
1 *Introduction*

SOMETIME IN THE mid-1970s the term *peace process* began to be widely used to describe the American-led efforts to bring about a negotiated peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The phrase stuck, and ever since it has been synonymous with the gradual, step-by-step approach to resolving one of the world's most difficult conflicts.

In the years since 1967 the emphasis in Washington has shifted from the spelling out of the ingredients of “peace” to the “process” of getting there. This procedural bias, which frequently seems to characterize American diplomacy, reflects a practical, even legalistic side of American political culture. Procedures are also less controversial than substance, more susceptible to compromise, and thus easier for politicians to deal with. Much of U.S. constitutional theory focuses on how issues should be resolved—the process—rather than on substance—what should be done.

Yet whenever progress has been made toward Arab-Israeli peace through American mediation, there has always been a joining of substance and procedure. The United States has provided both a sense of direction and a mechanism. That, at its best, is what the “peace process” has been about. At worst, it has been little more than a slogan used to mask the marking of time.

The Pre-1967 Stalemate

The stage was set for the contemporary Arab-Israeli peace process by the 1967 Six-Day War. Until then, the conflict between Israel and the Arabs

had seemed almost frozen, moving neither toward resolution nor toward war. The ostensible issues in dispute were still those left unresolved by the armistice agreements of 1949. At that time, it had been widely expected that those agreements would simply be a step toward final peace talks. But the issues in dispute were too complex for the many mediation efforts of the early 1950s, and by the mid-1950s the cold war rivalry between Moscow and Washington had left the Arab-Israeli conflict suspended somewhere between war and peace. For better or worse, the armistice agreements had provided a semblance of stability from 1949 to 1967.

During this long truce the Israelis had been preoccupied with questions of an existential nature. Would the Arabs ever accept the idea of a Jewish state in their midst? Would recognition be accompanied by security arrangements that could be relied on? Would the Arabs insist on the return of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who had fled their homes in 1948–49, thereby threatening the Jewishness of the new state? And would the Arabs accept the 1949 armistice lines as recognized borders, or would they insist on an Israeli withdrawal to the indefensible lines of the 1947 United Nations partition agreement? As for tactics, would Israel be able to negotiate separately with each Arab regime, or would the Arabs insist on a comprehensive approach to peacemaking? Most Israelis felt certain that the Arabs would not provide reassuring answers to these questions and therefore saw little prospect for successful negotiations, whether with the conservative monarchs or with the new brand of nationalistic army officers.

From the Arab perspective, the conflict also seemed intractable, but the interests of existing regimes and the interests of the Palestinians, who had lost most from the creation of Israel, were by no means identical. The regimes struck the pose of defending the rights of the Palestinians to return to their homes or to be compensated for their losses. They withheld recognition from the Jewish state, periodically engaging in furious propaganda attacks against the “Zionist entity.” The more militant Arabs sometimes coupled their harsh rhetoric with support for guerrilla attacks on Israel. But others, such as Jordan and Lebanon, were fairly content with the armistice arrangements and even maintained under-the-table contacts with the Israelis. “No war, no peace” suited them well.

The Palestinians, not surprisingly, used all their moral and political capital to prevent any Arab regime from recognizing the Jewish state, and by the mid-1950s they had found a champion for their cause in Egypt’s president Gamal Abdel Nasser. From that point on, Arab nationalism and the demand for the restoration of Palestinian rights were Nasser’s most potent

weapons as he sought to unify the ranks of the Arab world. But Nasser also sought to steer a course between war and peace, at least until the momentous days of May 1967. Then, as tensions rose, Palestinian radicals, who had hoped to draw the Arab states into conflict with Israel on their behalf, rallied to Nasser's banner and helped to cut off any chance that he might retreat from the brink to which he had so quickly advanced.

The 1967 Watershed

The 1967 war transformed the frozen landscape of the Arab-Israeli conflict in dramatic ways. Israel revealed itself to be a military power able to outmatch all its neighbors. By the end of the brief war, Israel was in control of the Sinai desert; the West Bank of the Jordan River, including all of East Jerusalem; Gaza, with its teeming refugee camps; and the strategically important Golan Heights. More than a million Palestinians came under the control of the Israeli military, creating an acute dilemma for Israel. None of the post-1921 British mandate of Palestine was now free of Israeli control. If Israel kept the newly conquered land and granted the people full political rights, Israel would become a binational state, which few Israelis wanted. If it kept the land but did not grant political rights to the Palestinians, it would come to resemble other colonial powers, with predictable results. Finally, if Israel relinquished the land, it would retain its Jewish character, but could it live in peace and security? These were the alternatives debated within the fractious, often boisterous Israeli democracy.

