# 1 The Background

The Arab-Israeli conflict is now in its seventh decade. An earlier conflict between the small Jewish and the much larger Arab community in Palestine had first erupted in the late Ottoman period. It became fiercer and more significant after the First World War, the publication in 1917 of the Balfour Declaration (in which the British government supported the "establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people"), and the establishment in 1920 of a British Mandate over Palestine on both sides of the Jordan River. During the next three decades, Arabs and Jews fought over rights and control, their conflict culminating in a war that broke out after the United Nations' decision in 1947 to partition Palestine between a Jewish state and a Palestinian-Arab one.[1]

Throughout the decades of low-level conflict, the indigenous Palestinian Arabs were supported and helped by a large part of the Arab world, but the conflict widened following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the immediate invasion by five Arab armies. Israel's victory, the consolidation of its existence and expansion of its original territory, the Arabs' military defeat, the failure to establish the Palestinian Arab state envisaged by the UN resolution, and the consequent problem of Palestinian refugees were the fundamental facts in the process that transformed the Arab-Jewish conflict in Mandate Palestine into the Arab-Israeli conflict we still know today.

The conflict's history is divided by the October War of 1973. For twenty-five years after the creation of Israel, the old wounds festered

as efforts to heal them or at least address some of their causes failed for reasons that I analyze. But after the Israeli victory in October 1973, diplomatic procedures were inaugurated that developed into an Israeli-Egyptian peace process, which in March 1979 produced Israel's first peace treaty with an Arab state. This process subsequently came to a grinding halt, and the ensuing stasis lasted through the 1980s. Then a new phase of peace negotiations was inaugurated in October 1991 at the Madrid Conference. These negotiations gave birth to a second Israeli peace treaty in 1994, with Jordan, to a Palestinian-Israeli breakthrough, and to a significant degree of Arab-Israeli normalization. Even in the heyday of the "Madrid process" in 1993–95, this phase failed to bring about a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict or to end the political disputes and the bloodshed between Israel and parts of the Arab world. New developments in 1996 slowed negotiations and in 1998 brought them near collapse.

The Madrid process represents the first sustained international effort to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.[2] It is significant that no comparable effort—as distinct from short-lived attempts, various mediation efforts, and partial settlements—had been undertaken before, and that nearly forty years of an uneven peace process have still failed to produce a comprehensive settlement. The Arab-Israeli conflict has indeed been one of the most complex and difficult international problems of the second half of the twentieth century and into the current century. The first step to understanding its complexity is to recognize that there is no single Arab-Israeli dispute but a cluster of distinct, interrelated conflicts:

—The core conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. This is a classic conflict between two national movements claiming historical title to and vying for possession of the same land. This original strand in the Arab-Israeli dispute was overshadowed for some fifteen years (1949–64) by the pulverization of the Palestinian community that had been dispersed during Israel's war of independence, and by the preeminence then of pan-Arab ideologies and Arab state interests. The resurgence of Palestinian nationalism in the mid-1960s and, ironically, the establishment in 1967 of Israeli control over the whole of Palestine west of the Jordan River restored a major role to the Palestinians in the Arab world. Their new importance was reinforced by the Palestine Liberation

Organization (PLO) offensive against Israel, conducted with the defeat of the established Arab armies in the background.

—A broader dispute between Israel and Arab nationalism. This is a national, political, cultural, and increasingly religious conflict. Both sides came into this conflict carrying their historical and cultural legacies. The Jewish people's national revival in their historic homeland in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and after millennia of exile and persecution, unfolded during a head-on collision with an Arab national movement seeking revival, renewal, and power after a century of soul-searching and humiliation at the hands of Western powers. Unfortunately, most Arabs have perceived Zionism and Israel as either part of the West or, worse, a Western bridgehead established in their midst.

—A series of bilateral disputes between Israel and neighboring Arab states created by geopolitical rivalries combined with other factors. Thus Egypt was drawn into war with Israel in 1948 by the Palestinian problem, but its decision to join the Arab war coalition and its subsequent conflict with Israel were also affected by the ambitions of Arab and regional leaders, by Egypt's sense of competition with Israel as the other powerful and ambitious state in the region, and by a desire to obtain a land bridge to the eastern Arab world through the southern Negev Desert. Similarly, Syria's bitter relationship with Israel has expressed both its genuine attachment to Arab nationalism and to the Palestinian cause and its acute sense of rivalry with Israel for hegemony in the Levant.

—The larger international conflict. The Palestine question has long been an important and a salient international issue. The interest and passion aroused by the Holy Land (*Falastin* to Arabs and Muslims), the saliency of what used to be called the Jewish question, the rivalries of colonial powers and later the superpowers in the Middle East, and the overall geopolitical importance of the Arab world are some of the considerations and forces that have accounted for the significance in international affairs of the evolving Arab-Israeli conflict. The conflict was not originally nor subsequently allowed to be a merely local squabble. Arabs and Israelis from the outset sought international support for their respective causes, while foreign governments and other actors—out of genuine commitment to one of the parties, in search of gain, or for the sake of peace and stability—have always intervened.

The Cold War magnified and exacerbated these international factors. The Middle East, because of its intrinsic importance, its geographical closeness to the Soviet Union, and its openness to change, became an important arena of Soviet-American competition. In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union shifted from initial support for Israel to sweeping support for the Arab states, and it exploited the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to weaken the Western position in the Middle East and enhance its own. After about a decade of fluctuation, the United States decided on a policy of open cooperation with Israel and other Middle Eastern allies against the region's radical and pro-Soviet regimes. So, in the Arab-Israeli wars in 1967 and 1973 and in other Middle Eastern crises, the two superpowers contended by proxy. Israel's power was increased dramatically by American aid and support, but the Soviet Union's military assistance to its allies and clients, the prospect of Soviet military intervention, and Soviet help in rebuilding the defeated Egyptian and Syrian armies were important in denying Israel the political fruits of its military power and achievements.[3]

Whereas in the 1950s and early 1960s it was the Soviet Union that tended to take advantage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the equation was altered by Israel's victory in the 1967 war. Within a few years, the Arab world grasped that Washington held the key to regaining the territories Israel had captured in that war. American endorsement of the principle of exchanging land for peace, and an occasional willingness and ability to act on it, were the basis on which the United States was able to orchestrate the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations and register several impressive achievements. For example, the Egyptian-Israeli peace process initiated after the 1973 war—the first major breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli conflict—was intimately linked to one of Washington's greatest Cold War accomplishments: Egypt's transition from a Soviet ally to a nation in the American orbit.[4] After the Soviet Union's collapse and the end of the Cold War, the international and regional landscape in the Middle East was transformed. Washington's interests in the Middle East were no longer shaped to a large extent by its rivalry with the Soviet Union; regional actors like Iraq, Iran, and Turkey began to play larger roles and in recent years a reassertive Russia began to make fresh inroads in the Middle East.

