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Mideast Peace: The Best of Chances

Mark Bruzonsky Speaks With Joseph Sisco

A Worldview Interview

Worldview Associate Editor Mark Bruzonsky spoke with Joseph Sisco in Washington, D.C., in early April. Sisco served as Under Secretary for Political Affairs in the Department of State from February to July, 1976—the No. 3 post in the State Department and top career post in the Foreign Service. As Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs from 1969 to 1974, he was principal advisor and deputy negotiator on Middle Eastern issues to Secretary of State Kissinger. Sisco is now President of American University in Washington and, he says, follows “developments on the Arab-Israeli dispute as closely as...when I was in the State Department.”



When you served in the State Department, did you ever envision that within a few years we would have either Menachem Begin as the Israeli prime minister or an Anwar Sadat recognizing Israel in a dramatic visit to Jerusalem?

I never assumed that the situation would develop in such a way that the Likud party would supplant the Labor party in the leadership of Israel. But I think a more interesting response to your question is that Menachem Begin himself never expected to be prime minister. I spoke with him shortly after he became prime minister and we focused, very briefly, on the matter. He had been in opposition twenty-nine years and now found himself in this very critical position at a very important time.

And did you ever think Sadat would take the steps he did?

I don't think any of us thought we would see the day when a major Arab leader would take the kind of initiative that Sadat took last November. However, it's clear, if you look at his pattern of leadership and pattern of operations, that he has normally taken the unexpected, the unusual step.

Moreover, you can see this in his method of negotiations, which is to make the broad, strategic decisions and leave the details of the negotiation to his foreign minister. In contrast, by the way, to the method of Assad. Assad, in the thirty-three-day negotiations that culminated in the Syrian-Israeli agreement, negotiated every inch of that territory and every inch of that withdrawal. And I'll tell you an interesting story. The Israelis, every time we would come back with the latest Syrian position, would raise questions about how Assad could behave in this way. And in the lighter and more jocular moments the

implication was that Assad really had no business negotiating in the same way that the Israelis negotiate.

Amazing things have happened since you left office. Do you think in general that the peace process, which you were so much a part of in the last decade, is on track today? Are you generally hopeful?

At present there is an impasse. But the peace process is not at an end. I am struck by the fact that both Sadat and Begin have underscored the importance of maintaining contact. And I think there are some very good reasons for this. Sadat started his initiative in November. For him to declare the death knell on that initiative would face Egypt with some very, very hard and critical decisions as to what the alternative would be.

And the Israelis, regardless of the fact that the negotiations on a face-to-face basis are really stalled, nevertheless have a very strong interest in assuring that the peace process not be declared at an end. That would be saying that Sadat has been lost as a partner in the peace process. As long as Egypt and Israel maintain that, regardless of the difficulties, the process has not come to an end, the focus is still on discussion, and this remains a deterrent against a resumption of hostilities.

I wonder if maybe we're not taking Sadat seriously enough now. The Egyptians are telling people, especially in private, that they feel they have very limited time, maybe only months, to make progress. And yet you're giving me the impression that the peace process is only barely alive and not going anywhere at the moment.

I do not believe that it is necessary at this time to try to estimate the time limit we have in regard to the peace process or to speculate about how much time Sadat has in the event there isn't much progress. I have seen these predictions time and time again in the past. I don't want to take anything lightly in the present situation, but these predictions historically have been overdrawn. That's been my experience in the last decade.

President Sadat has an obvious firm interest in his own survival. And I do not make the assumption that a possible end to the peace process is synonymous with an end to Sadat's position of leadership in Egypt. I don't believe that there is any known, viable alternative to President Sadat's leadership in Egypt. I was struck that his initiative in November really reflected what I think are very, very strong and deep yearnings for peace on the part of the peoples on both sides of the issue—in Israel as well as in Egypt.

I happen to believe that people in the area are absolutely sick and tired of war and that in this respect the people have been ahead of the governments. And I think that the kind of public reaction we've seen to the events that surrounded the November initiative—and I don't want to overdraw this—are really basically a reflection of the psychological mood of the people. The broad masses of people on both sides want to find a way to achieve a just and durable peace. And I don't think this is just rhetoric. I think this is a deep feeling that exists in these countries.

Does that include the Syrians, the PLO, and the Palestinians?

With respect to Syria, yes, I would include the Syrian people. As for Assad himself, his posture is wait and see, on the sidelines. He obviously has had the most serious doubts, and has expressed them publicly, about Sadat's initiative. But if that initiative should achieve progress, if it should lead to an agreement between Egypt and Israel, if it should bring, within some broad framework of principles, Hussein into the negotiations, I think that you will find that Assad's watchful waiting posture has been intended to keep all of his options open. The last thing that President Assad wants, in my judgment, would be to be left out of the peace process if, in fact, that process were making progress.

