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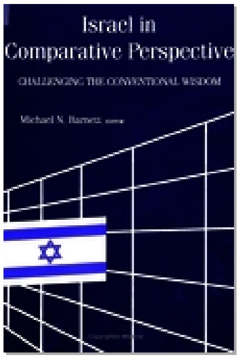

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2

Israeli Foreign Policy: A Realist Ideal-Type or a Breed of Its Own?

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If revisionist interpretations of the cold war have proliferated with the decline of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, so too will new assessments of Israeli foreign policy multiply with the achievement of Arab-Israeli peace. Neo-realist theorists, who have found much empirical confirmation for their hypotheses in Israeli foreign policy, as they did in the U.S.-Soviet competition, are likely to be challenged on the empirical validity of their interpretations. In the same manner that questions are being raised about the "inevitability" of the cold war, new questions will emerge about the extent to which Israel's quest for security made its major foreign policy decisions inevitable.

This chapter focuses on the applicability of neo-realism to Israeli foreign policy and reassesses some of the assumptions that have been made in this regard. An attempt is made to sort out areas of theoretical interest to students of international relations in such a way that the case of Israel could help illuminate the debates on this issue. In addition, I will consider the relative weight of a neo-realist explanation in one recent case of Israeli foreign policy: the Palestinian-Israeli Declaration of Principles agreement.

Neo-Realists and Israeli Foreign Policy

If nothing else, neo-realists brought a breath of fresh air to the study of international relations of the Middle East, an area that had been clouded by assumptions of peculiarity and irrationality.[1] This is true of scholars who have studied both Israeli foreign policy and the policies of Arab states. In assessing issues of nuclear proliferation and nuclear deterrence, for example, neo-realist scholars treated Israel and the Arab states as "rational actors" when it came to survival instinct.[2] In fact, for many neo-realists, Israel was seen as an ideal example of a state behaving as realists expect states to behave, for they assumed that state behavior will conform more closely to their predictions when state security is at stake, and Israel's security was viewed to be highly threatened. Even when Israel retained a degree of military superiority (as in the 1967 war), rational calculations of risk under uncertainty in situations where the offense had an advantage were thought to account for Israeli behavior.[3]

Along similar lines, it was argued that Israel's security calculations in the context of its hostile environment are, by themselves, sufficient to explain the dominant tendencies in Israeli foreign policy: the drive to establish and protect strategic relations with the United States and the tendency to exacerbate divisions within the Arab world. These tendencies alone, posited as long-term objectives, were thought to account for actions where even immediate security concerns were not dominant.[4]

Missing in these neo-realist accounts has been an evaluation of those aspects of Israeli foreign policy that are not easily captured by neo-realist criteria and about which even neo-realists themselves disagree. Besides the fact that most of the analyses of Israeli foreign policy have focussed on crisis situations where variables advocated by realists tend to apply more often, there have been important shortcomings in the treatment of Israel's behavior even in crises. In particular, two areas pertaining to the application of realist hypotheses to the study of foreign policy could have benefitted from an empirical analysis of the Israeli case: the question of relative vs. absolute gains as a motivating drive in the behavior of states;[5] and the realist assumption that the realm of foreign policy analysis is not identical to the realm of international relations and, thus, that in every case of foreign policy there are variables that are internal to the state accounting for that state's behavior. It is useful to explore these debates in the context of the Israeli case.

Realist Treatment of Foreign Policy

Many students of foreign policy have argued that a state's foreign policy is largely affected by the "national interest." While this view has often been associated with realism, it is evident that an important variant of realism, structural realism, has been at odds with the empirical conclusions about what constitutes the national interest. For example, in their study of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts concluded that the conventional and unanimous interpretation of the "national interest" was that communism must be stopped in Vietnam, regardless of whether this position was objectively reasonable; as a consequence, "the commitment in principle always determined the scale of the commitment."[6] Similarly, Stephen Krasner found that many U.S. policies in Latin America were driven by the prevailing understanding of the "national interest," whether or not this understanding was deducible from realist assumptions. For Krasner, the national interest is not treated as an analytical assumption from which one can derive specific propositions about the behavior of the United States; rather, the national interest "is defined inductively as the preferences of American central decision-makers. Such a set of objectives must be related to general societal goals, persist over time, and have a consistent ranking of importance in order to justify using the term 'national interest.' "[7] How then is this national interest arrived at, and how does it affect foreign policy?

Most realists recognize that the foreign policies of states are not deducible from their relative position in the international system and that they are highly affected by domestic variables;[8] structural realism is less about preferences (except for the assumed, minimal objective of security) and more about how the distribution of power affects the ability of states to attain their given preferences.[9] Kenneth Waltz, for example, argued that the realm of international relations is different from the realm of foreign policy, and that tendencies expected from assumptions at the international level could be outweighed by other factors at the level of foreign policy making.[10] While one theoretically can make the case for a general drive by states to achieve "relative gains" as opposed to absolute gains,[11] specific international and internal factors can and do outweigh this drive. For Waltz, given a self-help international system, competing parties consider relative gains more important than absolute ones. But he argues that "absolute gains become more important as competition lessens. Two conditions make it possible for the United States and the Soviet Union to be less concerned with scoring relative gains and more with making absolute gains. The first is the stability of two-party balance, a stability reinforced by second-strike nuclear weapons . . . The second condition is the distance between the two at the top and the next most powerful states . . ."[12] Extending this logic to the post–cold war era, one would expect that the decline of the Soviet Union would further lessen the U.S. interest in scoring relative gains.

