

The PLO and the Reagan Administration

*The Great Thaw of 1988*

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## Intro and Thesis

On January 31, 1988, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger expressed his displeasure regarding the first Palestinian Intifada to American Jewish leaders in a private breakfast meeting.<sup>1</sup> Palestinians in the occupied territories were protesting the ongoing construction of Israeli settlements, the dispossession of their people, and a discriminatory and often violent military occupation. Kissinger admonished the Israelis for the negative publicity: they should have expelled the media and shot rather than beaten the Palestinians.<sup>2</sup> Kissinger, a cold warrior and member of President Ronald Reagan's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, was just one Reagan adviser hostile to the cause of Palestinian liberation. Current Secretary of State George Shultz harbored deep enmity for the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat. President Reagan upheld Israel as a symbolic and strategic ally of democracy in the fight against Soviet communism—prioritizing this alliance over any Palestinian grievances. And yet, despite his administration's often overt hostility toward the Palestinians, Reagan was the first president to initiate talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization in December 1988.

Since 1975, the United States had refused to open dialogue with the PLO until it fulfilled the prerequisites established by President Nixon's then-Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, in a secret Memorandum of Understanding with Israel. The U.S. was bound to not negotiate with the PLO until it recognized Israel's right to exist, accepted U.N. resolutions 242 and 338, and renounced terrorism. The PLO had resisted these conditions for thirteen years, but it finally

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<sup>1</sup> Julius Berman, "Henry Kissinger's Prescriptions for Suppressing the First Palestinian Intifada, 31 January 1998," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31 no. 4 (Summer 2002): 100.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

accepted them during the First Intifada and after the 19th Palestine National Council (PNC) at Algiers in 1988. The outbreak of the First Intifada had granted Palestinians new political weight on the international scale by forcing the world to see them as a community with legitimate grievances and the right to self-determination.<sup>3</sup> It was a state-building project that led to the Palestinian Declaration of Independence at the 19th PNC. This document was far more conciliatory to the state of Israel than the Palestinian Covenant of 1964 had been. The PNC reversed previous rejections of a two-state solution, implicitly recognized Israel's right to exist, deemphasized armed struggle, and renounced terrorism as defined under U.N. law.<sup>4</sup>

President Reagan proved lacking in knowledge of or interest in the Middle East, delegating authority over Middle East policy to his cabinet. By the end of his presidency, the extent of Regan's involvement was capped at rubber-stamping Secretary of State George Shultz's decisions and advocating a continued commitment to the safety of Israel. As the administration drew to a close, Shultz, who regarded the State Department as a Secretary of State's "information machine," became the primary policymaker and ultimate decision-maker regarding Middle Eastern affairs.<sup>5</sup>

Shultz viewed the PLO primarily as a terrorist organization, unfit to lead the Palestinian people, and therefore rigidly stuck to a personal interpretation of an American anti-terror law to thwart the PLO's strides for peace and keep its leader out of the United States. Denying Yasser Arafat a visa to the U.S. in the wake of the 19th PNC was a policy choice criticized and

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 240.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome Segal, "The Meaning of the PNC in Algiers," *Tikkun Magazine*, January/February, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> George Shultz. *Turmoil and Triumph* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 37.

questioned both within and outside the administration. Arafat, who had been issued a visa to the U.S. once before in 1974, hoped to announce the PLO's new diplomatic positions to the U.N. General Assembly, located in New York. On November 27, 1988, after a month of deliberation, Shultz announced his recommendation that Arafat be denied a visa to enter the United States.

This choice was no small matter. People feared it would derail Arafat and the PLO's chartered course toward mediation and enhance his diplomatic prestige by presenting him as an underdog.<sup>6</sup> For Shultz and the administration as a whole, condemnation came in droves from around the world. Detractors argued that the U.S. had exceeded the bounds of host state discretion and violated international norms to prevent Arafat from speaking.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, Shultz and Reagan stood firm in their insistence on offering the PLO no special, or even routine, treatment, hoping to diplomatically strong-arm Arafat into making further adjustments to the PLO's internally agreed-upon position. That too many adjustments would damage Arafat's standing within the PLO and undermine his ability to control its many factions meant little to Shultz and Reagan.

In December 1988, unable to visit New York, Arafat spoke at a General Assembly meeting in Geneva. For the first time in the PLO's history, he publicly declared its recognition of Israel and a spirit of acceptance toward the stipulations of the 1975 Memorandum of Understanding. Using unofficial channels, the State Department had delivered to Arafat a statement it wanted to be followed precisely: it would not tolerate deviations. Privately Arafat agreed to this language, but Shultz still felt he had not followed instructions to the letter after

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<sup>6</sup> Janet and Joe Wallach. *Arafat: In the Eyes of the Beholder*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Birch Lane Press, 1997), 391; Magnuson, "Dance of Many Veils."

<sup>7</sup> Michael W. Reisman, "The Arafat Visa Affair: Exceeding the Bounds of Host State Discretion," *The American Journal of International Law* 83 no. 3 (July 1989): 519-527.

reviewing his speech in Geneva.<sup>8</sup> In an attempt to persuade the U.S. to accept Arafat's declaration without further clarification, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt told Shultz that Arafat had "already taken off his shirt and that the U.S. was asking for his trousers."<sup>9</sup> When on December 14, Arafat recited the State Department's language to eager reporters at a televised conference, he made a sly reference to this metaphor. Pressed again to clarify if he recognized Israel, Arafat blurted out, "enough is enough... What do you want? Do you want me to striptease?"<sup>10</sup>

In meeting the Reagan administration's demands (and thereby risking his own political viability among fellow Palestinians and Arabs, Arafat created a new problem for the Secretary of State: Shultz and Reagan now had what they asked for. The U.S. had wrested from Arafat both his shirt and his trousers - and now the U.S. had to decide if and how to uphold its side of the deal. Was it finally time for the State Department to open official diplomatic channels with the group it had reviled for so long? Would Shultz and his bureau repeat the resounding no of little more than two weeks ago? Or would the U.S. finally end its long, self-imposed estrangement from the PLO?

Hours after Arafat's near-striptease, George Shultz went before the press to announce the U.S. would enter into substantial dialogue with the PLO, reversing over thirteen years of formal policy.

The Reagan administration's other actions in 1988—signing another, reaffirming Memorandum of Agreement, approving \$1 billion in defense contracts for Israel, and denying

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<sup>8</sup> Magnuson, "Dance of Many Veils."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid; Paul Lewis, "Right of All Parties Accepted by Arafat," *New York Times*, December 15, 1988.

Yasser Arafat a visa to visit the U.N.—hardly indicated an impending thaw in relations with the Palestinians.<sup>11</sup> Yet, by the end of that year, the Reagan Administration was communicating with their chosen representatives.

Scholars, historians, and active participants in the process have cited a multitude of potential factors influencing the Reagan administration's decision to open talks with the PLO. In her book *Perceptions of Palestine*, writer and political analyst Kathleen Christison attributes the decision to Yasser Arafat's drive to cooperate with the United States, despite numerous impediments placed in his way by George Shultz. Christison maintains that the "so-called 'Arabist' State Department," operating under Shultz's purview, "had little influence on Reagan administration policy."<sup>12</sup> Few, if any, scholars analyzing 1988 make the State Department an integral part of their study. Instead, the department is assimilated into evaluations of Secretary of State Shultz, as though incorporated into his person and therefore unworthy of detailed analysis. Shultz's ultimate decisions are generally assumed to be congruent with the bureaucracy he managed.

Nevertheless, discord was present in the State Department: though official U.S. policy was non-contact with the PLO, those tasked with creating Middle Eastern foreign policy were embarking on a multitude of pursuits. Some compiled evidence of transgressions of PLO members, while others authorized secret channels of backdoor diplomacy to shift the diplomatic culture into one more accommodating to peace.<sup>13</sup> L. Paul Bremer III, best known for his role in

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<sup>11</sup> Helena Cobban, "The U.S.-Israeli Relationship in the Reagan Era," *Conflict Quarterly* 9 no. 2 (Spring 1989): 13.

<sup>12</sup> Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 201.

<sup>13</sup> Arafat's Personal Role in Terrorism, 1986; Folder, "PLO-II," Box 19; Records: Green, Max Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

governing Iraq after the United States deposed Saddam Hussein in 2003, served as the State Department's Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism during the Reagan administration. Bremer, a strong proponent of the oft-cited 'you cannot negotiate with terrorists' axiom, strongly opposed allowing Arafat to enter the country and opening talks with the PLO; he is considered a significant influence on Shultz's decision to reject the visa application.<sup>14</sup> Richard Murphy, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (NEA), believed denying the visa was politically risky and counterproductive. He advocated for and participated in the process to open talks between the U.S. and PLO: practicing shuttle diplomacy on the ground, meeting with members of a delegation of American Jews on their way to meet with representatives of the PLO, and joining a four-member commission committed to crafting a secret initiative between the U.S. and PLO.<sup>15</sup>

These two men exemplify the competing impulses within the State Department regarding contact with the PLO in 1988: one, represented by Bremer, sought to continue the long-standing practice of excluding the PLO from Middle East negotiations, on account of the organization's affiliations with terrorist acts and its refusal to recognize Israel unequivocally. The other, personified by Murphy, hoped to create a rapport between the U.S. and PLO that might lead to substantial peace in the Middle East. While the first Intifada continued in the West Bank and Gaza, the diplomatic environment transformed. As the American public grew more concerned about the treatment of Palestinians, and as the PLO made strides toward recognition of Israel, it became clear that this problem would need more sympathetic attention from the U.S.

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<sup>14</sup> L. Paul Bremer III, "The West's Counter-Terrorist Strategy," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4 no.4 (Winter); Dan Oberdorfer, "U.S. Denies Entry Visa to Arafat," *Washington Post*, November 27, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Mohamed Rabie, *U.S.-PLO Dialogue: Secret Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995): 74 and 80.

government. Further exertion of pressure came in July 1988 in the form of an announcement that Jordan's King Hussein would relinquish his kingdom's claims to the West Bank, depriving Shultz of his favored alternative of allowing Jordan to negotiate on behalf of West Bank Palestinians.

For some months, Shultz resisted the obvious implications of these developments. His refusal to grant Arafat a visa represents his visceral belief in the treacherous nature of the PLO and its leaders, a belief bolstered by Bremer. Meanwhile, however, the efforts of State Department officials—in particular, Richard Murphy—to create different avenues of communication between the U.S. and PLO proved triumphant when it came to opening talks. Though the visa denial was a discouraging development, Arafat persevered in Geneva, publicly declaring the PLO's alignment with documents provided by the U.S. through these unofficial channels of communication. As a result, Shultz could no longer maintain his rigidly rejectionist stance: he had no choice but to announce that the U.S. would communicate with the PLO.

