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Ronald Reagan and Menachem Begin: Bridge across Stormy Waters

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ABSTRACT
Throughout the first two years of Ronald Reagan's presidency, there seemed to be a consistent discord between him and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. However, this article aims to demonstrate that despite any apparent disagreements between the two leaders, the relationship between their respective countries remained robust and durable during their tenures.

President Ronald Reagan is widely regarded as one of the most pro-Israel presidents in American history. But still, in the initial two years of his presidency, the relationship between Israel and the United States seemed to be strained to the brink of rupture. During the period of 1981–1982, a succession of crises ensued. The President and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin seemed to be constantly at odds, exchanging bitter messages. The Reagan administration responded by imposing punitive sanctions on Israel, which included the suspension of arms deliveries and measures that significantly impacted Israel’s economy. Furthermore, a strategic Memorandum of Understanding was signed, only to be rescinded shortly after. So, what was it? Was the image of President Reagan as one of the friendliest presidents toward Israel inaccurate or exaggerated? Or were the crises merely temporary obstacles that obscured an otherwise strong relationship? The answers are no and yes. For contemporaries, however, the crises were significant and caused considerable strain on the Israel-US relationship, despite Reagan’s reputation as one of the friendliest presidents toward Israel. At the same time, while the crises were indeed real, they were ultimately temporary and did not leave a lasting impact on the Israel-US relationship.

While such crises may not be unheard of in the history of US-Israeli relations, they are not without precedent. During the Eisenhower administration, economic sanctions were imposed on Israel in October 1953, and the threat of further sanctions loomed following the 1956 Suez War. In 1963, President Kennedy pushed hard, almost to the point of breaking, Ben Gurion’s government, as he pushed for access to Israel’s nuclear plant in Dimona; President Nixon suspended at least twice the shipments of combat jets to Israel in an attempt to bring Israel to flex its attitude toward peace; and in 1975, President Ford’s administration further strained the US-Israel relationship when Israel refused to implement Henry Kissinger’s disengagement plan with Egypt. In response, Ford announced that the relationship between the US and Israel would be re-evaluated. During these and many other instances, contemporaries believed that a significant crisis...
was unfolding, with lasting consequences for the relationship between the US and Israel. However, history has shown that these crises often passed without causing lasting damage to the relationship between the two countries. The 1981–82 crises were unique in that they were further complicated by the personal dimension added to the conflict. While conflicts over interests were not unprecedented in the history of US-Israeli relations, the involvement of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s persona in exacerbating the situation was something that had not been seen before. It was not only Israel-US crises, but also Reagan – Begin crises. The meeting between them involved a patient American president who was accommodating towards Israel, and a prime minister who was inclined to believe he was right in all his actions and words. Begin felt and acted as if he carried the weight of Jewish history on his shoulders and was impatient with those who didn’t share his views and had a strong sense of self-importance. Furthermore, Begin’s mental health issues further complicated the already challenging situation.

The discussion surrounding the clashes between President Reagan and Prime Minister Begin must also be also considered within the context of the core values that underpin the special relationship between the United States and Israel. In December 1962 US President John F. Kennedy told Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir that ‘the United States has a special relationship with Israel in the Middle East really comparable only to that which it has with Britain’. While agreeing that the US-Israel relationship can indeed be labelled ‘special,’ many students of American-Israeli relations offer different dates or events to explain the origin of these special relationships. The explanations vary in accordance with each scholar’s approach to the nature of US foreign policy. Proponents of the realist school of thought usually mark the 1967 war as the turning point in American–Israeli relations. It is widely believed that the United States began to view Israel as a strategic asset during this time, leading to the establishment of a special relationship between the two nations based on strategic considerations. Another school of thought emphasize the role of idealism and religion as determinants of the American special attitude toward Israel. This argument posits that both before and after the establishment of the State of Israel, Christian Americans, including presidents, fostered the growth of Zionism in the United States, ultimately shaping the fundamental nature and trajectory of the Israeli-American relationship. As I suggested recently, my underlying assumption is that the Israeli–American relationship were based on ideals and shared values. Viewed from this perspective, the Reagan-Begin conflict can be better understood as a testament to the strength of the Israeli-American relationship. Despite temporary strains caused by conflicting interests, the robust ties built on shared ideals and values ultimately prevailed, demonstrating the enduring nature of the bond between the two nations. Taking into account the ‘Great Man Theory’, which highlights the role of leaders in shaping history, and without delving into psychological analysis, this article will utilize primary sources from Israel and the United States to examine how each leader viewed the other and how policies were formulated and executed during periods of conflict in the Israeli-American relationship.