Within the whole Palestinian movement you've got some real divisions. There are some Palestinians who are prepared to proceed and negotiate, who are prepared to recognize Israel, and who are prepared to adopt a live-and-let-live attitude.

You mean within the PLO, within the Palestinian national movement?

Within the Palestinian movement itself. But there are a number of other elements that remain unreconstructed, whose objectives continue to be the destruction of Israel, who are deeply committed by conviction to the Covenant, and therefore are not willing to proceed either to negotiations or to accommodate themselves to the continuing existence of Israel. And the difficulty is that some unreconstructed elements are likely to remain even if peace were achieved.

The critical question today is: Are there Palestinian elements residing primarily in the West Bank with whom, in the first instance, Jordan and Israel could work cooperatively? I happen to believe that Jordan and Israel, and I would add Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have a common interest—whatever is established in whatever portion of the West Bank Israel ultimately

would agree to withdraw from—that there not be a radical solution, that any solution not jeopardize the security of Israel and Jordan. Because Hussein knows that a radical leadership would be potentially a serious threat to his own security, that those guns could just as well point eastward toward Hussein as they could westward toward Israel.

So my own feeling has been that with this parallelism of interests, in the first instance of Jordan and Israel—which by the way manifests itself on a day-to-day basis by the de facto cooperation that has existed over the years in preventing violence and terrorist attacks in the West Bank—that that parallelism of interest, bulwarked by a parallelism of interest on the part of Egypt as well as Saudi Arabia, makes it possible for the principle of withdrawal to be applicable to the West Bank, subject to specific negotiations on what the borders are and specific negotiations with respect to provisions to meet the needs of security.

So you favor a West Bank, at least most of it, returned to Jordan?

First of all, the interpretation of Resolution 242 given by the Begin government is unsustainable and, in my judgment, is contrary not only to the position of the Carter administration but to the position adopted by the Labor party over the years—Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Yigal Allon....

But perfectly consistent with the platform Begin won on.

Yes, what he won on. And, moreover, in 1970 he actually resigned from the Cabinet on this particular issue. But what I'm trying to say is that the security concerns of Israel are entirely understandable. But the Labor government position was that some portion of the West Bank would be returned to Jordan and that it would be under Jordanian sovereignty.

There's no doubt in my mind that if there is to be achieved an accommodation between Jordan and Israel, there is going to have to be some Israeli withdrawal; whatever is returned should return to Jordanian sovereignty; and that Jordan and Israel should negotiate the specific agreement on the borders as well as the security arrangements.

You mentioned only the West Bankers—less than a third of the Palestinian people. But the opinion on the West Bank among the great majority of the people seems to be: first, that they cannot separate their identity from the broader concept of the entire Palestinian people; second, that although they have some tactical and personality differences, the PLO remains their political representative; and third, that return to Jordan is not satisfactory because it doesn't provide for any kind of self-determination. How do you respond to these widely held views?

Well, I don't take these as the final views.

Take, for example, the recent elections in the West Bank. Most of the Palestinians who were elected were at great pains in their public pronouncements not to draw any distinction between themselves and the PLO. I think that that is the political environment one is operating in. But I think the issue remains unsettled. Given the parallel interests Jordan and Israel have in assuring that whatever remains in the West Bank not be a threat to the security of each side, Jordan and Israel and Egypt and Saudi Arabia are not without influence in this situation.

Let's assume for the purposes of discussion that we have a negotiation between Israel and Jordan and they are able to work out an accommodation that includes a contractual peace, includes withdrawal involving the return of some territory, includes an agreement on borders. And let's assume that this kind of agreement comes alongside a specific agreement between Egypt and Israel as well. Political views are not immutable. Now that's an environment different from what we see today and have seen in previous years, where, quite frankly, it's been an environment in which no such progress has been made.

I can't myself believe that there are not Palestinian leaders, presently there, who would not be disposed to cooperate in an arrangement that returned territory and provided an opportunity, economically and otherwise. But again, I underscore, Jordan and Israel and Egypt and Saudi Arabia are not without influence as to what the political evolution is or may be in the future among the Palestinians that reside today in the West Bank.

You seem to differ with President Carter and his National Security Advisor, Brzezinski, about a "Palestinian homeland." You haven't mentioned what's coming or what should come.

My own feeling has been that the territories from which Israel would withdraw in the West Bank would be linked to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. And this is a proposal that Jordan has talked about, Sadat has talked about, and it is also a proposal that—prior to the present position enunciated by Prime Minister Begin [the self-rule proposal]—was spoken of by the Israeli Government. There was, before Begin, an open-minded attitude on this in Israel itself.