Yet, there has not been sufficient differentiation in the realist literature between variables that affect individual policy decisions and those that affect the prevailing paradigm about what constitutes the national interest. For example, structural realists have opposed the "domino theory" and the U.S tendency to posit communist ideology as a global threat, even though, empirically, these two assumptions have been central in the operational view of the national interest; similarly, some realists opposed major U.S. policies that were driven by these assumptions, like the Vietnam War and the invasion of Grenada. In other words, the undeniable observation that the U.S. conception of its national interest during the cold war sought to confront communism globally, and the obvious fact that such conception has had significant policy consequences, are perceived as "irrational" by some of the leaders of structural realism. In short, a concept of national interest that is strictly deduced from structural-realist assumptions cannot explain some key foreign policy decisions. In the case of the United States, for example, even the decision to intervene militarily against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 fails the test: Several advocates of realism opposed the U.S. decision to go to war precisely on the grounds that such a decision was not called for by the "national interest."[13] So, if important and consequential conceptualizations of the national interest cannot be derived deductively from the relative position of the state in the international arena, what is the source of the national interest? In other words, even aside from the case-based influence of domestic variables on individual foreign policy decisions, realists have not agreed upon the sources and the implications of the "national interest" when assessing the foreign policies of states. It is useful to sort out this debate in the case of Israeli foreign policy.

Consequences for Israeli Foreign Policy

For Waltz, the more powerful the state in the international context, the less threatened it is and the larger the role of domestic variables in its foreign policy. If the U.S. has the "luxury" to succumb to domestic urges, weaker states may not afford that luxury. It is in this sense that for many realists Israel presented a prime example of a vulnerable state whose security concerns drove its foreign policy. With the possible exception of the hotly debated 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Israeli war decisions were seen in the context of the security paradigm; the Camp David Accords with Egypt and the increased strategic cooperation with the U.S. during the Reagan era appeared to have given Israel increased leeway in the conduct of foreign policy.

This is not to say that neo-realist interpretations totally ignored the domestic and ideological components of Israeli foreign policy, including differences among the political parties in Israel. Rather, it was assumed that major foreign policy decisions such as those pertaining to war and peace could be accounted for without reference to internal variables. Even the controversial Israeli invasion of Lebanon, for example, was interpreted this way by Avner Yaniv, who, after noting the ideological and domestic considerations of the Likud government, concluded:

> Yet, having said all that, there is still sufficient evidence to suggest that, much like Israel's previous decisions to employ force, the invasion of Lebanon was primarily a response to the security dilemma. It did not emanate from any Zionist blueprint; it was not just a matter of personal whim, and it most certainly was not a response to a domestic demand or attempt to divert attention away from burning domestic political problems.[14]

Yet other accounts suggest that Israeli security concerns alone cannot account for the Israeli operations in 1982.[15] There also are cases of major international crises before 1982 in which important episodes of Israeli foreign policy cannot be explained by calculations of immediate security concerns; even in the case of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the extent of immediate security concerns is debatable.[16] One case that is less debatable is the 1956 Suez War[17] where the degree of immediate concern from guerilla operations coming from Gaza against Israeli targets certainly cannot explain the scope of the Israeli military operations. A telling moment in that episode was Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's refusal to entertain the idea of retaining Gaza when the decision to withdraw from the Sinai was made.[18]

How, then, does one interpret the Israeli operations? There are several potential realist formulations,[19] the discussion of which could inform the debates in the theoretical IR literature. Two of these formulations have to do with the conception of the "national interest" and whether this national interest is objectively "deduced" from the state's position in the international system[20] or is conceived as an empirically-identified set of interests that endure over time.[21] In the first case, domestic variables are ignored in the derivation of national interest;[22] in the second case, some structural features of domestic politics that endure over time could affect the formation of the national interest.[23] Additionally, there is the question of whether the international dimension of the national interest simply entails the minimal attainment of security,[24] or whether it entails the more aggressive tendency of maximizing power;[25] and whether this differentiation has any consequences in light of the argument that even the security drive alone entails the pursuit of relative gains.[26]

In the Morgenthau conception of international relations, power-maximization, even aside from security concerns, drives the behavior of states. In the Israeli context, Edward N. Luttwak has argued that Israel's strategy throughout the cold war was to maximize its military power beyond the minimal requirement for Israeli security, despite Israeli claims that Israel sought only security. According to Luttwak, the cold war defined the commodity of influence in international politics; to be at the "center of world politics" a state had to be on the cutting edge militarily. But, since this maximizing drive went beyond the minimal security requirements, the commodity of competition need not always be military. In the post–cold war world, Luttwak expected economic power to be the new commodity, and as a consequence expected Israel's new strategy to limit itself to the necessary minimum in the military arena while concentrating on maximizing its economic power.[27]

The logic behind the proposition that states pursue relative gains in the structural-realist scheme of a world of self-help is concern for security, not power-maximization for its own sake. But since this tendency is driven by insecurity, one can imagine circumstances where its relevance beyond a certain point is muted. In Waltz's scheme, bipolarity, nuclear weapons, and a substantial gap in power between the given state and the next tier of states, present such circumstances.[28] For Waltz, this situation was apparent for the United States throughout the post–World War II period, making the relative gain drive irrelevant. In Israel's case, however, facing multiple opponents and having limited resources, the relative gain drive cannot be easily dismissed. This left the nuclear option, which led another realist, Shai Feldman, to propose making Israel's nuclear option explicit as the best way to ensure Israel's security through effective deterrence, while reducing Israel's need to maximize conventional power. Even here, however, fears of conventional "attrition" against Israel's limited human and economic resources raised questions about the value of this nuclear option in reducing Israeli concerns as long as a state of war existed between Israel and the Arab states.