Thus, analysis that excludes the State Department fails to grasp the integral role those reporting to George Shultz played in creating these dual Reaganite policies of visa denial and dialogue approval. By collapsing the entire bureaucracy into its head, we no longer hear the multiplicity of official voices that created the final policies of the United States. Examining Bremer and Murphy allows us to grasp the dialectical processes within the State Department that culminated in the opening of dialogue between the PLO and the United States on December 15, 1988. Such an analysis demonstrates that when it came to the great thaw between the PLO and the U.S. in late 1988, competing influences within the State Department were a key indicator and driver of the changing diplomatic landscape.

### **Zionism and Palestine through the 1980s**

In the early twentieth century, Jewish political activist Theodor Herzl sought a solution to the marginalization and mistreatment of his people via a homeland of their own.<sup>16</sup> Herzl drew on visions of Israel's biblical past and advocated for a national Jewish homeland in Palestine, birthing political Zionism. Zionists saw their cause advance on November 2, 1917, when British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour committed Britain to the "establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish People."<sup>17</sup> Following the Anglo-Franco-US World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the British declared a mandate over Palestine to end no later than 1948.

Facing the imminent termination of the British Mandate, the newly inaugurated United Nations approved a partition plan for Palestine in 1947 to accommodate the tensions between its Arab population and the growing Jewish community: U.N. Resolution 181.<sup>18</sup> A civil war in Palestine followed between the Jewish and Palestinian Arab factions. During this period, Palestinians fled the violence that had engulfed their homeland or were expelled from their homes by Jewish forces in an exodus of biblical proportions known as the 'catastrophe' or

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<sup>16</sup> Jewish Virtual Library, "Theodor (Binyamin Ze'ev) Herzl," Jewish Virtual Library, 1998-2022, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/theodor-binyamin-ze-rsquo-ev-herzl>.

<sup>17</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Balfour Declaration," Encyclopedia Britannica, October 26, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Balfour-Declaration>.

<sup>18</sup> The category of Arab is a racialized and permeable ethnolinguistic one: as not all Arabic speaking people are considered Arabs the term must be problematized, which is outside the scope of this thesis. I take Arab to mean those in or originating from the countries of the Arab League: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. For further discussion about the Arab label and the Middle East see Peter Webb. *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam*, 1st ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

*Nakba*.<sup>19</sup> On May 14, 1948, the Jewish People's Council proclaimed the establishment of the state of Israel, codifying the Palestinian people's loss of land. After forces sent by neighboring Arab states were defeated, Israel seized all territories apportioned by the partition plan and some further Arab-designated lands. U.N. cease-fires in 1949 halted the fighting but were unable to force Israel to relinquish these areas.<sup>20</sup>

Hostilities between Arab nations and Israel flared in 1967 with the Six-Day War. Still reeling from the embarrassment of 1948's defeat, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser fueled pan-Arabism by evoking a common hope for overturning the imposition of the Zionist state and the dispossession of the Palestinian people.<sup>21</sup> When border skirmishes between Israel and Syria arose, the Arab world looked to Nasser, who in May 1967 employed belligerent rhetoric against Israel and announced the closure of the strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping. These actions enhanced his self-styled status as the leader of the Arab world and instigated a 'preemptive' Israeli strike against Egyptian airbases. Within six days, Israel defeated and humiliated both Egypt and Jordan, occupied the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Gaza and the West Bank, home to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, were subject

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<sup>19</sup> For greater discussion of the temporality of the Nakba consult Sherene Seikaly, "The Matter of Time," *The American Historical Review* 124 no. 5 (December 2019).

<sup>20</sup> Office of the Historian, "The Arab-Israeli War of 1948," May 9, 2017, US Department of State. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/arab-israeli-war>.

<sup>21</sup> For more information on Pan-Arabism see Michael Scott Doran. *Pan Arabism before Nasser*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Barry Rubin, "Pan-Arab Nationalism: The Ideological Dream as Compelling Force," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26 no. 3/4 (September 1991); and Jeremy Bowen, "1967 war: Six days that changed the Middle East," BBC News, June 5, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39960461>.

to an indefinite Israeli military occupation that strangled their political autonomy, economic development, and legal rights.<sup>22</sup>

After Nasser died in 1970, his successor Anwar Sadat sought to recover the lost Sinai and make peace with Israel on Egyptian terms.<sup>23</sup> In 1973, he launched a surprise attack with Syria on Israeli forces occupying the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights during the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, finding far more success than in 1967. Though defeated, Sadat enjoyed enhanced prestige and positional leverage, turning the tides on peace negotiations more favorably for Egypt. Evidence of this better leverage was fortified by 1978's bilateral Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt. The Israel-Egyptian Treaty, born of President Jimmy Carter's arbitration between Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, earned the former the ire of the Arab states. As the first to break ranks and recognize Israel and recover its own territory even as other Arab lands remained occupied, Egypt faced suspension and sanctions from the Arab League.<sup>24</sup> While the Sinai Peninsula returned to Egypt, allusions to future negotiations regarding Palestinian 'autonomy' in the final settlement were purposefully ambiguous and contingent upon the heavy involvement and guidance of Jordan.

The Palestinian people were not passive actors while their homeland was in contention. Some Palestinians chose to remain in their homes in 1948, no matter the cost. Others, like Palestinian doctor Naim Cotran diligently compiled evidence beginning at the *Nakba's* 1948

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<sup>22</sup> Office of the Historian, "The Arab-Israeli War of 1948"; For more information on the consequences of occupation see "Israel: 50 Years of Occupation Abuses," June 4, 2017, Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/04/israel-50-years-occupation-abuses>.

<sup>23</sup> History.Com Editors, "Yom Kippur War," History, September 15, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/yom-kippur-war>.

<sup>24</sup> Don Schanche and Los Angeles Times, "Arab Sanctions Leave Egypt Unshaken," *Washington Post*, April 2, 1979.

inception, and insistently petitioned the Israeli government to restore their private property and make recompense for their refugee status.<sup>25</sup> Others mounted resistance in subsequent years, launching guerrilla raids against Israel. However, many forced to flee found themselves living in refugee camps in nearby Arab states. The basic humanitarian aid afforded by organizations such as United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) allowed host countries to wash their hands of integrating and supporting refugees.<sup>26</sup> Nearly two decades of dispossession radicalized Palestinians living in these camps, invigorating the quest to end the Nakba. In 1964, at the first Arab League summit in Cairo, Nasser pushed for the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Ostensibly, Nasser intended to make the Palestinian question central to Arab-Israeli relations. Seasoned observers suspected, however, that the move was aimed at containing Palestinian militancy and amplifying Nasser's own stature.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, many Palestinians enthusiastically continued the quest for Palestinian liberation under the auspices of the PLO.<sup>28</sup>

The PLO, chaired by Ahmad Shukeiri, created the Palestine National Covenant in that same year in Jerusalem, outlining the PLO's goals. Maija Lähteenmäki in *The Palestine Liberation Organization and its International Position* summarizes this manifesto into three basic premises:

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<sup>25</sup> Seikaly, "The Matter of Time," 1686.

<sup>26</sup> Adel Manna, "The Palestinian Nakba and Its Continuous Repercussions," *Israel Studies* 18 no. 2 (Summer 2013): 92.

<sup>27</sup> Maija Lähteenmäki, *The Palestine Liberation Organization and its International Position* (Turku: University of Turku, 1994), 54.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

” Zionism is to be eliminated from Palestine... [e]limination of Zionism amounts to the elimination of the Jewish state.”

” Palestine is liberated through armed struggle.”

“The Palestine Liberation Organization is the principal executor of the goals and principles enumerated in the Charter... It pursues those goals in cooperation with Arab states.”<sup>29</sup>

In the wake of 1967’s war, the PLO, which had been operating as a tool of the Arab League, fell under the control of its militaristic and independent faction, Fatah, chaired by the charismatic Yasser Arafat. This transfer of power emboldened the PLO to act autonomously in the international arena. Fatah led many guerrilla attacks against Israel and firmly believed in the self-liberation of the Palestinian people through armed struggle. In 1969, the PLO’s Executive Committee installed Arafat as Chairman of the PLO, rendering him the organization’s most recognizable public face until his death in 2004. During his tenure, the U.N. General Assembly and League of Arab States affirmed their support of the Palestinian quest for self-determination, recognizing the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people in 1974.<sup>30</sup>

Initially, neighboring Arab states welcomed Palestinian guerrilla fighters, but support waned among host states as they suffered the collateral damage of battles with Israel. In September 1970, the PLO and the Jordanian forces of King Hussein were drawn into a military conflict known as the ‘Black September.’ Continued fighting through 1971 resulted in the expulsion of the PLO and thousands of Palestinians from the state. Defeated, the PLO moved its operations to Lebanon, and in 1982 the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) invaded, hoping to root out

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 62

<sup>30</sup> League of Arab States, *PLO Sole Legitimate Representative of the Palestinian People* (Rabat, Morocco: United Nations, 1974).

the organization during the Lebanon War. The United States Special Envoy Phillip Habib helped negotiate a withdrawal, causing a significant loss in power and prestige for the PLO. The organization was forced to move its operations to Tunis, roughly 1,500 miles away from the homeland. The loss of leverage caused by these expulsions made previously taboo concessions, like a two-state solution rather than the elimination of Zionism, increasingly feasible.

From the end of World War II through 1989, the Cold War roiled the globe, as the U.S. and USSR competed to expand their spheres of global influence via oppositional ideological and economic systems. When mapped onto the Arab world, the United States developed a special relationship with Israel, antagonizing the Soviet Union and its Middle Eastern benefactors, such as Egypt, Yemen, and Syria.<sup>31</sup> In 1981, a President overtly attuned to the battle against the Soviet Union and its specter of communism as the basis of all foreign policy assumed office in the United States: Ronald Reagan.

Naseer Aruri, a leading activist and scholar in Middle East politics until his passing in 2015, argues that the Reagan administration was the most active presidential administration since Harry Truman's pursuing Cold War-oriented policies in the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> Besides feeling a personal sense of duty in ensuring its survival, Reagan revered Israel and its democracy as a source of geopolitical power in the fight against communism, showing little understanding of the reality of Palestinian displacement. The Reagan administration was resolutely opposed to negotiation with the PLO until it met the conditions established by Henry Kissinger in the 1975 Memorandum of Understanding. The U.S. refused to recognize or speak to the PLO unless it

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Wolfe, "The USSR and the Arab East," (Paper prepared for a presentation, Washington D.C., 1969).