Self-rule, you think—the "autonomy" that Begin has come forward with—is of no real significance?

The "self-rule" proposal does represent a step forward on the part of Begin, particularly when you compare it with the positions he expressed during the political campaign. The question is, however—and I think the individual who has raised it in the most specific sense is former Foreign Minister Abba Eban—if self-rule were applied, what does this mean geographically and demographically for Israel? If this means that thousands of Arabs would remain under Israeli rule, what does this mean in terms of the fundamental character of the Jewish state of Israel? How many Arabs—and I'm not sure I know the answer to this question—could Israel absorb and still retain its fundamental Jewish character?

It will become binational you mean?

Yes. But, regardless, I don't think the self-rule proposal will prove viable, even though, as I said at the outset, it does represent a step forward.

You seem to be saying that self-rule for the Palestinians under Israeli sovereignty is a concept that cannot go very far, for a number of reasons. But self-rule—some kind of local autonomy—within the Hashemite Kingdom does raise for you the possibility of a solution.

A possibility. And certainly an important and significant step forward and beyond what the present position is.

And when you speak of moderate elements in the Palestin-

ian movement, I gather you do not have in mind any major elements within the PLO or Arafat's Fatah.

No, I do not. I happen to believe there are parts of the Palestinian leadership in the West Bank that have an interest in retaining leadership in the West Bank and that they have no interest in having themselves supplanted by Palestinian interests coming from Lebanon or other parts of the world.

So the two million Palestinians outside the West Bank and Gaza—I assume you mean Gaza too—would have to find some way of settling, on a permanent basis, in the countries they are now in.

I doubt very much that very many Palestinians would move from their present locations. In Kuwait the Palestinians are doing well. In Syria it is a satisfactory situation from their point of view. The Palestinian problem is critical in one place, namely, in Lebanon, where at one point they were essentially a state within a state. The Syrian intervention weakened the PLO both politically and militarily. The Syrians moved into Lebanon, in my judgment, for one principal reason: They were afraid that Palestinian guerrilla action might draw Syria into a one-front war with Israel. And the same overriding consideration, I think, constitutes the primary explanation for Syrian restraint in the more recent developments, when Israel moved into southern Lebanon militarily. As long as Sadat continues to say that the peace process is still alive, this confronts Syria with only the capability for a one-front war against Israel. In other words, as long as there is some hope to this process you do not have a united Arab front focusing on the alternative to the peace process, namely, the possible resumption of hostilities. I do not believe that these are imminent, but I do believe that the most significant aspect of the Sadat initiative is this: It means the end of the no-war, no-peace situation in the area. Either there will be practical progress toward peace, or we will be seeing in today's circumstances the early beginnings of the fifth bloodletting in the area.

Why does Sadat continue, time after time, to emphasize that there must be Palestinian self-determination—he often even says Palestinian state? And what is it that you are proposing for the at least half-million Palestinian refugees scattered around Lebanon and Syria and elsewhere?

The problem is most difficult, as I indicated, in Lebanon itself. There is no alternative, so far as Lebanon is concerned, to continuing to develop the capacity of the central government. Lebanon today does not have the capacity to maintain its own house in order. And as long as that is the case there will be a Palestinian problem within Lebanon.

Or you can say it the other way: As long as there is a Palestinian problem the Lebanese central government will never have the cohesive authority to control the country.

Yes, you can put it that way, but I'm more inclined to the first way, for this reason: Whatever force the Palestinians have within Lebanon is importantly affected by the fact that there has not been significant practical progress toward peace. That's the issue the PLO seeks to exploit. The situation in Lebanon is intimately related to the question of practical progress toward peace—progress that moderate Arab governments are willing to commit themselves to. This can, in time, have an impact on the situation in Lebanon.



“Those of us who have lived and breathed and worried and dreamed about this area know that it has been a history of lost opportunities. And I just don’t want to see this best of opportunities lost at the present time.”

Lebanon is fractionalized today as a result of the civil war; the centralized authority is insufficient. Therefore I don’t assume that, even if agreements are achieved, the situation in Lebanon will not offer serious difficulties in the future.

Why does Sadat keep focusing on the need for Palestinian self-determination?

Well, I think that here one has to distinguish between the rhetoric and the reality. All of the Arab states, in public pronouncements, essentially take the same line as it relates to the Palestinians. But what strikes me is, if you take an event such as the Lebanese civil war, what it proves is that each one of the Arab states is, in the first instance, pursuing its own national interest. And I happen to believe that each of the Arab states will, in the first instance, pursue its own perceived national interest in negotiations. For this reason, given the present political environment, there will be continuing statements made in the public domain. But I don’t take these public statements as the final position in the actual negotiations.

Now I’m not saying there can be peace in the area and at the same time disregard legitimate interests of the Palestinians. There is a Palestinian movement in the area—that’s a reality....