Given the magnitude of their victory in the 1967 war, some Israelis seemed to expect right afterward that the Arabs would have no option but to sue for peace. But that did not happen. So, confident of its military superiority and assured of American support, Israel decided to wait for the Arabs to change their position. But what would happen to the occupied territories while Israel waited? Would they be held in trust, to be traded for peace and security at some future date? Or would they gradually and selectively be incorporated into Israel, as the nationalists on the right demanded? East Jerusalem, at least, would not be returned, and almost immediately Israel announced the unilateral expansion of the municipal boundaries and the annexation of the Arab-inhabited parts of the city. Palestinians living in Jerusalem would have the right to become Israeli citizens, but few took up the offer. Israel signaled its willingness to return most of the occupied territories, apart from Jerusalem, although the passage of time and changing circumstances gradually eroded that position.

The 1967 war was a shock to Arabs who had believed Nasser could end their sense of weakness and humiliation at the hands of the West. Indeed, although Nasser lived on for another three years after the war, his prestige was shattered. Arab nationalism of the sort he preached would never again be such a powerful force. Instead, regimes came to look more and more after their own narrow interests, and the Palestinians followed suit by organizing their own political movement, free of control by any Arab government. One of the few dynamic developments in the Arab world after the 1967 war was the emergence of a new generation of Palestinians leading the fight for their rights.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), originally supported by Arab regimes to keep the Palestinians under control, quickly became an independent actor in the region. It symbolized the hopes of many Palestinians and caused much concern among established Arab regimes, which were not used to seeing the Palestinians take matters into their own hands.

In theory, these changes in the Arab world might have opened the way for an easing of the Arab-Israeli conflict. A certain amount of self-criticism took place in Arab intellectual circles. Political realism began to challenge ideological sloganeering. But no one made any serious peace effort immediately after the 1967 war, and by September of that year the Arab parties had all agreed there would be no negotiations with Israel, no peace, and no recognition. Once again, “neither war nor peace” seemed to be a tolerable prospect for both Arabs and Israelis.

The Need for a Mediator

With the parties to the conflict locked into mutually unacceptable positions, the chance for diplomatic movement seemed to depend on others, especially the United States. Because of the close U.S.-Israeli relationship, many Arabs looked to Washington to press Israel for concessions. The example of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had pressed Israel to relinquish its gains from the Suez war of 1956, was still a living memory. The two main areas of Arab concern were the return of territories seized in the 1967 war and some measure of justice for the Palestinians. In return, it was implied, something short of peace would be offered to Israel, perhaps an end to belligerency or strengthened armistice arrangements.

The Arab regimes were still reluctant to promise full peace and recognition for Israel unless and until the Palestinians were satisfied, and that would require more than Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories. As time went by, and the PLO gained in prestige, it became more and more

difficult for the Arab states to pursue their narrowly defined interests with no regard for Palestinian claims. And the Arabs were reluctant to deal directly with Israel. If a deal were to be struck, it would be through the efforts of the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—and the United Nations.

By contrast, Israel was adamant that territory would not be returned for less than peace, recognition, and security. And the means for getting to a settlement would have to include direct negotiations with Israel by each Arab party. For most Israelis, the claims of the Palestinians were impossible to deal with. At best, Jordan could act as a stand-in for the Palestinians, who would have to be satisfied with some form of internationally supported rehabilitation and compensation scheme. Above all, Palestinians would not be allowed to return to their homes, except in very special circumstances of family reunions and in very small numbers.

American Ambivalence: Positions and Policies

Confronted with these almost contradictory positions, the United States was reluctant to get deeply involved in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. The Vietnam War was still raging in 1967, and the needs of the Middle East seemed less compelling than the daily demands of a continuing war in Southeast Asia. Still, from the outset the United States staked out a position somewhere in between the views of Israelis and Arabs. Israel, it was believed, was entitled to more than a return to the old armistice arrangements. Some form of contractually binding end to the state of war should be achieved, and Israeli security concerns would have to be met. At the same time, if the Arabs were prepared to meet those conditions, they should recover most, if not all, of the territory lost in 1967. These views were spelled out by President Lyndon Johnson soon after the war, and they became the basis for UN Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967, which thereafter provided the main reference point, with all its ambiguities, for peacemaking.¹

The basic American position adopted in 1967 has remained remarkably consistent. For example, each American president since 1967 has formally subscribed to the following points:

—Israel should not be required to relinquish territories captured in 1967 without a quid pro quo from the Arab parties involving peace, security, and recognition. This position, summarized in the formula “land for peace” and embodied in UN Resolution 242, applies to each front of the conflict.

—East Jerusalem is legally considered to be occupied territory whose status should eventually be settled in peace negotiations. Whatever its final political status, Jerusalem should not be physically redivided. Reflecting the legal American position on the city, the American embassy has remained in Tel Aviv, despite promises by many presidential candidates to move the embassy to Jerusalem.