<sup>32</sup> Naseer Aruri. *Dishonest Broker: The U.S. Role in Israel and Palestine*, (n.p.: South End Press, 2003), 25.

recognized Israel, accepted U.N. resolutions 242 and 338, and renounced terrorism.<sup>33</sup> The U.N. resolutions encapsulate a strategy of land for peace: Israel would relinquish its hold on certain territories, and in exchange, Arab states would lay down their arms and recognize Israel. The PLO refused to endorse these resolutions because they made no mention of Palestinian national self-determination, referring to Palestinians only as refugees.

Though these were tall orders for an organization initially predicated on the complete elimination of Israel, the PLO had been steadily advancing toward recognition. In 1974, it ratified the Ten-Point Program, calling for the creation of a national authority in *any* part of Palestine via armed struggle and *other means*. These additions indicate acceptance of the idea that Israel would continue to exist on some Palestinian territory for some foreseeable future and implicitly open the PLO to diplomacy, rather than armed struggle, as a means of liberation.<sup>34</sup> Successive U.S. administrations had dismissed these Palestinian gestures as too hedged and vague; Washington demanded an unambiguous relinquishment of the PLO's final diplomatic bargaining chip: the willingness to extend formal recognition to Israel.

In 1982, President Reagan made some formal strides toward bridging the gap between the U.S. and Palestinians, unveiling his peace plan via a nationally broadcasted speech amid the Lebanon War. The plan excluded PLO representation of the Palestinians, the right of refugees to return to their homeland, and an independent state of the Palestinians. It called for Israeli settlements to halt for five years, weakly opposed permanent Israeli sovereignty over the West

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<sup>33</sup> The final stipulation was codified into law by the US Congress in 1984.

<sup>34</sup> Hussam Mohamad, "PLO Strategy: From Total Liberation to Coexistence," *Palestine-Israel Journal* 4 no. 2 (n.d. 1997).

Bank and Gaza, and counseled Palestinian self-government in association with Jordan.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately for Reagan, the plan failed to court moderate Israelis, and Israel's right-leaning Likud party could emphatically reject it.<sup>36</sup> The initial Arab response "was cautiously favorable," The PLO and Jordan took some months to evaluate the offer, believing it offered an opportunity for discussion.<sup>37</sup> Eventually, they too rejected the plan, wary of Israeli non-participation.<sup>38</sup> The Reagan administration's pursuit of a solution to the Arab-Israeli problem, particularly the plight of the Palestinians, effectively stalled for the next five years.

### *Intifada and Beyond.*

This bleak history of an ongoing *Nakba* demonstrates the dispossession, military domination, political disenfranchisement, foreign incursions, Israeli occupation, and armed struggle Palestinians faced. After decades of repression and inaction, in December 1987, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip reacted violently against the suffocating Israeli military regime. Their Molotov cocktails and stones were no match for the IDF's American-funded machine guns and tanks, and yet, for five years, the First Intifada raged.

Israel's government reacted to this challenge of authority with violent assaults and increased repression. Many Israelis began to view the Occupied Territories as a liability rather

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<sup>35</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on United States Policy for Peace in the Middle East" (speech, Burbank, CA, September 1, 1982), Reagan Library.

<sup>36</sup> Julianna Peck, *The Reagan Administration and the Palestinian Question* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1984), 89-91; Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 221-2.

<sup>37</sup> Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 210.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 211.

than an asset.<sup>39</sup> The international community felt new sympathy for the Palestinians who, as articulated by scholar Mark Tessler, had announced, “[w]e exist and have political rights, and there will be no peace until these rights are recognized.”<sup>40</sup> American friends of Israel were unhappy with the positive attention the Intifada drew towards the plight of the Palestinians but could do little to prevent it. American media, so often unabashedly pro-Israel, was taking a new line. The New York Times published a piece titled “Soul-Searching” on May 8, 1988, in response to the increasing violence broadcasting from the West Bank.<sup>41</sup> It identifies a fundamental change in the way people, particularly the American Jewish Community, viewed Israel: it was apparent that the Palestinians were the victims of Israeli oppression.<sup>42</sup> The state of Israel, a symbol of hope and resilience for Jewish people worldwide, had revealed itself to be a state like any other: capable and willing to use violence to repress people. American public opinion still was sympathetic toward Israel, but if the brutality of the Intifada and occupation was allowed to continue, it would lose its moral mandate and thus a great deal of support globally.<sup>43</sup>

American media, ever fixated on sensational stories, was just one source of pressure on the Reagan administration.<sup>44</sup> Israel’s increasingly stained reputation reflected negatively on the U.S. internationally. Thus the administration sought to stop the Intifada and restore a sense of fairness in its relations with the Middle East. Again, Reagan and Shultz were forced to direct

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<sup>39</sup> Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 236.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Albert Vorspan, “Soul-Searching,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1988.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Vorspan, “Soul-Searching.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

attention to the fundamental Palestinian aspect of the Arab-Israeli problem. Unfortunately, little changed as compared to their approach in 1982. Kathleen Christison explains in *Perceptions of Palestine* that the U.S. was primarily concerned with “how to extricate Israel from the problems of the intifada and how to exclude the PLO from any negotiations.”<sup>45</sup> Shultz sought to turn to King Hussein of Jordan as representative of the Palestinians but saw this hope dashed when Jordan relinquished its claims to the West Bank in July 1988. With the Hussein option off the table, the United States was forced to accept that any dialogue with the Palestinians would have to involve the PLO.

The first Intifada reinvigorated the quest for Palestinian statehood: some saw it as a political opportunity of historic magnitude. As it raged, the PLO convened in Algiers in mid-November 1988. Its legislative arm, the Palestine National Council (PNC), utilized the forward thrust of the Intifada to declare an independent state based on U.N. resolution 181. This 1947 resolution, passed by the General Assembly, called for the establishment of separate and independent Jewish and Arab states: in using Resolution 181 as the fulcrum for statehood, the PLO implicitly recognized the partitioning of land and sought coexistence. Scholar, activist, and participant Edward Said notes that the PNC dropped the usage of armed struggle, rejected terror in all forms, and indicated a “willingness to *negotiate* directly.”<sup>46</sup>

Hence, the Reagan administration faced a new dilemma: was this proclamation sufficient to open talks with a group still formally classified as a terrorist organization? The answer varied from Reagan administration official to the next.

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<sup>45</sup> Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine*, 236-7.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Said, “Intifada and Independence,” *Social Text* no. 22 (Spring 1989): 35-6.

## Players

### *Ronald Reagan*

Ronald Reagan, the famous actor and former governor of California, was inaugurated to the American presidency in 1981 on the Republican ticket. A man renowned for his prepared jokes and charisma, the finer points of his personality were harder to place. President Reagan personally tapped Edmund Morris to document and biography his presidency in the completed work, *Dutch*. Getting to know ‘Dutch,’ a reference to Reagan’s childhood nickname, personally and following him around during the final years of his administration gave Morris intimate knowledge of the man—and he still admittedly struggled to articulate all aspects of Reagan’s personality and policies.

In foreign affairs, Reagan’s most articulate policies concerned the Cold War and his emphatic belief that the Soviet Union was an evil empire, threatening global stability with the specter of communism.<sup>47</sup> Lou Cannon creates an extensive biography of his life and presidency in *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*. Cannon examines the Ronald Reagan approach to foreign policy, declaring him an “occasional court of last resort,” who placed an inordinate amount of responsibility upon his advisers.<sup>48</sup> By all accounts, Reagan was a foreign policy neophyte: requiring the use of visual aids and films to educate him on foreign policy at the start of his presidency.<sup>49</sup> Cannon documents Reagan’s tendency to withdraw when conflict occurred

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<sup>47</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Evil Empire Speech” (speech, Orlando, FL, March 8, 1983), US Oratory Project.

<sup>48</sup> Lou Cannon. *Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, revised, subsequent edition (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 365 and 635.

<sup>49</sup> Cannon, *Reagan*, 127.

between advisors: particularly pertinent when Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger felt great animosity toward each other.<sup>50</sup>

Further complicating Reagan's ability to formulate coherent foreign policy was his decision to demote the role of the National Security Adviser, believing that past NSAs, Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, had assumed roles properly belonging to the Secretary of State.<sup>51</sup> Reagan's minimal foreign policy knowledge and warring cabinet made a strong national security advisor all the more necessary. Such an advisor would have played both the role of an interpreter: synthesizing information from State, the Pentagon, and CIA; and that of a broker: dealing compromises and consensus.<sup>52</sup> This counsel, Reagan lacked.

The best example of his disengaged management of foreign affairs was the embarrassing Iran-Contra affair. The administration was caught dealing covert weapons to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages in Lebanon and then funneling the profits to a subversive Nicaraguan group, the Contras. How much Reagan knew is still uncertain despite the extensive Tower Commission appointed by the President to investigate the matter. What is known is that despite unified opposition from his Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense (a unicorn in itself), President Reagan signed a directive authorizing sales of American arms to Iran.<sup>53</sup> When this flagrant abuse of power, which flew in opposition to Congressional actions prohibiting funding for the Contras, was discovered, Reagan claimed innocence and ignorance.<sup>54</sup> At worst,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 352.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 155 and 351.

<sup>53</sup> William Quandt. *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001): 266.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 267.

President Reagan had actively lied to Congress and the public, empowering those beneath him to channel funds and arms to both an illicit organization and an adversarial state. At best, the Iran-Contra affair demonstrates the extent of Regan's incomprehension regarding the construction and execution of policy in the lower echelons of the executive branch.

There was one policy in the Middle East Reagan did take an interest in: deepening the United States' strategic commitment to Israel.<sup>55</sup> In *The Reagan Diaries*, a record of President Reagan's daily logs throughout his presidency, he wrote that "I've believed many things in my life, but no conviction I've ever held has been stronger than my belief the U.S. must ensure the survival of Israel."<sup>56</sup> His sympathies toward Arab and Palestinian concerns were ambivalent, and his attention toward their grievances was minimal. Despite the tacit acknowledgment that the plight of the Palestinians was the fundamental issue in Middle Eastern diplomacy, Reagan's loyalty to Israel complicated any potential solutions. Both of the administration's failed peace plans excluded the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians, the PLO, and it seems they were also excluded from his interest. In *Dutch*, the PLO is mentioned once after the Lebanon War in 1982, and Yasser Arafat is never mentioned. In his autobiography *An American Life*, Reagan makes even fewer references to the Palestinians after Lebanon's 1982 War and only in reference to terrorism. Further evidence of Reagan's lack of involvement in Arab-Israeli affairs, particularly in 1988, comes from *The Reagan Diaries*. His brief entries focus on Shultz's role as

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<sup>55</sup> Helena Cobban, "The U.S.-Israeli Relationship in the Reagan Era," *Conflict Quarterly* 9 no. 2 (Spring 1989).

