipartisanship to Dysergia: Trends in Congressional Actions Toward Israel', in *Israel Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2014), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Mearsheimer & Stephen M. Walt, 'The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy', in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2006), p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> See Alan Dershowitz, 'Debunking the Newest - and Oldest - Jewish Conspiracy: A Reply to the Mearsheimer-Walt "Working Paper"', Harvard Law School Working Paper, April 2006, accessible online at <http://www.comw.org/warreport/fulltext/0604dershowitz.pdf> (last accessed 30 October 2015).

and whether by extension ties with Israel are legitimate. Both sides emphasise the unprecedented level of support provided by the US, either justifying it due to shared interests or attacking it as the product of a shadowy lobby.

This dichotomisation does little to advance understandings of how this extraordinary relationship originated and developed. Framing the Israel-US relationship as a product of a shared, contemporary strategic and ideological outlook or a shadowy lobby is deeply reductionist, thinly masking predetermined value judgments. This study addresses the gap in current debates, by examining when, why and how US-Israel relationship developed. Tackling these questions provides an essential toolbox for the focal question of the debate: Why does the US afford such preferential treatment to Israel? Answering this question requires tracing the development of ties, beginning with the foundation of the State of Israel, in 1948.

#### *Ambivalence: From Independence to Suez*

In May 1948, the new-born State of Israel joined the United Nations with the consent of both the United States and the Soviet Union; it was unclear whether the embryonic state would learn east or west in the unfolding Cold War. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's Prime Minister, sought alliance with the US, but was repeatedly frustrated: America scuppered Israel's bid to join NATO, fearing that close ties would jeopardise the West's capital in the Arab world<sup>7</sup>. Whereas contemporary military cooperation is extensive, American policy initially was to embargo all arms sales to Israel and the Arab world.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, France served as Israel's great power guarantor, providing limited arms.

Throughout the 1950s, Israel-Egypt tension led to escalating skirmishes. Despite Israeli protests, President Eisenhower upheld the arms embargo, even after Egypt signed a major, Soviet-endorsed weapons deal with the Czech

Republic in 1955.<sup>9</sup> The level of mutual distrust is obvious in an exchange of letters between Eisenhower and Ben-Gurion, in April 1956. Eisenhower singled out Israel for criticism, demanding Ben-Gurion: 'Abstain, even under the pressure of extreme provocation, from any retaliatory acts, which may result in very dangerous consequences.'<sup>10</sup> The Israelis were furious at perceived American bullying and a failure to recognise Israel's security needs. Ben-Gurion's patronising response accused Eisenhower of ignorance:

I am certain that if the entire situation were detailed for you, you would not have restricted yourself merely to expressing hope that we would abstain from military acts. I cannot imagine that in case of continual Egyptian attacks you would assume that we would abandon our country and people to the dangers and bloody consequences of a perpetual campaign of terror by the terrorist gangs of the Egyptian government.<sup>11</sup>

Supported by France whilst shunned by America, Israel went to war to prevent Egypt from absorbing Soviet weapons. The result was the 'Suez Crisis' of October-November, 1956, with 3000 Egyptian and 200 Israeli deaths.<sup>12</sup> In a triple entente with France and Great Britain to topple the Egyptian government, Israel invaded the Gaza Strip and Sinai Peninsula, vanquishing the Egyptian army. In a victory speech, Ben-Gurion suggested Israel would have to recognise Israel to regain territory.<sup>13</sup>

Enraged, Eisenhower publically denounced the Israeli-Franco-British plot. The US brought a proposal to the UN Security Council demanding Israeli withdrawal, which was then vetoed by Britain and France. Eisenhower subsequently threatened that if Israel did not withdraw, the US would ban all private

<sup>7</sup> Avi Shlaim, 'Israel, the Great Powers and the Middle-East Crisis of 1958', *The Journal of Commonwealth and Imperial History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1999), p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Lasensky, 'Dollarizing Peace: Nixon, Kissinger and the Creation of the US-Israeli Alliance', *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2007), p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Lipson, 'American Support for Israel: History, Sources, Limits', *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1996), p.139.