—Israeli settlements beyond the 1967 armistice lines—the “green line”—are obstacles to peace. Until 1981 they were considered illegal under international law, but the administration of Ronald Reagan reversed position and declared they were not illegal. But Reagan, and especially George Bush, continued to oppose the creation of settlements. No American funds are to be used by Israel beyond the green line.

—However Palestinian rights may eventually be defined, they do not include the right of unrestricted return to homes within the 1967 lines, nor do they entail the automatic right of independence. All administrations have opposed the creation of a fully independent Palestinian state, preferring, at least until the mid-1990s, some form of association of the West Bank and Gaza with Jordan. Over time, however, the Jordan option—the idea that Jordan should speak for the Palestinians—has faded, and since 1988 the United States has agreed to deal directly with Palestinian representatives.

—Israel’s military superiority, its technological edge against any plausible coalition of Arab parties, has been maintained through American military assistance. Each U.S. administration has tacitly accepted the existence of Israeli nuclear weapons, with the understanding that they will not be brandished and can be regarded only as an ultimate deterrent, not as a battlefield weapon. American conventional military aid is provided, in part, to ensure that Israel will not have to rely on its nuclear capability for anything other than deterrence.

With minor adjustments, every president from Lyndon Johnson to Bill Clinton has subscribed to each of these positions. They have been so fundamental that they are rarely even discussed. To change any one of these positions would entail costs, both domestic and international. These positions represent continuity and predictability. But they do not always determine policy. Policy, unlike these positions, is heavily influenced by tactical considerations, and here presidents and their advisers differ with one another, and sometimes with themselves, from one moment to the next.

Policies involve judgments about what will work. How can a country best be influenced? What levers exist to influence a situation? Should aid be offered or withheld? Will reassurance or pressure—or both—be most

effective? When is the optimal time to launch an initiative? Should it be done in public or private? How much prior consultation should take place, and with whom? On these matters, there is no accepted wisdom. Each president and his top advisers must evaluate the realities of the Middle East, of the international environment, of the domestic front, and of human psychology before reaching a subjective judgment. While positions tend to be predictable, policies are not. They are the realm where leadership makes all the difference. And part of leadership is knowing when a policy has failed and should be replaced with another.

How Policy Is Made: Alternative Models

More than any other regional conflict, the Arab-Israeli dispute has consistently competed for top priority on the American foreign-policy agenda. This study tries to account for the prominence of the Arab-Israeli peace process in American policy circles since 1967. It seeks to analyze the way in which perceived national interests have interacted with domestic political considerations to ensure that Arab-Israeli peacemaking has become the province of the president and his closest advisers.

Because presidents and secretaries of state—not faceless bureaucrats—usually set the guidelines for policy on the Arab-Israeli dispute, it is important to try to understand how they come to adopt the views that guide them through the labyrinthine complexities of Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Here several models compete for attention.

One model would have us believe that policies flow from a cool deliberation of national interest. This *strategic* model assumes that decisions are made by rational decisionmakers. Such a perspective implies that it does not much matter who occupies the Oval Office. The high degree of continuity in several aspects of the American stance toward the conflict since 1967 would serve as evidence that broad interests and rational policy processes provide the best explanation for policy.

But anyone who has spent time in government will testify that policymaking is anything but orderly and rational. As described by the *bureaucratic politics* model, different agencies compete with one another, fixed organizational procedures are hard to change, and reliable information is difficult to come by. This perspective places a premium on bureaucratic rivalries and the “game” of policymaking. Policy outcomes are much less predictable from this perspective. Instead, one needs to look at who is influencing whom. Microlevel analysis is needed, in contrast to the broad systemic approach favored by the strategic model. Much of the gossip of

Washington is based on the premise that the insiders' political game is what counts in setting policy. Foreign embassies try desperately to convince their governments back home that seemingly sinister policy outcomes are often simply the result of the normal give and take of everyday bureaucratic struggles, the compromises, the foul-ups, the trading of favors that are part of the Washington scene. If conspiracy theorists thrive on the strategic model—there must be a logical explanation for each action taken by the government—political cynics and comics have a field day with the bureaucratic politics model.²

A third model, one emphasizing the importance of *domestic politics*, is also injected into the study of American policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. Without a doubt Arab-Israeli policymaking in Washington does get tangled up in internal politics. Congress, where support for Israel is usually high, and where pro-Israeli lobbies tend to concentrate their efforts, can frequently exert influence over foreign policy, largely through its control over the budget.³ While some senators and representatives no doubt do consider the national interest, for many others positions taken on the Arab-Israeli conflict are little more than part of their domestic re-election strategy. Some analysts have maintained that American Middle East policy is primarily an expression of either the pro-Israeli lobby or the oil lobby. Little evidence will be found here for such an extreme view, even though in some circumstances the lobbies can be influential.