<sup>56</sup> Ronald Reagan. *The Reagan Diaries: 1981-1985*, unabridged edition (New York: Harper, 2009), 410; in the text *The Reagan Diaries* is used to refer to three translations of the same content: the aforementioned, Ronald Reagan. *The Reagan Diaries: 1985-1989*, unabridged edition. (New York: Harper, 2009), and the illustrated edition.

the peace process inched forward in that year —elucidating his opinions on actions taken by Shultz, rather than any personal influence he had on them.

Though both Reagan and Shultz claim that a cornerstone of Reagan’s foreign policy orientation involved attempts to resolve the Arab-Israeli affair, the President’s disengagement indicates otherwise.<sup>57</sup> Shultz’s assertion that Reagan had “a readiness to understand Arab views and engage personally with Arab leaders and a willingness to support sensible negotiating efforts even when the probability of success was clearly not high” is suspect when applied to Palestine.<sup>58</sup> This so-called ‘willingness’ to engage personally with Arab leaders did not extend to the designated leader of the Palestinian people, Yasser Arafat.

### *George Shultz*

George Shultz, born in 1920 to “parents who loved [him], and [he] knew it,” was a bright and academically eager child of the Great Depression.<sup>59</sup> Accepted into a PH.D. program at MIT, he instead went to war, operating as a marine toward the end of World War II in the South Pacific.<sup>60</sup> After the war, he returned to school, earning his doctorate, becoming dean of the University of Chicago, and then segueing into three cabinet posts during the Nixon administration.

Well respected by his colleagues, Shultz was described as a natural negotiator: forceful, solemn, deliberating, and courteous. Four out of five days a week, he was notably cheerful and

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<sup>57</sup> Ronald Reagan. *An American Life*, reprint edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 705.

<sup>58</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 429.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

consistent — on that fifth day, however, when he felt slighted, he became a “stone-faced sulk.”<sup>61</sup> One State Department aide declared that to “know the true meaning of silence...you should be alone in the elevator with George when he’s on a bummer.”<sup>62</sup> Still, he was deemed a reasonable choice for the administration, and far better than his predecessor, Secretary of State Haig.

For Shultz to assume the mantle of Secretary of State, Alexander Haig had to be removed. Haig, who had served as chief of staff under two presidents, as a four-star military general, and former commander of all NATO troops, came to Ronald Reagan personally recommended by President Nixon. Haig’s confrontational nature rubbed other members of the cabinet the wrong way, and they began to plot and pressure his resignation—finding success in May 1982.<sup>63</sup> Members of Reagan’s staff invited Shultz to the White House to demonstrate that other options for Secretary of State were possible. Shultz presented a talk on international economic policy and exhibited a refreshingly calm and professorial manner, pushing him to the top of the shortlist for the position. National Security Advisor William Clark was tasked with the formal search for a political appointee for the role of Secretary of State: his first choice for the job was Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.<sup>64</sup> The public somewhat erroneously viewed Weinberger as warlike: a perception Reagan hoped to avoid in his new Secretary of State.<sup>65</sup> Politically, Shultz was the safest choice: though not entirely without controversy.

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<sup>61</sup> Edmund Morris. *Dutch*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1999), 475.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Cannon, *Reagan*, 170; Bernard Gwertzman, “Haig Resigns Over Foreign Policy Course, But Cites No Issues; Reagan Names Shultz,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1982.

<sup>64</sup> Morris, *Dutch*, 462.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

When first entering office, Shultz's ties to the Bechtel Company and its many contracts in the Middle East, as well as his statement that "Arabs are people, too," when questioned about Israeli violence in Lebanon, led many to believe he might be an 'Arabist,' in contrast to his 'pro-Israel' predecessor.<sup>66</sup> However, by 1985, Shultz had cemented his status as a firm Zionist publicly and emphatically: his legacy is littered with claims that he was the most pro-Israel Secretary of State besides Henry Kissinger.<sup>67</sup> Former President Nixon, whose recommendation that Haig be Secretary of State backfired, warned president Reagan that Shultz might prove disloyal to the administration. Reagan was not keen on this belief, liking Shultz's "solidity, strength, [and] taciturnity," thus billing him for the job.<sup>68</sup> On the day Shultz accepted President Reagan's offer of the role of Secretary of State, pending Haig's imminent resignation Reagan used his daily diary entry to praise Shultz's patriotism.<sup>69</sup> Reagan stated that as the transition took place, George "handled himself with great class and dignity."<sup>70</sup>

For his six-year tenure as Secretary of State, Shultz's primary item on the agenda was the Cold War. However, by the last two years of Reagan's presidency, State ran the bulk of American foreign policy actions. After the Iran-Contra affair, Shultz strengthened the State Department, returning to it powers that had been delegated to the National Security Council. For the last two

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 463; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Donald Neff, "How George Shultz Became the Most Pro-Israel Secretary of State," Washington Report, April 5, 1998, <https://www.wrmea.org/1998-april/middle-east-history-it-happened-in-april.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Morris, *Dutch*, 463.

<sup>69</sup> Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, illustrated edition, ed. Douglas Brinkley (n.p.: Harper Perennial, 2009), 91.

<sup>70</sup> Reagan, *Reagan Diaries: 1981-1985*, 140.

years of Reagan's administration, Shultz and the State Department dictated most foreign policy, particularly in areas that garnered little attention from the President, like the Middle East.

Shultz's memoir, *Turmoil and Triumph*, spends its bulk documenting his time as Secretary of State. Though written in a somewhat self-congratulatory fashion, the memoir relays Shultz's youthful endeavors, how he came to the role of Secretary of State, actions he took within the administration, and a personal vision for foreign policy. Shultz provides detailed insight regarding how he ran the State Department. A former executive of multinational corporation Bechtel, Shultz aptly represented the stereotype of the gray-suited executive, he discouraged creativity and individuality, preferring things to be "aboveboard," "on the table," "moved and seconded," and "agreed to".<sup>71</sup> Shultz was not above underhanded tactics to get his way with the President, threatening to resign on multiple occasions when policy decisions ran contrary to his advice. His relationship with Secretary of Defense Weinberger was also less than professional. Both men had been employed by the Bechtel Company and had served thrice in the Nixon administration. Both also carried pre-formed prejudices against the other to their roles in Reagan's cabinet. Weinberger's fascination with foreign policy and Shultz's inclination toward military force as a diplomatic tool led the two to clash in each other's designated areas of expertise more often than typical in the State-Defense rivalry.<sup>72</sup>

Shultz, a suit-wearing high-level executive at Bechtel Company and former Secretary of the Treasury knew a thing or two about managing an organization. By putting political appointees in line with the President's foreign policy, he hoped to create an "efficient[t] and

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<sup>71</sup> Morris, *Dutch*, 475.

<sup>72</sup> Cannon, *Reagan*, 353.

effectiv[e]” machine within the State Department.<sup>73</sup> He did not underestimate the difficulty of getting “people to ‘mind the store,’” so to speak, and focus on the nitty-gritty of organizational procedures, rather than the more exciting creation of policy.<sup>74</sup>

Orderly bureaucratic practices were vital for the State Department because of the sheer volume of information it had to sort through daily: 5,000 cables came in per day from embassies, consulates, foreign governments, and the like.<sup>75</sup> First, these cables reached desk officers, who forwarded filtered information to the assistant secretaries of state for each sector of the world. Functional bureaus, like those of counterterrorism, narcotics, and human rights, worked in tandem with the assistant secretaries of state in ad hoc groups depending on the issue. These bureaus then filtered to Shultz final reports on “what was happening in real time, background on what had been done before and how that had worked, analyses of alternative courses of action and ideas on what might be done.”<sup>76</sup> Shultz kept a close eye on the State Department, appreciating the “extraordinary information machine” essential to forming foreign policy decisions.<sup>77</sup>

### *L. Paul Bremer III*

Politically reared at the metaphorical breast of Henry Kissinger, L. Paul Bremer III had a reputation for “diplomatic polish[,] neoconservative credentials,” and militarism as reported by

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<sup>73</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 34.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*.

*New York Times* journalist James Dao.<sup>78</sup> Despite a prolific career, serving as Executive Assistant to Secretary of State Kissinger under Nixon, Ambassador to the Netherlands, and chairman of the National Commission on Terrorism, Bremer is best known for his role in Iraq. Under George H. W. Bush, he was named Presidential Envoy to Iraq, Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003. In this role, he is often credited for exacerbating existing tensions and mishandling affairs: disbanding the Iraqi army, barring Ba'ath Party members from serving in the new government, and losing track of nine billion dollars.<sup>79</sup> He is considered an architect of the Iraq War sit unfolded after the deposition of Saddam Hussein.

Bremer was a bonafide hawk and neoconservative: the former, a term used to describe those who were tough on foreign policy, as opposed to peace-seeking and accommodating doves. Neoconservative references a broad American trend beginning in the late 1960s. Emerging from disenchanted liberal thinkers, neoconservatives in foreign policy strongly opposed radicalism and communism while promoting a formidable international reputation and democracy abroad.<sup>80</sup> Though neoconservatives saw the U.S. as a benevolent hegemon, they did not discount the role violence could play in promoting democracy. As Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism during the Reagan years, Bremer headed what is now known as the Bureau of Counter-Terrorism. This bureau “leads the Department of State in the whole of government effort to counter terrorism abroad and secure the United States against foreign terrorist threats.”<sup>81</sup> Bremer was the first to

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<sup>78</sup> Encyclopedia of World Biography Contributors, “L. Paul Bremer Biography,” Encyclopedia of World Biography, n.d., <https://www.notablebiographies.com/newsmakers2/2004-A-Di/Bremer-L-Paul.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Zachary Roth, “10 years later: The Architects of the Iraq War,” *MSNBC*, March 17, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> Arsenije Dusanic and Plamen P. Penev, “The Influence of the Neoconservative Movement On U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Connections* 8 no. 2 (Spring 2009).

<sup>81</sup> U.S. Department of State, “About Us - Bureau of Counterterrorism.” n.d., n.p.

serve as coordinator, giving him the status of an Ambassador at Large and a principal advisor to the Secretary of State.