And the legitimate interests of the Palestinians are what?

That’s what the argument is all about.

But what in your view?

In my judgment there ought to be an opportunity for choice—a negotiated settlement that returned part of the territory of the West Bank to Jordan. A negotiated settlement that gives Palestinians an opportunity to participate in the governing of such a territory, it seems to me, goes a long way to meeting the legitimate interests of the Palestinians.

Does that include the possibility that they might decide one day that the Hashemite Kingdom should become a democracy—in which case the Palestinians would have their state? They would be by far the majority of such a state.

Yes, but that’s something for the Jordanians to decide. I don’t think they have that result by right. We’re talking about a political process here.

After all, look at the number of Palestinians you have already in the East Bank. The question of the form of government within a Jordan—whether we are talking of a Jordan limited to the East Bank or one that includes some piece of territory in the West Bank linked to it—that’s for the Jordanian people themselves to determine, and that includes the Palestinians in the East Bank and the West Bank.

What I’m suggesting is that if you squeeze the Palestinian movement into the Hashemite Kingdom, aren’t you setting

up the conditions for a resumption of the 1970 civil war there? Especially if you assume the Soviets will continue to play a destabilizing role within that kind of semi-settlement?

Of course that is the critical question....

One day you could wake up with the PLO in control of much more than the West Bank.

Sure. Moreover—and here we’ve in very iffy territory—let’s assume there was an agreement basically along the lines you and I have discussed—a linkage with Jordan. There is no doubt in my mind that at some point the people who reside in Jordan—and here I am including East Bankers as well as that portion of the West Bank that might be returned—they are the ones who really have to determine their way of life and their governmental structure. But that is a political process that is not only influenced by what would be going on in the West Bank and in the East Bank, it would be influenced by what the defined nature of the peace relationship had been and by what it had evolved into as a matter of day-to-day practice. It would be influenced by what the political situation and the political attitudes were in other parts of the Arab world—Saudi Arabia and so on.

This is not a static political situation. And it’s not a situation that carries with it no risk. There is no solution to the problem that can give absolute security and give absolute assurances as to what its ultimate outcome will be.

Are you saying that to create the Jordanian-Palestinian entity and hope for the best while also creating a Middle East framework where stability would be more likely is a better risk than to allow some sort of Palestinian self-determination on the West Bank? And are you saying this because you don’t believe Palestinian self-determination in the West Bank would be a stabilizing influence in the area, though you do recognize the movement’s existence?

I would put it a bit differently. The alternative to the kind of possible solution that we’re talking about is an area in continual turmoil, an area of instability that in time carries the risk of another resumption of hostilities. But also under those circumstances there is the greater danger of a radicalization of the area—meaning particularly the Arab world—bringing with it a danger not only to Jordan but to the kind of moderate regimes that we have today in Egypt and Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. And so that’s what concerns me. There are no easy alternatives, as you well know, in this situation.

You seem to be saying that you don’t think there can be a taming of the PLO by offering them half a loaf, a small state in the West Bank and Gaza. You seem to be saying that what the Carter administration got itself involved in last year was a bad idea and that it’s good that the U.S. didn’t enter a formal relationship with the PLO.

I'm more comfortable with the present Carter administration position—where the president has said explicitly that a PLO state in the West Bank and a part of Gaza would be destabilizing and would be a threat to the security of Israel. And, I would add, a potential threat to the State of Jordan as well.

One final question about the Palestinian problem. In the April issue of *Worldview* I interviewed Mohamed Sid Ahmed—I believe you know him—and he said the following: "...in power politics the Palestinian issue is the weakest link. What is the Palestinian issue—just a small piece of territory? In the dialectics of the conflict, the mechanisms of the conflict, the Palestinian issue is the heart; it looks enormous. It can only be dealt with properly in the logic of the genuine, justifiable aspirations of the various parties who are at the origins of the conflict." How do you respond to someone like Mohamed who feels that what you're outlining just won't work, nor is it right?

My response is that in the last analysis the Palestinian problem is primarily an Arab problem. Obviously it's an Israeli problem in the sense that the very heart and the security of Israel are involved. But we're dealing with a political force in the Arab world and we're seeing a tussle—and, this is admittedly somewhat of an oversimplification—we're seeing a tussle, essentially, between political forces in the Arab world that are ready and prepared to try to find an accommodation with Israel on the basis of recognition and a live-and-let-live policy, and forces that basically have been unwilling and are unwilling to make that accommodation.

I see it in those terms. It is also a tussle within the elements of the Palestinian movement itself as to what would satisfy what they consider their legitimate interests and aspirations.

