



**ARAB-ISRAELI
DIPLOMACY
UNDER CARTER
THE U.S., ISRAEL AND
THE PALESTINIANS**

JØRGEN JENSEHAUGEN

I.B. TAURIS

Jørgen Jensehaugen is Associate Professor of Modern History at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. He holds a PhD in History from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), and has previously worked as a researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). He has published extensively on the Arab–Israeli conflict, including in the journals *The International History Review* and *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.

'Jorgen Jensehaugen has provided an original piece of work, both in his use of US archival material and his examination of the way the Carter administration dealt with the Palestinian issue and the matter of Palestinian participation in negotiations. Indeed, this work fills a void, enlightening us on the inner workings of Carter's team regarding the conflict, while also highlighting the Palestinian aspect of the negotiations at that time (as distinct from the relatively large literature on Egyptian–Israeli relations of the same period). The volume provides new material and insights regarding deliberations within the Carter administration prior to the Camp David talks. Moreover the author brings a wealth of supporting information and detail, analysing the factors involved in the decisions taken, and the individuals behind them. Truly a valuable contribution to our understanding of the history of American policy regarding the Palestinian issue.'

Galia Golan, Darwin Professor Emerita, Hebrew University of Jerusalem; author of *Israeli Peace Negotiations since 1967* (2014)

'This is a well-researched and expertly told account of the Carter administration's diplomatic efforts in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Jensehaugen has written one of the most compelling narratives of Jimmy Carter's pursuit of, and ultimate failure to achieve, comprehensive Arab–Israeli peace.'

Asaf Siniver, Associate Professor of International Security,
University of Birmingham

ARAB–ISRAELI DIPLOMACY UNDER CARTER

The US, Israel and the Palestinians

JØRGEN JENSEHAUGEN

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

I.B. TAURIS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

BLOOMSBURY, I.B. TAURIS and the I.B. Tauris logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2018
Paperback edition first published 2020

Copyright © Jørgen Jensenhaugen, 2018

Jørgen Jensenhaugen has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgements on p. xi constitute
an extension of this copyright page.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval
system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for,
any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given
in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher
regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have
ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-7883-1052-9
PB: 978-0-7556-1683-1
ePDF: 978-1-8386-0801-9
eBook: 978-1-8386-0800-2

Series: Library of Modern Middle East Studies, volume 212

Typeset in Garamond Three by OKS Prepress Services, Chennai, India

To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

To Amanda

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1. President Carter and the Palestinians	1
Carter's rising star in Palestine	7
2. US Presidents and the Palestinians	10
The first Arab–Israeli war	11
The rise of pan-Arabism	13
The six-day war: Shifting fronts	16
Fatah takes charge	18
1970: Exiled from exile	20
The 1973 Arab–Israeli war	23
Step by step	27
Sinai II	29
Failing to see the Palestinians	31
3. The Comprehensive Approach	35
Coming into office	36
Developing the comprehensive approach	37
Theory to practice: Visiting the Middle East	38
The Clinton speech and tidings from Moscow	40
Theory to practice: State visits	41
To talk or not to talk?	45
Talking around the dilemma: Palestinian back channels	47
Begin the game-changer	50

The Begin visit	54
Second Vance tour	57
Problems with the PLO	58
Peace treaty drafts	61
4. Clinging to Comprehensive Peace	66
Including the PLO through Syria and the Soviet Union	68
Multi-bilateral negotiations: Israel sets the tone	73
The US–Soviet joint communiqué	76
Duelling with Dayan	78
Who can accept the working paper?	80
Selling the working paper	82
Could Egypt go it alone?	83
Jimmy gets personal	85
5. The Jerusalem Bombshell	89
Going to Jerusalem	91
Visiting Israel	93
Taking the talks to Cairo	97
Consequences of a separate peace	99
Home rule for the Palestinians	102
The Aswan statement	106
6. The Torturous Road to Camp David	111
Missing an opportunity to pressure Begin	115
Begin and Carter clash	119
Carter's face-off with the Israel lobby	123
London talks	125
The invitation to Camp David	128
7. Camp David and the Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty	132
Study papers – still a comprehensive strategy	132
Camp David Phase I: Openings and trilateral meetings	134
Camp David Phase II: The US draft	136
Camp David Phase III: Changing the framework, weakening the ties	137
Camp David Phase IV: Endgame	141
Evaluating the framework	143
Difficult rounds ahead	146

Settlement expansion without consequence	148
Another go with the PLO?	151
There goes the deadline	153
Begin in Washington	155
Arab reactions	160
8. Where do we Go Now, but Nowhere?	162
Finding some Palestinians, <i>any</i> Palestinians	163
Starting the Palestinian autonomy talks	165
From bad to worse in the Middle East and beyond	169
Begin the builder	170
Things fall apart	172
A last try	173
9. A Failed Ambition	177
The Carter legacy	178
Changing conditions	180
Building a house of cards	182
On shaky ground	185
Sadat's initiatives	187
The cards fall down	189
Camp David	191
Whither the pressure	194
<i>Notes</i>	198
<i>Bibliography</i>	266
<i>Index</i>	279

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Forty years ago Carter, Begin and Sadat gathered at Camp David. Absent, as always, were the Palestinians. This Palestinian absence from the various Arab–Israeli peace processes has long intrigued me, and I remember the immediate sense of a lost opportunity the first time I read that President Carter had wanted to include the Palestinians in his peace-making. What had happened to that effort? That question drove me to conduct this research. Now, several years later, I am the proud author of this book.