<sup>10</sup> Exchange of Letters Between David Ben-Gurion and Dwight D. Eisenhower, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1956.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> 'The Sinai War of 1956', online at <https://www.onwar.com/aced/chrono/c1900s/yr50/fsi/nai1956.htm> (last accessed 30 October 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Shlaim, 'Israel, the Great Powers', p. 179.

donations to Israel by American citizens, a dire threat to the cash-strapped Jewish State.<sup>14</sup> Eisenhower's anger is captured by one of the harshest letters ever written by an American President to an Israeli leader:

'Statements attributed to your Government to the effect that Israel does not intend to withdraw from Egyptian territory (...) have been called to my attention. I must say frankly, Mr. Prime Minister, that the United States views these reports (...) with deep concern. Any such decision by the Government of Israel (...) could not but bring about the condemnation of Israel as a violator of the principles as well as the directives of the United Nations'.<sup>15</sup>

Israel internalised these threats and withdrew troops from both the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip in 1957. However, Israel also gained critical concessions from the US-led negotiations. For the first time, the US recognised Israel's economic and security needs by consenting to an UN-controlled buffer zone along the Egypt-Israel border, and agreeing the Straits of Tiran - the Egyptian-dominated waterway leading to Israel's port city of Eilat - must remain open to Israeli shipping.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the US provided Israel with aid for the first time, delivering \$100 million between 1959-1961.<sup>17</sup> Thus, withdrawal from the Sinai, whilst carried out under duress, was the foundation stone of the 'special relationship'.

The writing was on the wall: powerless to resist American demands, the collapse of British and French willpower demonstrated that the United States was the West's only 'great power'. Israel internalised this message. Responding to Eisenhower's threats, Ben-Gurion took a different tone to 1956:

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<sup>14</sup> O. Eran and L. Calin, 'Were, are and will Sanctions be Effective Against Israel?', in *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2014), p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Exchange of Letters Between David Ben-Gurion and Dwight D. Eisenhower, 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> November 1956.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Little, 'The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and Israel, 1957-68', in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 25, No. 4 (1993), p. 564.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 567.

Your statement that a United Nations force is being dispatched to Egypt in accordance with pertinent resolutions of the General Assembly is welcomed by us. We have never planned to annex the Sinai desert.<sup>18</sup>

Though Ben-Gurion had, in fact, suggested Sinai would be annexed,<sup>19</sup> Israel had clearly changed style and substance when dealing with the US; capturing vast swathes of territory, whilst handing back every inch of it due to American demands. The Americans, too, had re-calibrated: though the US ignored Israel's needs during peacetime, conflict created a paradigm shift in American policy-making. Beginning with the Suez Crisis, this new approach would be solidified further by conflict in 1967.

#### *The Foundations of Friendship: 1957-1973*

Following 1957, the US perception of ties with Israel as detrimental to the national interest was slowly retrenched. The emergent paradigm, tried and tested at Suez, suggested the US could establish regional supremacy through peace-making, offering incentives to increase Israeli flexibility.<sup>20</sup> Simultaneously, the Suez Crisis precipitated an Egyptian-Syrian shift towards the USSR, making US policy-makers increasingly prone to support Israel. Kennedy was the first president to authorise arms sales, selling Israel Hawk anti-aircraft missiles in 1962.<sup>21</sup> Johnson finally relented to multiple Israeli requests in 1968 to sell Israel the advanced Phantom fighter jet. Both these sales followed Soviet weapons deals to Arab states. The US now appeared to be guaranteeing Israel that whatever the USSR sold the Arabs, the US would sell Israel effective counter-measures.

The 'Six Day War' of June 1967 provided the impetus for the next stage of the 'special relationship'. Striking pre-emptively, Israel

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<sup>18</sup> Exchange of Letters Between David Ben-Gurion and Dwight D. Eisenhower, 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> November 1956.

<sup>19</sup> Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arabs* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 179.