Mohamed would probably say that the peace you are advocating is a conservative peace, a peace linked to the oil interests and the privileged-class interests, a peace that in itself would not stabilize the Arab world but would, in fact, do the opposite. What do you think of this view?

I wouldn't agree that we're creating such a peace. Your statement would imply that those who hold this view are in the majority as far as the Palestinian movement is concerned. Again, I think that the political dynamics in the Middle East are not static. The attitudes within the Arab world are not static. Not only are they influenced by what happens within the Arab world itself, but they, obviously, are influenced by what happens in Israel, what happens in these negotiations. And the question is: Is there a substantial force on both sides of this issue that wants to try to find a stable, peaceful relationship based on coexistence? And I would argue that this represents the preponderant thrust and force of a majority of the people in the area.

In this context, in March Crown Prince Fahd made a statement. There were ifs and buts and whens, but he spoke of the concept of Saudi recognition of Israel, opening this up as a possibility. Did you interpret this statement as potentially an ideological breakthrough for the Saudis?

Saudi Arabia has been playing a quiet role in support of keeping the peace process on track. Saudi Arabia has no interest in a radicalized Middle East because it would be a threat to Saudi Arabia. And Saudi Arabia has been giving support—material and otherwise—to Egypt and Jordan. While they have never pursued an intrusive policy in the peace process, they have intervened at the critical moments, for

example, in helping to bring about an end to the Lebanese civil war and in giving support to the kind of initiative that Sadat has taken.

The Saudi Arabians will continue to exercise their quiet influence to this end. And a statement such as the one you've indicated by Fahd does represent an evolution. It also reflects, as I said a moment ago, the fact that the preponderant majority in the Arab world are ready to try to negotiate a settlement.

Does Fahd's statement, to the best of your knowledge, represent an opening to normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel as well as between Egypt and Israel?

That's very premature in my judgment.

Is it conceivable now though?

I think it's now conceivable because I don't really think that normalization is going to prove to be the major stumbling block in these negotiations, even though, as a practical matter, normalization is going to take a good long while. But as a matter of formal commitments in the first instance, I don't really think it's going to be a major stumbling block. And Saudi Arabia will tend to follow the Egyptian lead in this regard.

Let's go to U.S. policy. What would you say are the major differences between what I'll call the Carter-Brzezinski approach to reaching a Middle East peace and what I'll call the Ford-Kissinger-Sisco approach?

Well, first of all, the interim agreements that we achieved in the last three years of the Nixon-Ford administration helped create the minimum conditions in the area that kept open the option for diplomacy and made it possible for the Carter administration to move from the piecemeal step-by-step approach to the objective of an overall settlement.

This objective was broadly agreed on, not only by the U.S., but by both the Israelis and the Arab states. So conditions had changed, and it was possible to begin to move diplomatically toward an overall settlement.

The major difference comes with the November initiative of Sadat, which has made it possible for the first time for there to be face-to-face negotiations at the highest level. It's not that there weren't face-to-face negotiations between Egypt and Israel and even Syria. If you go back to the interim agreements, it was necessary for the Egyptians and the Israelis, and the Syrians and the Israelis to get together at Geneva, admittedly at a low, usually technical level. But the decisive difference is that this initiative has made it possible for there to be face-to-face negotiations at the highest level.

Because of the changed environment the Carter administration can direct itself more to facilitating these face-to-face discussions. Basically, we were in lieu of direct negotiations. Now that doesn't mean that the role of the U.S. in seeking to reconcile differences has been different. I think that the new administration has an opportunity, and has operated on this assumption, to try to get the parties together to the maximum in the aftermath of this November initiative. But it's obvious there have been critical junctures at which impasses have resulted, and it's obvious that the U.S., as in the previous administration, is the only party acceptable to both sides. And so our mediation role is a reflection of continuity more than difference.

You've hinted at what seems to me the major difference between the Kissinger-Sisco approach and the Carter-Brzezinski approach. Last year, when this administration came into power, it not only came out for a "Palestinian homeland," but the president went so far as to say that "the PLO represents a substantial part of the Palestinians." And behind the scenes they were even dealing with the PLO, trying to get the PLO to accept 242, and telling the PLO that when they did that we would start dealing with them. Our implication then was that they would be recognized by us as the political representative of the Palestinians and possibly invited to Geneva. Is that or was that the most major difference?

Well, there's no doubt there was a tremendous evolution in the position of the administration as it relates to the Palestinian question. And what you're describing is precisely accurate. In the Soviet-American memorandum they talked in terms of the "rights of the Palestinians," whereas the previous administration limited its public expressions to the "legitimate interests." And these are code words, as you well know. At no time had the previous administration come out for the concept of a "homeland" or an "entity" or a "Palestinian state." So that all these pronouncements obviously go well beyond the position of the previous administration.