Secretary of State Shultz regarded Bremer as a trusted friend and colleague, confiding in him his concerns about President Reagan's competence regarding Iran. Shultz had confronted the President before a press conference addressing the Iran-Contra affair, expressing in no uncertain terms that Reagan must own up to the administration's grievous errors. Reagan resolutely clung to his belief that the arms for hostage negotiation was good policy and that Iran had toned down its support for terror, despite detailed material compiled by Jerry Bremer indicating the opposite.<sup>82</sup> In Shultz's estimation, the following press conference was nothing short of a disaster, containing many factual errors. Shultz confided his frustrations to Bremer, stating that the President "is surrounded by people who are interested in protecting themselves, not in serving him. He therefore has not received the full flow of facts. Congress is going to tear this place apart unless changes are made."<sup>83</sup> Shultz turned to Bremer for support at such a terse moment, indicating a familiar relationship between the pair.

The two also had a shared sense of jocularitas in their relationship, cutting through the thick tension surrounding the Iran-Contra affair with a joke about Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, was at Camp David with President Reagan and Secretary of State Shultz shortly after the Iran-Contra scandal broke. Thatcher had lent her unyielding support to Reagan in the immediate aftermath—undermining Shultz's attempts to impress the seriousness

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<sup>82</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 828.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 830-1.

of the situation upon President Reagan.<sup>84</sup> Bremer, drawing parallels to the administration's decision to send covert arms to Iran, joked that Shultz "should tell Mrs. Thatcher, that as the Irish Republican Army does not conduct terrorism against Americans, we have decided to open a quiet dialogue with them, and as a signal of our serious intent, we are making some token arms shipments to them."<sup>85</sup> Shultz was amused, lightly admonishing Bremer, "[d]on't tell me things like that, I may use them."<sup>86</sup> With the ear of a Secretary of State who is remembered for his belief in the phrase "trust is the coin of the realm," and control of a top-level bureau with direct reporting to Shultz, Bremer's opinions were always available and valuable to Shultz should he need them.<sup>87</sup>

### *Richard Murphy*

Richard Murphy, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, spent most of his career on the ground in the Middle East as an ambassador. Secretary of State Shultz described Murphy as a man of "sharp mind, a keen sense of irony, and a wry wit," and believed him to be one of the best career diplomats he had seen.<sup>88</sup> Following a stint in the army at the end of the Korean war, Murphy's decades-long career in the foreign service began with stints as U.S. ambassador to Mauritania, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan: earning him the honor of being named a

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<sup>84</sup> John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): 113.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 821-822.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 822.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Hirsh. "George Shultz, Revered US. Diplomat, Dies At 100," *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/07/george-shultz-obituary-diplomat-cold-war/>.

<sup>88</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 582.

career ambassador in 1985—of whom there are only ever five.<sup>89</sup> His expertise in these countries, and success as the country director for the Arabian Peninsula and director of personnel for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, more than qualified him for his role in the Reagan administration.<sup>90</sup> First meeting in Saudi Arabia while George Shultz still worked for the Bechtel Corporation, the pair enjoyed a conversation about the diplomatic situation in the kingdom.<sup>91</sup> Shortly after that, Murphy was told his Saudi tour would end after only two years as Shultz was offering him the position of Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs (NEA).<sup>92</sup>

At the onset of Murphy's tenure, skeptics believed he might be a heavy-handed 'Arabist,' and distrusted his pursuit of even-handed policy regarding Israel.<sup>93</sup> The State Department, particularly the NEA, had long been accused by Zionists as being overrun with 'Arabists,' a deprecatory term used to describe those deemed 'unduly' familiar with the Middle East.<sup>94</sup> Originally a politically neutral term indicating someone who studied Arabic and was familiar with Arab cultures, the term took on new connotations after World War II.<sup>95</sup> Those foreign service officers perceived as overly sympathetic to Arab perspectives faced the label of Arabist and potential character assassinations.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> "Profile: Richard W. Murphy," n.d., Middle East Institute.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Murphy, interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, December 6, 2017 to April 18, 2018, transcript, n.p., Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training: 110.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> "Personality: Richard W. Murphy," Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, July 9, 1984, <https://www.wrmea.org/1984-july-9/personality-richard-w.-murphy.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> John Solecki, "Arabists and the Myth," *Middle East Journal* 44 no. 3 (Summer 1990): 446.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

Though Murphy studied Arabic and was more than familiar with Arab cultures, he believed that because all sides of the political spectrum had found fault in his various statements and actions, he had proven to be “balanced and fairminded.”<sup>97</sup> When entering the Arab World, Murphy saw himself as neither “pro-Israel or anti-Israel,” and as possessing the ability to evaluate the state of affairs in Middle Eastern diplomacy fairly.<sup>98</sup> Secretary of State Shultz and President Reagan strongly supported Murphy in his role coordinating Near Eastern Affairs, encouraging the Israelis to confide in him and observing his ability to listen to any multitude of complaints from Arab representatives patiently.<sup>99</sup> By the time he became Assistant Secretary of State in the 1980s, the accusation of Arabism held less import than in the 1950s and 1960s, due in part to the President’s reputation as a friend of the Jewish community and Israel. Murphy “wasn’t personally accused” of overly-sympathizing with the Arabs within the State Department.

Throughout his career, he found that his reports, which he considered to be of tantamount importance, were merely a part of the organizational shuffle of running a country’s foreign policy.<sup>100</sup> Despite a lack of close ties to any military officers, Murphy had a reputation in Washington for maintaining positive relationships with the military.<sup>101</sup> He appealed to the Pentagon as a diplomat because nothing in his record indicated criticism of the military: other candidates for administration roles were rendered unacceptable because of their military

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<sup>97</sup> “Personality: Murphy.”

<sup>98</sup> Murphy, Interview by Charles Kennedy, 18.

<sup>99</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 582.

<sup>100</sup> Murphy, Interview by Charles Kennedy, 40-41.

<sup>101</sup> Murphy, Interview by Charles Kennedy, 86.

criticisms in the wake of the Vietnam War.<sup>102</sup> He was an essential cog in the great machine of American foreign policy, ruffling few feathers and diligently working toward peace in the Middle Eastern region.

### **A Shifting Diplomatic Landscape**

#### *Shultz's Plan*

The First Intifada reinvigorated the quest for an end to the Palestinian-Israeli problem, shaking up the diplomatic stalemate of the past five years. For the majority of 1988, the U.S. maintained its policy of non-negotiation with the PLO, and the PLO withheld its final bargaining chip of recognition of Israel. Yet, new developments were thawing the chill between the two actors throughout the year.

The first signs of a shift came not from the United States or PLO but from Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. On January 17, 1988, Shultz received a note from him indicating greater willingness to participate in negotiations that might result in Palestinian autonomy—a position Shamir had certainly never endorsed before.<sup>103</sup> As the Intifada raised the profile of the Palestinian plight and more American Jewish leaders encouraged negotiations, Shultz placed greater urgency on the matter.

Like Kissinger before him, Secretary of State Shultz attempted his form of shuttle diplomacy, paying four visits to the Middle East personally in 1988 and using Richard Murphy as his intermediary.<sup>104</sup> With decades of immersion in the Middle East, Murphy also had

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 27

<sup>104</sup> Kathleen Christison, "The Arab-Israeli Policy of George Shultz," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18 no. 2 (Winter 1989): 235.

established relationships with President Hafez al-Assad of Syria and King Fahd of Saudi Arabia from his time as an ambassador.<sup>105</sup> Since 1985, Richard Murphy had represented Shultz in visiting various Middle Eastern states to promote direct negotiations, to little avail: Jordan and Israel in particular.<sup>106</sup> He was trusted by the Israelis and respected by the Arabs, making him the ideal interlocutor for the Shultz Initiative.

On March 4, 1988, the State Department announced Shultz's initiative: a plan to bring peace to the Palestinians and Israelis—still without the PLO. This operation called for an international conference to establish Jordanian authority over a transitional Palestinian 'self-government' in the West Bank.<sup>107</sup> Shamir had revealed that he would consider an international conference, predicated on the condition that Jordan represent the Palestinians in June of 1987.<sup>108</sup> Shultz hoped to open negotiations between a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation and Israel, in a move that would insulate the United States, a nonparticipant, from any potential adverse outcomes.

Even though the PLO was the clearly designated voice of the Palestinians, Shultz bemoaned the lack of partners to negotiate with. He hoped to convince King Hussein of Jordan to accept responsibility for the occupied territories and thus become the 'Palestinian' party most digestible to the U.S. and Israel for negotiations. Yet Hussein delayed acceptance of this role out of fear that Jordanian intervention would be seen as a challenge to the ability of the PLO to

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 238.

<sup>106</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 937.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 272.

represent the Palestinians. Moreover, at the time, only Egypt had bilateral relations with Israel and had suffered political isolation from the rest of the entire Arab world.

Domestically, the State Department engaged with Palestinians in ways they never had before. On March 31, 1988, Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod met with Secretary of State Shultz at his request. These two prominent Palestinian American activists and scholars were members of the Palestine National Council. They had close ties to the PLO—no invitations had been extended to Palestinian Americans to address the Secretary of State directly before the Intifada for fear of retribution from Israel and its American supporters. However, as the situation grew more desperate in the West Bank and Gaza, Shultz granted Said and Abu-Lughod a direct audience: as citizens, who could complain?

At the meeting, Said and Abu-Lughod report that while they did not represent the PLO, they did reflect its views— emphasizing that the PLO was the Palestinian’s chosen representative.<sup>109</sup> Said pointed out the inherent contradiction of requiring the Palestinians to jump through so many hoops on the path to peace: as dispossessed people, they were the victims. Yet, they faced retribution as if they were the perpetrators.<sup>110</sup> Abu-Lughod left the meeting particularly optimistic about its symbolic meaning: the United States finally recognized “that the Palestinians play an important role in any future settlement since the conflict is between them and the Israelis.”<sup>111</sup> Shultz acknowledged the need for ‘credible’ Palestinian participation in all discussions affecting them, representing a change from his former hope that negotiations could

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<sup>109</sup> Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, “The Shultz Meeting with Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 17 no. 4 (1988): 162.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

be held exclusively between Jordan and Israel. The men found Shultz still harbored a serious impediment toward achieving resolution, as he made “it clear that the United States government is not yet ready to accept the participation of the PLO in an international peace conference at this time.”<sup>112</sup>

### *Private Channels of Communication*

Secretary of State Shultz’s meeting with two Palestinian Americans was not the only indication of a shift in the diplomatic landscape. As early as March 1988, Sweden’s Foreign Minister Sten Andersson was formulating a way to establish contact between the PLO and Israel, using the American foreign policy establishment as an intermediary. Contact between any Israeli and the PLO was forbidden by law, and the United States was committed to the status quo: Andersson hoped to circumvent this inability to communicate with the help of American Jews. Having visited Israel in March, he was personally horrified by the violence of the Intifada, and in April met with Shultz in Washington to discuss harm reduction.<sup>113</sup> Shultz accepted Andersson’s intent to moderate talks between the PLO and a delegation of American Jews, granting his tacit approval. Andersson, sensing some give within the PLO following a June statement advocating direct negotiations with Israel by Arafat’s spokesperson, Bassam Abu Sharif, reached out to Arafat via a letter in early July. The U.S. State Department also took notice of this publication in a fact sheet, noting that they had “been struck by the overall constructive tone of the article,

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>113</sup> Magnuson, “A Dance of Many Veils.”

particularly its emphasis on the existence of Israel.”<sup>114</sup> Andersson proposed a meeting between the PLO and representatives of the American Jewish community, hoping to convince Arafat to endorse Abu Sharif’s statement, which would be “critical in helping to transform the political landscape of the Middle East.”<sup>115</sup> Though Arafat neither responded nor endorsed the statement, the political landscape of the Middle East was going to transform drastically just a few short weeks later.