## 1948–67

This was the formative period of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The 1948 war that gave birth both to the state of Israel and to the Arab-Israeli conflict ended with a series of armistice agreements, not with a peace settlement. This fact has in recent years been the focus of a fierce debate in Israel among three schools of opinion: an orthodox, establishment-oriented, almost official historiography that blames this failure on the Arab world and its refusal to accept Israel's existence; a revisionist school that considers these critical years through a contemporary ideological prism, relying on several newly opened archives, primarily Israel's state archives, and that lays much of the blame on Israel and its first leader, David Ben-Gurion, for refusing any sensible compromise or concession; and another school of postrevisionists, also using newly available archival and other sources, that shuns both the apologetic tendency of the first historiography and the blunt revisionism of the second.[5]

This third group is interested less in allocating blame and discovering "missed opportunities" than in trying to understand the stalemate produced by the Arab-Israeli clash of interests and outlooks and in their asymmetries. Israel sustained heavy casualties in the 1948 war, believed that in the aftermath of the Holocaust the Jewish people were entitled to a secure homeland, and maintained that a belligerent force defeated in a war that it had itself initiated could not reasonably demand a reversal of its outcome.

Israel was also guided by a genuine, albeit sometimes exaggerated, existential insecurity and a fear that a second round of conflict might be initiated by its Arab adversaries, who had refused to accept the war's outcome and Israel's entrenchment in their midst. Under Ben-Gurion's leadership, Israel sought to stabilize the status quo on the assumption that, once it had consolidated its existence and absorbed the postwar wave of Jewish refugees and immigrants, peace could later be made on better terms. In a series of exploratory and then real peace negotiations conducted after the 1948 war, Israel offered some concessions, though not the ones demanded by its Arab interlocutors.[6]

From the Arab nationalist perspective, Israel was an illegitimate state that threatened the Arab world culturally and geopolitically. The few

Arab leaders who agreed to negotiate with Israel insisted on far-reaching concessions—giving up the southern part of the Negev Desert, allowing a corridor to link Gaza to the West Bank, permitting the return of Palestinian refugees, and jurisdiction over part of Lake Tiberias (or the Sea of Galilee). These leaders made such demands both to legitimize any prospective agreement in Arab eyes and because they believed that only significant and painful Israeli concessions could redress some of the injustices done them by Israel's very establishment and the expansion of its original territory, the defeat of the Arab armies, and the disintegration of the Palestinian community.[7]

A close look at the various attempts to arrive at peace settlements between Israel and its Arab neighbors after the 1948 war will point to many reasons and forces responsible for their failure, but at the root of the difficulty is the truth that the Arab and Israeli perspectives were irreconcilable. In the circumstances obtaining at the war's end, any concession that could possibly satisfy at least some of the Arabs was perceived by Israel's leaders as an existential threat. This state of affairs continued until June 1967, when Israel's victory in the Six-Day War gave it territorial assets that it could use as bargaining chips in peace negotiations. Until then, the conflict had lingered and festered. The limitations and shortcomings of the armistice agreements, friction over unresolved issues, the impact of radical ideologies espoused by certain Arab army officers on Arab politics, Israel's response to these developments, and the Soviet Union's influence in the region combined to shape a full-blown Arab-Israeli conflict by the mid-1950s. This meant a virtual absence of normal contacts between Israel and the Arab world; a complete Arab boycott; border clashes; individual and organized group Arab violence against Israel and an Israeli policy to retaliate against both; a second Israeli-Arab war in 1956 shaped by Israel's cooperation with Great Britain and France, two declining colonial powers, versus revolutionary pan-Arab nationalists; an arms race; and perennial fear of still more war.[8]

Soon events and developments occurred that led to the crisis of May 1967 and the Six-Day War in June. One was the completion of Israel's overland water carrier, bringing water from Lake Tiberias in the north to the more spacious but arid lands in the south, and the Arab decision to thwart a project designed to enhance Israel's capacity to absorb more

people and thus consolidate its existence. A second was the return of the Palestinians and the Palestinian national movement to a directly active role in Middle Eastern politics with the emergence of various groups and organizations that subsequently assembled under the umbrella of the PLO. Third was the radicalization of Syrian politics under the Ba'ath Party's regime and the exacerbation of rivalries among various Arab states, particularly with regard to issues relating to Israel. Fourth was the intensification of Soviet-American rivalry in the region. And lastly there was a leadership crisis in Israel after David Ben-Gurion's second and final retirement in 1963.[9]

## 1967–73

Although the June 1967 war created a potential for a political settlement by gaining Israel new territorial assets, it also escalated the Arab-Israeli conflict to hitherto unfamiliar levels. Right after the war, Israel indeed considered the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights as, essentially, temporary holdings to be used to obtain a genuine peace. As time went by and peace failed to come, however, the situation progressively acquired the trappings of permanency, and the temporary holdings were tied to Israel by a variety of bonds and vested interests.