**President Ronald Reagan**

Ronald Reagan had demonstrated his sympathy and attachment to Israel already when he was governor. During the Six Day War, Reagan organized in Hollywood a large rally in support of Israel. In 1971, he signed an act authorizing banks and savings institutions to purchase and invest in Israel bonds. ‘It was clear that he liked us’, testified Israel’s former prime minister and foreign minister, Yitzhak Shamir. Reagan support for Israel was driven by both idealism and interests. He cherished Israel as a site which ‘is the Holy Land to a great many of us’. He also deeply appreciated the similarities between the United States and Israel. Both were democracies and both ‘are melting pots’ that attracted people from around the world in pursuit of freedom.
Reagan’s religious beliefs about Israel were not solely based on the past but also on the future. In 1970, he read Hal Lindsey’s book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which predicted future events leading to the apocalypse and the Second Coming of Jesus, with Israel playing a pivotal role in these events. In 1971, he argued that the establishment of the state of Israel, coupled with the country’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, had set the stage for the final battle, as predicted in the book: ‘For the first time ever, everything is in place for the battle of Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ’. As negotiations on the Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement were about to conclude, Reagan expressed his concern about Syria’s actions and wrote in his diary that ‘Syria is poisoning the well’. He also noted that a war between Israel and Syria, potentially involving the Soviet Union, was possible. Reagan then wrote, ‘Armageddon in the prophecies begins with the gates of Damascus being assailed’, reflecting his beliefs about the role of Israel in biblical prophecy. A line of thinking such as this led American Evangelicals, mainly Dispensational Premillennialists, to be staunch supporters of Israel.

Reagan, like his predecessors, saw the Holocaust as one of the main justifications for the existence of the state of Israel. He also recognized it as a lesson that justified Israel’s deep concern for its security. While serving in the military, Reagan was exposed to films that documented the liberation of concentration camps by American troops. The images of survivors and the dead left a lasting impression on Reagan, stating that they were ‘engraved images on my mind that will be there forever’. This experience also shaped his attitude toward Menachem Begin. Reagan admitted that he ‘had many difficulties’ with him, but ‘my heart went out specially to Begin’. He was an Israeli patriot devoted above all to the survival of his country. As a survivor and near victim of the Holocaust, he knew from personal experience the depth of the hatred and viciousness that can be directed at Jews simply because they are Jews.

Sharing the New-Conservatives’ view, who regarded Israel as a formidable ally in the fight against the Soviet Union, Reagan published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* during his campaign for president, in which he called for the recognition of Israel as a valuable ally. An staunch Cold War Warrior, Reagan argued that preventing the Soviet Union from gaining a foothold in the Middle East was a top priority for the United States. The Soviets were expanding their military presence in various countries in the region, and the United States failed to grasp the challenge and to meet it effectively. Reagan contended that the Soviet Union was capitalizing on the division and rivalry among countries in the region, which threatened the free flow of oil out of the Middle East and further deepened the Soviet Union’s hold on the region. Israel, ‘with a democratic political system like our own’, was an island of stability in the region, and the only state that could stand with the United States against the Soviet Union. As a president, Reagan would follow through on this vision.