But I think, by the same token, one has to say that the previous administration was approaching this problem from the point of view of small steps, interim steps, piecemeal steps, and therefore there was absolutely no need or attempt made to begin to define positions relating to the substance of an overall settlement.

The peace process has been carried forward, frankly, in the definition of respective positions on both sides. After all, the Israelis have made a very far-reaching proposal as it relates to the Sinai. They have indicated a willingness to return the Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty. Granted, the position on the settlements has proven to be an obstacle in this regard. But there have been definitions and further evolutions by all the parties concerned—namely, Egypt, Israel, and the U.S.—simply because the diplomacy has been directed at an overall settlement rather than the piecemeal step-by-step approach that we were involved in.

Do you think Carter and Brzezinski have now rethought their original Palestinian policy and have returned pretty much to the policy you were involved in?

Well, there's been an obvious change. Because, as you say, in the first several months of the administration the president talked in terms of "homeland" and in terms of "entity," and he did indicate that if the Palestinians were willing to accept 242, the administration would take another look at its position. Now, I think, they're very explicit in terms of their current position. Namely, the administration is opposed to a PLO state, which it would consider to be destabilizing. So I think there has been a drawing back of Carter's position with respect to the Palestinians—a drawing back from what they expressed in the early months.

Do you consider the Joint Statement in early October to have been a mistake on the part of the administration?

I think its timing was unfortunate. And on the substance I am struck with the fact that only the U.S. is acceptable to both

sides. Neither Israel nor Egypt wants the Soviet Union to play a determinant role. Still, the reality is that the Soviet Union is a power in the Middle East. No peace is possible in the Middle East without at least Soviet acquiescence, because their presence is a reality.

On the other hand, I'm equally struck by the fact that Soviet diplomacy in the Middle East is a diplomacy with one hand behind its back. It has relationships with only one side. And even with that side, my own view is that the U.S. obviously has more influence than the Soviet Union in Cairo, more influence in Amman, more influence in Jeddah, more influence in Lebanon, and I would even add, at least as much influence as the Soviet Union in Damascus, even though there exists an ongoing military assistance relationship between Syria and the Soviet Union.

The reason I believe this is that I believe President Assad is a strong Syrian nationalist. He is not going to be the tool of either the Soviet Union or the U.S. While the Soviet Union can help Syria with arms, there is a broad perception in the Arab world, including Syria, that it's really only the U.S. that can help achieve peace in this situation.

Therefore we are influential in Damascus because Damascus is keenly aware that progress toward peace is dependent not only on the attitude of the parties but on the U.S. role. This perception was brought home to me in the clearest way in the thirty-three consecutive days in which Dr. Kissinger and I saw President Assad and negotiated with him on the Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement.

The relationship with Israel—the U.S.-Israel relationship. Has it ever been as strained as it is today?

Oh my, yes. I have seen periods that have been even more difficult. Suez, for example—1957. The period in which Golda and Dulles negotiated the Israeli withdrawal. Much deeper feelings than at the present time. This is without discounting the seriousness of the present situation.

But except for '57. Our relationship with Israel was still evolving then and had never reached the levels of intimacy of recent years.

Well, these things are very hard to compare. But the commitment to Israel's security and survival is firm, in my judgment. The strain is in an environment where neither side believes war is imminent. The strain is in the context of differences of view in a negotiating framework. Not that anybody can be totally relaxed in this situation, because ultimately the risk of a resumption of hostilities becomes great in the event of the failure of the peace process.

But this is a strain in relations on the basis of very explicit differences on what the substantial positions of Israel ought to be in the negotiations. Note, there's been no threat of a cut-off of military assistance. Take, for example, the period of so-called "reassessment" in March of 1975. There was very deep feeling at that particular juncture.

Were there threats then?

There were more threats at that time. I don't know of any official threats, I should say quite clearly. But the environment was one of threats.

Has Begin as a personality and as an ideologue and as a man representing Revisionist Zionism—has he exacerbated the

tensions, or would they have existed anyway?

I think it's enough to say there's a clear difference on two critical issues, *first*, the settlements and *second*, withdrawal in the West Bank. The Begin proposal of self-rule precludes withdrawal, precludes the return of any territories to Jordanian sovereignty.

These two are very critical differences between the Begin government and the U.S. One has to say this. Since these two positions are viewed by the Carter administration as a retrogression from positions held by previous Israeli governments, obviously one has to assess *who* has contributed *what* to the strained relationships in light of these two very specific differences between the present leadership and the past leadership of Israel.

That's a diplomatic way of saying it, isn't it?