It is hard to remember all the people who have assisted me along the way. For help in the final stages I would very much like to thank my editor Sophie Rudland, who believed in the project from our first conversation at MESA, and Nils A. Nadeau who has lifted the precision of the text several notches.

For earlier stages of the work I am highly indebted to Hilde Henriksen Waage and Ann Lesch, who both critically commented on every single sentence of the various drafts with a level of knowledge that I can only hope to strive for. Galia Golan and Asaf Siniver, thank you for the highly engaging and inspiring discussion in Trondheim. It really helped me to believe in this work and to strengthen several of my arguments.

Thank you to all the individuals that have commented on various pieces of text along the way, Sarah Salameh, Marte Heian-Engdal, Mari Salberg, Helge Jensehaugen, Hans Otto Frøland, Véronique Pouillard, Tor Egil Førland, Tore Tingvold Petersen, Helge Pharo, Kenneth Weisbrode, Geir Almlid, Ingrid Lundestad, Ole Magnus Theisen and the anonymous reviewers.

I am also very grateful to the various institutions which have hosted me in one way or the other during this research and writing process: PRIO, NTNU, UiO, HiL and the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. To all the archivists in Atlanta, London, Washington and Maryland – without your help I would be fumbling in the dark. Thank you especially to Sarah J. Chilton, Ceri McCarron and William B. Quandt who have been so kind as to send me archive material digitally.

Thanks also to my parents who seem to have a knack for raising historians with an interest in the Middle East.

Most importantly, Sarah, Amanda and Oliver, you mean much more to me than any of this. If I ever give the opposite impression, I deeply apologise. I love you.

CHAPTER 1

PRESIDENT CARTER AND THE PALESTINIANS

On 16 March 1977, US President Jimmy Carter publicly declared: ‘There has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years.’¹ The statement, however, was off-script. Carter was responding to a question from a journalist and caught everybody off guard, including his own advisors. While this focus on the Palestinian issue was a cornerstone of President Carter’s Middle East policy, it was almost revolutionary in a US context. For decades the Palestinians had either been ignored, treated as a humanitarian issue or viewed as terrorists. Under President Carter the Palestinians suddenly found themselves playing a central political role in the Middle East peace process. Carter made solving the Palestinian issue one of three cornerstones in solving the larger Arab–Israeli conflict; the other two were mutual recognition and the establishment of permanent borders.² Still, slightly more than two years after coming to power, Carter helped Egypt and Israel sign a bilateral peace agreement, which pushed the Palestinian issue to the sidelines in all but name. Israel and Egypt continued conducting Palestinian autonomy negotiations for the remainder of Carter’s term, but nothing came of them. Almost two decades later, however, the autonomy model would resurface in the Oslo negotiations.

Carter’s presidential legacy in the Middle East, then, had little to do with the Palestinians. By failing to deliver on the Palestinian issue while securing an Egyptian–Israeli peace, Carter had reverted to the

traditional US approach to the Arab–Israeli conflict. What had happened to the comprehensive peace and the call for a Palestinian homeland? Why were the Palestinians excluded from the negotiations, when Carter had insisted on their inclusion?

To answer these questions, we must start at the beginning. Jimmy Carter was an unlikely candidate to be the first US president to make the Palestinian question the centrepiece of US policy towards the Arab–Israeli conflict. He was a born-again Christian from the deep South – a peanut farmer who eventually became the governor of his home state of Georgia, and who had practically no foreign policy experience. As governor, he had visited Israel only once, arranged by the Israeli government, but he had never visited an Arab country and never met an Arab leader. Prior to becoming president he had never met any Palestinians, and he did not meet any while he was president either.³

The Palestinian issue was not the only area where he lacked political experience. In fact, Carter made it very clear that he was an outsider in Washington. This was important, because in the mid-1970s, Washington was tainted by Watergate and the Vietnam war. In one election commercial, Carter stated ‘There is one major and fundamental issue. And that is the issue between the insiders and the outsiders. I have been accused of being an outsider and I plead guilty.’⁴ He took great care to distance himself from what many considered the dishonesty that plagued US politics, and key-words in his campaign included ‘good’, ‘honest’ and ‘decent’.⁵ Carter’s position as a political outsider helps explain both why he won the election and how he was able to think outside the box of traditional US foreign policy. He was not enmeshed in the Vietnam and Watergate imbroglios, and his mindset was not stuck on the idea that the Palestinians were either refugees or terrorists. As such, Carter brought a fresh perspective to Washington. Despite his lack of relevant experience, foreign policy played an unusually significant part in his election campaign.⁶ Carter came to power with a desire to change US foreign policy, insisting that he was the man for the job.