**Menachem Begin**

Menachem Begin, who assumed office in 1977, had limited exposure to foreign affairs. His political career was predominantly spent in the opposition, with the exception of a brief period as a minister without portfolio in the Israeli unity government leading up to the 1967 June War. Begin resigned from this post in August 1970. During his tenure in the opposition, he reacted aggressively to American threats and demands from Israel. Following the 1956 Suez War, President Dwight Eisenhower demanded that Israel withdraw its military forces from the Sinai and threatened to impose sanctions if they did not comply. Menachem Begin responded to this demand by giving a passionate speech to the Knesset in which he vowed to resist such pressure. He famously declared, ‘If the American financial pressure continues… and because of it we will have to eat less, to dress less, to consume less, then we will call the people to eat less, to dress less, to consume less’. In August 1970, the Israeli government reluctantly accepted William Rogers’ plan for a cease-fire with Egypt, which ended the attrition was with Egypt, Begin
resigned from his position in the government in protest of this decision. Thus, when he assumed the position of Prime Minister, he brought with him limited experience and knowledge of foreign affairs. Yet, he had deep appreciation of the American values and history, identifying in it values and moments in history which both nations shared. This reverence for American ideals was a trait that fit for the man who was described by his close adviser Yehuda Avner as ‘the most ideological prime minister Israel had ever elected’, and as ‘man of many words’. Begin appreciated the American fight for independence and ‘human freedom’ against the ‘repressive regime of George III’ as an experience both nations shared. He evoked the American Revolution not only because of its outcome, but also because it was a revolution, and a violent one at that. Begin quoted in 1978 from Thomas Jefferson’s letters: ‘I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storm in the physical’. To that he added another quote in praise of the revolution, ‘the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants’. Appreciating the American Revolution as an act of defiance and dissidence, Begin made an almost explicit claim in justification of his dissident organization – the IZL - that conducted terror attacks against the British military in Palestine. These actions were condemned by the main Jewish community in Palestine but Begin seemed to draw inspiration from Jefferson’s legacy of dissent. Menachem Begin also sought to emphasize the mutual dependency between Israel and the United States, placing them on equal footing. Prime Minister Golda Meir attempted to dissuade Menachem Begin from resigning from the Unity Government over the Rogers Plan. She argued that the government should accept the plan as part of a comprehensive package that also included American arms shipments to Israel. Begin remained steadfast in his refusal to accept the plan, arguing that ‘the Americans did not give Israel arms out of the kindness of their hearts. Israel had done more for America than America for Israel’. He reiterated his belief that the relationship between Israel and the United States was mutually beneficial, not one-sided also during one of his arguments with President Reagan (see below).

Another feature that was common to Begin and President Reagan was their relations with the American Evangelicals. When Begin came to power in 1977, the American Protestant Evangelicals had become a prominent political force in the United States. After their defeat in the Scopes Trial in the 1920s, Evangelicals turned inward, focusing on personal sin and self-reflection, and abstained from politics, leaving the field to mainstream Protestants. Since the 1970s, the Evangelical protesters had reclaimed their place in American politics, increasing their engagement, impact, and visibility. Ronald Reagan eagerly embraced this rising political power. During his 1980 election campaign in Dallas, he addressed a gathering of 15,000 Christian leaders, including Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and the President of the Southern Baptist Convention - all staunch supporters of Israel. Reagan told them, ‘I know you can’t endorse me, but I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing’. Despite his initial concerns, the Evangelicals did endorse Reagan, with 67% of them casting their votes for him in 1980. It turned out that President Reagan not only needed the Evangelicals, but the Evangelicals also needed Reagan. During their recent ascent to importance in politics, they felt alienated from the federal government and the Carter administration. Candidate Reagan addressed them in a way that gave them hope that their vision for America would be realized through him. While aiming at domestic politics, the Evangelical support for Israel also aligned well with Reagan’s views. Thus, in a meeting with Jerry Falwell, the reverend told the president that ‘God deals with nations in regard to how those nations deal with Israel. […] So, if there is one thing that you as a president must never compromise, it is our commitment to Israel’. According to Falwell, the president’s answer was, ‘I believe that’.