<sup>20</sup> Lasensky, 'Dollarizing Peace', p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Ben-Zvi, 'Stumbling into an Alliance: John F. Kennedy and Israel', in *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2009), p. 226.

captured the West Bank from Jordan, the Golan Heights from Syria and the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt, routing a multi-national Arab coalition in less than a week. Conflict was the product of the Suez Crisis: Egypt broke the US-sponsored agreements by closing the Straits of Tiran and ejecting the UN buffer force. The American response demonstrated the shift in framing since Suez. Instead of demanding a return to the status quo – eventually yielding to some Israeli demands – as Eisenhower had in Sinai, Johnson pushed ‘land for peace’:<sup>22</sup> employing the crisis as a game-changer, to engender (American-sponsored) peace.

The new US policy paradigm was enshrined by UN Security Council Resolution 242. Subsequently, no American president expected Israel to vacate occupied territory without limited non-belligerency guarantees from Arab states.<sup>23</sup> The resolution stresses ‘inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war’, demanding:

Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict; termination of all claims or states of belligerency and respect for and acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every State in the area and their right to live in peace within secure and recognized boundaries.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the US was now committed to a dual approach - perfect for a mediator – demanding Israeli withdrawal from territory in exchanges for regional recognition and non-belligerency: ‘land for peace’. Israel accepted Resolution 242; the text seemingly vindicated Ben-Gurion’s position in 1956 that Arab states should recognise Israel for territory to be returned. Subsequently, the Arab League met in Khartoum, agreeing to the ‘three no’s’: no recognition of, no peace, and no negotiations with Israel, undermining supporters of

withdrawal in Israel, and infuriating the US.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Resolution 242 demonstrated both the increasing convergence of Israeli and American perspectives and the divergence between the US and the Arab World.

Under the Nixon administration, Israel prevented a pro-Soviet Syrian invasion of US-allied Jordan in 1970. This convergence of ‘strategic’ interests was reflected by a massive increase in US aid to Israel, from under \$3 million from the entire period of 1968-1970, to \$1.5 billion 1971-1973.<sup>26</sup> Whereas Johnson sought conflict resolution, Nixon’s National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, argued that ‘the longer Israel holds its conquered Arab territory, the longer the Soviets cannot deliver what the Arabs want’.<sup>27</sup> However, regional actors had other ideas. Egypt’s President Sadat had attempted to shift Egyptian orientation towards the west, but had been dismissed by Kissinger. Thus, as Israel had done in 1956, Egypt went to war with Israel in the 1973 ‘Yom Kippur War’, to try to gain from the US in conflict what it could not in peacetime.

America found itself once again pushed into the position of regional peacemaker. Kissinger eventually authorised a massive, \$2.2 billion arms airlift to Israel, though he deliberately delayed it to prevent a decisive Israeli victory, which he feared would render post-conflict mediation impossible.<sup>28</sup> The airlift caused the Arab World to refuse to sell oil to the West, sparking an energy crisis. This altered US perceptions further: conflict resolution, through Israeli territorial withdrawal – rather than Israeli military strength – was now seen as vital to US strategic interests.<sup>29</sup> Kissinger’s new paradigm of conflict maintenance and increased ‘no strings attached’ aid to Israel was stillborn.

Thus, the period 1956-1973 was underlined by a complex period of convergence and

<sup>22</sup> Y. Bar-Siman-Tov, ‘The United States and Israel Since 1948: A ‘Special Relationship?’’, in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1998), p. 241.

<sup>23</sup> William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p.5.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 242.

<sup>25</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, ‘The United States and Israel’, p. 246.

<sup>27</sup> Boaz Vanetik and Zaki Shalom, ‘The White House Middle East Policy in 1973 as a Catalyst for the Outbreak of the Yom Kippur War’, in *Israel Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2011), p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, ‘The United States and Israel’, p. 247.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

divergence in bilateral US-Israel ties. It was regional events, primarily conflict and the need for mediation, which drove US involvement in the region, rather than influences in US domestic politics or strategic convergence. Israeli-American strategic perceptions were far from aligned, as demonstrated by the 1973 airlift: the US aided Israel, but ensured Israel would not become too powerful. Increasingly drawn into the region by conflict, occupation and geostrategic concerns, the US walked a tightrope between conflict mediation and increasing bilateral ties with Israel. This balancing act would be tested further as the dust of the Yom Kippur War settled.