The West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which Jews considered parts of the historical Land of Israel and which had been parts of Mandate Palestine, were treated from the outset on an entirely different basis. Sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza was, unlike that over the Sinai and the Golan, according to the Israeli interpretation at least, an open issue. Control over and title to these territories raised fundamental issues of security and identity—these were the lands of the Bible (much more so, in fact, than the coastal plains where most of Israel's population actually lived). In them lay the key to a historic compromise with Palestinian nationalism or, alternatively, to yet another effort to make an agreement with Hashemite Jordan; but neither the shape of such a settlement nor an available partner was readily apparent. Moreover, Israel's politics were altered by the powerful wave of messianic-mystical nationalism generated by Israel's acquisition of Judea and Samaria. (In the coded language of Israeli politics, the term "West Bank" is neutral but the biblical term "Judea and Samaria" expresses a claim to the heartlands of

Jewish history.) This wave was reinforced by the Israelis' unprecedented sense of power after their great and swift military victory, and their determination never to return to the vulnerable borders of the prewar period or to a trauma like the one they had endured in May 1967, when on the eve of the war many in Israel feared a disaster.[10]

The military might that Israel displayed in June 1967 convinced the Arabs, at least temporarily, that they could not reasonably hope to end the conflict through a military victory, although limited wars and wars of attrition could still be launched. The effect of the 1967 defeat was qualitatively different from that of the defeats in 1948 and 1956—Israel's swift and stunning victory could not be explained away by the Western powers' direct participation or by the decay of the old order in the Arab world, for though Jordan's King Hussein was a traditional Arab monarch, the Nasserite regime in Egypt and the Ba'ath regime in Syria were paragons of revolutionary Arab nationalism. In the Arabs' ensuing soul-searching, several alternatives were fiercely debated—return to the Islamic fold, further radicalization, or stay with the familiar status quo. But a recommendation to draw yet another conclusion from the repeated failure to defeat Israel—to seek a political settlement based on a historic compromise—was not made.[11]

These Israeli and Arab frames of mind were chiefly responsible for the diplomatic stalemate over the next six years. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union hastened to rebuild and resupply the Egyptian and Syrian armies, while the United States supported Israel's insistence that its victory should lead to nothing less than a genuine settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The United Nations' lengthy deliberations in the summer and fall of 1967 ended with the adoption of Security Council Resolution 242, an epitome of constructive ambiguity: it has served ever since as the basis for the several efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute precisely because its careful formulation (along with the differences between the English, French, and Russian versions of it) has enabled all parties to claim the validity of their own interpretations.

The initial efforts at international mediation having failed, Egypt, with its armed forces rehabilitated with Soviet aid, resumed hostilities in late 1968. Limited fighting with Israel spread along the Jordanian and Syrian fronts; this war of attrition lasted until the summer of 1970. The Arab states' eagerness to regain the territories they had lost in June 1967

was supplemented and enhanced by Palestinian nationalism's quest for self-determination. Thus the Six-Day War gave new scale and impetus to a process that had already begun: the Arab states' formation of the original PLO, the challenge presented to the PLO by authentic Palestinian groups, the formulation of the Palestinian National Charter—in short, the return of the Palestinian issue to the forefront of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

After the June war, the relationship and balance between the Palestinian national movement and the Arab states changed, the latter losing power and prestige while the former seemed to offer new hope—of defeating Israel through a popular war of liberation, and inflicting unfamiliar blows on it through a series of spectacular terrorist acts. In addition, the Palestinians built virtually independent territorial bases in Jordan and Lebanon, at the expense of these states' sovereignty. An authentic Palestinian organization led by Yasser Arafat, Fatah, took control of the PLO, ending the rivalry of the previous four years. Arafat became an important Arab leader, wielding influence in summit conferences and at other Arab meetings.[12]

In theory, some of these developments might have been the basis for an Israeli-Palestinian accommodation. Israel was in control of all of Mandate Palestine, but it was not eager to add the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank to its body politic. Palestinian leaders had the authority and credibility to make a compromise agreement that their predecessors had refused to consider. But accommodation and compromise remained only theoretical options. Israeli attachment to the West Bank intensified, while the PLO was carried away by its initial successes to an inflated view of its power and prospects.[13]

By the summer of 1970, it had become clear that the PLO's efforts to organize a popular uprising in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were unsuccessful. Still more significant, the Arab states' war of attrition against Israel had run its course, and Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, responded positively to Secretary of State William Rogers's "initiative" for a cease-fire. The PLO's radical wing fought a rearguard action against what it viewed as capitulation. Western airliners were hijacked to Cairo and Jordan. In Jordan this defiance triggered a final showdown between the Palestinians and the Hashemite regime. For three years, King Hussein had tolerated the gradual erosion of his

authority and sovereignty in Jordan by a movement that enjoyed the support of both the Palestinian majority among his own subjects and the larger Arab world. In September 1970, the Palestinians overplayed their hand, humiliating him and his loyalists, but the Jordanian army crushed the Palestinian opposition and expelled the PLO's fighting units from Jordanian territory without incurring significant criticism from Nasser, who had just made his own truce with Israel. A halfhearted Syrian intervention on behalf of the Palestinians ended ignominiously: Hafiz al-Asad, commander of the Syrian air force, refused to commit his planes to what he regarded as a senseless adventure, and without air cover the Syrian armored column invading Jordan fell easy prey to Jordan's small air force and was forced to turn around.

There was more to this episode than a minor military clash between Jordan and Syria. It was also a Soviet-American conflict by proxy. In the Cold War context, a Soviet client had invaded the territory of an American client and had apparently been defeated by the latter's armed forces, though it was also deterred by the mobilization of Israeli land and air forces in case they were needed to support Jordan in its battle against the Syrians. Israel's moves were closely coordinated with the United States, which viewed this coordination as a successful implementation of the Nixon doctrine—resolving a regional crisis with local allies and without American troops. This was the first in a series of exploits by Henry Kissinger that defined his spectacular Middle Eastern diplomacy during the next years.