On July 31 of 1988, King Hussein announced that Jordan relinquished all ties to the West Bank, opting out of a politically risky intervention and squashing Shultz’s hopes to engage the Palestinians while circumventing the PLO entirely. Jordan had washed its hands of the West Bank: as one Palestinian representative at the U.N. put it, “[Hussein] finally came to the conclusion the PLO is the only interlocutor for the Palestinians.”<sup>116</sup> This decision spelled the end for the Shultz Initiative, which relied on a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation to participate in negotiations, but opened the door for another.

Mohamed Rabie, a Palestinian American with close ties to the PLO, believed the organization might finally accept U.S. conditions if it were guaranteed that an official dialogue would be reciprocated.<sup>117</sup> Rabie also felt the time was ripe to change U.S. policy toward Palestine due to the moderating effects of the Intifada and the lack of other options for George Shultz to pursue as potential spokespeople.<sup>118</sup> On August 2, he approached William Quandt, a

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<sup>114</sup> Fact Sheet: Bassam Abu Sharif Statement, June 1988; Folder, “Israel [1/1/1988-7/18/1988],” RAC Box 1; Records: Burns, William Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

<sup>115</sup> Rabie, *U.S.-PLO Dialogue*, 70.

<sup>116</sup> Magnuson, “A Dance of Many Veils.”

<sup>117</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 179.

<sup>118</sup> Rabie, *U.S.-PLO Dialogue*, 12.

former member of the National Security Council for both the Nixon and Carter administrations and a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies program at the Brookings Institute. Rabie hoped that Quandt could reach out to State Department contacts while he would communicate with the PLO's leadership. In pursuing this track of diplomacy, Quandt believes two fruits were born of the effort: establishing that "both sides were interested in beginning a dialogue," and that "mutually acceptable language would not be too difficult to develop."<sup>119</sup> That same month, George Shultz appointed Richard Murphy as a member of a four-person team convened to assist in managing these secret negotiations, hoping to produce a statement that all parties could agree upon accepting.<sup>120</sup>

While Rabie and Quandt privately worked with contacts in the State Department to draft such acceptable language, the PLO, too, was attempting to find reciprocal solutions. In August, the PLO approved an American draft of a statement to be issued to substantiate dialogue—conditional on American recognition of the Palestinian right to self-determination.<sup>121</sup> Though the State Department received this proposal with great interest, Shultz authorized Rabie on September 23 to convey to the PLO that they could expect a response in about six weeks: following American and Israeli elections.<sup>122</sup> Some modicum of insight came, however, on September 16 as Secretary Shultz addressed the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Though he refused to accept any unilateral action to declare a Palestinian state, nor accept their

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<sup>119</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 448.

<sup>120</sup> Rabie, *U.S.-PLO Dialogue*, 140.

<sup>121</sup> Quandt, *Peace Process*, 279.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 280.

right to self-determination, but had said they were “free to argue for independence.”<sup>123</sup> Further evidence of a potential breakthrough and American willingness to move forward came in his assertions that the “status quo...does not work. It is not viable. It is dangerous... [it] serves the interests of no party.”<sup>124</sup>

The United States and the Soviet Union were even coming to grips with the need for a complementary resolution to the Palestinian problem. On August 1, 1988, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy articulated the American posturing on the peace process to Soviet ambassadors. Though there were dangers in the increasing violence of the Intifada, the State Department had identified some positive trends in the region. Greater pragmatism in Arab politics abounded, with Israeli border states accepting, if not recognizing, its presence.<sup>125</sup> Palestinian flexibility, too, seemed more likely, especially in relation to Abu Sharif’s article.<sup>126</sup> Notably, Murphy identified a primary strategy that both the U.S. and USSR should follow: building confidence in the region to “condition the atmosphere for negotiations both politically and psychologically.”<sup>127</sup> The United States was already acting constantly to moderate Israel, particularly its excessive use of force to quell the Intifada. The Soviets could continue to moderate the PLO’s thinking, evidenced by their influence on Abu Sharif’s statement. At the end, Russian ambassador Polyakov appraised the exchange positively, saying it would “have an

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<sup>123</sup> The Administration’s Approach to Middle East Peacemaking, September 16, 1988; Secretary of State George Shultz; Folder: “Israel [1/1/1988-7/18/1988],” RAC Box 1; Records: Burns, William Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Memorandum of Conversation. US-Soviet Middle East Talks. August 1, 1988. Folder, “Peace Process, 1988,” RAC Box 4. Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Records: Burns, William J. Files. Ronald Reagan Library.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

influence and would facilitate the peace process. He surmised that “[o]n the whole Murphy had made an evaluation which corresponded to the [balanced and goal-oriented] Soviet position in the Middle East.”<sup>128</sup>

Still waiting to hear back from Secretary Shultz, the PLO publicized its upcoming plans on October 19: at the next meeting of the Palestine National Council, it would accept a two-state solution, with reference to the Palestinian right to self-determination, condemns terrorism, and then issue the statement the Americans had sent in order to eliminate all barriers to talks.<sup>129</sup> On November 10, Yasser Arafat applied for a visa to visit the United Nations General Assembly in New York and announce the PLO’s new positions.

Between Shultz’s increased attention to and contact with Palestinians, the PLO’s acceptance of a two-state solution authored via American channels, the encouragement and participation of American Jews, and a rare moment of agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, all seemed poised for the Reagan administration to finally enter into negotiations with little pushback. These developments demonstrated an ongoing metamorphosis in relations between the PLO and United States, from hostility and stalemate to communication and consensus. Not everyone, however, was on the same page.

### *The Visa Affair*

From November 12 to 15, 1988, the Palestine Liberation Organization convened at the 19th Palestine National Council in Algiers. Edward Said attended the meeting as an unaffiliated

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

member and documented its events in a December 1988 opinion piece published in *The Nation*, titled “Palestine Agenda.”<sup>130</sup> He conveys the magnitude of Palestinian concessions and the unmistakable spirit of its documents, which were subject to intense scrutiny by the Reagan administration. Though Arafat had won a long-fought battle within the PLO, in convincing the PNC to vote in favor of statehood based on U.N. Resolution 242, implying the continued existence of an Israeli state, some in the Reagan administration refused to believe the sincerity of the chosen leader of the Palestinians. The George Washington University in Washington D.C. hosted a panel evaluating President Reagan’s policy on terrorism on November 22. L. Paul Bremer III, Ambassador for Counter Terror, aimed a dig at the Palestine Liberation Organization, arguing that the PNC had not “denounced [nor] renounced” terrorism in its declaration.<sup>131</sup> Bremer said emphatically, “[t]his is nonsense.”<sup>132</sup>

Others in the State Department were thinking along those same skeptical lines: Shultz was certainly inclined to respond negatively when it came to Yasser Arafat. The impulse to pursue the ongoing policy of disbelief and refusal to negotiate with the PLO proved more potent than any shifting diplomatic landscape when it came to Shultz’s decision to deny Arafat a visa.

When first the question of granting Yasser Arafat a visa, as had been done for other PLO members in the past, reached Shultz’s desk, he decided to wait until there was a formal application before acting.<sup>133</sup> Shultz was told the standard operating procedure was for the

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<sup>130</sup> Edward Said, “Palestine Agenda,” *The Nation*, December 12, 1988.

<sup>131</sup> George Washington University, “Evaluation of Reagan Policy on Terrorism,” C-Span Video, 1:58:12, November 22, 1988.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Issue: U.S. Visa Applications by Yasser Arafat, August 29, 1988; Folder: “PLO,” RAC Box 2; Records: Burns, William J. Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1036.

organization to deliver a diplomatic note to him before deciding whether to issue the visa or not based on the content of such a note. After making his decision, the Attorney General would make the final decision, though their role was to rubber-stamp the Secretary of State's decision more than anything else.<sup>134</sup> Despite this general method of dealing with such requests, Arafat's particular request was out of the routine, with no precedent to follow: the applicant in question did not belong to any government formally recognized by the United States and was also suspected of involvement in terrorist activities.<sup>135</sup> Shultz faced the prospect of making a decision that might seriously derail the progress toward peace and good faith efforts the PLO had undertaken to open a dialogue with the United States.

The U.N. Headquarters were housed in the United States, and therefore the United States had agreed to allow representatives into the country to attend sessions as long as they did not threaten its security interests. Legally, since Arafat was a known member and, in fact, the leader of a 'terrorist' organization, a U.S. anti-terror law indicated that a visa could only be issued should the Secretary of State recommend it to the Attorney General.<sup>136</sup> Concurrently, as host country to the U.N., the U.S. was bound to international treaties and laws that dictated he could only deny Arafat entry if the United States believed it would threaten the nation's safety.<sup>137</sup> To deny him entry was to explicitly violate the Headquarters Agreement, with attempted justifications supported by dubious legal loopholes enabling the U.S. to bar Arafat due to

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<sup>134</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1037.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 1373

<sup>137</sup> Reisman, "Arafat Visa Affair," 527.

personal resentments and political interests.<sup>138</sup> Earlier in the year, the United States had already landed itself in hot water with the international community, in its unsuccessful attempt to leverage an anti-terror law to shut down the PLO Observer Mission at the U.N.<sup>139</sup> Denying Arafat a visa was not only legally risky, but diplomatically, threatening the support the U.S. would receive in the U.N. Richard Murphy, the CIA, FBI, former President Jimmy Carter, a Saudi Prince, Margaret Thatcher, President-elect Bush and Secretary of State Baker (indirectly), and even the Pope advised Shultz to recommend Arafat.<sup>140</sup>

Before making his decision, Murphy was called in along with several other colleagues to voice his opinions on the visa affair. Colin Powell, who is best known as the first Black Secretary of State during the George W. Bush administration, was a senior official in the Reagan administration, serving as National Security Adviser. During Shultz's meeting, in opposition to fifty-one U.S. senators and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Powell is reported to have emphatically advocated Shultz administer the visa to Arafat.<sup>141</sup> Other officials were more guarded in their comments to avoid upsetting Shultz, who kept his own opinion guarded. However, Michael Armacost, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and Richard Murphy entered the debate on Powell's side. As reported by a State Department lawyer present at the meeting, Murphy "said we should give him the visa because otherwise it will tend to change Arafat's behavior," indicating a concern that to deny the visa would be a slight turning Arafat away from

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 526-7.