The Evangelicals’ rise and unwavering support for Israel, coupled with their close ties to President Reagan, made them welcome allies to Prime Minister Begin. He formed close relationships with Jerry Falwell, who symbolized the change within the Evangelical movement and its growing involvement in active politics. Begin was well aware of the concerns and opposition
of Jews to his rapport with the Evangelicals, but he had a pragmatic explanation for the association, ‘if a man or group will stretch out his hand and say, “I am friend of Israel” I will say, “Israel has strong enemies and need friends.” Reverend Falwell is a very strong friend’.28

The AWACS deal

The first crisis between the administration and the Begin government was triggered by President Reagan’s decision to sell Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) planes to Saudi Arabia, which Israel viewed as an existential security threat. Trying to assuage Israeli concerns, the president pledged not to allow a change in the military balance between Israel and the Arabs.29 The president kept his promise. Agreeing that Israel had ‘genuine security concerns about the AWACS’, the NSC and Secretary Haig prepared a $200 million package of arms and grants.30 Additionally, the president approved the purchase of Israeli-made defense items worth up to $250 million.31

Although the Israelis expressed grateful for the gesture, they contended that the AWACS deal was one step too far, that they could not agree to it, owing to fight it.32 However, despite the Israeli resistance, it was mainly the Jewish community and AIPAC that fought against the deal.33 Thus, all things considered, the struggle against the AWACS had small impact on the Israeli-American relationship, in general, and on the Begin-Reagan relationship in particular. At their first meeting in September 1981, the president thanked the prime minister for his ‘restrained’ – Reagan’s word - reaction to the AWACS deal.34 The struggle became, to a great extent, an American domestic issue, with debates centering on the relationship between the legislative and executive branches in the making of foreign policy, and the rights of the Jewish community to oppose the President and support Israel on matters the president deemed to be of national interest.35

Yet there was one notable exception. In his memoirs, President Reagan revealed that during their meeting, Prime Minister Begin had expressed his opposition to the AWACS deal. The President reassured the Prime Minister that he would ensure Israel’s military superiority, and gradually, Begin ‘mellowed’.36 Then, five days later, Reagan recorded in his diary his disappointment with Begin, who, so the president wrote, ‘had gone to the hill and lobbied against the sale after leading me to believe he would not’.37 It is unclear why the President made that statement. The record of the Begin-Reagan meeting indicates that Begin and his Minister of Defense, Ariel Sharon, emphasized the threat that Saudi Arabia posed to Israel. Meanwhile, the President and his team reiterated the importance of the deal for American national security and reassured Begin that Israel would not be put in harm’s way. The meeting ended with each side making its point, and there is no mention in the meeting records of Begin’s appearance in the Senate.38 At Begin’s meeting with the Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee, he only voiced his objections to the AWACS deal in response to questions from the committee members.39 It is impossible to know whether Begin would have raised his objections if not asked first. Nonetheless, it seems that in this particular instance, President Reagan’s criticism of Begin for breaking his promise not to lobby against the AWACS deal in Congress was unfounded.

The AWACS episode ended with what seemed to be both a promise and a warning. After the deal was finalized, President Reagan wrote to Prime Minister Begin, assuring him that although the Senate had approved the bill for the supply of the AWACS, the special relationship between Israel and the United States would continue to flourish.40 While the letter could be interpreted as an invitation to move forward now that the deal was approved, it could also be seen as a subtle warning and a reminder that when the president threw his weight into advancing a policy, Israel could not stop it, even at a Senate so friendly to Israel. A definitely positive note was another letter the president sent to Begin, which aimed to allay Israel’s concerns about the
The transfer of high technology to the Arabs. 'I'm determined to see that Israel's qualitative technological edge is maintained', pledged the president.41