Unsurprisingly, Washington insiders disagreed. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was dumbfounded by Carter’s lack of foreign policy experience, complaining: ‘I don’t know how you can have a President who knows nothing about foreign policy and a Secretary of State also.’⁷ This quote says more about Kissinger than it does about Carter. While

Carter's choice for Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, would play a central role in the Carter administration, Carter was going to make his own foreign policy. He would be a hands-on president if ever there was one.⁸

In a thinly veiled attack on his predecessors, Presidents Gerald Ford and Richard Nixon, Carter insisted: 'The President is the one who makes foreign policy. I make the foreign policy. There have been Presidents in the past, maybe not too distant past, that let their Secretaries of State make foreign policy. I don't.'⁹ As Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, pointed out, 'Carter wanted to be his own Secretary of State [...] he would therefore be in control over foreign policy in the White House.'¹⁰ Giving his insistence on such a pronounced role in foreign policy, Carter's lack of experience could have been costly, but he was unusually smart and he appointed a competent and generally unified foreign policy team.¹¹ Carter also decided to invest the bulk of his time in foreign policy issues. Carter has often been described as a naive moralist, but his Palestinian policy, as well as much of his other foreign policy, was actually based on a strategic and pragmatic evaluation of the global situation which he derived from the ideals of liberal internationalism.¹²

Until Carter started his presidency, the inclusion of the Palestinians in the peace process had been merely academic and had not led to a change in US policy towards the Palestinians. Many explanations have been put forth regarding Carter's decision to focus on the Palestinians, including his Christian faith, his focus on human rights in general and his experiences in the segregated South.¹³ While each of these explanations shed light upon part of the picture, particularly on an emotional level, they miss a central point: solving the Palestinian issue was considered a strategic necessity by Carter, his closest foreign-policy advisors, and both the CIA and the State Department. He entered the White House with a clear intention of taking the United States in a new direction, away from the 'malaise' which had descended upon the nation during Nixon's presidency and persisted during Ford's. Carter came to power with an approach based on 'preventive diplomacy', global interdependence and the pursuit of human rights.¹⁴

In addition to the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate political atmosphere, Carter had also inherited the aftermath of the international oil shock, a consequence of the Arab oil embargo which followed the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Carter therefore thought it vital to secure

stability in the Middle East, and reduce the potential for a new oil embargo.¹⁵ In terms of this peace-making, Carter had a radically different approach from the preceding presidents. Where Nixon and Ford, under Kissinger's guidance, had tried to solve parts of the conflict while always isolating the Soviet Union, Carter aimed to solve the whole conflict with the assistance of the Cold War rival, not in competition with it. This approach had been promoted by, amongst others, a 1975 Brookings Institution report titled *Toward Peace in the Middle East*, written by a study group which included Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Middle East advisor, William B. Quandt.¹⁶ The report is often cited as having provided the 'blueprint' for the Carter administration's approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁷

While that may be an overstatement, the report was clearly influential, particularly because so many of its authors subsequently gained prominent positions within the Carter administration. The report was seen by many Americans as so radical and anti-Israeli that both Brzezinski and Quandt were targeted by pro-Israeli groups in the United States for being co-authors of the report. Appeals were even made to exclude them from the Carter administration.¹⁸ This pressure on the report's signatories was a forewarning of the domestic tension which such a comprehensive approach would create in the United States. It was also particularly hard for Carter to sell domestically because it contradicted two of the most essential aspects of the well-established tradition of US Middle East policy: the exclusion of the Palestinians and the Soviet Union from the diplomatic process. Despite the evident controversy, Carter ultimately failed to grasp the importance of grounding his Middle East policy domestically. This oversight would weaken his ability to counteract domestic pressure.¹⁹

The British journalist and Middle East expert Patrick Seale neatly summed up Carter's incoming position:

the Bible and Brookings, the fear of another war and another energy crisis, a sense that Kissinger had left the peacemaking job half done, pity for the Palestinians under Israeli occupation – promoted the Middle East to the top of Carter's foreign policy priorities.²⁰

Carter's comprehensive approach was, for better or worse, far more ambitious than Kissinger's step-by-step approach, which had preceded it. If it were to succeed, it would solve the Arab–Israeli conflict in its entirety. Rather than merely calm some areas and address some aspects of the conflict, the comprehensive approach sought to remove the possible reasons for the conflict to reassert itself.