<sup>139</sup> Memorandum; Robert B. Oakley to Colin L. Powell, August 9 1988; Folder, "PLO Mission," RAC Box 2; Records: Burns, William J.: Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

<sup>140</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1037-8.

<sup>141</sup> Wallach, *Arafat*, 391.

compliance with the United States' demands.<sup>142</sup> Murphy, Powell, Armacost, senior members of the U.S. mission to the U.N., and 'all' Middle East experts were reported to have advocated for approval based on two general arguments.<sup>143</sup> First, in the wake of criticism for American attempts to close the PLO observe mission at the U.N., they sought to avoid another diplomatically risky interaction with the United Nations. Secondly, these advisors believed that to deny Arafat a visa was to risk opposition in the Arab world and amongst European allies.<sup>144</sup>

A smaller group of close advisors, two of whom Shultz refers to as his "key people," encouraged Shultz to emphatically reject terrorism by rejecting the overtures of moderation the Palestine Liberation Organization was presenting.<sup>145</sup> These advisors included assistant secretary of state for international affairs, Richard Williamson; Charles Hill, former director of Israel and Arab-Israeli affairs and Executive Secretary of State; and L. Paul Bremer III.<sup>146</sup> Bremer, who believed that the United States should never make concessions to terrorists and must apply the rule of law to all terrorists, was reported to have had a significant impact on Shultz's final decision.<sup>147</sup> In addition, U.S. senators, including Chuck Grassley (R-IA), Mitch McConnell (R-KY), Larry Pressler (R-SD), and others who had formally called for President Reagan to close

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Robert Pear, "Shultz's 'No' to Arafat; Personal Disgust for Terrorism Is at Root Of Secretary's Decision to Rebuff the P.L.O.," *New York Times*, November 28, 1988.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 1038.

<sup>146</sup> Pear, "Shultz's 'No' to Arafat."

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

the PLO observer mission at the U.N., opposed any interpretation of the law that allowed Arafat into the country.<sup>148</sup>

In the hopes of clarifying the PNC's declarations to make them more digestible for the Americans, Sten Andersson and the American Jewish Delegation met with Arafat and the PLO on November 21. Prior to the meeting, New York attorney and member of the Jewish Delegation, Rita Hauser, traveled to the desk of Richard Murphy in D.C. to discuss the declarations.<sup>149</sup> She tried to “elicit a more positive reaction to the Algiers decision.” However, Murphy let her know in no uncertain terms that the United States decided to maintain their conditions before entering a dialogue.<sup>150</sup> When meeting with the PLO, Hauser conveyed the seriousness expressed by Murphy—lending an air of credibility to their attempt to clarify the PNC's declarations. The document produced by this meeting represented the first mutual agreement between the American Jews and the PLO. However, it did not go far enough to satisfy Hauser, Murphy, or Shultz, the latter of whom lukewarmly stated that it “represented a step the right direction.”<sup>151</sup> The step was not large enough for Shultz, who, over the voices of many experts and advisers, unilaterally decided not to recommend approval for Arafat's visa to the attorney general, tacitly ending his bid to speak at the U.N. convention in New York.

### *Ramifications*

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<sup>148</sup> Senate Committee on the Judiciary to President Ronald Reagan, October 17, 1986; Folder: “PLO-I,” Box 19; Records: Green, Max Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

<sup>149</sup> Rabie, *U.S.-PLO Dialogue*, 73.

<sup>150</sup> Jacob Eriksson, *Small State Mediation in International Conflicts* (n.p.: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2015): 88.

<sup>151</sup> Rabie, *U.S.-PLO Dialogue*, 74.

The international community condemned George Shultz and did so harshly. On December 2, the U.N. passed two unprecedented resolutions isolating the United States for this decision and damaging its diplomatic prestige. President-elect Bush is reported to have said it was “a damn fool mistake,” and the American press was hardly more charitable.<sup>152</sup> In “Palestine Agenda,” Edward Said wrote an impassioned defense of the PLO’s declarations and a condemnation of the American response, clarifying four unequivocal truths found in these resolutions. First, declaring statehood while accepting U.N. Resolution 181, which called for the partition of Palestine, implies the continued existence of an Israeli state. The Palestinians declared a desire to end armed struggle, explicitly rejected terrorism within the bounds of the U.N. definition, and showed clear intent to negotiate directly with Israel. Said claims these transformative resolutions represent a genuine attempt at peacemaking while asserting Palestinian self-determination.<sup>153</sup> In such an estimation, American foreign policymakers are willfully misinterpreting a good faith effort by the PLO to “make sacrifices in the interests of peace, as a definitive statement of the Palestinian acceptance of the international consensus.”<sup>154</sup> Rita Hauser told *The Washington Post* in 1988 that this backlash led Shultz to reach back out to Andersson and attempt to salvage the peace process.<sup>155</sup>

The United Nations voted to move the Assembly to Geneva, and on December 13, Yasser Arafat took to the stage and spoke to the world. A group of advisers, Secretary of State Shultz, and President Reagan gather to listen to Arafat speak on CNN—Reagan penned in his diary entry

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Said, “Palestine Agenda,” 638.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Rita Hauser, “Behind our Breakthrough with the PLO,” *Washington Post*, December 18, 1988.

that night, “I don’t think Arafat has met our demand.”<sup>156</sup> The United States still believed that the PLO and Arafat had not done enough, throwing another obstacle in the way of dialogue.

The next twenty-four hours were full of intense negotiations aiming to get the peace process back on track—Andersson and his Swedish fellows relayed messages for the PLO and Richard Murphy, playing a high-stakes game of telephone.<sup>157</sup> The next day, Arafat, having explicit assurance from the U.S. that dialogue would result from his acquiescence, “totally and absolutely renounce[d] all forms of terrorism,” at a press conference following his declaration at Geneva.<sup>158</sup> No longer able to avoid it, Shultz announced the opening of substantial dialogue between the PLO and the United States on December 15, 1988.

### **The Winds of Continuity and Change**

American and Palestinian policymakers were able to seize the opportunity the Intifada presented to move from a place of non-negotiation and terse distance toward mutually agreeable models of conflict resolution. Throughout 1988, the diplomatic atmosphere surrounding the Arab-Israeli problem shifted in favor of the Palestine Liberation Organization as the Intifada lent urgency toward settling the Palestinian problem. The State Department had a critical role in aiding Secretary of State Shultz as he created policies for a different landscape. This landscape was marked by increased American sympathy and willingness to deal with the Palestinians, improved prospects for a PLO endorsement of a two-state solution, and an increase in channels of communication between the U.S. and Palestinians.

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<sup>156</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 679.

<sup>157</sup> Eriksson, *Small State Mediation*, 90.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

Within the State Department, many officials, including Richard Murphy, embraced these changes, hoping that they would bring lasting peace to the region. As Assistant Secretary of State, Murphy primarily worked in the Levant and on Arab-Israeli affairs: mitigating the many ongoing conflicts in the region during Reagan's presidency.<sup>159</sup> Murphy, a true diplomat, pursued a long-term and interpersonal strategy built on mutual trust to improve relations between the Palestinians and Israelis. His approach to Middle Eastern peacemaking was pragmatic, testifying before the Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 1986 that he had "long counseled against expecting a dramatic breakthrough [between the parties]."<sup>160</sup> Instead of using the black-and-white logic often found within the Reagan Administration, Murphy understood that the region's challenges could not be solved without stupendous care and effort. "Finding ways to bridge differences is no small challenge," he said to the Subcommittee, "untangling the whole knot will require additional effort, ingenuity and political courage...I continue to believe, however, that this can be accomplished."<sup>161</sup> As early as 1985, Murphy was detecting the winds of change in the air, announcing that "the climate for peace has improved markedly—the question of who was to represent the Palestinians remained the most severe impediment.<sup>162</sup> Without credible representation, Murphy believed that the Palestinian community would never accept the results of the process.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Murphy, Interview by Charles Kennedy, 111.

<sup>160</sup> Review of Developments in the Middle East, January 28, 1986; Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy to Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East of the House Foreign Affairs Committee; Folder: Middle East Conflict, Box 16; Records: Green, Max Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Max Green Files, The Middle East Peace Process and the United States, November 9, 1985.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

In 1985, Murphy was tasked with spearheading the first stage of negotiations between Israeli and U.S. officials and a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.<sup>164</sup> Murphy was on the ground in the Middle East, ready to meet with the delegation and discuss PLO acceptance of U.S. conditions when he got a call ordering him not to pull the trigger on the meeting.<sup>165</sup> Reagan was concerned that the inclusion of PLO members in this peace process would damage his relationship with Israel and thus abandoned the attempt at peace altogether. Murphy, however, did not abandon the quest for peace. He believed that building up confidence between all parties would help to facilitate an environment ripe for peace.<sup>166</sup> For the next three years, he spent much of his time shuttling around the Middle East on Secretary Shultz's orders and maintaining a reputation for even-handedness between the Israelis and Palestinians.

After the beginning of the First Intifada in December 1987, Murphy's role in the peace process took on new dimensions. He acted as a stand-in for Secretary of State Shultz in the Middle East, attempting to promote the Shultz initiative by essentially participating in shuttle diplomacy. Shultz designated Murphy and three others to manage secret negotiations with the PLO through channels like Mohamed Rabie and William Quandt. He engaged personally with members of Sten Andersson's American Jewish delegation, providing specifics on what the U.S. required to commence talks. He met with the Soviets to discuss how the two nations could come together to help the peace process progress. Finally, he worked personally to stoke these positive interactions, helping to create a more resolution-friendly environment.

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<sup>164</sup> Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018): 243.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> Memo, US-Soviet Middle East Talks, August 1, 1988.