The attack in Osirak

The AWACS crisis was still raging when the next crisis erupted. On June 7, Israeli war planes attacked and destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor near Baghdad. The Israeli government claimed that the attack was an act of self-defense, a pre-emptive measure since the plant was intended to be used against Israel. This way of presenting the attack aimed not only to justify the Israeli attack, but also to defeat the argument that Israel violated the terms under which it was granted the F-15s and F-16s. The White House and the Department of State rejected Israel's claim that the facility posed a potential threat to Israel and condemned the attack.42 The president thought that Israel should have turned to the United States and France, which could have done 'something to remove the threat'.43 This though was not what the president really thought of the Israeli attack. He understood the reasons for the Israeli attack and justified it. 'Iraq is technic-ally at war with Israel', he wrote in his diary, 'and I believe [the Iraqis] were preparing to build an atom bomb'. Thus, Israel had the right to use the American planes.44

After nearly ten days of publicly remaining silent, President Reagan broke his silence in a press conference and acknowledged that Israel had legitimate reasons for concern, 'I do think that one has to recognize that Israel had reason for concern in view of the past history of Iraq, which has never signed a cease-fire or recognized Israel as a nation, […] It does not even recognize the existence of Israel as a country'. In his diary, he wrote that Saddam Hussein 'was trying to build a nuclear weapon. He called for the destruction of Israel, and he wants to be the leader of the Arab world'.45 However, the president could not ignore the points raised by those who criticized the attack. Publicly, displaying dismay over the act, and particularly of the use of American planes, Reagan temporarily suspended the delivery of additional F-16 jets to Israel. He also supported a security council resolution denouncing the Israeli attack, but he did so mainly as a 'show of displeasure'. Ultimately, as the president confided in his diary and later in his memoirs, 'I sympathized with Begin's motivation, and privately believed that we should give him the benefit of doubt'.46 This was also the gist of his response to ambassador Ephraim Evron's complaints as to the suspension of the planes. 'We did the minimum we could do under our law', almost apologized the president, who emphasized that the United States was neither re-evaluating nor reassessing its relations with Israel, indicating that the temporary suspension was simply a show of displeasure over the use of American planes in the attack.47 Similarly, the Americans would not veto an anti-Israeli resolution at the security council but would ensure that the resolution carried no more than declaratory weight, without bearing any actual measures.48

While President Reagan attempted to limit the American response to what he considered a 'show of displeasure', Prime Minister Begin refused to accept even symbolic measures of protest and was defiant in his response to the administration's offer to end the clash over the attack on the nuclear plant. Secretary Haig proposed that the United States issue a formal admonition to Israel, and Israel respond by indicating that it 'will in future consider its actions more carefully in terms of the interests of its most important friend'.49 Haig did not dispute Israel's right to attack the plant, but rather asked the Israeli government to make a commitment to consult with the US when planning measures that could impact American national interests. Begin would not have it. In what he described as 'the worst crisis in US-Israeli relations since Golda Meir similarly rejected the Rogers Plan', Begin 'categorically rejected' the American proposal. He was 'infuriated by the substance and tone of the demarche', and 'deeply hurt and insulted'. Begin insisted that the raid was 'an inescapable supreme act of legitimate self-defense', for which he had no intention to apologize 'in any manner'.50 The president decided ot to escalate the matter further, and on July 13 the two governments 'declare that any misunderstanding which have arisen in the
wake of the [raid] have been clarified to the satisfaction of both sides. The suspension of the F-16 aircraft shipment to Israel was lifted on August 17.

Beyond Begin’s demagogic rhetoric, what really bothered the President was the fact that the Israeli government had not informed the administration of its intention to carry out such an attack. For President Reagan, neglecting to do so was more than just a measure of ungratefulness toward a close ally, who was so supportive of Israel. It was the way Israel’s actions reflected on their strategic partnership. As a strategic ally, the United States expected Israel to consider American strategic interests in the region. Israel should have collaborated with the United States on matters of strategic importance, and the bombing of the Osirak plant certainly fell into that category. There were instances where Israel and the United States had differing views, but their shared interests were of greater importance, and thus the two nations should act in accordance with those interests. However, the administration preferred to leave it all behind. There were ‘recently’ disagreements, wrote the secretary of state to prime minister Begin, but ‘we must cooperate to put that disagreement behind us’.