As this book will show, Carter clearly sought such a comprehensive approach, but he was equally clearly unprepared for the resistance to it he would face. Carter was the first US president to talk of a Palestinian 'homeland'. This was a radical stance for a US president to take. While the term 'homeland' was imprecise and non-binding, it recalled the language used by Lord Balfour when he made his promise to the Jews in 1917 – a declaration which became the frame of reference for the Zionist movement when it established Israel. The use of 'homeland' in relation to the Palestinians therefore made Carter highly unpopular in Israel, and amongst Israel's supporters in the United States. Carter's initial stance was generally supported by the Arab states and the Palestinians, though the latter wanted him to take a step further and support their demand for a Palestinian state under PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) leadership. Such a step was unacceptable in the United States, however, and anathema to Israel.²¹ It was not a step, therefore, that Carter would take – while he sympathised with much of the Arab position, he found himself bound by domestic political structures and policies which strongly favoured the Israeli position. If Carter ventured within those bounds, he never directly crossed them.

During the whole presidency, then, the Carter administration manoeuvred between the Israeli criticism of going too far in supporting the Palestinians, and the Palestinian criticism of not going far enough. This bind was made even more difficult by the context in which the negotiations took place. The Arab states were divided; the United States did not talk directly to the PLO; and Israel's supporters in the United States applied persistent domestic pressure upon Carter. In practice, that is, many of the steps Carter took were seen as being far beyond the maximum of what Israel could give, yet below the minimum of what the Arab states and the Palestinians were demanding.²²

As the Carter administration pushed forward with its approach to peace during the early months of 1977, it became clear that this initiative was a very tall order. Some would insist that it was impossible from the start. The Carter team, however, dove straight in. Secretary of

State Cyrus Vance went on several tours of the Middle East, and Carter hosted most of the Middle East leaders in Washington. While the Carter administration refused to meet directly with the PLO, Carter went further than previous US administrations in lowering the bar for what would be needed to initiate such contact. Several back-channels were used to communicate with the PLO, and the PLO sent signals that it was heading in a more moderate direction and closing in on the type of formulation regarding UNSC Resolution 242, implying a recognition of Israel, which was demanded by the US administration to open any direct contact with the Palestinian national movement. At the same time however, the PLO was sending contradictory signals, implying that it was heading in what the United States considered to be the wrong direction, away from moderation.²³

Meanwhile the Arab states were at odds, not only with Israel but also amongst themselves. Egypt was leaning towards a willingness to participate in a peace process through which it could make large concessions. Jordan had a similar stance, but, being the weak link in the Arab chain, it depended on Syria to move forward. Jordan also had a domestic problem, in that over half its population was of Palestinian origin. Making peace without Palestinian consent was therefore extremely difficult. Syria, for its part, was against entering any open-ended peace process. The PLO, then, was mired amongst these various Arab stances and, to complicate things further, was struggling with internal divisions of its own.²⁴ When Carter tried to induce the PLO to make concessions so that it could be included in the peace process, he was not addressing a unified movement, and those groups within the PLO which opposed the moderate leadership's position could always use violence to spoil that leadership's ability to negotiate.

Just months after Carter came to power, Israel also underwent a political change which had, to that point, been considered inconceivable: the age of Labour ended with the Likud victory in the national elections in May 1977. Israel's new prime minister, Menachem Begin, was ideologically more hawkish and much more decisive than Yitzhak Rabin had been, though he did share Rabin's adamant opposition to the comprehensive approach.²⁵ Israel, under both Rabin and Begin, did not want the Soviet Union on board; it did not want to negotiate with all the Arab states at once; and, most importantly, it found any engagement with the PLO to be unacceptable. Also, particularly after Begin came to

power, it moved to take the West Bank and the Gaza Strip completely off the negotiating table.²⁶ Carter would not fully grasp the ideological depth of Begin's commitment to keeping the West Bank and Gaza for Israel.²⁷ What he treated as an Israeli bargaining position was in fact an Israeli red line. Had he realised this, he might have acted differently, but it is unlikely that he could have changed Begin's mind on the Palestinian territories.

In the end, of all the Arab leaders, Carter managed to please only Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Sadat was a rather difficult leader to understand, with a decision-making style which might best be described as erratic and 'enigmatic'.²⁸ In terms of foreign policy, it would eventually become clear that Sadat primarily sought two things: a close alliance with the United States, and the return of the Sinai, which had been occupied by Israel since 1967.²⁹ These goals were achieved upon the signing of the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty. Beyond them, it was hard to say exactly how much he cared about the Palestinian issue, if at all. After the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty was signed, Sadat essentially stopped working towards any Palestinian gains; by then, as well, he had been ostracised within the Arab world. He became furious with the PLO and the other Arab leaders and lost all interest in struggling for gains on their behalf. This does not mean that he did not initially seek to be the Arab leader who had also secured a broader peace and real gains for the Palestinians, but these were never his primary goals.