### *The Special Relationship Begins: Sinai I and II*

With a plethora of states breaking off relations following pressure from oil-producing Arab nations, Israel ended the Yom Kippur War internationally isolated, dependent on Washington for aid and diplomatic support.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Israeli society was shocked out of its sense of invulnerability and contentment with the status quo. Conversely, the Jewish State ended the war with more captured territory, in both Egypt and Syria. Thus, Israel would not easily consent to withdrawal, whilst Arab states were still reluctant to provide non-belligerency assurances. However, through the role of 'positive sanctions', the US operationalised 'land for peace', bringing the sides closer than ever before.

The US played a critical role in ending the war, demanding Israeli forces limit their advances into Syria and Egypt. Adopting 'shuttle diplomacy', since the Arab states would not directly negotiate with Israel, Kissinger flew between each belligerent, conveying messages. Under US mediation, all involved parties - Egypt, Israel and Syria - committed to separation-of-forces agreements, seeing Israel withdraw from territory captured in June 1967 for the first time - in the Golan Heights and western Sinai - whilst all parties foreswore violence.<sup>31</sup> Both Egypt and Israel prioritised an

agreement with the Americans, rather than their adversary, seeking a great power ally. This ensured that progress on the Egypt-Israel track was smoother than the Israel-Syria track, since Syria was a firm ally of the Soviet Union.

The US adopted the doctrine of 'a piece of peace for a piece of land':<sup>32</sup> limited withdrawal, for limited non-belligerency, the first proposed step on the road to full peace, and full withdrawal. Following the separation-of-forces agreements, Israel received an unprecedented \$2.2 billion; Jordan and Egypt also received US aid for the first time.<sup>33</sup> Thus, diversification of US aid to Israel was again the product of the American approach to encourage Israeli territorial withdrawal. Nixon's successor, Gerald Ford, encapsulated the American strategic logic of increased support for Israel:

If we provided the hardware, we could convince Israelis that they were secure. Then they might be willing to accept some risks in the search for peace'.<sup>34</sup>

Incentives were supplemented with more coercive tactics. President Ford, exasperated with Israeli reluctance to follow-up on the separation-of-forces agreement with Egypt (Sinai I), declared a 'reassessment' of US-Israel relations. The Israeli demand for full peace before limited withdrawal was seen as a non-starter by both American and Egyptian officials. The level of public and private confrontation had been unseen since the 1956 Suez Crisis: the US was publically blaming Israel for the failure of negotiations, hinting hard-won aid would be cut.

Pro-Israel elements in Washington - who had been unable to prevent 'reassessment' - mobilised to retrench the policy. However, reassessment served its objective: forcing Israel to consent to further withdrawals from Sinai. American policy-makers, not Israel or the Israel lobby, won this round. Kissinger knew Israel feared losing its status as America's pre-eminent

<sup>30</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p.131.

<sup>31</sup> L. Fischer, 'Turning Point on the Road to Peace: The Government of Yitzhak Rabin and the Interim

Agreement with Egypt', in *Israel Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2014), p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>33</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 146.

<sup>34</sup> Lasensky, 'Dollarizing Peace', p. 178.

regional ally<sup>35</sup>. This combination of diplomatic 'carrots' and 'sticks' bore fruit as Israel signed the September 1975 'Sinai Interim Agreements' (Sinai II). Israel withdrew further from Sinai, whilst both sides renounced the use of force and Egypt's Suez Canal was opened to non-military Israeli shipping.