**Applying the Israeli law on the Golan height**

To demonstrate the strength of the American-Israeli relationship and deepen their strategic ties, the two governments decided to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on strategic cooperation. This was seen as a way to move past the recent arguments and reinforce their shared interests. Israel hoped that the agreement would ‘tightened bilateral security ties and recognized in formal language the mutually important nature of the relationship’. Concerned that a formal strategic agreement between the two countries would harm American relations with Arab countries, Secretary of Defense, Casper Weinberger, streamlined the agreement into a document that addressed only the Soviet threat. The agreement was signed in November, and typically, without the presence of the press. As such, the agreement was merely a piece of paper, but it was sufficient for Begin, who valued it not so much for its content but rather as ‘a symbol of the alliance,’ as ambassador Lewis put it. For Begin, words and gestures were more important than deeds. The MoU held mainly symbolic importance, as it did not carry any significant practical implications for the Israeli-American strategic relationship. Begin did not need more than that.

Yet, it was Begin who exposed the hollowness of the MoU as a symbol of the strategic relationship between Israel and the United States. One reason for President Reagan’s wish to proceed with the agreement was the assumption that Israel would no longer surprise the United States and would not take unilateral actions that would adversely affect US interests in the Middle East. Israel did just that shortly after signing the MoU. On December 13, the Begin government applied the Israeli law over the Golan Heights. The timing was not coincidental. The international climate created the impression that the Israeli action would go unnoticed. Poland captured the world’s attention, following the government’s suppression of the Solidarity movement. On the other side of the world, Britain and Argentina engaged in a war over the Falklands. Begin considered the possibility of an angry American reaction, but he had an answer, “we genuinely believe that justice is on our side.” Begin had a straightforward explanation for why he did not consult or inform the American administration before taking action. It was “because we had no doubt that our friends the Americans would say “no” to us.”

Thus, in a few words, Begin exposed the hollowness of the MoU. When he presented the MoU to the Knesset, he took pride in the mutuality of the agreement. However, the mutuality worked only as long as it served Israel’s interests, and it was this point that upset the administration most. Reagan and the people around him were not pleased with the Israeli decision. Secretary Haig informed the Israeli government that the United States would support an “acceptable” security council resolution condemning the Israeli act – that is, the administration
did not want to overreact, but still felt compelled to take some action. However, the President was less tolerant when it came to Israel’s failure to inform the administration of its intention to apply Israeli law in the Golan Heights. When they signed the MoU, it was the administration’s understanding that “we were both undertaking to consult with one another before taking actions which would significantly affect the other’s strategic interests.” As Israel failed to comply with the Memorandum, the administration announced that it was unable “at this time to proceed with implementation of the memorandum.” In addition to this, the President also imposed economic sanctions, including the withholding of the purchase of defense items worth $250 million manufactured by Israelis, which was decided in April. Furthermore, the President abolished the permission granted to Israel to use up to $100 million of foreign military sales credit for the purchase of defense-related goods and services.

In the spirit of “I deserve it,” and in complete disregard for his share in bringing the US-Israel relationship to this low point, Begin did not mince his words in response to the American measures. Talking with ambassador Lewis, Begin dismissed the idea of sanctions against what he called a “sovereign country.” “What are we, a vassal state, a banana republic? Is [the Israeli government] composed of 14-year-old boys that if they don’t behave, they have to be knuckled on their fingers, scolded, punished?” he said defiantly to the ambassador. The administration should engage in dialogue and persuasion rather than resort to punitive measures, insisted Begin, ignoring the fact that it was his government that failed to communicate before taking measures that provoked the American response. “Threats will not frighten” the Israeli government “at all.” As if standing by itself, without context, Begin rejected what he referred to as turning Israel into a hostage of the MoU. “Mr. Ambassador,” he declared, “the Jewish people lived for 3,700 years without a memorandum of understanding with the United States and the Jewish people will live for another 3,700 years without that memorandum.” As Israel understood it, said Begin, with the suspension of the talks on the implementation of the MoU, the United States renounced it. And indeed, the Israeli cabinet decided to rescind the Memorandum of Understanding on Strategic Cooperation on December 20.