In Israel a retrospective policy debate followed this episode. Henry Kissinger's chief partner on the Israeli side had been Yitzhak Rabin, who was serving as ambassador to Washington—a preparatory phase in his transition from a military career to a political one. He and the government of Prime Minister Golda Meir took pride in what they considered a clear demonstration of Israel's strategic value to the United States, its contribution to pragmatism and stability in the region, and the reinforcement of Israel's community of interests with the Hashemite regime in Jordan. Curiously, the government's right-wing critics took exception to this latter point. In their view, Israel should have remained neutral in the Jordanian dispute and allowed the Palestinians to defeat the Hashemite regime and take over the Jordanian government, for they believed

that, once the Palestinians had their own state in Jordan, Israel could press its claim to the West Bank. Thus the maxim: Jordan is Palestine.[14]

But this Israeli debate seemed almost academic. The successful conclusion of the Jordanian crisis, the end of the war of attrition, Nasser's subsequent death, and the partnership and intimacy with the United States combined to generate a feeling that the status quo could be indefinitely perpetuated. This, however, came from a false sense of security.[15]

The war launched in October 1973 by Egypt and Syria against Israel differed from those of 1948 and 1967. They did not go to war in support of the Palestinians or drift into it in an uncontrolled process of escalation. Rather the Sinai Peninsula for Egypt and the Golan Heights for Syria were parts of their national territories, and Israel's control of them seemed unbearable. The real driving force behind planning and executing the war was Nasser's underestimated successor, Anwar al-Sadat.

Sadat's new policy toward Israel was predicated on his underlying decision to liberalize Egypt's politics and economy and to reorient that nation from a Soviet to an American focus. To implement these changes, he had to disengage from the conflict with Israel. His concepts for a diplomatic settlement with Israel were very modest (and very distant from the peace treaty he ended up signing years later), but they were unacceptable to Golda Meir in 1971, and Sadat decided to launch a limited war to break the deadlock.

Sadat relied on two partners. One was Syria's new ruler, Hafiz al-Asad, who had seized full power in his country in November 1970 after an internecine debate over Syria's debacle in Jordan two months earlier. Asad, a senior member of the Ba'ath regime since its inception in March 1963, headed its more pragmatic wing. He did not believe in the ill-defined notion of a "popular war of liberation" championed by his radical rivals, but instead advocated cooperation with other Arab states against Israel. When Sadat approached him in 1972, he agreed to join Egypt in a war coalition, although he did not share Sadat's concept of the war as a prelude to negotiations or relish Syria's junior-partner position. Sadat's other partner was the group of conservatively governed, oil-producing Arab states. By the early 1970s, the first signs of the energy crisis were visible, and the balance was shifting among the oil-producing nations, the international oil companies, and the Western powers. Sadat

knew that in launching a war he could rely on the increasing political and economic power of the Gulf Arabs.[16]

The PLO was not part of or privy to these preparations. Having been evicted from Jordan, it was busy building a new territorial base in Lebanon. The weakness of the Lebanese state, the sympathy and support of several factions within Lebanon, and the backing of other Arab governments enabled the PLO to build a state within a state there—with virtual control over Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut and in the south, autonomous political and operational headquarters in Beirut, and an extensive infrastructure in southern Lebanon, which it could use as a base of operations against Israel.

## 1973–77

The October War of 1973 did indeed break the deadlock and opened the way to a lengthy, intermittent effort to convert the potential created by the 1967 Six-Day War into peace negotiations that would settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. The transition from violence to diplomacy was facilitated by the absence of a clear outcome to the 1973 war, which ended with Israeli troops on the Egyptian side of the Suez Canal, a hundred kilometers from Cairo, and also in Syrian territory, within artillery range of Damascus to the north. Only forceful diplomatic intervention by the United States saved Egypt from a total military defeat. But Egypt did effect a successful crossing of the Suez Canal and managed to keep some troops inside the Sinai Peninsula. And Syria, before its troops were pushed back toward Damascus, had overrun the Golan Heights. Owing to an intelligence setback caused by political shortsightedness and a bureaucratic mind-set, Israel had been caught by surprise, and at first its armed forces performed poorly. Its recovery and subsequent performance were most impressive, but the impact of the war's early phases could not be forgotten: the large number of Israeli casualties, the need for American resupplies, and therefore the collapse of an important element in strategic U.S.-Israeli cooperation—the belief that Israel could hold its own against any Arab coalition so long as the United States deterred the Soviet Union.

Given the war's ambiguous outcome and the danger of resumed hostilities, the chief protagonists sought an accommodation, and their early

agreements became the starting points for a new Arab-Israeli diplomacy led and driven by President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger, whose sense of urgency derived from several sources: the energy crisis, the quadrupling of oil prices by Iran and the principal Arab oil-producing states (which clearly took advantage of the war to effect a change they had been planning for some time), and the danger of a confrontation with the Soviet Union if war broke out again.

Beyond these immediate considerations, additional forces were at work. The debacle and shock of the early days in the October War disabused many Israelis of the sense of power they had enjoyed ever since their victory in 1967 and paved the way for significant changes in domestic politics and national-security policies. The full extent of this domestic change was manifested only in 1977, when the Labor movement, after fifty years of hegemony in prestate and independent Israel, lost power to the right-wing Likud alignment. In the meantime, a yearning for peace and a weariness with bloodshed provided public support for the concessions made in foreign policy by Prime Minister Meir and her successor, Yitzhak Rabin, in 1974 and 1975.

The Arab states were buffeted by contradictory forces. The Egyptian and Syrian armies' initial success, and the swelling of Arab economic power and political influence, tilted many Arabs against the notion of a compromise with Israel. These were the years (1973–82) of the Arab Decade, when the rest of the world sought Arab oil and money and Arabs could reasonably hope that as a result Israel's base of international support might be undermined. Other Arabs were more cautious. If Israel could not be defeated even when caught by surprise, as it had been in 1973, with its military machine out of gear, what was the point of waiting for some prospective opportunity to fight it in the future? From that perspective, there was no value in a long-drawn-out effort to erode Israel's position when significant concessions might be obtained through diplomacy.[17]

After the October War, Sadat completed the move he had begun in 1972, when he expelled the Soviet Union's military advisers from Egypt and placed his country squarely within the American orbit. Indeed, for Henry Kissinger, his partner in this transition, the Israeli-Arab peace process was not only a mechanism for preventing another war, for directing Arab-Israeli relations on the path of resolution, and for

calming the Arab oil-producers, but also part of a strategy designed to facilitate precisely this shift of allegiance. And the success of that strategy was one of the United States' greatest achievements during the Cold War. But Kissinger's effort to apply the same rule to Syria met with only limited success. Asad concluded one military disengagement agreement with Israel and began negotiating with Washington, but he refused to abandon his pro-Soviet orientation.