Well, I don't know how diplomatic that is, but I'm reminded of what someone said to me recently in a jocular vein. I had just written a 250-word article for a magazine and I thought it was very statesmanlike. And they liked it. But the message that came back was that Joe Sisco had left the State Department but the State Department had not left Joe Sisco. I took this as a compliment in this sense. After you've been in the State Department for twenty-five years and you know how difficult it is to make these decisions under the gun, you are not prone to level critical broadsides at policymakers.

The differences the U.S. has with Israel are honest differences. I have no hesitation in saying that I'd like to see the Israeli Government alter its positions on the settlements issue and on 242, because I think it's required in order to get on with the face-to-face negotiations. Those of us who have lived and breathed and worried and dreamed about this area know that it has been a history of lost opportunities. And I just don't want to see this best of opportunities lost at the present time.

If the Joint Statement was a mistake, what about the idea of an arms package—the idea of linking Israel's supply of arms to the supply of arms to Egypt and Saudi Arabia? Doesn't this in concept alter the "special relationship"?

No, I do not think it does. These are individual commitments. The fact of the matter is that it isn't possible for the U.S. to pick and choose which part of a relationship it wishes to pursue. The F-5s for Sadat are primarily in the psychological category. They're obviously no match for either the Phantoms or the F-15s or the F-16s. The F-15s and F-16s for Israel are a continuation of the special relationship that exists and our continued commitment to Israel's security and survival. The arms commitment to Saudi Arabia is intended to meet what is a primary Saudi Arabian concern, namely, its own security in the area of the Gulf and in the area of the Arabian peninsula.

I do not believe there is any realistic way on the part of the U.S. to avoid some provision of F-15s to Saudi Arabia. It is a risk. But in the overall interests of the U.S. there is not only the commitment and the special relationship to Israel but there is the question of the need for continuing friendly relations with the moderate Arab states in the area. This is an example of where there is a large measure of parallelism in the interests of Israel and the U.S., but they are not totally identical.

Israel understandably looks at this question of arms from the point of view of the region itself and its own immediate problem of three million people surrounded by Arab governments and states that are viewed as inimical. The U.S. has

to view this from the point of view of its global position. I myself don't find anything inconsistent between the special relationship and pursuing a policy of friendly relations with the Arab states. And I don't see how that policy can be pursued with Saudi Arabia without the U.S. being at least modestly responsive to Saudi Arabian military needs.

There are no absolute guarantees that these planes cannot be used at some time in the future on the Israeli front. But, in my judgment, on balance, difficult as it is, it is in the interest of the U.S. to provide these planes. There are some appropriate safeguards against third-party transfer that can be taken and that give some assurance—note I say "some" assurance, not "absolute" assurance. Moreover, I think it's important to bear in mind that Saudi Arabia does have legitimate self-defense and security needs and interests. And these planes are intended to meet these particular needs. If we don't meet them, they will be met by others. And I think it is prudent for us to try to meet this situation in a way such as the administration is trying to meet it, with a minimum impact on the balance of forces in the area.

But the Israelis are incensed that they've been told by the administration that should the Congress, for whatever reasons, take a different view on arms to Saudi Arabia or arms to Egypt, then the administration will not supply Israel either. And that's something very different from what you and Kissinger ever did.

You've got to remember that our relationships in the Arab world in the past few years have evolved. Moreover, in terms of the definition of our own interest in this situation one has to be fairly blunt about it. And that is that in the overall national interest the question of continuing friendly relations with Saudi Arabia, particularly in the aftermath of the '73 embargo, has taken on an added importance. I just don't happen to believe it is possible for any American administration today—given what our overall interests are—to avoid entirely the question of supplying military assistance to Saudi Arabia.

But if we're going to be candid, don't we have to admit that the administration's primary interest in putting everything into a package is to get around the fact that the Jewish lobby might block the Saudi sale if they were put up simultaneously but independently? The concept of linkage in this case has to do with getting around political pressures in this country, doesn't it?

Well, I suppose there is a tactical element in relation to the Congress. I think that's probably right.

On the other hand, we have to look at the situation on an overall basis and to try to pursue a policy of arms assistance that does not weaken either the commitment or the security of Israel, while at the same time deepening and nurturing the friendly relationships that exist between ourselves and friendly Arab states.

Moreover, this has an impact on the peace process itself. Saudi Arabia has been helping to keep Egypt and Jordan on the track. And, though I don't want to put any Israeli leader on the spot, one of the leading Israelis has often said that the more friends the U.S. has in the Arab world the better it is for Israel. I happen to believe that the special relationship and the special commitment to Israel and the policy of good friendship with Egypt and Saudi Arabia and Jordan are complementary rather than conflicting.

Does this mean that down the road the special relationship might evolve into a security treaty relationship, which is something that was discussed by President Carter and Prime Minister Begin in March?