Furthermore, Begin asserted that imposing economic sanctions on Israel not only constituted a blatant violation of the President’s commitment to him, but it was also an act of anti-Semitism. To support his argument, Begin invoked the memory of British General Evelyn Barker, who had commanded British forces in Palestine after the Second World War. In 1946, after an attack on British headquarters, Barker prohibited British soldiers from patronizing Jewish cafes, declaring that “the only way to punish that race is to hit them in their pocket.” The directive and its accompanying remarks were widely regarded as anti-Semitic both in Britain and Palestine. Begin accused the US of following General Barker’s ideology by imposing economic sanctions on Israel, and he pointed out that the US was a democracy with a strong Jewish community that was actively aiding Israel. In addition to the Jewish community, Begin noted that Israel would receive support from millions of Christians as well. Begin did not explicitly mention the potential electoral consequences for the president, and Lewis did not offer any commentary on this matter. However, it is probable that the underlying message was not lost on the president.

In his presentation, Begin failed to acknowledge the connection between Israel’s actions and the subsequent reactions of the United States, as well as the impact of Israeli actions on American strategic interests. Instead, he justified every Israeli action by invoking anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, portraying the relationship between Israel and the US as a one-way street. “If you want to cooperate with us, we shall cooperate with you. If you don’t want to cooperate with us, c’est la vie [sic].” The United States should cooperate with Israel, and then Israel would reciprocate, which meant that the United States should support Israel whenever “our enemies and your enemies,” the Soviet Union, Syria, and the Third World assailed Israel’s actions, and even if doing so came at the expense of American interests. Therefore, the United States should support Israel’s application of the Israeli law over the Golan Heights because “our enemies and your enemies” denounced it. As was his way, resorting to demagogy, Begin stated that in
response to the demand from Israel to rescind the law in order to avoid possible sanctions imposed by the Security Council with the support of the United States, Begin would ask the Israeli people, “if they want to rescind the Golan Law or live on bread and margarine?” There was no doubt in his mind that their answer would be “we will not surrender.”® Adding insult to injury, the prime minister published the message he asked Lewis to deliver to President Reagan shortly after his meeting with the ambassador.®,

While clashes and heated arguments between Israeli prime ministers and American presidents were not uncommon, Begin’s attacks against President Reagan were unprecedented in their severity. Philip Habib, who met the prime minister and heard from him, once again, a harsh attack on the administration, assumed that it had to do with Begin’s sensitivity to Israel’s honor. Begin, a man of grand gestures and (some would say hollow) rhetoric, was overly sensitive to his own and his government’s honor. But there was more to it than that. It was also Begin’s mental state. Kept as a state secret at the time, Begin suffered from what ambassador Lewis described as “prolonged depressions” and sometimes “generally rather euphoric and hyperactive” that could explain his erratic behavior.™ In his report to Washington, Lewis described Begin as “tired, shrunken,” “enfeebled” and “in considerable pain.” During his presentation, added Lewis, Begin was “defiant and embattled.”®