The perspective one takes on this issue is highly consequential for determining the extent to which Israeli motives were security-based or expansionist in nature (deriving from domestic and ideological features of Israel.) This question becomes critical in cases like the 1956 war, where immediate security concerns fail to account for policy. One perspective on this issue focuses not simply on the immediate security concerns in any given crisis situation, but on the impact of Israel's overall position in the realm of security, or on its conception of the national interest; with this in mind, the implications of this national interest for any given situation facing Israel could then be examined. In an earlier work, for example, I suggested that because of Israel's limited resources and hostile environment, it has tended to pursue a dual international strategy.[29] On the regional level, Israel has sought to prevent collective Arab action, and in this context has always sought to separate Egypt from the rest of the Arab world. On the international level, Israel needed strong and durable ties with the West, earlier with France and Britain, and later with the United States. Under the best of conditions, Israel sought to project itself to the world as an extension of the United States and therefore as having nearly unlimited resources. In this regard, Israel could not simply rely on the traditional U.S. commitment and on domestic lobbies in pursuing this objective, but also sought an indispensable role in America's international strategy. As a result, any Middle Eastern competitor with Israel for an alliance with the United States was perceived as a threat, and consequently, Israel sought to prevent closer ties between the United States and the Arab states. Together, these objectives constituted the Israeli "national interest" as derived from broad security concerns. Even some specific Israeli offensive military doctrines may be attributable to Israel's security circumstances.[30] In this approach, the Israeli decisions to wage war in 1956 and 1967 were better understood in the context of these broad long-term objectives than in the context of immediate security concerns.[31]

Yet my purpose was not to discount the possible relevance of other variables, including domestic ones, in any one of these decisions. My argument was only that "whether or not Israel has had expansionist designs in the Middle East, the minimalist assumption of survival instinct" dictated predictable policies given Israel's hostile environment.[32] Since it is argued here that the "national interest" could have sources other than security, it would be useful to consider whether long-term territorial ambitions that are not security-based have affected Israeli foreign policy over time, and to consider the "unique" sources of these ambitions. Since an exhaustive treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will limit myself to identifying some relevant issues in this debate before considering one recent case of Israeli foreign policy: the decision to conclude the Declaration of Principles agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization in September 1993.

There are obvious features of the Israeli state that are "unique"; some of these features, such as the importance of the military in Israeli politics and society, may themselves be attributable to issues of security, but others are not. One of the most striking features of Israel, for example, is its Jewish identity. This feature has important consequences: Israeli policies are constrained by the drive to preserve a Jewish majority; and Israel relies on Diaspora Jewish support while seeking to serve the interests of Jews beyond its boundaries. Some consequences of this feature of the state, such as the expulsion of some Palestinians in 1948 and the prevention of others from returning, are undeniable. Others, such as the need for bigger territories to absorb more Jews from around the world, are questionable. The central question of relevance here is the extent to which the Jewishness of Israel has entailed ideological/religious territorial ambitions that go beyond the realm of security and whether this tendency has transcended political parties.

The fact that some Israeli policies cannot be understood without the presupposition that the government of Israel had territorial ambitions over the West Bank is an easy case to make. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 cannot ultimately be understood without such a presupposition.[33] Conventional interpretations of this episode in Israeli foreign policy find answers in the ideological outlook of the Likud government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and the ambitious designs of his defense minister, Ariel Sharon.[34] If this proposition holds, it should imply that a different Israeli government, such as a Labor-led one, would not have had the same commitments, since what is at issue here is the motive of the government, not the instrumentality of the policy in meeting it. Thus, ideological differences between the two major parties in Israel explain variations in Israeli foreign policy even on issues of war and peace. Two issues need to be clarified: the factual proposition about these differences in Israeli politics, and the theoretical consequences of this proposition.

The ideological divisions between Likud and Labor are well-documented in the literature, and they have roots in different interpretations of the "Zionist dream," one envisioning Israel as less an ideological and religious entity and more a home for Jewish nationalism in a world of nationalism, the other a territorially more expansionist, ideologically more ambitious vision. The conclusion from this is that the Jewish identity of Israel need not entail territorial ambitions beyond security, since a significant, and historically more dominant, vision of Zionism has been defined in minimalist terms. Still, this issue should not be dropped in haste.

One can find, for example, a degree of unanimity among Israelis on the question of controlling Jerusalem, and this question is certainly connected to Israel's "Jewishness" and transcends divisions among political parties. As for the West Bank, there is evidence that coveting that piece of territory has had a long history in Israeli thinking. During the Suez crisis of 1956, for example, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion suggested to the French that Jordan be divided into two with the territory west of the Jordan River becoming part of Israel.[35] There is also evidence that some key Israeli officials placed the West Bank very high on their list of priorities, even when choices of war and peace were made. A striking example of this calculation was provided by former Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharet in 1949 during Israeli deliberations over relations with Arab states:

> In general, total and absolute peace is desirable for us. But, there is no certainty that we are about to conclude a peace treaty with any (Arab) state. Even if this does not come about, however, we will lose nothing if we

> enter negotiations without giving up any of our cards. This consideration applies to Jordan as well, but there is a difference between Jordan and others. With Egypt, it is certainly desirable that we conclude a peace treaty that will stabilize our relations, will permit mutual trade, and will allow the return of the previous status of Egyptian Jews. This also applies to Lebanon, and perhaps to Syria with some reservations about the new government there. This does not apply to Jordan however. We are not interested in officially recognizing the annexation of any part of [Eretz Yisrael] or any part of Jerusalem by Jordan. At this stage, it is desirable to the extent possible, to limit ourselves to resolving the urgent problems by widening the cease-fire agreement, or by concluding a series of special practical agreements.[36]

The fact that Sharet, not Menachem Begin, presented this position of Israeli priorities is significant in indicating a longstanding, ideologically-based territorial drive in Israeli politics that is not limited to Likud and Herut.

"Jewishness" has certainly affected Israeli motives in other cases. During the deliberations over the Camp David Accords with Egypt, for example, the chief of staff of the Israeli army, Motta Gur, remarked: "Peace without Zionism is something I do not want. Zionism without peace? That's feasible."[37]

Still, there is little question that a difference exists between the major parties in Israel on at least the degree of commitment to the West Bank; Likud has been willing to pay a higher price for this preference, and this tendency has affected Israeli foreign policy choices depending on which party governed the state. But if, despite the difference in degrees of commitment, both parties showed a preference for controlling the West Bank, how does this finding square with realist assumptions about the security motives of Israeli foreign policy?