Secretary Shultz was also touched by the changing atmosphere and hoped to renew the administration's involvement in promoting peace following the onset of the Intifada. Shultz decided to meet publicly with Palestinian Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and created the Shultz initiative to address the problem. In the spirit of the international climate, he was taking a more conciliatory stance toward the Palestinians. However, slow and subtle shifts in the relationship between the PLO and United States could not overshadow his distrust and dislike of the PLO's chairman, whom he believed was intimately connected to terrorist acts and the murder of American citizens.<sup>167</sup> State Department officials, experts on the Middle East, world leaders, and members of the United Nations responded positively to the PLO's announcement of their plan to declare an independent state on the basis of U.N. resolution 181. It seemed an absolute triumph of peacemaking: it represented the fulfillment of American conditions for many. Richard Murphy counseled Shultz to embrace the new direction the PLO was taking in and promote a climate of cooperation for the sake of peace. However, Shultz, unwilling to let go of his perception of the Palestinian leader, chose principle over cooperation—acting against the new diplomatic status quo. He paid for it. His decision to deny Arafat a visa brought two condemnations down upon the U.S. and Israel from the U.N. and earned the ire of most of the international community. A new diplomacy of tolerance for the cause of Palestinian liberation and taken root in the international community: Shultz faced intense pressure to 'get with the program,' so to speak.

Though conflict resolution seemed to be the new acceptable modus operandi, the impulse to continue the long-standing American policy of blackballing the PLO remained. The impulse to

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<sup>167</sup> Yasser Arafat Has Been Authoritatively Linked to the Murder of a United States Ambassador; Folder, "PLO-II," Box 19; Records: Green, Max: Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

do so still held great sway within the administration. L. Paul Bremer III, Ambassador for Counter-Terror, advocated the stricter application of law and strength to the PLO in all cases. His counter-terror strategy, which circulated the State Department and became the official strategy of the U.S., was tripartite. The U.S. would never “accede to terrorist demands... would pressure states that support terror... and would work to impose the rule of law on terrorists for their criminal actions.”<sup>168</sup> Though it had not taken on the vastly magnified dimensions it would take post 9-11, terrorism was a top priority for foreign policy decision-makers. When in 1985, a radical faction of the PLO hijacked the Achille Lauro and murdered an American citizen—Leon Klinghoffer— Murphy testified to its preeminence. All of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs had its attention diverted away from the peace process: a move the terrorists surely wanted in order to spoil negotiations.<sup>169</sup>

Naturally, Bremer would be suspicious of Arafat’s intentions and opposed to his entering the country: Arafat was a known terrorist in the eyes of the United States. Violence as a means of liberation fell out of popularity in the post-colonial world, making terrorism unacceptable for any cause “no matter how just it is nor how repugnant the regime might be.”<sup>170</sup> Bremer insisted that “we should not let ourselves be drawn into the conceptual starting point that somehow if a group is a national liberation movement then what it does is justified.”<sup>171</sup> For Bremer, who had Shultz’s

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<sup>168</sup> George Washington University, “Evaluation of Reagan Policy on Terrorism.”; International Terrorism, Bureau of Public Affairs, Department of State, May 1987; Folder, “Terrorism,” RAC Box 5; Records: Oakley, Robert: Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

<sup>169</sup> The Middle East Peace Process and the United States, November 9, 1985; Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy, National Executive Council of the American Jewish Committee; Middle East Peace Process, Box 16; Green, Max: Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

<sup>170</sup> George Washington University, “Evaluation of Reagan Policy on Terrorism.”

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

ear concerning the visa decision, it was fundamental that the United States accede nothing to terrorists: to grant Arafat a visa when he had not accepted American demands verbatim was a concession and therefore intolerable.

It was hardly difficult to convince him that Arafat was undeserving of American hospitality: he had a vendetta against Arafat, and nothing would change that. When in 1986, rumors had flown that Arafat might apply for a visa, Shultz wrote to Senator Robert Dole (R-KS) that any application Arafat submitted would be subject to his “most severe scrutiny.”<sup>172</sup> Both shared a “desire that Arafat should not come to the United States.”<sup>173</sup> In hindsight, Shultz has claimed that his approach was to force Arafat’s hand, aiming to force capitulation to all U.S. demands. The Secretary of State presented his decision to deny Arafat a visa as a deliberate tactic to gain the surrender of the PLO, noting that he believed this strong-arming would make the American position more evident,” to open a dialogue with us, the PLO, not the United States, would have to do the changing.”<sup>174</sup> Presenting the visa affair as a stroke of strategic genius made sense as a way to escape the harsh criticisms levied against him by the international community. The strategic element, however, is cast into doubt when one considers Shultz’s documented hatred for Arafat, especially after the murder of Leon Klinghoffer and Richard Murphy’s claim that the decision was an intensely personal one.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Letter, George Shultz to Robert Dole, May 29, 1986; Folder, “PLO,” RAC Box 2; Records: Burns, William J.: Files; Ronald Reagan Library, Simi Valley, CA.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 1040.

<sup>175</sup> Magnuson, “Dance of Many Veils.”; Wallach, *Arafat*, 392.

President Reagan supported Shultz's decision unequivocally but noted that the decision had been the Secretary of State's to make. Though it was under Shultz's purview, he was glad that the United States would not look like a bunch of "patsies."<sup>176</sup> Forever in the Cold War mindset, the conservative Reagan supported shows of strength above others: in this case, diplomatic, but nonetheless an emphatic disapprobation of the increasingly haunting specter of terrorism.<sup>177</sup>

Even when Shultz initiated talks with the PLO, Bremer accepted them only under an onerous condition. He emphasized that as chairman, Arafat "made certain commitments on behalf of the PLO, not just on behalf of parts of it, or the parts that he controls, or the parts that he wants to have identified with it... If members of the PLO, or groups in the PLO, now conduct acts of terrorism, we expect him not only to publicly denounce that, distance himself publicly from that, but also to discipline these people, at least by expelling them from the PLO."<sup>178</sup> Bremer is encouraging a line that is doomed to tank the talks: Arafat could not possibly address all terrorist connections within the PLO—especially for factions not under his control. Richard Murphy takes a far more reasonable approach: acknowledging that many terrorists aim to spoil compromise: he was determined that the United States "not...allow terrorism to halt our efforts for peace."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Pear, "Shultz's 'No' to Arafat."

<sup>177</sup> Bremer, "The West's Counter-Terrorist Strategy."

<sup>178</sup> United States Committee on Foreign Affairs, PLO Commitments and Compliance Report, Jerry Bremer, originally cited in *Washington Post* article on December 12, 1988. Washington D.C: US Government Printing Office, 1990.

<sup>179</sup> Max Green Files, "The Middle East Peace Process and the United States," November 9, 1985.

Though Shultz's visa decision could have derailed the positive strides made domestically and internationally, Shultz was ultimately powerless to the new diplomatic culture. This is the triumph of Richard Murphy and those who think like him: by working steadily for years to build credibility and trust on both personal and national levels, the State Department garnered considerable concessions from the PLO—predicated on confidence that in a more cooperative environment, gains would be earned in the end. His belief that if the United States were to “opt out of the peace process, those who believe in the role force and in absolute solutions will take our place” motivated him to seek breakthroughs via diplomatic channels.<sup>180</sup> While Bremer had better access to Shultz's ear and was able to influence negotiations more directly, Richard Murphy was intimately intertwined in all aspects of the peace process, steering it forward and wielding his influence by supporting confidence building measures in the region. These efforts ensured lines of communication, like the Swedish connection, were in place to overcome any blunders, such as Shultz's decision to deny Arafat a visa or Arafat's refusal to say the ‘magic words’ exactly. Shultz's pushback on the status quo put greater international pressure on him to rectify this separation from the consensus. Finally, by communicating so many times via these secret negotiations, operated in part by Murphy, Shultz had committed the United States to opening negotiations should Arafat and the PLO meet their conditions. Shultz's hands were tied: all his obstacles for Arafat had been sidestepped, and the U.S. finally opened talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

For American policymakers, the belief in Israel's importance as a 'strategic asset' in the Middle East, in need of support and safeguard, was practically dogmatic.<sup>181</sup> Both states enjoyed a symbiosis: the United States had a reliable ally in the Middle East with shared ideological and strategic viewpoints, while Israel gained diplomatic power at the U.N. and military power through an immoderate number of American defense contracts. The 'special relationship' between the United States and Israel was fostered by American presidents, Congress, and one of the most powerful lobbies in the country, the American Jewish lobby, headed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).<sup>182</sup> Central to the political machinations of both states was a hope for peace in the region, based on recognition of Israel by all Arab states and Israeli military deterrence.

For most of the 1980s, relations between the PLO and United States seemed to stall: President Reagan unabashedly showed a preference for Israel compared to the Arab states and only rarely criticized its actions. As the other participants refused to recognize Israel, Reagan would not pander to them. Moreover, both the United States and Israel agreed that there was no place for the PLO at the table when it came to negotiations for peace—actively searching for other representatives. Nevertheless, by 1988, these diplomatic currents had flowed far enough to permit not only negotiations between the United States and Palestinians but with the PLO.

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<sup>181</sup> Cheryl A. Rubenberg, *Israel and the American National Interest: A Critical Examination* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 188.

<sup>182</sup> Morris, *Dutch*, 463; Murphy, Interview by Charles Kennedy, 80; Whether or not the Jewish lobby is most powerful is up to interpretation: Morris claims that it is; a belief President Assad in Syria also revealed to Richard Murphy. Murphy disagrees and says the National Rifle Association has most power.

The talks that followed were brief and ultimately accomplished few tangible results. In the broader stream of American and Palestinian history, opening talks with the PLO was not of paramount importance. Perhaps its greatest triumph is forcing the United States to acknowledge the right Palestinians had to represent themselves in matters regarding their future.

Though the administration fell short of accepting the right to Palestinian self-determination, Richard Murphy's December 22 statement that the United States "do[es] not consider Jordan the Palestinian state," implies that the administration envisioned a Palestinian state, rather than the assimilation of Palestinians into Israel or Jordan.<sup>183</sup>

Bremer and Murphy continued to work in the Middle East: the former, exercising his neoconservative credentials as a high-ranking official in the George H.W. Bush Administration—becoming Presidential Envoy to Iraq. Murphy remained involved in the peace process as a private citizen, making contact with Arafat and the PLO in late 1989.<sup>184</sup> On March 23, 1990, the two met in person, and both seemed to view it as a historic occasion—taking pictures, drinking tea, and discussing the region together. Relations between the United States and PLO were still terse, and by no means had the chill between the two parties desisted, but thanks to the work of those hoping to shift the diplomatic climate towards an orientation for peace, the ice had thawed.

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<sup>183</sup> George F. Will, "The Snowball Of Appeasement," *Washington Post*, December 22, 1988.

<sup>184</sup> Murphy, Interview by Charles Kennedy, 121.

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