The 'reassessment' was dropped in favour of massive political, economic and military assistance. Between 1974-1976, Israel received \$5.8 billion in US aid, more than ever before.<sup>36</sup> These financial ties were matched by political pledges: the US undertook to protect Israel from the USSR, and to refuse to recognise the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, until the latter recognised Israel.<sup>37</sup> The relationship therefore developed as the product of Israeli territorial withdrawal, with the employment of aid to facilitate disengagement. Lasensky argues that:

'By using aid for political purposes, Nixon and Kissinger turned positive economic inducements into a powerful agent for Arab-Israeli peace-making.'<sup>38</sup>

Thus was born the 'special relationship': the product of US mediation and Israeli territorial withdrawal, rather than US domestic politics, or strategic convergence. Despite the existence of the 'Israel lobby', Israel was more reliant on the US than ever before; America was able to publically threaten Israel by threatening to end the nascent 'special relationship'. Concurrently, the upgrade in bilateral relations did not result from 'strategic' alignment of Israeli and American interests; the opposite was the case, as the US employed carrots and sticks to goad Israel to accepting positions previously deemed untenable. This strategy led to a regional paradigm shift, as Israel and Egypt turned to negotiations and away from violence. Whilst 'land for peace' had been tentatively operationalised, Israel continued to occupy half the Sinai, whilst Egypt had yet to recognise Israel. With incremental diplomacy breaking the impasse, the stage was set for an increase in US

mediation and peace-making.

### *Entrenching the Special Relationship: The Camp David Accords*

President Carter had hoped for a comprehensive, multilateral peace conference to deal with the Arab-Israel conflict. However, regional events yet again derailed US planning. Egypt's President Sadat, who felt that the process was being unnecessarily delayed, despite his gamble in negotiating Sinai II, took another risk. In 1977, Sadat visited Israel, the first Arab leader to do so. This ground-breaking visit sent shockwaves through the region, with the Carter administration pivoting to back Sadat. Carter proposed the US host a summit between Sadat and Israel's new, right-wing leader, Menachem Begin, at the American president's Camp David retreat. Carter felt the time was ripe for a final-status agreement, enabling the fulfilment of land for peace.<sup>39</sup>

Negotiations took place between 5-17 September 1978, significantly longer than anticipated. Begin, suspicious of American intentions, demanded the US limit its role to getting the parties together, a position rejected by Carter and Sadat.<sup>40</sup> Carter felt Sadat was more flexible and often cooperated with the Egyptian leader: Carter asked Sadat to present the toughest possible proposal, so they could suggest to the Israelis that the US was forcing Egypt to make serious concessions.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Carter prepared a press release in case the summit failed, informing the world that he sided with Sadat, whilst heaping blame on Begin.<sup>42</sup> Whilst the US is often accused of siding with Israel in negotiations, at Camp David, Carter preferred to work with the Egyptians to counter Israeli obstinacy.

With the signing of the Camp David Accords on 17 September 1978, two separate agreements were signed: one dealing with Israel-Egypt peace, and another planning Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and

<sup>35</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 164.

<sup>36</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, 'The United States and Israel', p. 248.

<sup>37</sup> Ben-Zvi, 'Stumbling into an Alliance', p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Lasensky, 'Dollarizing Peace', p. 164.

<sup>39</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 179.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>42</sup> S. Telhami, 'The Camp David Accords: A Case of International Bargaining', Working Paper (University of Maryland, 2001), p. 24.

Gaza. The latter was never implemented; Israel's foreign ministry asserts that: 'the framework agreement regarding the future of Judea, Samaria (West Bank) and Gaza was...interpreted differently by Israel, Egypt, and the US'.<sup>43</sup> Quandt suggests the autonomy agreement was a product of all parties deferring disagreements to a later stage<sup>44</sup>. Begin was so uncompromising that a major crisis in Israel-US relations was only averted by the Iranian Revolution of 1978, diverting American regional priorities elsewhere.<sup>45</sup> Resultantly, the agreements failed to facilitate a broader, regional peace involving the Palestinians, Jordan and Syria, as Carter had hoped.