Alongside the American mediation, a direct channel of communication between Egypt and Israel was opened after the October War: talks between Generals Abd-ul-Ghani al-Gamasi and Aharon Yariv at Kilometer 101, a site named for its sign marking the distance from Cairo. The talks revealed the potential for reconciliation inherent in the relationship between the two countries, but at the end of the day both preferred to have Washington's mediation. With American help, Egypt and Israel signed a number of agreements that culminated in a disengagement-of-forces agreement in January 1974. This stabilized the situation and indicated the direction further peace negotiations could take: the agreement stipulated Israel's withdrawal from the Egyptian mainland and from the banks of the Suez Canal. Egypt thus emerged from the war with its first concrete achievement, while Israel could relish the opportunity to regroup and contemplate its next moves, taking comfort in the notion that a withdrawal from the Suez Canal was a sine qua non for starting a peace process with Egypt. (Israel could also ask itself whether it had been necessary to go through the October War to come to that conclusion.)

Kissinger's mediation efforts and the three accords they yielded—disengagement agreements between Israel and Egypt and then Syria in January and May 1974, and the Israeli-Egyptian interim agreement of September 1975—were referred to at the time as step-by-step diplomacy. As this implied, U.S. policy was to aim not for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict but for a series of partial, interim agreements. The pessimistic presumption was that a comprehensive, final settlement that met Arab demands and expectations and also addressed Israel's needs and concerns was not feasible under prevailing circumstances. Though almost everyone paid lip service to the idea of a comprehensive settlement by coming to a brief Arab-Israeli peace conference held in Geneva under UN auspices in December 1973, this was

an essentially ritualistic affair designed to placate the Soviet Union and Arab nationalist opinion, both of which resented Washington's control of the negotiations and its preference for partial bilateral agreements.[18]

Syria boycotted the Geneva conference but was eager nonetheless to collaborate with the United States in negotiating a disengagement agreement with Israel. The negotiation was protracted and arduous. Syria had fewer bargaining chips than Egypt, but Asad was determined to obtain an equivalent agreement, and he bargained hard, reinforcing his diplomacy with a minor war of attrition. The agreement finally reached in May 1974 provided for Israel's withdrawal from the territory it had captured beyond the Golan Heights in October 1973 and from Quneitra, the provincial capital there. Like Sadat, Asad thus managed to win back a slice of the territory his country had lost in 1967. But whereas in the Egyptian case the postwar disengagement agreement was only a first step in a phased process, the Israeli-Syrian agreement of May 1974 had no sequel.

In the early summer of 1974, it was clear that Israel and Egypt were ready for the next stage of their negotiations, but the substantive issues were compounded by a procedural problem. Sadat was willing to defy the Arab nationalist demand for a comprehensive agreement with Israel, but he was not willing to go it alone. Syria had been Egypt's partner until now, but the idea of pairing the two again did not appeal to anyone; Asad had acquired the reputation of being a tough, meticulous negotiator, and the Golan Heights' limited terrain offered limited choices. A short-lived effort was made to bring in Jordan: Kissinger's idea was to offer Jordan a bridgehead in the area of Jericho as a prelude to its getting back the West Bank. To Rabin, Israel's new prime minister, and to the Labor Party as a whole, Jordan was preferable to the PLO as a partner in resolving the Palestinian problem. However, Rabin was not ready to make a bold move that would address this underlying issue in Israeli politics and public life, for though partnering with Jordan might possibly provide a satisfactory solution it would certainly generate bitter controversies at home. This was not Rabin the mature statesman of the 1990s, but a political novice still, entrusted with ultimate responsibility at a very difficult time. So Rabin rejected Kissinger's initiative. Shortly thereafter, the Arab states, in a consensus formulated in a summit conference at Rabat, formally denied Jordan's claim to the West Bank and

recognized the PLO as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian People" and as the rightful claimant to those parts of historical Palestine that Israel might give up in future negotiations.[19]

Given this sequence of events, Egypt decided to go it alone in negotiations with Israel. After nearly a year of arduous work, an interim agreement over the Sinai Peninsula was signed in September 1975: Egypt regained its oil fields there and the strategic Mitla and Gidi passes; a collateral U.S.-Israeli memorandum of understanding was also signed that advanced the two nations' strategic and diplomatic cooperation still further.

The interim agreement represented the high point of Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy, but it also marked its end. At least one additional phase might have been planned in the Sinai, but it was not at all clear that Sadat was able or willing to face an angry Arab chorus led by Syria. Kissinger showed his own ambivalence when he allowed a senior State Department official, Harold Saunders, to state in a congressional hearing in November 1975 that the Palestinian issue was "the core of the problem." If this was indeed the case, negotiations that did not deal with that problem had only limited value. In any event, the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon in 1975–76 and the Ford administration's preoccupation with the presidential election in November 1976 resulted in a virtual suspension of Middle Eastern diplomacy.[20]

## 1977–82

Jimmy Carter's election and the inauguration of his administration in January 1977 began a new phase in Israeli-Arab relations. President Carter and his team—Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Harold Saunders and William Quandt as the bureaucratic experts on the Middle East—were motivated by a host of new considerations: an open desire to distance themselves from their predecessors' policies, a genuine belief that a final and comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict could be made, diminished interest in East-West Cold War rivalries and a concurrent preoccupation with tensions between North and South, concern about the supply and price of oil, and a religiously inspired sense of mission. Carter's new Middle East policy not only reversed Kissinger's but turned a

comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict into a major goal. His administration's concept of comprehensiveness meant an international conference, cooperation with the Soviet Union, and the allocation of significant roles to Syria and the PLO. Carter made no secret of the fact that, in line with a Brookings Institution report that inspired his policies, he believed that Israel should withdraw practically all the way back to its pre-1967 borders and should allow for the establishment of a Palestinian state, in return for diplomatic recognition and peace that Israel would obtain from the Arab states.

