

# new outlook

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# FOR A STRAIGHTFORWARD U.S. POLICY

Interview with GEORGE BALL  
by MARK BRUZONSKY

Israel's understandable insistence on maintaining its independent foreign policy compels the United States to do the same. It must pursue its own interests, which are not really so far from what Israel's true interests are.

*Q: You wrote in February, 1976, that the United States must establish its own independent Middle East policy. What did you mean and do you think that the Carter administration has done this?*

*A: The United States has often made its decisions with regard to Israel in response to — I rather hate the word "pressure". but — suggestions, influence, whatever you like — by people who were fundamentally committed to Israel and its policies. As a result we have not been fair to Israel or to ourselves and have often let the more extreme elements in Israel dominate American policy. To play an appropriate role as a great power we should concentrate first of all on the American national interest. And in this situation it seems to me that we would be doing Israel itself a favor. There are situations in which the American national interest and the position of the Israeli government may not be congruent. But there are also situations in which the position of the Israeli government and the national interest of Israel may not be congruent. This is true in any country; every government is the prisoner of its own domestic policies. I think that during Vietnam, for example, the United States official government position and the country's national interest were not always congruent.*

The Carter administration *has* established an independent position, and the president's proposals as to the nature of a possible settlement are a very positive and useful stand. The question remains as to whether the president and the administration will have the courage and the stalwartness to see this

through. Domestic pressure is going to be very difficult.

*Q: You have become known as an advocate of the imposed settlement solution. Is this accurate?*

*A: I think the phrase "imposed settlement" is a red herring. It is primarily designed to prevent the United States from exercising any serious influence on the course of events in the Middle East. I really do not understand how anyone can say that the government should not make a decision as to what kind of situation it is prepared to subsidize in the Middle East. At the moment the United States subsidizes Israel with two billion dollars a year out of the public sector, and laws and regulations which facilitate perhaps another billion dollars from the American private sector. This is an indispensable element in enabling Israel to maintain itself as a garrison state. Now if we are going to make that substantial effort then it seems to me we have not only the right but also the obligation to say to what end are we spending this money and what would we like to see happen in this area.*

To imply that we cannot have an opinion as to what is a fair and equitable settlement seems to me outrageous. So I suggest that we take a very hard look at the situation and decide what is in the American national interest, and then what we are prepared to commit these very substantial funds for. If we continue to subsidize the current stalemate then we are subsidizing a catastrophe, a catastrophe which is certainly going to be a disaster for the United

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States as well as for the rest of the free world and in the long run, a disaster for Israel. Most fervent Israeli advocates are saying that the United States should write a blank check, give it to Israel and say "No matter what you do we'll continue to provide you with this even though the course of action you are following may be based on rather parochial narrow considerations which will be disastrous." I am not going to say that.

*Q: After the 1975 reassessment, the administration decided what in fact should be our policy. But then Congress, through efforts of the Jewish lobby and the Israeli government, made it clear to the administration that that the policy was going to be challenged if it was pursued, and Kissinger backed off. Do you think the present Congress will act differently?*

A: It depends on what effort the president makes to educate them and the American people.

*Q: How great of an effort has this president made, in your opinion, with the Congress?*

A: So far very little. To think that the American government would go all out on the Panama issue, which is a peripheral and rather absurd aspect of American policy, and not make an equivalent effort or even a greater effort with regard to the Middle East seems to me kind of a bizarre distortion.

*Q: You have focused on the money given to Israel. We also supply Israel with arms that allow it...*

A: What we do for Israel goes way beyond the money. It involves support in the United Nations against the opinion expressed by almost every other country. It means political-moral support which is indispensable to Israel's continued position. Now we cannot prevent any nation in the world from committing suicide if it chooses to do so; it is unfortunate but that is the choice of that nation. The most the United States can do is say this: Look, we have an American national interest which has to

be a balanced interest. It has to take into account a great many factors. This is a key strategic area in the world. We also have a commitment based on emotion and a sense of justice and of respect and admiration and affection and so on for the people of Israel. We will do everything possible, within reason, to maintain the existence and indeed the prosperity of the Israeli people. We cannot, however, say to the people of Israel "We will give you a blank check to do anything you want, whether we think it is sensible or not sensible".