Besides considering the role of Congress, one must also take into account the effect of the workings of the American political system, especially the four-year cycle of presidential elections. This cycle imposes some regular patterns on the policymaking process that have little to do with the world outside but a great deal to do with the way power is pursued and won through elections.⁴ One should hardly be surprised to find that every four years the issue of moving the American embassy to Jerusalem reemerges, arms sales to Arab countries are deferred, and presidential contenders emphasize those parts of their programs that are most congenial to the supporters of Israel. Nor should one be surprised to find that once the election is over, policy returns to a more evenhanded course.

The Mind of the President

As much as each of these approaches—strategic-rational analysis, bureaucratic politics, and domestic politics—can illuminate aspects of how the United States has engaged in the Arab-Israeli peace process,⁵ the most important factor, as this book argues, is the view of the conflict—the defi-

dition of the situation—held by the president and his closest advisers, usually including the secretary of state. The president is more than just the first among equals in a bureaucratic struggle or in domestic political debates. And he is certainly not a purely rational, strategic thinker.

More than anything else, an analyst studying American policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict should want to know how the president—and the few key individuals to whom he listens—makes sense of the many arguments, the mountain of “facts,” the competing claims he hears whenever his attention turns to the Arab-Israeli conflict. To a large degree he must impose order where none seems to exist; he must make sense out of something he may hardly understand; he must simplify when complexity becomes overwhelming; and he must decide to authorize others to act in his name if he is not interested enough, or competent enough, to formulate the main lines of policy.

What, then, do the president and his top advisers rely on if not generalized views that they bring with them into office? No senior policymaker in American history has ever come to power with a well-developed understanding of the nuances of the Arab-Israeli dispute, the intricacies of its history, or even much knowledge of the protagonists. At best policymakers have general ideas, notions, inclinations, biases, predispositions, fragments of knowledge. To some extent “ideology” plays a part, although there has never really been a neat liberal versus conservative, Democrat versus Republican divide over the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Any account of policymaking would, however, be incomplete if it did nothing more than map the initial predispositions of key decisionmakers. As important as these are in setting the broad policy guidelines for an administration, they are not enough. Policy is not static, set once and forever after unchanged. Nor is policy reassessed every day. But over time views do change, learning takes place, and policies are adjusted. As a result, a process of convergence seems to take place, whereby the views of senior policymakers toward the Arab-Israeli conflict differ most from those of their predecessors when they first take office and tend to resemble them by the end of their terms. Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter disagreed on Middle East policy in 1976–77 but were later to coauthor articles on what should be done to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even Ronald Reagan in his later years seemed closer to his predecessor’s outlook than to his own initial approach to Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

It is this process of adjustment, modification, and adaptation to the realities of the Middle East and to the realities of Washington that allows each administration to deal with uncertainty and change. Without this

on-the-job learning, American foreign policy would be at best a rigid, brittle affair.

What triggers a change in attitudes? Is the process of learning incremental, or do changes occur suddenly because of crises or the failure of previous policies? When change takes place, are core values called into account, or are tactics merely revised? The evidence presented here suggests that change rarely affects deeply held views. Presidents and their advisers seem reluctant to abandon central beliefs. Basic positions are adhered to with remarkable tenacity, accounting for the stability in the stated positions of the United States on the issues in dispute in the Arab-Israeli conflict. They represent a deep consensus. But politicians and diplomats have no trouble making small adjustments in their understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and that is often enough to produce a substantial change in policy, if not in basic positions or in overall strategy. One simple change in judgment—that President Anwar Sadat of Egypt should be taken seriously—was enough to lead to a major reassessment of American policy in the midst of the October 1973 war.

Since most of the American-led peace process has been geared toward procedures, not substance, the ability of top decisionmakers to experiment with various approaches as they learn more about the conflict has imparted an almost experimental quality to American foreign policy in the Middle East. Almost every conceivable tactic is eventually considered, some are tried, and some even work. And if one administration does not get it right, within a matter of years another team will be in place, willing to try other approaches. Although American foreign policy is sometimes maddening in its lack of consistency and short attention span, this ability to abandon failed policies and move on has often been the hallmark of success.

Foreign-policymaking seems to involve an interplay among the initial predispositions of top policymakers, information about the specific issues being considered, the pull of bureaucratic groupings, the weight of domestic political considerations, the management of transitions from one presidency to the next, and the impact of events in the region of concern. It is often in the midst of crises that new policies are devised, that the shortcomings of one approach are clearly seen, and that a new definition of the situation is imposed. And it is in the midst of crises that presidential powers are at their greatest.