Carter's rising star in Palestine

While Jimmy Carter is often recalled as an unpopular president, he has, in recent years, earned a positive reputation with regard to the Palestinian issue. He may have failed to provide the Palestinians with a viable solution when he was president from 1977 to 1981, but he returned to the issue in 2006 with his controversial book titled *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*.³⁰ That same year, he suggested that the international community recognise Hamas.³¹ Clearly, then, Carter had never given up on Palestine. Recent literature on the Arab–Israeli conflict has also placed his efforts in a positive light. In Nathan Thrall's 2017 book *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine*, Carter is depicted as the role model for how a US president can pressure Israel to make concessions. While Thrall strongly

exaggerates the extent to which Carter pressured Begin, he is undeniably right in his assertion that Carter was central in making Israel withdraw from the Sinai in the interests of peace with Egypt.³²

Carter has also gained academic attention of late simply because his administration's archives have been declassified over the past few years, making his presidency much more accessible to the research community. Much of this literature paints a picture of Carter entering office as an idealist and leaving as a realist who was scarred by the harsh realities of the world. The most poignant expression of this view is found in the title of Yael S. Aronoff's article 'In Like a Lamb, Out Like a Lion'.³³ It is difficult to disagree with this general assessment, and it largely rings true for his work on the Arab-Israeli conflict as well. He came in with an innovative approach aimed at a grand peace, and he left office largely content with a more limited arrangement which secured traditional US interests in the region.

The main problem with this view, however, is that while it is easy to criticise the comprehensive approach as naive, it was not disconnected from US interests. Quite the opposite, in fact. The central premise of the comprehensive approach was that only such a grand peace could create a stable Middle East and reduce Cold War tensions. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, while immensely significant, did neither of those things, as the amount of conflict in the wider Arab-Israeli arena since 1979 amply demonstrates.

In general, the literature on President Carter's Middle East peace-making is dominated by works covering the period from Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem on 19 November 1977 to the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty on 26 March 1979.³⁴ And no wonder: the period before this did not produce any results, whereas the Camp David summit is one of the most famous modern peace conferences, and the peace between Egypt and Israel was a tremendous diplomatic accomplishment. Still, this focus on the period starting with Sadat's Jerusalem visit largely disregards the depth of commitment the Carter administration had towards a comprehensive peace, and thus misses out on his historical role as the first US president to focus on the Palestinian issue.

This book is the first full account of the impact of the Palestinian issue upon the Carter administration's policies. Its in-depth research was made possible by the aforementioned declassification of the Carter

archives, which include all the papers which went through the White House during Carter's time in office. Because Carter was so deeply involved in the day-to-day running of US foreign policy, this means that the Carter archive houses most of the relevant documents. Some important papers, however, did not pass through the White House, so other US government sources have been used to complement the White House papers, including documents from the State Department and the CIA. To further complement these US archives, material from the British Foreign Office and some recently available Israeli sources have been used, as have a variety of interviews with decision-makers.

From the perspective of the 1970s, it was truly remarkable how present the Palestinians were in the Carter White House's deliberations. From today's perspective, it is odd to find that it took 30 years for an American president to understand that the Palestinians were central to their own conflict, but, as we will see, the Carter administration brought about a unique moment in US Middle East policy. Carter broke with a decades-old frame of reference in US policy towards the Middle East, through which the Palestinians had been ignored.³⁵ After Carter, they would once again be moved to the sidelines, though events in Lebanon, then later in the occupied Palestinian territories, would make it impossible to ignore them completely.

CHAPTER 2

US PRESIDENTS AND THE PALESTINIANS

Eleven minutes after Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion declared Israeli statehood on 14 May 1948, US President Harry S. Truman extended a *de facto* recognition of Israel. This set the tone for US–Israeli relations and earned Truman the nickname ‘Israel’s midwife’. While Truman’s policy towards the Zionist movement varied over time, his vital support at the key moment created an almost mythological link between him and Israel, to the extent that ‘the history of Truman and Israel’ has become a genre of its own.¹ Compared to later US presidents, however, Truman was lukewarm towards Israel. As time passed the United States would increasingly support Israel, with close cooperation on all fronts.

In contrast, the Palestinians were largely invisible to US decision-makers. While this did not start with President Truman, it also certainly did not end with him. The United States had supported the UN’s 1947 partition plan, which nominally paved the way for a Palestinian state, but no such thing was established in 1948 or in the decades that followed. The Palestinians were the clear losers of the 1947–49 war, and as a result they disappeared from the US political horizon. For decades they would be ignored by US presidents. How did events in the Middle East allow the Palestinians to disappear from the political limelight? What had shaped the US view of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and why was there such a lack of understanding of its Palestinian aspects?

President Truman and the United Nations had together inherited the Palestine issue from Britain, when the British government decided to

withdraw from Palestine in 1947.² On 28 April 1947, the UN arranged a special session to discuss the question of Palestine, and established the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP).³ UNSCOP's subsequent partition plan, which called for the division of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, with Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*, won through on 29 November 1947, as the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181, with 33 votes in favour, 13 against, ten abstentions and one absent vote.⁴ With the narrowest of margins, then, the world body decided to divide Palestine. None of the parties directly involved had voted for the resolution. The US government, though, had not only voted for partition but worked hard to get other states to vote for it, too. This was not done in the spirit of equal support for Palestinians and Zionists but out of great sympathy for the latter.⁵