These views and policies pitted Carter against Prime Minister Rabin and, after May 1977, his successor, Menachem Begin. But they also confounded President Sadat, who could not understand why the United States would want to bring the Soviet Union back to center stage in the Middle East and relegate Egypt, Washington's newfound ally, to a role secondary to that of uncooperative Syria. Egypt's and Israel's concern with these developments led to their forming a direct channel of communication. By means of it, the groundwork was laid for Sadat's historic journey to Jerusalem and for the negotiations that led to the Camp David Accords of September 1978 and to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of March 1979.[21]

Shared exasperation with the policies of the Carter administration certainly helped to start this direct Egyptian-Israeli dialogue, but both parties were also moved by more significant considerations. Sadat wanted, of course, to regain the whole of the Sinai Peninsula. In 1977, he understood that this was a realistic possibility but full peace had to be offered in return. Early in his presidency, Sadat had decided that disengagement from the conflict with Israel was integral to a realignment of Egypt's policies and politics. However, he had not thought through a plan and had only a sense of direction, some rudimentary notions, and an understanding of the Egyptian public's weariness. By 1977, he had several years' experience, self-confidence gained in the October War and its sequel, and a clearer idea of what had to be done.

In Menachem Begin, Sadat found a surprising, not to say unlikely, yet effective partner. On May 17, 1977, after successive defeats in previous elections, Begin finally won and became Israel's prime minister, a victory that ended Labor Zionism's hegemony and represented the first genuine transfer of power in Israeli politics. The accession to power of a nationalist right-wing politician was widely expected to exacerbate

Arab-Israeli tensions. But this expectation failed to take account of two significant changes in Israeli politics: as a newcomer, Begin was less constrained by convention than his predecessors had been; and as a nationalist ideologue, he was totally committed to the idea of the Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*) but not to the Sinai Peninsula—from which, it turned out, he was willing to offer full withdrawal to achieve peace.

A separate peace with Israel was not what Sadat had in mind. The discrepancy between his and Begin's ideas of what peace meant produced an early crisis in their direct negotiations that was resolved by the United States. Washington initially responded coldly to the direct Egyptian-Israeli dialogue, but the president and his team soon understood that, whatever their own hopes, once Egypt and Israel were in direct negotiation, both opportunities and dangers presented themselves that U.S. policy had to address. The unusual gathering at Camp David in September 1978 was the culmination of a process that made the United States a third, often dominant, partner in the negotiations and introduced a kind of mediation-cum-arbitration into what originally had been direct give-and-take.

The Camp David Accords turned Arab-Israeli diplomacy into a full-blown effort to achieve peace. By extending diplomatic recognition to Israel, signing a peace treaty with it, and establishing normal relations with it, Sadat and Egypt violated a taboo that an Arab consensus had strictly enforced for more than three decades. There were two parts to the Camp David Accords—an Israeli-Egyptian agreement terminating the bilateral dispute between them, and a framework laying down the principles for resolving Israel's conflict over the Palestinians and its disputes with other Arab neighbors. But the two parts were not of equal importance. Begin and Sadat were primarily interested in their bilateral agreement, and both leaders saw to its strict implementation. Indeed, this was how the Arab world perceived the agreements: as Sadat's having broken ranks and made a separate peace with Israel. He was denounced and vilified, Egypt was ousted from the Arab League, and most Arab states severed diplomatic relations with Cairo.[22]

Sadat reacted angrily to this criticism. He viewed himself not as a traitor to the Arab cause but as a pathfinder showing the Arab world the only course open to it for regaining territories lost in 1967. When Asad and other critics accused him of being a careless and ineffective

negotiator, he retorted that they were small-minded men who focused on minor details and failed to see the overall picture. He kept saying that his loudest critics would end up following in his footsteps—a judgment that was vindicated posthumously.

As for Begin, he exploited part of the potential created in June 1967 to resolve the "conflict of 1948" on the Egyptian front. His far-reaching achievement—Israel's peace agreement with Egypt—was the most significant breakthrough in Arab-Israeli relations to date, but the price was commensurate. Sadat was willing to offer Israel full peace and generous security arrangements in the Sinai, but he insisted on regaining the whole territory, every last square inch. By agreeing to this, Begin not only conceded the whole of the Sinai but established a precedent (in fact explicitly): full withdrawal for full peace.

Furthermore, if Begin expected Sadat to treat the Palestinian dimension of the agreement as a mere formality and allow Israel a free hand in the West Bank, he misunderstood. In the Israeli-Egyptian negotiation of 1977–78 Sadat had pressed for recognition of the Palestinians' "national rights." Begin, worried by the potential ramifications of this abstract principle, had put forth a plan for Palestinian autonomy, to which Sadat had reacted coldly. But once it was agreed on, Egypt pressed hard for a liberal interpretation of full autonomy for the Palestinians. A deadlock was reached on this issue, and relations between Israel and Egypt soured.

The failure to implement the Palestinian component of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty allowed Sadat and his successors a convenient justification for keeping bilateral relations between the two countries at a low level, or, as it came to be known, the cold peace. Egypt has kept its principal commitments to Israel (full diplomatic relations, a security regime in the Sinai, free access to Egypt for all Israeli tourists) but has imposed severe restrictions on the development of normal relations in the economic and cultural spheres and has continued its political and diplomatic rivalry. Thus the collapse of the "autonomy negotiations" in 1980, which seemed at the time only a temporary setback, was perpetuated over the next decade, aided by several events and developments: Jimmy Carter's loss in his reelection campaign, Sadat's assassination, the Lebanon war, the Iran-Iraq war, the changes in the PLO's standing and position, and new trends in Israeli politics.