Only rarely are crises anticipated and new policies adopted to ward them off. As a result, American policy often seems to run on automatic pilot until jolted out of its inertial course by an event beyond its control. Critics who find this pattern alarming need to appreciate how complex it

is to balance the competing perspectives that vie for support in the Oval Office and how difficult it is to set a course that seems well designed to protect the multiple interests of a global power like the United States—and to do all this without risking one's political life.

National Interests

To get a sense of the difficulty, consider the nature of American interests in the Middle East, as seen from the perspective of the White House. An assessment of these interests almost always takes place at the outset of a new administration, or just after a crisis, in the belief, usually unjustified, that light will be shed on what should be done to advance the prospects of Arab-Israeli peace at the least risk to American interests.

Politicians and some analysts like to invoke the national interest because it seems to encompass tangible, hard-headed concerns as opposed to sentimental, emotional considerations. There is something imposing about cloaking a decision in the garb of national security interests, as if no further debate were needed.

In the real world of policymaking, interests are indeed discussed, but most officials understand that any definition of a national interest contains a strong subjective element. Except for limited areas of foreign affairs, such as trade policy, objective yardsticks do not exist to determine the national interest.

In discussions of the Arab-Israeli conflict, several distinct national interests often compete, confounding the problems of policymaking. For example, most analysts until about 1990 would have said that a major American interest in the Middle East, and therefore related to the handling of Arab-Israeli diplomacy, was the *containment of Soviet influence* in the region. This interest derived from a broader strategy of containment that had been developed initially for Europe but was gradually universalized during the cold war.

In Europe the strategy of containment had led to creation of the Marshall Plan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). But the attempt to replicate these mechanisms of containment in the Middle East had failed, in part because of the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict. So, however much American policymakers might worry about the growth of Soviet influence in the region, they rarely knew what should be done about it. In the brief period of a few months in 1956–57, the United States opposed the Israeli-French-British attack on Egypt (the Suez war), announced the Eisenhower Doctrine of support to anticommunist regimes in the area, forced the Israelis

to withdraw from Sinai, and criticized Nasser's Egypt for its intervention in the affairs of other Arab countries. How all that contributed coherently to the agreed-on goal of limiting Soviet influence was never quite clear.

Over the years many policies toward the Arab-Israeli conflict have been justified, at least in part, by this concern about the Soviet Union. Arms sales have been made and denied in pursuit of this interest; and the Soviets have been excluded from, and included in, discussions on the region, all as part of the goal of trying to manage Soviet influence in the region.

One might think that a strategy of challenging the Soviets in the region would have led the United States to adopt belligerent, interventionist policies, as it did in Southeast Asia. But in the Middle East the concern about overt Soviet military intervention was high, especially from the mid-1960s on, and therefore any American intervention, it was felt, might face a comparable move by the Soviets. Indeed, on several occasions, in the June 1967 war, in 1970 in Jordan, during the October 1973 war, and to a lesser degree in 1982 in Lebanon, the United States feared a possible military confrontation with the Soviet Union. Thus, however ardently American officials might want to check Soviet advances, they wanted to do so without much risk of direct military confrontation with Moscow. In brief, the Soviet angle was never far from the minds of policymakers, but it did little to help clarify choices. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990–91, this interest suddenly disappeared, leaving oil and Israel as the two main American concerns in the Middle East.

Oil has always been a major reason for the United States to pay special attention to the Middle East, but its connection to the Arab-Israeli conflict has not always been apparent. American companies were active in developing the oil resources of the area, especially in Saudi Arabia; the industrialized West was heavily dependent on Middle East oil; and American import needs began to grow from the early 1970s on.⁶

The basic facts about oil in the region were easy to understand. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran, along with the small states of the Persian Gulf littoral, sit atop about two-thirds of the known reserves of oil in the world—reserves with remarkably low production costs. Thus Middle East stability seemed to go hand in hand with access to relatively inexpensive supplies of oil.

Throughout most of the 1950s and 1960s Middle East oil was readily available for the reconstruction of Europe and Japan. American companies made good profits, and threatened disruptions of supply had little effect. A conscious effort to keep Persian Gulf affairs separate from the Arab-Israeli conflict seemed to work quite well.

But by the late 1960s the British had decided to withdraw their military presence from east of Suez. How, if at all, would that affect the security of Gulf oil supplies? Should the United States try to fill the vacuum with forces of its own, or should it try to build up regional powers, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia? If arms were sold to Saudi Arabia to help ensure access to oil supplies, how would the Israelis and the other Arab countries react? What would the Soviets do? In short, how could an interest, which everyone agreed was important, be translated into concrete policies?