Not everything Truman did pleased the Zionist movement, however – far from it. In 1947, the Truman administration initiated a Middle East arms embargo, which encompassed Israel. The United States would not sell advanced weaponry to Israel until 1962, during the Kennedy administration.⁶ Arms sales to Israel would then gradually increase for each presidency thereafter.⁷

The first Arab–Israeli war

Although the UN had formally provided what the solution to the question of Palestine should look like – a division of Palestine under which 56 per cent would be a Jewish state, 43 per cent would be an Arab state, and the Jerusalem area would have international status – there was no plan for *how* to divide the land. Since neither the UN nor the superpowers were willing to provide military forces to implement partition, the stage was set for the parties to fight for, or against, partition.⁸

By December 1947, a civil war was raging in Palestine between Zionist forces and the Palestinians.⁹ During this period, as well, the first wave of Palestinian refugees left Palestine, largely to avoid the war.¹⁰ The armed Palestinian groups had some initial success, but, in April 1948, the Haganah (the predecessor of the Israeli Defense Forces, or IDF) launched the Plan D offensive. Plan D was decisive in turning the tide of the war, and a profound contribution to the creation of the Palestinian

refugee problem, since part and parcel of Plan D was to clear the interior of threats, which in practice often meant rooting out Palestinians.¹¹

On 14 May 1948, Israel declared its independence as the last British forces left Palestine. The next day the Arab armies invaded. Despite the many controversies surrounding the establishment of Israel, the new-born state was recognised *de facto* by the United States and full *de jure* by the Soviet Union within the timespan of three days.¹²

Starting on 15 May 1948, Israel began to fight a war against Syria, Lebanon (Trans)Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. The war was divided into rounds of fighting separated by several cease-fires, the last of which was established on 6 January 1949. Armistice negotiations followed throughout the first half of 1949. After the armistices were signed, Israel was in possession of 77 per cent of Palestine, including the western half of Jerusalem.¹³

While the war was a success for Israel, where it is known as the War of Independence, it was a disaster for the Palestinians, who know it as *al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe). From 1947 to 1949, more than 700,000 Palestinians had fled from the area which became the state of Israel. They settled in refugee camps in the surrounding Arab states, in Gaza and in the West Bank.¹⁴

The formal UN approach to the refugee question was then founded in UN General Assembly Resolution 194(III), which stated: 'the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date'.¹⁵ This position had the support of the Arab states and the Palestinians. Israel, for its part, claimed that it had no responsibility for the refugees, because they were the result of a war started by the Arabs.¹⁶ This then becomes one of the deepest, most controversial issues between the parties.

After the 1948 War, the Palestinian population was divided between those who had remained in Israel, those who had fled outside of Palestine, and those who were in Gaza, under Egyptian military control, or the West Bank, which was annexed by Jordan. A large portion of those who lived in Gaza and the West Bank were refugees. Thus, while Israel emerged as a strong state with which many Americans identified, the Palestinian state never came to be at all, and the Palestinians were grouped under the generic term 'Arab refugees', disappearing from view as a national entity. In the words of Kathleen Christison:

The Palestinian people themselves were nameless [...] without identity or status except as a mass of camp dwellers. As far as the United States was concerned, the Palestinians did not exist politically [...] an entire generation of policymakers came of age not knowing, and not thinking it necessary to learn, the Palestinians' story.¹⁷

For American policy-makers, Jordan and Egypt would represent the Arab claims on the West Bank and Gaza, respectively. The humanitarian understanding of the Palestinians as a mass of 'Arab refugees' would colour the US outlook during the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administrations.¹⁸ US policy towards the Palestinians would therefore centre upon the non-political humanitarian approach of relief, rather than the political repatriation approach. To the extent that repatriation was an issue at all, that is, it would not be connected to support for the establishment of a Palestinian state.¹⁹ Instead, the US approach towards the Palestinian refugees would be based on the fear that they would become communists due to their predicament.²⁰ Aid, channelled through UNRWA, was the tool used to avoid such a scenario.²¹ Humanitarian aid, after all, was easier and less politically costly than a political solution based on repatriation. For consecutive US administrations, then, the Palestinians were 'a problem, not a people'.²²

The rise of pan-Arabism

The defeat suffered by the Arab armies in the war in Palestine sent political shock-waves through the Arab world. The obvious question was this: How was it possible for a united Arab world to suffer such a staggering defeat at the hands of small, new-born state? The answer was that Arab unity had been a bluff. The Arab leaders were increasingly seen as corrupt and inept, and the years following the 1948 war would see great upheaval in the region. In 1951, King Abdullah of Jordan was assassinated. In Syria, a series of coups took place between the 1940s and the 1960s. Most importantly, in Egypt, the Free Officers carried out a coup in July 1952.²³ For US policy-makers this meant that the Arab states were unstable, and they grew concerned that they might tilt towards the Soviet sphere of influence. From this perspective, as well, the regional developments seemed to confirm this analysis.