In the realist perspective, to say that a state's security concerns dominate all others indicates that, ideological and other internal motives aside, any government would give in to these concerns if forced to make a choice. In this view, strong as Menachem Begin's commitment may have been to the West Bank, he would have chosen to freeze Jewish settlements on the West Bank if the choice was between that move on the one hand (which would undermine the essential U.S. commitment to Israel) and wasting a chance to split Egypt from the rest of the Arab world on the other. In such cases, domestic differences become less relevant.

The problem is that politicians rarely have to make such clear-cut choices among their competing preferences and, as in the case of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, ideological motives can often prevail. When politicians have to make such choices, as in the Camp David case, the choices are not all-or-nothing but choices among degrees, in which case most key preferences play a role in the decision. Even worse, a leader who is concerned about having to make such clear-cut choices, as Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was during the Bush administration, can design the foreign policy of the state in ways intended to avoid making such choices. In short, one cannot rule out either the ideological motive in Israeli foreign policy or the relevance of party divisions within Israel in considering the relative weight of the ideological motive. I will now address the relevance of these variables, compared with strategic factors, in one important case of Israeli foreign policy, the 1993 agreement with the PLO.

A Case Study in Israeli Foreign Policy: The Palestinian-Israeli Declaration of Principles

The Israeli government's decision to conclude the Declaration of Principles agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization provides an enlightening case study for assessing the relative weight of domestic and international variables. On the one hand, an argument can be made that the strategic circumstances following the Gulf War presented Israel with an opportunity it could not let pass. As many Palestinian opponents of the agreement argued, it would have been hard to imagine that Palestinians would have accepted a similar agreement during the U.S.-Soviet cold war or prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. On the face of it, as former President Jimmy Carter has argued, the Palestinians were offered more in the Camp David Accords but chose to reject the offer. Moreover, all the major issues that had presented obstacles to a Palestinian-Israeli agreement in the past (Palestinian sovereignty, Jewish settlements, the status of Jerusalem, the return of Palestinian refugees) have still not been addressed. This has led some among the Palestinian opposition to point out that three years into the interim Palestinian autonomy, when issues of final settlement are to be negotiated, the Palestinians will possess even more limited leverage with Israel, as it is likely that Arab states will have normalized their relations with the Jewish state and the Palestinians will be further marginalized.

Within this line of thinking, the breakthrough leading to the Declaration of Principles agreement resulted strictly from PLO "capitulation." In addition to the reduced strategic leverage that the Palestinians faced after the Gulf War, the Palestinian leadership itself was struggling to survive in the face of financial bankruptcy and increasing Islamist opposition. Moreover, it is striking that the DOP agreement came about without the direct involvement of the United States—perhaps even despite the reluctance of the United States to deal directly with the PLO. In short, Israel did not need to be pressured by anyone because what the PLO offered Israel was too good to be turned down.

In this perspective, the decision of the Israeli government had little to do with domestic politics and even less to do with the fact that Israel had a government led by the Labor party. Even an Israeli government headed by the Likud party, which had been in power when the Camp David Accords calling for a transitional period of Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza were signed, would have accepted the terms of the DOP. In other words, the Israeli decision was so obviously rational that one does not need to address Israeli domestic politics in order to understand it. The fact that there was strong opposition to the agreements coming from several political parties could be dismissed as merely tactical.

Yet there are serious shortcomings in this account. While it is true that most of the concessions leading to the breakthrough came from the Palestinian side, and that those concessions were largely driven by a weakened Palestinian position, it is not obvious that Israel had no other alternative to this agreement, nor is it obvious that the terms of the DOP were inferior to the terms of the Camp David Accords from the Palestinian point of view.

The comparison between the DOP and the Palestinian autonomy component of the Camp David Accords reveals two significant differences favoring the DOP from the Palestinian point of view. First, the central issue of territorial control was addressed differently. In the vision of former Prime Minister Begin, Palestinian autonomy related largely to affairs of the people of the West Bank and Gaza (Judea and Samaria), not to territorial control. In this vision, Israel intended to control the land in the autonomous areas with the continued ability to build and expand Jewish settlement. The basis of this control was not merely security concerns, but also principled claims. In contrast, the vision in the Declaration of Principles agreement is that the Palestinian Council shall have authority over land in autonomous areas. Where Israel retained territorial rights, the reasoning pertained to security issues and to existing settlements whose status was yet to be addressed. Since land has been one of the core issues of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, this difference between the Camp David Accords and the DOP is not to be underestimated, and it is unlikely that a Likud-led government would have readily agreed to the terms of the DOP on this issue.

The second issue on which the two agreements differ is the question of Palestinian "peoplehood." Although the term "Palestinian people" is employed in the text of the Camp David Accords, a letter from President Carter to Prime Minister Begin, written at the latter's urging and appended to the Accords, stated that Carter acknowledged that "in each paragraph of the agreed framework document, the expressions 'Palestinians' or 'Palestinian People' are being and will be construed and understood by you as 'Palestinian Arabs' " and that "in each paragraph in which the expression 'West Bank' appears, it is being and will be understood by the Government of Israel as Judea and Sammaria." This interpretation continued to be held by the Likud-led government of Prime Minister Shamir, which sought to differentiate between "residents of Judea and Samaria" and Palestinians residing outside those territories. Even after the Gulf War and during the Bush Administration, which was perceived as antagonistic by the Shamir government, the Israeli government managed to prevail on this question by excluding any Palestinians from the "outside" from joining the Palestinian delegation in the U.S.-arranged negotiations inaugurated in Madrid, Spain.