American calculations about oil were further complicated by the fact that the United States is both a large producer and a large importer of oil. For those concerned with enhancing domestic supplies, the low production costs of Middle East oil are always a potential threat. Texas oil producers argue for quotas to protect them from “cheap” foreign oil. But consumers want cheap oil and will therefore resist gasoline taxes, tariffs, or quotas designed to prop up the domestic oil industry. No American president would know how to answer the question of the proper price of Middle East oil. If forced to give an answer, he would have to mumble something like “not too high and not too low.” In practice, the stability and predictability of oil supplies have been seen as more important than a specific price. This perception has reinforced the view that the main American interest is in reliable access to Middle East oil, and therefore in regional stability. Still, price cannot be ignored. In 2000 the annual American import bill for oil from the Middle East exceeded \$20 billion, out of a total oil import bill of more than \$60 billion. Each one-dollar increase in the price of oil added more than \$1 billion to the oil import bill.

The other main interest that has dominated discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the *special American commitment to Israel*. The United States was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the idea of a Jewish state in part of Palestine. That support was clearly rooted in a sense of moral commitment to the survivors of the holocaust, as well as in the intense attachment of American Jews to Israel. During the 1980s a “strategic” rationale was added to the traditional list of reasons for supporting Israel, although this view was never universally accepted.

Support for Israel was always tempered by a desire to maintain some interests in surrounding Arab countries, because of either oil or competition with the Soviet Union. As a result, through most of the years from 1949 until the mid-1960s, the United States provided few arms and only modest amounts of aid. As Eisenhower demonstrated in 1956, support for Israel did not mean offering a blank check.

Managing the relationship with the Soviet Union in the Middle East, access to inexpensive oil, and support for Israel were American interests readily accepted by successive administrations. Yet what the implications for policy were of any one, to say nothing of all three, of these interests was not clear. To take the most difficult case, what should be done when one set of interests seemed to be at variance with another? Which should get more weight, the economic interest of oil, the strategic interest of checking Soviet advances, or the moral interest of supporting Israel?

Without a common yardstick, the interests were literally incommensurate. How could arms for the Saudis or Jordanians be squared with support for Israel? How could Soviet inroads in a country like Egypt be checked? Was it better to oppose Nasser to teach him a lesson about the costs of relying on the Soviets, or should an effort be made to win him away from dependence on Moscow? And what would either of these approaches mean for relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia?

In brief, U.S. national interests were clearly involved in the Middle East and would be affected by every step of the Arab-Israeli peace process. But there was almost no agreement on what these interests meant in terms of concrete policies. Advocates of different perspectives, as will be seen, were equally adept at invoking national interests to support their preferred courses of action. Often policy preferences seemed to come first, and then the interests were found to justify the policy. Precisely because of these dilemmas, policymaking could not be left to bureaucrats. The stakes were too high, the judgments too political. Thus Arab-Israeli policy, with remarkable frequency, landed in the lap of the president or his secretary of state. More than for most issues of foreign policy, presidential leadership became crucial to the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Insofar as presidents and their advisers saw a way to resolve the potential conflict among American interests in the Middle East, it was by promoting the Arab-Israeli peace process. This policy is the closest equivalent to that of containment toward the Soviet Union—a policy with broad bipartisan support that promises to protect a range of important American interests. If Arab-Israeli peace could be achieved, it was thought, Soviet influence in the region would decline, Israeli security would be enhanced, and American relations with key Arab countries would improve. Regional stability would therefore be more easily achieved, and oil supplies would be less threatened. Obviously, other sources of trouble would still exist in the region, but few disagreed on the desirability of Arab-Israeli peace or the need for American leadership to achieve it. The differences, and they were many, came over the feasibility of a peace settlement

and over appropriate tactics. In making these judgments, presidents made their most important contribution to the formulation of policy.

Presidential Leadership and Policymaking

In U.S. politics, there is a strong presumption that who is president matters. Huge sums are spent on electoral campaigns to select the president. The office receives immense respect and deference, and most writers of American political history assume that the man occupying the White House can shape events. Does this perspective merely reflect an individualism rooted in American culture, or does it contain a profound truth?

One can easily imagine situations in which it would be meaningless to explain a policy by looking at the individuals responsible for making the decisions. If no real margin for choice exists, individuals do not count for much. Other factors take precedence. For example, to predict the voting behavior of senators from New York on aid to Israel, one normally need not consider their identity. It is enough to know something about the constituency, the overwhelming support for Israel among New Yorkers, and the absence of countervailing pressures to be virtually certain about the policy choice of an individual senator.

If context can account for behavior, so can the nature of perceived interests or objectives. If we were studying Japan's policies toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, we would not be especially concerned with who was prime minister at any given moment. It would make more sense to look at the dependence of Japan on Arab oil and the lack of any significant cultural or economic ties to Israel to predict that Japan would adopt a generally pro-Arab policy. When interests easily converge on a single policy, individual choice can be relegated to the background.