However, what was achieved at Camp David was extraordinary. The 'Land for peace' doctrine had now been implemented, leading to full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai and full, bilateral peace. Egypt, Israel's most powerful regional adversary, became the first Arab state to recognize Israel. Despite Begin's stubbornness, Israel indubitably undertook huge concessions, forcibly removing 7000 Jewish settlers and dismantling 150 military installations, the first time Israel had forcibly evicted Jewish citizens in such numbers. In abandoning Sinai, Israel evacuated 91% of the territory it had captured in the Six Day War, leaving behind oil fields that provided 50% of its oil needs.<sup>46</sup> The Straits of Tiran, the closing of which caused Israel to go to war in 1956 and 1967, were returned to Egyptian control, with guarantees of access for Israeli shipping.

The US rewarded and compensated both parties generously for their undertakings. Egypt received \$1.5 billion annually in US aid, which continues to this day. Israel received \$10.2 billion over four years, including \$3 billion to relocate military bases.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, 1979 saw the largest amount of US aid transfer to Israel in

one year, with the Jewish State receiving an unprecedented \$15.7 billion<sup>48</sup>. Hence, the Camp David treaty represented the high water mark of US aid to Israel, but also set a precedent. From 1979 to the present day, annual US aid to Israel remained more than \$2 billion every year, suggesting the critical role of Camp David in setting a paradigm of sustained, unprecedented US aid to Israel. Thus, Israeli withdrawal from Sinai had, for the fourth time, engineered a dramatic escalation in US-Israel bilateral relations. Withdrawal from occupied territory, rather than domestic pressures, or shared strategic interests, created, defined and escalated the 'special relationship' between the US and Israel.

#### *Land for Aid: Israel's Disengagement from Gaza*

Following the Sinai withdrawal, aid to Israel diversified and took on a life of its own beyond the 'positive sanctions' paradigm. Israel was declared a 'major non-NATO ally' in 1987, diversifying and increasing US arms sales to Israel. Concurrently, tensions publically exploded to levels matching the 1975 'reassessment' crisis in 1990, when US Secretary of State Baker publically suggested that the Israelis were not 'serious about peace'.<sup>49</sup> The US also withheld \$10 billion in loan guarantees in protest at Israeli settlement-building. Regardless of increasing aid, construction of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip continues to divide Israeli and American administrations.

In the new millennium, both American mediation and the 'land for peace' doctrine were severely tested. The US mediated Israeli-Syrian peace talks under three separate Israeli prime ministers, but each attempt was fruitless. The 2000 Camp David talks between Israel and the PLO collapsed, leading to the Second Intifada, a bloody conflict between Israeli and Palestinian forces. Whilst Israel withdrew from

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<sup>43</sup> Camp David Accords, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>44</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p201.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p224.

<sup>46</sup> Mitchell Bard, 'Israel-Egypt Relations: Background and Overview of the Peace Treaty', *Jewish Virtual Library*, online at [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/peace\\_with\\_Egypt.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/peace_with_Egypt.html) (last accessed 30 October 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, 'The United States and Israel', p. 251.

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<sup>48</sup> Moti Bassok, 'US Military Aid to Israel Exceeds \$100 Billion', 18 August 2008, online at <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.611001> (last accessed 30 October 2015).

<sup>49</sup> Alona Ferber, 'Six Times That US-Israel Ties Hit Rock Bottom', *Haaretz*, 17 February 2015, online at <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.642814> (last accessed 30 October 2015).

southern Lebanon in 2000, ending a 15-year occupation, this was undertaken without negotiations, US mediation, or a peace agreement with Israel's adversaries. This instance of Israeli 'unilateralism' was game-changing: perceiving a deficit of peace partners, Israel gave up on non-belligerence, seeking to retrench occupations in territory deemed non-beneficial to security. In 2003, Israel's Prime Minister Sharon proposed another 'unilateral' withdrawal, this time from the Gaza Strip. This strategy of 'unilateralism' is encapsulated by a letter from Sharon to US President Bush:

There exists no Palestinian partner with whom to advance peacefully toward a settlement (...) I have decided to initiate a process of gradual disengagement with the hope of reducing friction.<sup>50</sup>

Disengagement from Gaza was seen as desirable for security and demographic reasons.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the doctrine of 'land for peace' was no more, replaced by 'unilateral' withdrawals initiated by Israel, rather than international pressure. Peace was no longer the goal; instead Israeli policy-makers sought to reconfigure Israel's security doctrine, abandoning peripheral, divisive occupations.