**Geneva and the PLO**

*Q: How about Geneva? Have you become more optimistic in the last couple of months?*

A: I am dubious about trying to get the parties to Geneva as long as the gaps between them remain as wide as they are right now. While pressing the parties toward Geneva, we ought to be doing everything possible to get a much greater area of agreement, or a much smaller area of disagreement, with regard to the substantive issues.

*Q: You have stated on a number of occasions that you foresee potential catastrophe.*

A: If a conference is bought together with no serious effort to resolve the major substantive matters in advance, it will only lead to catastrophe. The effort now being put into convening the Geneva Conference could perhaps be better used to bring about a narrowing of the gap on the substantive issues.

*Q: If they do go to Geneva, what role would be reasonable from your point of view for the PLO?*

A: I have never really understood the issue of the PLO as the Israelis have put it forward. Historically peace conferences have always been between contending parties who would like to eliminate one another but found that they could not, that it was impractical. Therefore they call a conference to resolve their differences and enable them to live in peace. I think that to try to get the PLO to agree in advance to support the

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continued existence of Israel is putting the emphasis in the wrong place. At the end of the conference, the PLO could agree to it.

*Q: So it sounds as if they should be there in some way.*

A: It certainly does not bother me. To the extent that the Israelis try to push this particular tactical question front and center it raises the fundamental issue which is really at the bottom of the concern of many Americans; Does the current Israeli government really want a settlement or does it want a continuation of the status quo, hoping that the world will sooner or later accept the present situation as an accomplished fact, letting Israel continue its military occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and ultimately try to absorb them.

*Q: Do you really think that a government led by Menahem Begin and Moshe Dayan will ever seriously discuss a Palestinian state or a total withdrawal from the occupied territories?*

A: I don't know. Time will tell. Begin's background would suggest that he himself is committed to an expanded Israel which would include the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. He bases it on Old Testament foundations, which seem to me rather curious because if one looked at the definition of the promised land as it appears in the book of Numbers and elsewhere in the Old Testament, it would include a lot more than the West Bank. It would include a substantial part of Jordan, and I am not quite sure that this really represents the Begin idea.

I think Mr. Begin is where he is because of the support of his own party and the Israeli people. If he abruptly changed his policies he would have difficulties. If we could help him change his policies by permitting him to say that he was not really doing so because he wanted to, but because he had to, to preserve a relationship with the United States, we would be doing him and the Israeli people a service.

*Q: Are you in general agreement with the outline presented by the Brookings Report for an overall settlement?*

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A: I have no quarrel with the Brookings recommendation, but I do think there are some questions as to whether the principle of a phased withdrawal is a good idea. In my own experience it is very often easier for people to make very big decisions than to make slow agonizing ones, and there are so many opportunities and so many possibilities for phased withdrawal being interrupted at some stage by deliberate acts of terrorism, by changes of opinion, and so on, that I would be cautious about it. But other than that I have no objection.

*Q: Let me try to clarify the exact nature of the settlement you envision would be implemented over a period of months. I assume you are talking about approximately the 1967 borders and a Palestinian state.*

A: When I say a Palestinian state, I mean some home for the Palestinian people and I think there should be some active decision on their part to determine what it is. If they want to rejoin the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan it would be fine with me.

*Q: It's not very likely. In reality we're talking about a small state with at least a major role for the PLO in politics.*

A: Very likely. I think so, but look — the PLO is everything and nothing. It's a cover for a great many different shades of opinion just as some of the Jewish organizations were before the creation of the state of Israel. Its more extreme forms represent the frustration of a people who live under military occupation for a very long time. When I was in the United Nations I used to amuse myself in the Security Council on dull days by writing little verses for the benefit of Lord Caradon, the British fellow who sat next to me. Once I wrote a fairly long verse; I remember only the first couplet which went something like this: "Fedayin or Irgun we call the Resistance/It depends if you're in Araby, Israel or France".