I think it's altogether possible. And the interesting thing is that if one had talked in terms of a security relationship between Israel and the U.S., say, ten years ago, the reaction in the Arab world would have been strongly, firmly, categorically negative.

My judgment is that there has been a new realistic perception and understanding in the Arab world—and when I say the Arab world, remember I'm focusing on Egypt and Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the so-called "moderates"—that such a treaty relationship in the eyes of many (and I've had this said to me directly by a number of these leaders) would really be a reflection of what the reality of the U.S.-Israeli relationship has been and is. And I don't think there would be any significant adverse reaction in the Arab world if—as part of an overall settlement and as part of the assurances that would have to be given—the U.S. and Israel would enter a precise, more formal security arrangement.

The kinds of letters and the kinds of commitments that the U.S. made in connection with the interim agreements weren't formal treaties, but they were submitted to the Congress, they were reviewed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And the commitment to Israel and Israel's security is bipartisan in character. I think you would find that it would not be a major problem in our Congress because of the bipartisan commitment to Israel's security even in this post-Vietnam environment.

You're saying that the Congress and public opinion would basically be sympathetic to the idea of a security treaty in the form of a NATO-type treaty, for instance, where the U.S. would commit itself to come to Israel's aid and the U.S. would symbolize this by maybe basing the Sixth Fleet out of Ashdod or Haifa or maybe by some sort of military presence in Israel. It wouldn't be credible otherwise, would it?

I wouldn't go so far as to define at this particular juncture the precise nature of the commitment. When you talk in terms of the NATO commitment, the critical commitment is that an attack on one is an attack on all. Whether the U.S. would want to go that far in a security treaty I think is something that would have to take the most careful study. I think a more likely formulation—and this is quite speculative—would be much more along the lines of SEATO and others, where the principal operative element is the commitment to consult in certain circumstances. But no one need make any judgments on this. It's quite premature.

But would you go so far as to say there would have to be some sort of credibility factor, some sort of American presence in one way or another, to make such a security treaty really meaningful?

Not necessarily. I don't preclude this as a possibility. But I think both Israel and the U.S. would want to weigh very carefully any concrete element in such a security arrangement that would call in time of peace for an actual American presence. Because one of the things that would have to be weighed is whether this would bring pressure on the other side for a Soviet presence. Remember that while the Arab-Israeli dispute is a regional dispute, it's global in character in the

sense that the U.S. and the Soviet Union obviously have vital interests in the area, so that the kind of commitment that is made in any security arrangement not only has to be evaluated in terms of its impact regionally, both on Israel and the Arabs, but has to be examined very, very carefully for what the political impact would be in a global context and, more particularly, in relationship to the Soviet Union.

For years you've been said to be the primary advocate of the thesis that only a strong Israel—one militarily confident in its own military credibility and confident of its relationship with the U.S.—could be psychologically prepared to take the kinds of risks involved in the kind of settlement that we've discussed.

Yes, I've long held this view.

There is some thought that this view hasn't been accurate. The U.S. has its special relationship with Israel, it continues to arm Israel at a much higher rate than ever before, yet the result has been the Likud government and retrenchment from former positions.

Well, we've pursued this kind of policy over the years. We achieved for the first time two withdrawal agreements in the Sinai and one on the Syrian-Israeli front. I'm absolutely convinced that only an Israel that feels reasonably secure would risk peace and negotiations toward peace. And I don't conclude that this approach has failed. There is an inherent asymmetry in the situation. You've got three million people in one state surrounded by a number of states with a considerably greater population. The basic notion that one hears in Israel time and time again—that Israel can only afford to make one fundamental mistake—is more than just rhetoric.

Therefore I feel, for example, that the policy that makes a reality of the commitment to the security of Israel is one that has produced concessions in the past, and I think that the interim agreements are cogent examples of this. I'm not convinced that an opposite policy, which seeks to cut off arms, would be effective. I think that such a policy carries with it the risk that Israel and the Israeli people will feel isolated. That might lead to less rationality.

Do things look different from your perspective as president of American University than they did from Foggy Bottom?

No. Things don't because I'm still very close to them in every respect. I follow developments very carefully. I am fortunate enough to be located right here, just a few miles from Foggy Bottom, and therefore I get an opportunity to see all of the principal high-level leaders from the area rather regularly as they make their frequent trips to Washington. Therefore, while I'm no longer in office, I have an incurable disease, and that is that I have as much interest in and am following developments on the Arab-Israeli dispute as closely as I did when I was in the State Department.

The one difference is a very critical difference—I have no official responsibility; the decisions are being made by others. From time to time, I do admit, I look back with a little ambivalence, but it doesn't last very long. I think the word is nostalgic, really. When you've been so actively involved in decisionmaking, at periods of heightened tension you miss the action. But it doesn't last very long, I find.

Thank you very much.