Finally, if a nation has no capability to act in foreign policy, we will not be particularly interested in the views of its leaders. To ask why a small European country does not assume a more active role in promoting an Arab-Israeli settlement does not require us to examine who is in charge of policy. Instead, the absence of significant means to affect the behavior of Arabs and Israelis is about all we need to know. A country without important economic, military, or diplomatic assets has virtually no choices to make in foreign policy. Obviously none of these conditions holds for the United States in its approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Capabilities for action do exist. The nature of American interests, as generally understood by policymakers, does not predetermine a single course of action. And, despite the obvious constraints imposed by the structure of the interna-

tional system and domestic politics, choices do exist on most issues, even though at times the margin of choice may be narrow.

Confronting Complexity and Uncertainty

Most political leaders, with no noteworthy alteration in personality or psychodynamics, are likely at some point to change positions on policy issues. Often such changes will be portrayed as opportunism or waffling. But they could instead be a reaction to a complicated situation, suggesting that people can learn as new information is acquired. Particularly when dealing with complex events and ambiguous choices, people may shift their positions quite suddenly, without altering the fundamental aspects of their approaches to policy. As Raymond Bauer said, “Policy problems are sufficiently complex that for the vast majority of individuals or organizations it is conceivable—given the objective features of the situation—to imagine them ending up on any side of the issue.”⁷

Policymakers often find it difficult to recognize the difference between a good proposal and a bad proposal. In normal circumstances, bargaining and compromise may be rational courses for a politician to follow, but adopting either of these courses of action assumes that issues have been defined according to some understood criteria. When such criteria are not obvious, what should one do?

On most issues of importance, policymakers operate in an environment in which uncertainty and complexity are dominant. Addressing an unknowable future with imperfect information about the past and present, policymakers must use guidelines and simplifications drawn from their own experience, the “lessons of history,” or the consensus of their colleagues. The result is often a cautious style of decisionmaking that strives merely to make incremental changes in existing policies.⁸ At times, however, very sudden shifts in policy may also take place. How can one account for both these outcomes?

Leadership is only rarely the task of selecting between good and bad policies. Instead, the anguish and challenge of leadership is to choose between equally plausible arguments about how best to achieve one’s goals. For example, most presidents and their advisers have placed a very high value on achieving peace in the Middle East. But values do not easily translate into policy. Instead, several reasonable alternatives, such as the following, are likely to compete for presidential attention:

—If Israel is to feel secure enough to make the territorial concessions necessary to gain Arab acceptance of the terms of a peace agreement, it

must continue to receive large quantities of American military and economic aid.

—If Israel feels too strong and self-confident, it will not see the need for any change in the status quo. U.S. aid must therefore be used as a form of pressure.

Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Bush subscribed to both the foregoing views at different times.

Similarly, consider the following propositions, which were widely entertained by U.S. presidents until the breakup of the USSR:

—The Soviet Union has no interest in peace in the Middle East, because it would lose influence unless it could exploit tensions in the area. Hence the United States cannot expect cooperation from the Soviet Union in the search for a settlement.

—The Soviets, like ourselves, have mixed interests in the Middle East. They fear a confrontation and are therefore prepared to reach a settlement, provided they are allowed to participate in the diplomatic process. By leaving the Soviet Union out, the United States provides it with an incentive to sabotage the peacemaking effort. Therefore, U.S.-Soviet agreement will be essential to reaching peace in the Middle East.

Concerning the Arabs, one may also hear diverse opinions:

—Only when the Arabs have regained their self-respect and feel strong will they be prepared to make peace with Israel.

—When the Arabs feel that time is on their side, they increase their demands and become more extreme. Only a decisive military defeat will convince them that Israel is here to stay and that they must use political means to regain their territory.

Each of these propositions has been seriously entertained by recent American presidents and secretaries of state. One could almost say that all of them have been believed at various times by some individuals. The key element in selecting among these plausible interpretations of reality is not merely whether one is pro-Israeli or pro-Arab, or hard line or not so hard line on relations with Moscow. A more complex process is at work.

Lessons of History

In choosing among plausible, but imperfectly understood, courses of action, policymakers inevitably resort to simplifications.⁹ Categorical inferences are thus made; confusing events are placed in comprehensible structures; reality is given a definition that allows purposive action to take place. Recent experience is a particularly potent source of guidance for

the future. If a policy has worked in one setting, policymakers will want to try it in another context as well. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, for example, apparently relied on his experiences in negotiating with the Chinese, Russians, and Vietnamese when he approached negotiations with the Arabs and Israelis in 1974–75. Step-by-step diplomacy was the result.