## 1982–91

Israel had two aims for the war it launched in Lebanon in June 1982. One was to resolve permanently the host of problems presented by the collapse of the Lebanese state in the civil war of 1975–76. On another level, the war's plan reflected a much more ambitious effort to bring about a sweeping change in the whole region. As Ariel Sharon, architect of the war, saw it, Israel could transform its regional position by inflicting serious blows on Syria and the PLO and by installing a friendly regime in Lebanon. This flawed plan failed on both levels. Israel's regional position was not transformed, and the general challenge of the Lebanese problem has continued and even worsened. The confrontation with the PLO has been replaced by a confrontation with the Shiite community in Lebanon and two Shiite militias—Amal and, subsequently, Hizballah. The latter is a political movement and also a militia and terrorist organization controlled by Tehran. During and after the conflict with Israel and the United States in 1982–84, Syria consolidated and further institutionalized its hegemony in Lebanon; as part of its strategic alliance with Iran, Syria afforded Tehran access to the Shiite community in Lebanon and acquiesced in its control of Hizballah, although it imposes some limits on Iran's activities.[23]

The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 that brought Ayatollah Khomeini and his fundamentalist regime to power was a cardinal event in the modern history of the Middle East. For Israel, it put an end to a vital relationship Israel had established with the shah of Iran and placed Iran's considerable potential at the service of the Muslim world's radical wing. Ever since, the Islamic Republic of Iran has agitated against Israel and against the notion of Arab-Israeli reconciliation, has used its extensive networks in the Middle East and other parts of the world for anti-Israeli terrorist activities, and has introduced new elements, such as suicide bombings, into the Shiite-Lebanese and Palestinian conflicts with Israel. But at first these negative effects were mitigated by other developments. The fall of the shah and the rise of the ayatollahs also upset a delicate balance of power in the Persian Gulf region. It had always been difficult to maintain stability in a region made up of several rich but weak states and two wealthy powerful states: Iran, a conservative monarchy, and Iraq, a radical republic. When the conservative monarchy in Iran was

taken over by revolutionary clerics, the balance became impossible, and indeed Iraq in 1980 launched a war against Iran that lasted nearly eight years. The war gave the weaker Arab states in the Gulf region a breathing spell, but the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 inevitably shifted the tension elsewhere; this happened in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait.

During this period, a substantial change occurred in the agenda and priorities of the conservative oil-producing states of the Arabian Peninsula. In the 1960s and 1970s, they had been genuinely concerned about the Arab-Israeli conflict and its radicalizing effect on their own polities. By the 1980s, different dangers were emanating from Iran and Iraq, which meant a change of attitude toward the conflict with Israel, as well as the peace process. Concerns about Israel were dwarfed by existential threats posed by Iran and Iraq. The peace between Egypt and Israel—the object of sharp criticism in 1978–79 when it was first struck—now seemed more positive, having stabilized the western part of the region and freed Egypt's armed forces to defend the Arabian Peninsula against the two radical republics. This change of perspective facilitated a reconciliation between Egypt and the other nations of the Arab world and enabled Sadat's successor to rejoin the Arab League in 1989 without having to give up the new relationship with Israel.[24]

At the same time, American leadership during Ronald Reagan's eight years in the White House lacked the drive, conviction, and determination that his two predecessors (and eventually his successor) displayed in matters concerning the Middle East. Reagan seemed warmly disposed toward Israel, but he lacked any emotional commitment to the Camp David Accords, his rival's great achievement. He also lacked the messianic zeal that drove the Carter administration's quest to bring peace to the Middle East. Reagan's administration was damaged badly by a series of negative experiences in the Middle East—a crisis in Lebanon, the virtual rejection of his September 1982 Reagan Plan, and the Iran-Contra affair—and turned its foreign-policy efforts elsewhere, mostly to the great struggle against the Soviet Union. Secretary of State George Shultz did invest time and ingenuity in his efforts to revive the Arab-Israeli peace process, notably in 1987 and 1988, but drive and muscle were lacking. The effort to broker an Israeli-Jordanian agreement (the London Agreement of 1987) and to turn the PLO into an acceptable negotiating partner (in 1988) failed.

In Israel, the debacle following the 1982 invasion of Lebanon was the beginning of the end of the Begin era in Israeli politics, but the Likud alignment's decline was not matched by a return to Labor ascendancy. The elections of 1984 and 1988 produced six years of power sharing under two versions of national-unity governments: the first gave a domestic political base for an (almost complete) Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, but efforts by the Labor leader Shimon Peres to revive the peace process, whether as prime minister (1984–86) or as foreign minister (1986–88), were to no avail. Then Labor brought down the second national-unity government in 1990, when it believed that Likud was not responding to efforts by Secretary of State James A. Baker III to restart the peace process.

At the core of the Likud-Labor disagreement were two conflicting approaches to an Israeli-Arab, or Israeli-Palestinian, settlement. Tactically, these differences were translated into a debate over the acceptability of various Palestinian negotiators and their affiliations with the PLO. Likud's opposition to the PLO was absolute. The Labor Party's leaders also refused to accept the organization as a legitimate negotiating partner but were willing to accept certain Palestinian negotiators whose relationships with the PLO were not direct or explicit. Still, in the end, it was Likud and its right-wing allies who were able to form a new government, and the Labor Party went back to the opposition.

Not every twist and turn in Israeli politics during the 1980s derived from the Likud-Labor rivalry and their respective ideologies, but a significant pattern could be identified: between 1977 and 1992, Israel was governed for thirteen years by a Likud prime minister and for only two years by a Labor prime minister. This shows the preeminence, however slight, of conservative nationalist forces in the Israeli body politic. Thus it was a right-wing Israeli government that confronted the massive changes of the early 1990s.[25]

On the other side, three forces had contended since 1967 to be the effective and legitimate representation of the Palestinian cause: the PLO, Jordan, and ill-defined local forces in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The PLO was dealt a severe blow in the Lebanon war of 1982; the subsequent removal of its headquarters and fighting forces to Tunis and to Yemen was a severe handicap. But there was no one else to take advantage of its predicament. The London Agreement of 1987 was the last time

an effort was made to have Jordan be Israel's principal partner in resolving the Palestinian issue, but it failed before its feasibility could be tested.

When the Palestinian uprising, the intifada, broke out spontaneously in 1987, it was sustained by individuals and groups that were not part of the PLO's hierarchy. The PLO ultimately captured the political capital generated by the intifada, but only after traveling a road that was far from straight: first, acceptance in 1988 of a formula for a two-state solution, then the establishment of a dialogue with the United States, the breakdown of that dialogue after the PLO's fresh drift into sponsorship of terrorism, and finally its misguided support of Saddam Hussein's Iraq after his invasion of Kuwait.

## The Turning Point of the Madrid Conference

The Madrid Conference of October 1991 finally placed the Arab-Israeli peace process on a qualitatively different footing. This first sustained effort by the international community to resolve the old conflict[26] was the product of three principal developments.