The Egyptian Free Officers gradually became more radical, increasingly allied with the Soviet Union and increasingly anti-Israel. This was the result of a complex dynamic, but several important events took place during the 1950s which pushed Egypt in this direction. For one, the border with Israel was never stable, but Gamal Abdel Nasser – who gradually took control of Egypt – tried to control the Palestinians who sought to infiltrate into Israel. However, in 1955, after an Israeli incursion into Gaza, during which 37 Egyptian soldiers were killed, Nasser decided to sponsor Palestinian Fedayeen attacks on Israel. Also in 1955, Nasser completed the famous Czech arms deal after he was denied US arms. This was interpreted by the United States as Egypt's turn to communism.²⁴ Within a dichotomist Cold War world view, this meant that the United States increasingly supported Israel as a Western bastion in the region, whereas the Palestinians were associated with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, President Eisenhower refused to sell advanced weaponry to Israel.²⁵

The pivotal moment for Nasser was the 1956 Suez War in which Israel, Britain and France colluded to attack Egypt. One of the goals was to topple Nasser. Although the war was a military success for the aggressors, they then found themselves politically humiliated by the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Nations, as the IDF was pressured to withdraw from the Sinai.²⁶ Rather than topple his regime, the Suez war made Nasser into the great Arab hero, and boosted pan-Arabism as a political project. President Eisenhower's decision to act against Israel did not mean that he sided with the Palestinians, however. They remained far removed from the political scene, as far as the United States was concerned. Despite the fact that the Fedayeen attacks were one of the reasons Israel had for starting the war, the United States continued to perceive the Palestinians only as 'Arab refugees'.²⁷ For Eisenhower, it was the Cold War that mattered, and all political decisions were based on the US rivalry with the Soviet Union. Eisenhower was therefore confused when he discovered that the Arab states disliked Zionism more than they disliked communism.²⁸

Eisenhower's pressure on Israel in the Suez war was the exception to the rule in US-Israeli relations and, after his administration, the US relationship with Israel only grew closer. Under President John F. Kennedy (1961–63), the United States shifted towards the role of staunch ally of Israel. Kennedy coined the term 'special relationship',

and in 1963 agreed to sell Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Israel, a reversal of the long-standing US policy of refusing to sell the Israelis high-tech weapons.²⁹ Kennedy was also the last US president to actively seek a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, through what was called the Johnson plan.³⁰ This initiative was named after Dr Joseph Johnson, not his namesake and Kennedy's successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson. When President Kennedy died, President Johnson informed Israel: 'You have lost a great friend, but you have found a better one.'³¹

While President Johnson would lump the radical Palestinian movements into what he saw as the rise of global communism, the rise of the Palestinian national movement was not a product of the Cold War, but the result of regional developments. It was within the context of pan-Arabism that the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was established in 1964, since the liberation of Palestine was a central tenant of Arab nationalism.³² To have any credibility among the Arab people, it was very important for Nasser to express support for the Palestinian cause. At the same time, however, he tried to retain control of the Palestinians by creating the PLO, while ensuring that it was not a politically independent body. The PLO therefore arose under supervision of the Arab League and Egypt and was placed under the leadership of Ahmed Shukayri, a Palestinian whom Nasser thought he could contain. Although the organisation had its own army, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), it was largely controlled by the Arab states.³³ The fact that the Arab states established the PLO made it possible for the United States to initially ignore this new movement, seeing it largely as an Egyptian puppet.³⁴ In March 1965 US Secretary of State Dean Rusk declared, 'We do not recognize it [the PLO] as the sole or even as the official representative of the Palestinian people. It is the [US government's] view that it has no official status whatever.'³⁵ Ironically, the view of the Palestinians held by both the Arab states and the United States in this period echoed Marx's general verdict upon the colonised: 'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.'³⁶

Initially, in any case, the pan-Arab expression of support for the Palestinians was mirrored by the Palestinian support for pan-Arabism. Many Palestinians saw in pan-Arabism the structure for their liberation.³⁷ Meanwhile a younger generation of Palestinians started creating its own political structures, along two main lines of thought. The first, mainly represented by Yassir Arafat's Fatah (the Arabic reverse

acronym for Palestinian National Liberation Movement), considered the Palestinian cause to be a nationalist struggle which was independent of the larger pan-Arab ideology. The second, mainly represented by George Habash's Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM), sought to encapsulate the Palestinian revolution within that larger pan-Arab movement.³⁸ Up until the 1967 war the movements which privileged the pan-Arab cause would dominate. After the war, this would all change.