However, the perception of unilateralism as Israel 'going it alone' is overly simplistic. Whilst 'land for peace' was eschewed, US-Israeli relations remained critical to the implementation of the Gaza disengagement. Peters argues that: 'Sharon was far more interested in reaching an understanding with the US than with the Palestinians'.<sup>52</sup> As the Second Intifada raged, Israel was under international pressure to change the status quo. Resultantly, Sharon sought to deflect American pressure by preparing his own plan.<sup>53</sup> Withdrawal was therefore Sharon's preemptive move against demands for concessions deemed harmful to Israeli security.

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<sup>50</sup> Exchange of Letters Between PM Sharon and President Bush, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2004, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>51</sup> See Joel Peters Joel, 'Gaza', in R. Caplan (ed.), *Exit Strategies and Peace Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 224-241.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>53</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 405.

With his own cabinet wavering, Sharon invoked the doctrine of 'positive sanctions' to win domestic support. Initially, aid was not forthcoming; US National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice argued:

'You take a unilateral step when that step is good for you. Therefore you cannot expect to get anything for having done yourself a favour.'<sup>54</sup>

Bilateral US-Israel ties were radically different than during previous withdrawals. Total US aid to Israel throughout 1973 was just under \$500 million; in 2004, Israel received over \$2.6 billion.<sup>55</sup> However, Israel was to receive additional assistance: from 2007, military aid was agreed to increase by \$6 billion over ten years.<sup>56</sup> Critically, Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip resulted in the US significantly softening its positions on the concessions required from Israel in a final status agreement with the Palestinians. In a personal letter to Sharon, Bush promised to refrain from imposing peace plans on Israel, also agreeing that no diaspora Palestinians would be resettled in Israel.<sup>57</sup> Equally critical were Bush's guarantees regarding the final borders of the Jewish state, affirming that:

It is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full...return to the armistice lines of 1949.<sup>58</sup>

For the first time, an American president had publically agreed that Israel's borders before the 1967 War were unsuitable for a final status agreement. This rendered Resolution 242 somewhat obsolete, as America no longer demanded full withdrawal for full peace. Bush also suggested that a 'freeze' on settlement

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<sup>54</sup> Zaki Shalom, 'The Disengagement Plan: Vision and Reality', in *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 13, No. 10 (October 2010), p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, 'US Foreign Aid to Israel: Total Aid', online at [https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/U.S.\\_Assistance\\_to\\_Israel1.html](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/U.S._Assistance_to_Israel1.html) (last accessed 30 October 2015).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Shalom, 'The Disengagement Plan', p. 97.

<sup>58</sup> Exchange of Letters Between PM Sharon and President Bush, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

building, a consistent US demand since the Camp David talks of 1978, should not be taken literally: Israel could continue building in the largest settlement blocs beyond the 1967 borders which would be retained by the Jewish State in a final-status deal.<sup>59</sup>

Indubitably, the 2005 Gaza withdrawal differed significantly to the withdrawals from Sinai. Previously, the US had resorted to 'sticks' alongside 'carrots', and had often been the primary driver of Israeli territorial withdrawal. By contrast, the Bush administration had been relatively detached from involvement in the peace process.<sup>60</sup> However, the withdrawal from Gaza was far from 'unilateral'. Israel deflected pressure to withdraw from the West Bank, gaining guarantees that a return to the 1967 borders would be ruled out. Employing the doctrine of positive sanctions, Israel had replaced 'land for peace' with 'land for aid'. Ignoring their Palestinian adversaries, Sharon went cap-in-hand to the US, demanding compensation for his strategic manoeuvre. In an era of significant American aid to Israel, which continued to flow unrelated to Israeli territorial withdrawal, US aid still played a role in generating status quo changing Israeli withdrawals from territory.