More general historical “lessons” may loom large in the thinking of policymakers as they confront new problems.¹⁰ President Harry Truman was especially inclined to invoke historical analogies. He well understood that the essence of presidential leadership was the ability to make decisions in the face of uncertainty and to live with their consequences. By relying on history, he was able to reassure himself that his decisions were well founded.¹¹

Several historical analogies have been notably effective in structuring American views of reality. The lessons of Munich, for example, have been pointed to repeatedly over the years, principally that the appeasement of dictators serves only to whet their appetite for further conquest. Hence a firm, resolute opposition to aggression is required. The “domino theory” is a direct descendant of this perspective, as was the policy of containment.

A second set of guidelines for policy stems from President Woodrow Wilson’s fourteen points after World War I, especially the emphasis on self-determination and opposition to spheres of influence. As embodied in the Atlantic Charter in 1941, these principles strongly influenced American policy during the Second World War.¹² Since the failure of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, new “lessons” have been drawn, which warn against overinvolvement, commitments in marginal areas, excessive reliance on force, and risks of playing the role of world policeman. Whether these will prove as durable as the examples of Munich and Wilsonian idealism remains to be seen, but American policy continues to be discussed in terms of these historical analyses.

When recent experience and historical analogies fail to resolve dilemmas of choice, certain psychological mechanisms may come to the rescue. Wishful thinking is a particularly potent way to resolve uncertainty. When in doubt, choose the course that seems least painful, that fits best with one’s hopes and expectations; perhaps it will turn out all right after all. In any event, one can almost always rationalize a choice after making it. Good reasons can be found even for bad policies, and often the ability to come up with a convincing rationale will help to overcome uncertainties.

Apart from such well-known but poorly understood aspects of individual psychology, the social dynamics of a situation often help to resolve

uncertainty. If through discussion a group can reach consensus on the proper course of action, individuals are likely to suppress their private doubts. Above all, when a president participates in a group decision, a strong tendency toward consensus is likely. As some scholars have emphasized, presidents must go to considerable lengths to protect themselves from the stultifying effects of group conformity in their presence and the tendency to suppress divergent views.¹³ Neither President Johnson's practice of inviting a large number of advisers to consult with him nor President Nixon's effort to use the National Security Council to channel alternatives to him are guarantees against the distortions of group consensus, in part because presidents value consensus as a way to resolve doubts.

At any given moment presidents and their key advisers tend to share fairly similar and stable definitions of reality. However such definitions emerge, whether through reference to experience or to history, through wishful thinking and rationalization, or through group consensus, they will provide guidelines for action in the face of uncertainty. Complexity will be simplified by reference to a few key criteria. In the Arab-Israeli setting, these will usually have to do with the saliency of issues, their amenability to solution, the role of the Soviet Union (up until late 1990), and the value of economic and military assistance to various parties.

Crises and the Redefining of Issues

Crises play an extremely important role in the development of these guidelines. By definition, crises involve surprise, threat, and increased uncertainty. Previous policies may well be exposed as flawed or bankrupt. Reality no longer accords with previous expectations. In such a situation a new structure of perceptions is likely to emerge, one that will reflect presidential perspectives to the degree that the president becomes involved in handling the crisis. If the crisis is satisfactorily resolved, a new and often quite durable set of assumptions will guide policy for some time.

Often crises can produce significant policy changes without causing a sweeping reassessment of a decisionmaker's views. It may be only a greater sense of urgency that brings into play a new policy. Or it may be a slight shift in assumptions about the Soviet role, for example, or the advantages of pursuing a more conciliatory policy toward Egypt. Small adjustments in a person's perceptions, in the weight accorded to one issue as opposed to another, can lead to substantial shifts of emphasis, of nuance, and therefore of action. Again, policymakers do not change from being pro-Israeli to being pro-Arab overnight, but crises may bring into focus new relations

among issues or raise the importance of one interest, thus leading to changes in policy. Basic values will remain intact, but perceptions and understanding of relationships may quickly change.

In the case studies that follow, I explore the important role of crises in defining issues for presidents and their advisers. And I try to account for their views, to understand their reasoning, and to see situations from their standpoint. Between crises, as is noted, it is difficult to bring about changes in policies that were forged in crisis and have the stamp of presidential approval.

Admittedly, this approach shortchanges the role of Congress, public opinion, interest groups, the media, and the bureaucracy. All these are worthy subjects of study and undoubtedly have influenced American diplomacy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nor do I discuss in this book why Arabs and Israelis made the decisions that they did. Only in passing do I deal with the protagonists in the conflict, describing their views but not subjecting them to the kind of analysis reserved for American policy.

Starting, then, with the key role of the president and his advisers in shaping policy, particularly in moments of crisis, when domestic and organizational constraints are least confining, the book examines how politics and bureaucratic habits affect both the formulation and implementation of policies in normal times. But at the center of the study are those rare moments when policymakers try to make sense out of the confusing flow of events, when they strive to relate action to purposes, for it is then that the promises and limitations of leadership are most apparent.