The six-day war: Shifting fronts

The run-up to the 1967 war was a complicated affair. In short, Israel seized on an opportunity created when President Nasser took a miscalculated gamble, based on Soviet misinformation, that Israel was planning an attack. After enduring prolonged Arab–Israeli tension and recurrent cross-border clashes, particularly on the Syrian front, Nasser knew he had to challenge Israel to save the image of the pan-Arab project. Unfortunately, his challenge would spiral out of control. Nasser removed the UN troops separating the Egyptian and Israeli forces, sent his troops into the Sinai, and closed the straits of Tiran. Israel considered this a *casus belli*. Since Egypt had a defence pact with both Jordan and Syria, Nasser was making a grand challenge on behalf of three of Israel's neighbours – a daring act of brinkmanship which demanded that Israel fold or call his bluff. Well aware that it would win the war, and with a 'yellow light' from US President Johnson, Israel chose the latter.³⁹

On the early morning of 5 June 1967, Israel launched a surprise strike against Egyptian airfields. Catching all the Arab armies unaware, Israel decimated the Arab air forces within hours. Then, in the six days from 5 to 10 June 1967, Israel captured the Sinai and the Gaza strip from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, from Jordan.⁴⁰

The war clearly demonstrated the increased US support for Israel. President Eisenhower had refused to sell advanced weaponry to Israel, and in 1956 he had forced Israel out of the Sinai after the Suez war. In the run-up to the 1967 war, on the other hand, consecutive US presidents, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, made large arms sales to Israel, including advanced weaponry.⁴¹ Then, in 1967, Johnson gave Israel the green light to start the war and allowed Israel to hold the occupied territories following the war. In this way, Johnson firmly

cemented the pro-Israeli tilt of US politics. For him, Israel was an ally, the Arab states were the enemies and the Palestinians were practically non-existent.⁴²

Nonetheless, intense diplomatic activity followed the fighting. In November 1967, after long rounds of haggling over words, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 242. It called for the following:

Withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict [...] 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 [...] *Affirms further* the necessity [...] For achieving a just settlement of the refugee problem.⁴³

This resolution became the foundation for all later attempts at solving the Arab–Israeli conflict, and it is therefore necessary to give a critical and detailed account of its contents. The document primarily describes the ‘land-for-peace’ formula through which Israel would withdraw from the occupied territories and the Arab states would grant Israel peace and recognition.⁴⁴

Beyond the fundamental premise of ‘land for peace’, however, UNSC Resolution 242 introduces several problematic issues. For one, it only refers to the ‘recent conflict’, making the June 1967 lines its point of reference, rather than the 1947 partition plan lines. Secondly, it refers to ‘territories’ in the indefinite form, omitting defining words such as ‘the’ or ‘all’, and thus allowing Israel to argue that some of the territories could be retained. Thirdly, the resolution only talks about states, and therefore excludes the Palestinians as an actor. And fourthly, the only reference to the Palestinians is hidden in the phrase ‘the refugee problem’. All these issues made UNSC Resolution 242 unacceptable to the Palestinians.⁴⁵ As we will see, this would become a massive hindrance for Jimmy Carter when he became president, because acceptance of the resolution became a precondition for participation in the peace process.

The 1967 war drastically shifted the map, both politically and geographically. All of Israel’s neighbouring Arab states were humiliated once again, and pan-Arabism suffered a serious defeat, from which it would never recover.⁴⁶ The Arabic name for the 1967 war made this

clear: *an-naksa* (the setback). To handle the setback, the Arab states convened an Arab League summit in Khartoum. Here they spelled out their official policy towards Israel. The stance has become famous as the 'three no's of Khartoum': no recognition of Israel, no negotiation with Israel and no peace with Israel. On the face of it, the Khartoum meeting delivered a completely rejectionist stance. Some analysts, such as Israeli historian Avi Shlaim, have instead argued that Khartoum was actually a victory for the *moderate* Arab states, and that the three no's should be read as 'no formal peace *treaty*, but not a rejection of a state of peace; no *direct* negotiations, but not a refusal to talk through third parties; and no *de jure* recognition of Israel, but acceptance of its existence as a state.'⁴⁷ Understandably, Israel heard only 'no', not the unstated 'but'.⁴⁸

An unintended consequence of the 1967 war was that the region became more deeply embedded in the cold war, since states like Syria and Egypt increasingly received Soviet weaponry.⁴⁹ This again entrenched US support for Israel, and the Americans sold arms to the Israelis on a much larger scale after the war. In 1969, weaponry totalling \$160 million was sold to Israel; in 1971, the total reached \$643 million.⁵⁰ The most significant development in the Arab–Israeli conflict at this time, however, went largely unnoticed by the United States.

Fatah takes charge

For the Palestinians, the 1967 war revealed that Palestine could not be retaken by the Arab armies – pan-Arabism, then, would not be the answer to their woes. The Palestinians had to take matters into their own hands.⁵¹ To all appearances, the 1967 war was the second major catastrophe in less than 20 years. Up to 300,000 Palestinians had fled from the West Bank and Gaza, which Israel had occupied. Most of these people fled to Jordan.⁵² Paradoxically, though, for some of the Palestinian guerrilla movements, the Arab defeat in the 1967 war presented an opportunity. As stated in one Fatah publication, the war ensured 'the return of the cause to its true nature – a Palestinian–Israeli conflict'.⁵³ Or, as Fatah leader Yassir Arafat stated to one of his comrades: 'This is not the end. It's the beginning.'⁵⁴ The United States did not notice this shift. For US Presidents Johnson, Nixon and Ford the conflict was still seen as one between Israel and the Arab states, and it was framed