In contrast, the DOP agreement was signed not by the Palestinian negotiation team that represented the Palestinians in Madrid, but by the Palestine Liberation Organization, most of whose leadership came from outside the West Bank and Gaza. Moreover, the signing of the agreement was preceded by a letter from Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin to PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat declaring that the Israeli government recognizes the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. In addition, the Israelis agreed that issues of sovereignty, the return of refugees, and the status of settlements are legitimate issues in the negotiations, although their discussion would be postponed. Given the centrality of the issues of "peoplehood" and the "unity" of the Palestinians, this shift in Israeli position was significant. It is unlikely that any representatives of the Palestinians would have been willing to accept an agreement that did not contain this component. At the same time, it is not at all obvious that a Likud-led government would have made this necessary concession.

Ultimately, in settling this debate, one has to consider the alternatives available to the Israeli government at the time they made the decision to reach an agreement with the PLO. It is useful in this regard to consider the strategic circumstances facing Israel before and after 1993, the year that the DOP was negotiated and signed.

Israel's position improved significantly between 1991 and 1993: besides the demise of the Soviet Union, which had previously provided strategic depth to Israel's opponents in the Arab world, the military defeat of Iraq deflated any Arab hopes for a military option in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moreover, the PLO's sympathy with Iraq during the Gulf crisis diminished its global and regional political influence. The 1992 electoral defeat of President Bush, who was perceived by many in Israel as harboring ill will toward the Jewish state, by Bill Clinton, who was perceived as supportive of Israel, reduced the chance of any serious U.S. "pressure" to secure Israeli concessions. The primary leverage remaining in the hands of the Palestinians was the continuation of the Intifada, which escalated in one significant dimension: attacks against Israelis both in the occupied territories and within Israel itself, mostly carried out by Islamist groups whose influence was increasing at the expense of the PLO.

Despite this improved Israeli position, one has to ask what options were open to Israel in dealing with the West Bank and Gaza. One will have to ultimately dismiss the "transfer option," which envisioned the forcible removal of Palestinians to Jordan, as this option was advocated by small and marginal groups on the extreme right of Israeli politics. Even the Likud party "very strongly opposed transfer. This will never happen."[38] But analytically, this option should not be thought of as impossible in light of the changed circumstances in 1993. In the absence of an agreement between Israel and the Arabs, and under conditions of escalating violence, especially of the sensational type, it is possible to envision a situation where the Israeli public might have been more supportive of "transfer" policies. Certainly the Palestinians feared that the end of the cold war created a situation where the removal of Palestinians from the occupied territories was viewed as a serious possibility in the absence of constraint from the Soviet Union. Indeed, it was this Palestinian calculation, in the summer of 1990, that led the PLO to gamble on Iraq's military option.[39]

The pursuit of such an option by Israel, however, even if it had Israeli domestic support, would have been extremely risky from the point of view of potential international reaction—so risky, in fact, that one could conclude that no rational Israeli politician would have considered it. But while one would have to favor excluding this possibility on the basis of unacceptable uncertainty and risk, the degree of that risk could have been calculated differently by Israeli politicians on the right—and not without some factual basis: witness the Clinton Administration's response to Israel's actions in Lebanon in the spring of 1993. In a remarkable episode in international politics, major Israeli military operations in South Lebanon were carried out with the publicly-stated objective of creating tens of thousands of refugees for the purpose of pressing the Lebanese government to crack down on militant groups. Given prevailing international norms, such action should have been, at a minimum, sharply criticized and actively opposed by the United States. Yet, the White House issued no critical statements despite the massive scale of the operation and its significant humanitarian consequences. In fact, following the signing of the Declaration of Principles agreement in the White House, President Clinton cited this U.S. restraint as one reason the Palestinians ultimately understood that they could not expect the U.S. to press Israel. If one adds to this episode the general reluctance of the U.S. to stop or reverse significant violations of international norms and human rights in other regions (Rwanda, Bosnia), one's imagination would not have to be stretched too far to see that some in Israel may have believed the risks entailed in "transfer" might be affordable. Nonetheless, there are obvious differences between a potential expulsion of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza and the Israeli military operation in Lebanon in 1993, and those differences undoubtedly would have generated different international reactions. The point here is that such an option was very risky for Israel, but not as unthinkable as one might first imagine.

An option that was less risky than the "transfer option" was the one advocated by the Likud-led government. Following the Gulf War, it was the view of the government of Prime Minister Yitzak Shamir that the primary obstacle to Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza was the Bush Administration.[40] Once this U.S. constraint was absent, the Shamir government planned for the eventual annexation of the West Bank and Gaza. Likud's strategy, according to Amos Rubin, the economic advisor to Prime Minister Shamir, was based on the hope that Palestinians in the occupied territories would find life so uncomfortable that they would decide to leave on their own in large numbers. He further suggested that the Shamir government's economic policy was partly designed to increase this possibility.[41]

Yet one can argue that, policy and wishful thinking aside, large numbers of Palestinians did not leave the occupied territories, despite difficult economic and political conditions. Moreover, observing the tragic fate of the Palestinian community in Kuwait was a reminder to the Palestinians of the frightening uncertainties of the Diaspora. The worsening conditions in Jordan were also a deterrent to Palestinian departure across the river. Put differently, this particular option of Likud was not exactly promising, so that one can maintain the argument that fewer options were open to Israel following the Gulf crisis, no matter who governed Israel.