### *Conclusions and Implications*

'The US is a dominant –if not sole– actor in facilitating the peace treaties between Israel and its neighbours, and is key to any progress in (...) peace negotiations.'<sup>61</sup>

This study demonstrated the salience of the above quote, despite the retrenchment of the 'land for peace' paradigm. Whilst bilateral ties diversified beyond a framework of territorial withdrawal, the 'special relationship' - particularly American political, military and economic aid to Israel - continues to play a role in generating Israeli territorial concessions. Conversely, Israeli withdrawals were instrumental in defining, extending and

developing bilateral relations to their contemporary level. From 1957 to the contemporary era, the 'special relationship' was defined and developed by the degree of Israeli willingness to withdraw from occupied territory.

Israel turned to war in 1956 out of exasperation that the US would not accept its security concerns. Ironically, it was not the war itself, but the Israeli withdrawal, and subsequent territorial withdrawals from Sinai, that engendered a paradigm shift in American strategy, creating the doctrine of 'positive sanctions' and bringing the two countries closer together through a shared end goal of 'land for peace'. Before 1979, US annual aid to Israel reached \$1 billion three times: 1974 (Sinai I), 1976 (Sinai II) and 1978 (Camp David negotiations). Following the finalising of the Camp David Accords in 1979, US annual aid never dropped below \$2 billion annually.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the 2005 Gaza withdrawal generated unprecedented American political concessions to Israel. This contextualisation of the relationship's development bears critical ramifications for the contemporary debate as to the utility of the 'special relationship'.

This study does not refute that the so-called 'Israel lobby' exercises impressive levels of influence over American politicians. However, framing Israel-US relations as the sole product of the 'Israel lobby' is reductionist and false. Over-emphasising these domestic influences in foreign policy passes a value judgment, portraying relations as morally and strategically unsound. By contrast, this study demonstrated that upgrades in relations were conditional on Israeli territorial concessions. Whilst unprecedented, US-Israel ties have performed a transformative regional role. Increased relations fulfilled key US foreign policy objectives of power-projection through successful conflict mediation, engendering non-belligerence.

Concurrently, US-Israeli bilateral ties were the product of divergences in perceptions and praxis, rather than shared ideological and strategic bonds. America showered Israel with 'rewards' to change the cost-benefit analysis of

<sup>59</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, p. 407.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408.

<sup>61</sup> Cavari and Nyer, , 'From Bipartisanship to Dysergia', p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, 'US Foreign Aid to Israel'.

Israeli policy-makers and society as to what was constituted to serve Israel's 'national interest'. Since US aid has increased, US influence has also increased, forcing Israel to act with self-restraint.<sup>63</sup> During the late 1990s, the Israeli government considered reducing aid received from the US, fearing it had an excessive influence over Israeli policy.<sup>64</sup> Unprecedented aid also gave, and continues to give, the US unprecedented abilities to influence Israeli policy.

American aid to Israel has often been an inherently political transaction to engender a shift in Israeli policy, rather than a no-strings-attached 'hand out' due to fraternal ties or a domestic lobby. However frustrating local intransigency may be, US policy-makers should not cut aid without encouraging a change in Israeli behaviour. The US has proven itself particularly effective in curbing Israel's settlement growth in the West Bank during the tenure of President Obama. History has demonstrated that the 'carrot' of aid has worked well to moderate Israeli policy, alongside occasional necessary threats to restrict aid. Itself the product of territorial withdrawals, the 'special relationship' still has a critical role to play in generating withdrawal from territory, through 'positive sanctions' and extensive bilateral ties.



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<sup>63</sup> Bar-Siman-Tov, 'The United States and Israel', p. 232.

<sup>64</sup> See Jewish Virtual Library, 'US Foreign Aid to Israel: Israel's Bold Initiative to Reduce US Aid', online at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/boldaid.html> (last accessed 30 October 2015).