### Guaranteeing a Real Peace

*Q: What kind of a peace do you envision?*

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A: Israel is quite right in insisting on a peace that is more than simply a declaration of non-belligerency. It should be a real peace and all that goes with it.

Q: *But is this realistic in the context of the actual relations between the countries? President Sadat now says five years, which really sounds quite reasonable to a lot of people, yet you are saying practically immediately.*

A: President Sadat is stating a negotiating position. Everyone is stating a negotiating position.

Q: *Do you really think that the Arabs are now prepared, in the context of this kind of a settlement, for real, normal complete relations?*

A: If they get a settlement, yes, I do.

Q: *What about the question of guarantees? Are we talking about the kind of past U.N. guarantees which in reality turned out to be no guarantees at all, or are we talking real ones?*

A: When we talk about a guarantee the questions fundamentally are: To what extent would Israel be prepared to abdicate its total freedom of action with regard to its own foreign policy. The only basis on which we could give anything approaching an automatic guarantee would be if the Israeli government and the U.S. agreed that there would be no action taken by Israel except a commonly consented one. I can understand why the Israelis have never agreed to this, but the United States has never in its history given an absolute guarantee — an automatic guarantee such as Hitler gave to Italy or was given from time to time by the absolutist powers in the 19th century. American policy has never been to indicate more than if a particular power with which it had relations were threatened, it would take such action as it thought proper and necessary within its own constitutional processes. The most far reaching guarantee we have given is the NATO, but that is embodied in a total collective security system.

Q: *But a guarantee of the boundaries would not necessarily be a guarantee only to Israel.*

A: Yes, but we must make a distinction between a guarantee to Israel and a guarantee of boundaries as finally established, which would be a guarantee to all parties that the United States would take action to preserve the boundaries as they were finally established through some kind of diplomatic process.

Q: *And would you favor such a guarantee?*

A: Yes, I think that could somehow be part of a total package. I would hope that other countries besides the United States would join in such a guarantee. But almost all Israeli political leaders have said that they do not want a guarantee from the United States, because they understand very well that implied was control by the United States over Israeli foreign policy.

Q: *Do you think Dayan's dropping the hint "Maybe we would let the U.S. have a base at Haifa" may indicate a change?*

A: A base in Haifa would not be a guarantee, but American involvement; they are two quite different things. American involvement in the physical sense might be a deterrent to the Arabs but it certainly would not be a restriction on Israeli foreign policy.

Look at the history of relations between the United States and Israel: In 1956, Israel kicked off the drive across the Sinai with no advance notice to the U.S. and caught our government completely by surprise. In 1967, the Israeli move caught us completely by surprise and indeed embarrassed our government. The Israeli government deliberately confused the U.S. — I hate to say "deceived", but it is a fair word — with regard to its nuclear development. That was its right. But I am simply using these points to illustrate one very simple fact: The government of Israel insists upon making its own decisions and upon total independence in action. In that case, an automatic American guarantee is an impossibility. It would be totally outside our tradition and total nonsense for a great power to give a blank check.

But Israel's final security does not depend on a U.S. guarantee. It will depend on its willingness to live in peace with the Arabs, to trust its neighbors. If they are never going to trust their neighbors, there is never going to be peace.

*Q: For many Israelis and Americans as well, Middle East stability and Israel's existence depends on the Arab willingness to live in peace with Israel.*

A: Yes, of course. That is part of it, but let us be serious for a moment. If Israel thinks that it can go on as a garrison state forever, dependent on American subsidy, that is nonsense. In the first place, the American people are not going to go on forever subsidizing a situation of instability in the Middle East, so that might as well be written off. This is the hardest truth that Israel is going to have to face up to.

*Q: But you are saying that if the Israelis finally decide that they want it, which would be a major change from their past policies, then you are prepared to discuss a formal guarantee, a treaty with senate approval?*

A: Sure, everything. But the United States cannot be in a position where a decision whether it goes to war or not is made not in Washington but somewhere else.