Yet, Likud's strategy of attrition against Palestinian population- growth in the West Bank and Gaza was initially designed to forestall the argument from the Israeli left about the "ticking demographic bomb" that threatens Israel's Jewish majority if the territories are not given up. But massive Soviet Jewish immigration into Israel in the early nineties, and the prospects for even more to come, reduced the impact of the demographic argument. This led one of the leaders of the Likud party, Benny Begin, to envision Palestinian autonomy as a transition toward full Israeli sovereignty over the territories:

> Eventually, Israel should apply Jewish sovereignty [to the West Bank and Gaza]. This can be done by decree. The legislation is already in place .... Autonomy is only for inhabitants, not for territory. And of course it is permanent, not transitional. So the people of Israel have nothing to fear from Likud, or from the peace process.[42]

In summary, Likud believed that other options were available to Israel besides concluding an agreement with the PLO that accepts Palestinian territorial control over much of the West Bank and Gaza, and prepared unilateral steps for Israel to take in the other direction. Some of Likud's partners in the governing coalition even argued that formal peace between Israel and the Arabs was not desirable, and that "de facto" peace as existed with Syria was preferable; "Egypt wants to destroy Israel by peace; Syria wants to destroy Israel by force. Egypt's method is more effective."[43]

Whether this belief was grounded in reality or not is of course debatable. For one thing, any Israeli government would have had to address the prospects of a more violent Intifada. But Likud's operating assumptions have been that time is on Israel's side, and given that the Arabs have no military option, building more Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza can only make Israeli withdrawal impossible in the future and the Palestinians more realistic about what they can get. In the context of these assumptions, it would have been unlikely that just as the United States elected a president who would not press for Israeli concessions, Likud would have suddenly changed its long-held strategy. At a minimum, 1993 would not have been the likely time for a Palestinian-Israeli agreement, and the absence of such an agreement for another year could have certainly generated unpredictable events that would have in turn affected the future prospects of such an agreement.

The conclusion one would have to draw is that Israel had other options, all of which had their own risks; an Israeli government led by Likud would have also assessed risks differently, and the policy choice would not have been the type of DOP agreement that was concluded with the PLO in 1993. In short, changes in the distribution of global and regional power aside, one cannot explain the DOP agreement without taking into account at least one central internal Israeli factor: the election of a Labor-led government in 1992.

If the election of a Labor government in Israel is central to the understanding of the agreement, it is not obvious that Labor's own calculations changed as a consequence of international circumstances; could Labor have accepted the terms of this agreement two years before? Moreover, the very election of Labor may have been a consequence of international events leading the Israeli public to reconsider. These issues need to be sorted out.

It is undeniable that Labor's agenda differed markedly from that of Likud. The Labor party ran its election campaign in 1992 on the issue of peace with the Palestinians, and on the priority of achieving this peace before an agreement with Syria; as Laborite General Ephraim Sneh put it, "I am ready for far-reaching concessions on the Palestinian issue, but less ready on security questions with Syria. I'm not in a hurry to make peace with Syria."[44] In line with the traditional position of the Labor party, along the lines of the "Alon Plan," most Labor politicians envisioned territorial compromise on the West Bank. Some Labor politicians, such as Knesset member Haim Ramon, and others who were allied with Labor, went to the extent of suggesting "American pressure" to compel Israel to compromise before it was too late; suggestions ranged from withholding political support for Israel in international organizations[45] to proposals to force Israel to allow direct investments from the United States and Europe to the West Bank.[46] In short, even before the PLO made significant gestures in the spring of 1993, the Labor party believed that the circumstances were ripe for a deal that entailed territorial compromise in the West Bank and Gaza. In addition, in the closing weeks of the election campaign of 1992, Labor leadership went as far as "promising" the Israeli public a deal on the Palestinian front in less than one year.

Yet, despite private talk about dealing directly with the PLO that one heard from some Labor leaders, official policy in the first few months of the Labor government remained focussed on reaching a more limited agreement with residents of the West Bank and Gaza in the context of the same Madrid process begun by the Likud government. In this sense, Labor's position in the months prior to the elections was not an indication of the agreement to come with the PLO. Even while secret contacts with members of the PLO ensued in Oslo, Cairo, and Rome, analysts who knew about these contacts, including U.S. officials,[47] believed that they were merely intended to ensure that the PLO would not derail an agreement in the Madrid process. What changed Labor's calculations?

As attacks against Israelis by Islamist groups, especially in Gaza, escalated during Labor's first year in office, progress in the Madrid process was slow. Some Labor leaders, pessimistic about immediate prospects for an agreement with the Palestinians, were considering a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. In one of the groups that brought PLO officials and Israelis together behind the scenes, a study group of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences meeting in Rome in March 1993, a leading Israeli, General Shlomo Gazit, brought a proposal for unilateral Israeli pullout for the group to discuss.[48] The agenda was preempted by a surprise announcement by the PLO official present: the PLO, he announced, was now ready for a "Gaza-first" agreement with Israel under two conditions: The PLO would take over directly in areas evacuated by Israel, and "concrete" gestures would be made to indicate that there would be an eventual link between Gaza and the West Bank, that a "Gaza first" is not a "Gaza only" agreement.

This offer was too good for Labor to turn down, but only because the alternative of prolonging the occupation was not seen as a viable option. Even while ruling out continued occupation, however, Labor had the option of holding out for a deal with Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza. Such a strategy, of course, had its risks: increased violence in the mean-time, the rise in the power of the Islamists, and the possibility that Palestinians from the territories would never go it alone in any case. But dealing with the PLO directly also had its own risks: Israelis had not trusted the PLO as a credible player, and recognizing the group opened up issues of Palestinian peoplehood and of Diaspora Palestinians, the kind of which Israelis traditionally feared. Why choose one option over the other?

In a parallel fashion one can raise questions about the PLO's decision to make a deal. The strategic pressures on the PLO to act were undeniable: The decline of global and regional support, the dire financial crisis, and the erosion of PLO influence in favor of emerging Islamic groups. But the PLO, too, was not without options. One option that was never pursued by the Palestinians was fully militarizing the Intifada; to "out-Hamas" Hamas. To be sure, this would have been a very risky option that would have resulted in many Palestinian casualties and ultimately could have backfired. But the DOP also had serious risks, as many Palestinian opponents pointed out. Why did the PLO choose one option over the other?