First, the decline and dissolution of the Soviet Union ended the Cold War's deleterious effects on Arab-Israeli issues. The United States was left as the sole power capable of exercising influence for settlement, while the Soviet Union's Arab clients lost their chief source of aid for their subsidized weapon systems. Rulers like Syria's Asad found themselves looking for substitutes, seeking out the United States, and dealing with the repercussions of the fall of Eastern European dictators. Israel, on the other hand, was a clear beneficiary. Soviet and Eastern bloc hostility was replaced by normal (in several cases friendly) relations.

Also, the arrival in Israel of nearly a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union had a very significant substantive and psychological effect on the Arab-Israeli balance. In absolute terms, the addition of a million Jews to the Arab-Israeli demographic equation may not seem very impressive. Still, the disappearance of Soviet support and the resulting influx of one million Jews (who constitute 20 percent of the population) to Israel sufficed to persuade many Arabs that time was not necessarily on their side.

Second, the United States, having already benefited from the Soviet Union's decline, saw its position and standing in the Middle East rise

to a new level after the world witnessed its willingness and ability to field half a million soldiers and build an international coalition for the liberation of Kuwait and the defense of Saudi Arabia. The Persian Gulf War weakened Arab radicals and the PLO. (The PLO leaders, aware of their diminished position, consented to being demoted, as it were, to only indirect representation at the Madrid Conference.) The United States also emerged from the war determined to take advantage of its enhanced influence and prestige to seek a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The administration of President George H. W. Bush saw resolution of the conflict as a prerequisite for stability and for a reorganized Middle East. It also believed, given Iraq's launching of Scud missiles against Israel in the Gulf War, that the danger had increased that weapons of mass destruction would be used in future wars, making a political settlement all the more vital.

Third, the Palestinians' first intifada in the West Bank and in Gaza beginning in late 1987 had a long and profound effect on the Israeli public. Ever since the 1967 war twenty years earlier, Palestinians had failed to devise an effective strategy for their struggle against Israel, and whenever Israeli society weighed the costs of keeping the status quo or working out a new compromise, the balance had tilted toward maintaining the status quo. But in 1988 a significant body of opinion in Israel was no longer willing to pay the costs of a perpetuated status quo. It is impossible to understand Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's acceptance of the Madrid framework or the Labor Party's victory in the 1992 elections without understanding the effect of this change in attitude.

It took several months of hard work by Secretary of State Baker, including nine trips to the Middle East, to build upon these developments and put together the formula for convening an international conference. A compromise had to be worked out between Arab and Israeli points of departure. As I have already noted, a weakened PLO had to give up hopes for direct participation in the conference and in ensuing negotiations. Syria, which for years had hoped for significant roles for the Soviet Union and the United Nations, one single Arab delegation, and continuous negotiation thereafter, finally agreed to a process cosponsored by the Soviet Union but dominated by the United States, and on comparatively loose coordination among four Arab-Israeli negotiating tracks. Israel accepted the notion of an international conference

and was willing to turn a blind eye to the Palestinian delegation's real source of authority (the PLO).

The final texts of the letter of invitation to the Madrid Conference and of the different letters of assurance given by the United States to the participants clearly expressed the bitter arguments over these principles and terms, and the nature of the compromise solutions finally worked out by Secretary Baker and his team. Thus the phrase "territories for peace" was not included in the text of the letter of initiation to the Madrid Conference or in the specific letter of assurances sent to Israel, but it was mentioned in the letters of assurance addressed to the Arab invitees. For Shamir's government, the fact that the Palestinians formally had no separate representation but were present only as part of a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation was an achievement.

Another Baker achievement (and Syrian concession) was the formation of a second, multilateral negotiation to supplement the bilateral one. Working groups were established to focus on five regional issues: water, refugees, arms control and regional security, environment, and economic cooperation. The original idea was to generate discussion of how to achieve regional cooperation on these matters and paint visions of a better future, which would facilitate the concessions that all the parties on the bilateral track would have to make. This plan proved to be particularly fruitful, even though Syria and Lebanon refused to join these multilateral talks. It enabled a group of states from outside the region to take an active part in the peace process, bringing in Arab states from the Gulf, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa, and accelerating Arab-Israeli normalization.

At the Madrid Conference—where for the first time the international community, led by the United States, committed itself to a sustained effort to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict—a framework and a set of rules were accepted by all parties. As we have seen, a measure of ambiguity was maintained, but the Madrid formula was more explicit than, say, Security Council Resolution 242 had been. Diplomatic ambiguity and various protestations notwithstanding, it was clear that Israel wanted full peace with the Arabs, and the Arabs wanted massive territorial concessions. Territories for peace of course did not mean all of Israel's occupied territories for peace, but the phrase was nonetheless unacceptable to Shamir's government, although its leaders had

come to understand that their advocacy instead of "peace for peace" was unrealistic.

The Madrid formula also showed that a new balance had been struck between the Palestinian and larger Arab components of the conflict. Earlier, choices had to be made in practice between Palestinians and the Arab states. Both the Geneva Conference and Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy had been predicated on a conscious policy to bypass the Palestinians and the Palestinian issue. President Carter's attempt to put the PLO and the Palestinian issue at the center of a comprehensive settlement was an important reason for the failure of that aspect of the Camp David Accords. True, the Camp David Accords and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty incorporated the notion of an interim or transitional Palestinian self-government, but this remained a dead letter. The Bush administration had, before the Gulf crisis, focused exclusively on the issue of Palestinian autonomy. But in 1991 the idea of dealing simultaneously with the Palestinians and with the Arab states was one of the keys to Baker's success.

Yet the forces that produced the Madrid successes could not take them beyond a certain point. The opening conference was impressive, but during the next nine months and five rounds of negotiations in Washington, no progress was made. It was clear from the outset that a breakthrough could happen only on the Syrian or the Palestinian track, and that progress with Jordan and Lebanon would have to come later. However, the Syrian and Palestinian protagonists were unwilling to make the concessions needed for progress, let alone for a breakthrough. The Bush administration, having invested a great deal of effort and political capital in Madrid, was not ready for the cost and pain entailed in goading the parties on; it was openly critical of Shamir and his government and was willing to wait for the Israeli elections of June 1992, hoping that a Labor victory would lead to change.