*Q: Are you assuming demilitarization of the West Bank as well as most of the other territories?*

A: Certainly I would use every device that has been developed over the last century, which means demilitarized areas, buffer zones with the injection of neutral forces which cannot be withdrawn merely at the will of one side.

*Q: Maybe more U.S. technicians.*

A: That does not bother me. All I am suggesting is that a very formal written automatic guarantee will never be approved in the United States unless Israel pays the price of abdicating its own foreign policy.

#### Oil Blackmail?

*Q: It has been said that the United*

*States is really being subtly blackmailed by the recent Saudi Arabian decision not to increase oil production and by the potential use of petro-dollars. Isn't there an element of blackmail, even if conducted in a very subtle and diplomatic way? We must agree to the Arab terms or else?*

A: What is blackmail? I do not accuse the Israelis of blackmailing the United States, though they use every conceivable instrument to make sure that American policy is on a course that is sympathetic to the policy of the Israeli government. Now I do not know what the Saudi Arabian government is doing. I have no indication myself that they are using their oil weapon as a definite policy. I think that the United States government would be mad if it didn't take into account the reality that the Saudi government can bring about a severe energy shortage for the United States and for the whole rest of the world if it chooses to do so, simply by failing to increase production. We ought to develop our independent sources of production and to reduce our dependence. If one looks at the shambles that is being made of an inadequate energy bill in the congress, however, why doesn't the pro-Israel lobby put every effort behind an energy bill which would reduce American dependence on the Arab world?

*Q: What about the U.S. and Egypt? Apparently we are pumping about a billion dollars into a large and seemingly bottomless pit with an unstable government and a great deal of corruption. We are giving more aid to the Egyptians than we give to the rest of Africa and Latin America combined...*

A: To the extent that we can sustain a modern government in Egypt and bring about a settlement, that would be the cheapest money we could spend.

*Q: Do you think public opinion is shifting away from Israel?*

A: I think it will in time, but if one gets away from the eastern seaboard, one already finds a considerable disquiet about the situation. People are not abandoning the commitment to Israel. I think it would be



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a tragedy if they did. But there is a good deal of questioning as to whether the United States should go on as uncritically as it has very often in the past supporting the actions and decisions of an Israeli government which are not conducive to a settlement.

*Q: Let me ask you very candidly: Does it appear that the U.S. and Israel are heading for a major head-on confrontation?*

A: I don't know. It depends on two variables: What will be the continued position of the United States government, and what will be the position of the Israeli government?

*Q: Which one is more likely to give?*

A: I hope the United States will stick to its guns. Whether they will or not I don't know.

*Q: How important is the American Jewish community in this?*

A: I think it plays a role for the simple reason that the members of the Jewish community are among the most intelligent, articulate, devoted, and engaged elements in American society. They have an actual political interest. They are deeply engaged in the development of policy and in the administration of policy. I don't know of any people that plays a more important role or a more useful role. I think that in the situation of Israel they obviously have deep emotional commitments which in some cases make total objectivity rather difficult. But I don't want to say this critically. I would say only that because there has not been a countervailing pressure or power in this situation, there may have been a bias injected into American policy which otherwise would not have been injected. That is

not their fault. There have not been people representing a different point of view as vocally and articulately and effectively as they.

*Q: Do you consider yourself a Zionist?*

A: I am a Zionist in the sense that I have long been committed to the idea of Israel. I can understand very well the aspirations which have brought the state of Israel about and I think that any American who is thoughtful and who looks at the tragedy of the diaspora and the agonies of Jewish history and who views all of this against the background of the horrors of the holocaust cannot help but feel a deep sympathy for what the state of Israel represents, not merely as a geographical political entity but as a kind of symbol of the Jewish longing for a homeland. I am totally sympathetic with it and I think it would be a terrible tragedy if anything should happen that would result in the destruction of the state of Israel. I certainly don't expect this to happen, and I think it should be an objective of American policy — a very important objective to see that it does not.