Ultimately, the choice of options is determined by assessments of risks and prospects on the one hand, and by priorities and motives on the other. In the context of motives and priorities, Islamic Jihad could not have accepted this agreement since it entailed recognizing Israel, and Likud could not have accepted this agreement because it gave up territorial control of land it coveted highly. In the context of the assessment of risks and prospects, however, the picture is more complex. If the PLO concluded that a limited DOP agreement had prospects of success, what accounts for this conclusion?

From the PLO's perspective, there was a significant shift in the assessment of the differences between Labor and Likud in Israeli politics. In the summer of 1990, PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat expressed the view that he did not see a substantial difference in motives between Labor and Likud, and that in any case, nothing the PLO did could affect Israeli politics.[49] This view was common among many Palestinians who viewed the differences between Labor and Likud as merely tactical. By the summer of 1991, however, there was a noticeable change in the position of the PLO leader on this issue.[50] One advisor to Mr. Arafat summarized his interpretation of the Israeli polity as divided in this way: 30 percent "extremists," 20–25 percent "democrats" and the rest simply backers of the official Israeli position. "Theoretically, if there is a new Israeli government with a different tone, the public mood would change within one year."[51] With this assessment, the PLO saw its best prospects for concluding a deal with Israel to be in "helping" the Labor party win the 1992 elections (for example, by refraining from carrying out the kind of attacks that play into the hands of the right wing in Israel). These conversions, of course, did not take place overnight; there were always some Palestinians who believed in the relevance of domestic Israeli politics. But this argument did not carry much weight at the top, as Palestinian leaders continued to be suspicious of Israeli intentions. So what accounts for the increased focus on this variable?

Obviously, one cannot isolate completely the increased PLO interest in Israeli domestic options from the fact that other options were taken away from the PLO after the Gulf crisis, limiting available options. Similarly, why did Labor, against all expectations, have any faith in an agreement with the PLO? I posit that the minimal trust that was required to assess that an agreement between the two sides had a better chance of success than the alternative was largely due to informal contacts over the years that intensified and were broadened in the year prior to the DOP agreement, between leaders of Labor and leaders of the PLO;[52] this minimal but essential assessment tipped the balance of one option over the limited others. It should be kept in mind, however, that this argument about the role of informal contacts does not constitute a value judgement. It may turn out to be that the Oslo accords were a mistake for both Palestinians and Israelis. Whatever the ultimate verdict may be, however, informal contacts were significant in clinching the deal.

This is not to deny the obvious: Given the changes in the global distribution of forces following the Gulf War, the PLO could not have survived the status quo and thus had to make some critical decisions. Given these strategic changes, which also partly accounted for the increased militarization of the Intifada, and given the PLO offer to Israel, the Israeli government also had to make critical decisions. But the fact that the options chosen by each side were determined by these strategic circumstances is not at all obvious; other options, limited as these may have been, existed. Determining Palestinian and Israeli choices were assessments of risks and possibilities that were undoubtedly affected by "softer" variables such as informal contacts among elites who were relevant in the decision-making of both the Labor party in Israel and the PLO.

A more tenacious realist would not be so hospitable to this conclusion: Is it a coincidence that the PLO, in one year, suddenly believed that Labor was a worthy partner? Was this not a function of the fact that Iraq's military weight was taken out of the Palestinian struggle? Were these sudden assessments any more than mere "rationalizations" of unavoidable reality? Given the degree of PLO concessions, was this really a victory that Labor could not turn down under any circumstances?

Even if one accepts the conclusion that a Likud-led government could not have concluded this agreement, a tenacious realist could ask: why was Labor elected in the first place? If the Likud party was willing to place a high premium on controlling the occupied territories, didn't the Israeli public decide, along realist lines, that the strategic costs were too high? Was it not the Bush Administration's withholding of loan guarantees that helped tip the balance in Israeli politics in favor of Labor? Yet, in the end, Labor's victory was so close that no one could argue that it was "inevitable" (and, in fact, opposition parties received more "Jewish votes" than did Labor and its coalition partners); the outcome could have gone either way. The consequence of this conclusion does not come as a surprise to some realists, like Kenneth Waltz, who understood the indispensable value of the empirical analysis of internal politics for the study of foreign policy.[53] Yet, this has not been the tradition of neo-realist analysis in the past two decades, as more emphasis has been placed on deductive reasoning.

Conclusion

Two central arguments were presented about Israel's decision to enter into agreement with the PLO. First, the shift in the attitude of the Labor government toward the PLO is well-explained by changes in international and regional politics, and through informal contacts by Israeli and Palestinian elites that narrowed the value of some options and increased the value of others. Second, the motives of the Labor government pertaining to the Palestinians and to the West Bank cannot be explained without understanding the prior ideological outlook of Labor (in contrast to that of Likud) driving Israeli objectives and priorities. This suggests that the Israeli "national interest" cannot be simply posited as a function of maximizing relative or absolute gains in the domains of power and security alone; it has an ideological component that is derived from competing core beliefs about Israel's Jewish identity.

Notes

1. Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Shai Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence: A Strategy for the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and Avner Yaniv, *Dilemmas of Security: Politics, Strategy, and the Israeli Experience in Lebanon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2. Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence. A Strategy for the 1980s.*

3. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30 (January 1978), pp. 167–214.

4. Shibley Telhami, *Power and Leadership in International Bargaining: The Path to the Camp David Accords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

5. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Joe Grieco, *Cooperation Among Nations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Duncan Snidal, "Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation," *American Political Science Review* 85 (September 1991), pp. 701–26; Robert Powell, "Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist-Neoliberal Debate," *International Organization* 48 (Spring 1994), pp. 337–38.

6. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 353.

7. Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 13.

8. Kenneth Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967).

9. It is important to note the differences between Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz on the assumed objectives of states: Whereas Morgenthau assumes that all states seek to maximize their power, Waltz assumes only that all states seek self-preservation and that some states seek power maximization but others do not. Still, whatever the objectives of states are, the distribution of military and economic power in the international system explains the extent to which each state succeeds in obtaining its objectives. For discussion of the differences between Waltz and Morgenthau, see Telhami, *Power and Leadership*, pp. 33 and 85–88.

10. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 121–122.

11. Grieco, *Cooperation Among Nations*.

12. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 195.

13. Kenneth Waltz, Robert Tucker.

14. Yaniv, *Dilemmas of Security*, p. 22.

15. Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Yaari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

16. Telhami, *Power and Leadership*.

17. Jonathan Shimshoni, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

18. According to then foreign minister Abba Eban, when, following a visit to the United States, he went back to report to Ben-Gurion that Israel could no longer maintain its control of the Sinai in light of adamant U.S. opposition, Eban floated the idea that Israel might make a case for continued control of Gaza on the grounds that Gaza is not part of Egypt. Ben-Gurion told him: "We must get rid of Gaza as soon as we can," on the grounds that it presented Israel with a bag of trouble (personal interview, Pittsburgh, PA, 1989).

19. Unlike the prevalent perception that "realism" is a monolithic harmonious school of thought, there are some important differences among realists. See, for example, Michael Doyle, "The Three Faces of Realism."

20. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics.*

21. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest.*

22. This does not mean that proponents of this approach discount the role of domestic politics in the formation of **foreign policy**; they posit domestic politics as an additional variable in the formation of foreign policy. See Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics.*

23. In this account, it is short-term domestic political considerations that are played down in foreign policy decisions in favor of a longstanding "national interest" whose existence may be partly due to some structural features of domestic politics. In this sense, account differs, at least in its focus, from Robert Putnam's "two-level games." "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization*, 42 (Summer 1988), pp. 427–60.

24. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics.*

25. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations.*

26. Grieco, *Cooperation Among Nations*; Snidal, "Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation."

27. Presentation on "Strategic Aspects of American-Israeli Relations," Conference on "American-Israeli Relations and the New World Order," The Leonard Davis Institute of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, June 8, 1994.

28. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics.*

29. Telhami, *Power and Leadership.*

30. For example, Israel's tendency to take the initiative, to preempt possible attacks, and overall to prefer offense over defense may be a derivative of both geography and limited demographic resources that do not allow for a professional army.

31. Telhami, *Power and Leadership,* pp. 107–24.

32. Ibid., p. 112.

33. There was no short-term threat as the PLO-Israeli truce was generally holding, and there was even a lesser long-term threat as the PLO strategy of centralizing its military and political forces in Lebanon took away its guerilla potential (which is more effective when forces are dispersed), without providing the PLO with a serious conventional challenge to Israel; as a consequence Israeli deterrence, most effective against conventional forces, came to rule the relationship with the PLO.

34. Schiff and Yaari, *Israel's Lebanon War.*

35. Isaac Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel,* (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1993), p. 204; Moshe Dayan, *The Story of My life,* (NY: De Capo Press, 1992), p. 215.

36. Quoted by Yuran Nimrod, *Al Hamishmar* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, April 16, 1984.

37. Quoted in Ezer Weizman, *The Battle for Peace,* (NY: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 75.

38. Personal interview with Benny Begin, July 16, 1991.

39. In a personal interview with PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat in June 1990, in Baghdad, Iraq, he stressed that he was expecting an Israeli military action into Jordan in the next several months to implement "the Jordan option" and to expel Palestinians from the West Bank into Jordan. He even produced maps to describe how he believed the Israelis would carry this out. He further believed that the United States, in the absence of the Soviet constraint, would do little to stop Israel. A similar view was held by Jordan's King Hussein who sounded especially ominous in his speech to the Arab summit conference in May 1990 in Baghdad, Iraq: "I have talked about my country with such candor and bitterness in the hope that the day may never come that I and my people in Jordan have nothing to repeat on every lip but that painful cry by the Arab poet 'they have lost me and what a brave man they have lost, for he would have defended their frontiers on the evil day.'" (Statement by King Hussein, FBIS Daily Report, 30 May 1990 (FBIS-NES-90).

40. Even some American columnists agreed with this view. See, for example, William Safire, "Humiliating Israel," *New York Times,* March 2, 1992; and A. M. Rosenthal, "Mideast: Forgotten Realities," *New York Times,* February 25, 1992. In Israel, characterizing the Bush administration as being anti-Israel was common even earlier. For example, Qol Yisra'el quoted Israeli government minister Rehav'am Ze'evi as having said "Bush is hostile to Israel, his policy smacks of anti-Semitism . . ." (FBIS-NES-91-184, September 23, 1991, p. 46).

41. Personal interview, July 17, 1991, Truman Institute, Jerusalem.

42. Personal interview, July 16 1991, Knesset, Jerusalem.

43. Personal interview with Knesset member Elyakim Haetzni, of the Tehiya party, the Knesset, Jerusalem, July 16, 1991.

44. Personal interview, Tel Aviv, July 17, 1991.

45. Benny Temkin of the Ratz party, for example, suggested that "the only real influence on Israeli occupation policies will be U.S. pressure." He suggested economic pressure as one effective measure (personal interview, Jerusalem, July 16, 1991).

46. Interview with Elazar Granot, secretary-general of the Mapam party, Tel Aviv, July 16, 1991.

47. Personal interview with the Director of the State Department's Policy Planning, Samuel Lewis, April 1993.

48. I personally attended this session.

49. This view was expressed in a personal interview in Baghdad, Iraq, in June 1990. Mr. Arafat was explaining why he did not see many potential benefits if he were to denounce an attack on the shores of Tel Aviv in May 1990 by a PLO faction led by Abu Abbas.

50. Personal interview, Tunis, Tunisia, July 25, 1991.

51. Interview, Tunis, July 25, 1991.

52. For an argument about how informal diplomacy matters, see Herbert C. Kelman, "Contributions of an Unofficial Conflict Resolution Effort to the Israeli-Palestinian Breakthrough," *Negotiation Journal* (January 1995), pp. 19–27.

53. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics*.