The reaction in Washington to Begin’s assault was mixed. The president’s immediate instinct was to recall ambassador Lewis “as a sign of displeasure with Israel.” However, Secretary Haig recommended not to take that path, but to present a “relatively cool and correct public stance.” Such an attitude, suggested Haig, would produce “useful results.”® And indeed, soon enough Begin’s bravado diminished as the repercussions of the American measures sank. The economic cost of the sanctions would be harsh and could result in the layoff of thousands of Israeli defense industry workers. Ministers in his government expressed – typically anonymously - strong criticism as to the way Begin handled the crisis, blaming him for escalating the situation.® Two days after his contentious conversation with Lewis and the public cancellation of the MoU, Begin called the ambassador once again. This time, he asked Lewis to consider a legal workaround that would allow the MoU to be revived in a way that would be a "face-saver" for the prime minister. “His call to me was plaintive and worried, demonstratively friendly though not apologetic,” wrote Lewis. “Apologies are not in Begin’s nature, no matter how much he may regret something he has done,” added the ambassador.® In what could be viewed as the last accord of the crisis, and in keeping with its decision to contain the crisis, the administration vetoed a security council resolution that demanded Israel to rescind its resolution under the threat of sanctions.®

The Lebanon War, 1982

In 1982, it became clear to both the Israeli and American governments that, more than the substance of the matter, it was the surprise of the actions taken that caused harm to each side. As a result, both sides agreed that they should inform each other before taking any action that could negatively affect the other government’s interests.® Israel had shown that it had learned the lesson, and throughout 1982 it flooded the administration with reports concerning its problems with the PLO in Lebanon. The problems did not start then, of course. After the Black September events in Jordan in 1970, the PLO shifted its primary base to Lebanon and launched attacks against Israel from there. In July 1981, Philip Habib managed to broker a cease-fire between the PLO and Israel in Lebanon. However, Israel repeatedly complained that the PLO was violating the cease-fire by carrying out attacks on Israeli targets within Israel and in other locations. The Americans read into the Israeli intentions and urged the government to exercise restraint. Prime Minister Begin pledged to President Reagan that Israel would not attack “unless attacked in clear provocation.”® To avoid any misunderstandings, Prime Minister Begin emphasized that the term
“clear provocation” would encompass attacks originating not only from South Lebanon. That is, according to Begin, any attack against Israelis by a Palestinian would be deemed as a ‘clear provocation’ that would warrant a military response from Israel. President Reagan accepted that category, with a qualification, which Secretary Haig presented in February to the IDF head of intelligence and in May to Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon. The provocation should be “an internationally recognized provocation.” Sharon’s response was unequivocal: “No one has the right to tell Israel what decision it should take in defense of its people.” To the government, Sharon presented a somewhat modified version of Haig’s remarks. He informed the government that Haig understood that Israel would not be able to avoid action in case of a “sharp provocation.” In such a case, Sharon reported, the United States would stand by Israel. It was not untrue, but it did not genuinely reflect the meaning of Haig’s massage.

With the continuous messages from Israel, both Lewis and Haig were convinced that an Israeli attack on the PLO in Lebanon was imminent. Despite this, the president still tried to prevent an Israeli attack. He warned Begin in April that an Israeli attack in Lebanon would “gravely damage […] vital US interests, […] and we could not predict the ultimate consequences for Israel’s security. In any event, there could be serious complications for further US-Israeli relations.” Begin tried to frame the impending war as fitting into President Reagan’s worldview, by portraying it as a battle against a Soviet proxy and base in the Middle East. He labeled the PLO as “a terrorist Soviet agent, the enemy of the free world,” in his conversation with Lewis.

Begin then drew once again on the memory of the Holocaust, to justify an attack on the PLO. When Secretary Haig reiterated on May 28 his warning that an Israeli attack would damage US interests, the Prime Minister responded with another strongly worded message: “you know there is in Lebanon a neo-Nazi terrorist organization which constantly proclaims its design to kill our people in Israel and abroad – men, women, and children, […] and you advise us to exercise restraint and refrain from any action. In other words, plainly stated, we should let them kill our citizens and brethren – and do nothing.” That would not happen, pledged the prime minister.

Thus, when Israel attacked Lebanon on June 6, 1982, following an assassination attempt on the life of the Israeli ambassador in London three days earlier (by members of the Abu Nidal group, bitter enemies of the PLO), the administration was not taken aback. In a message to the president, after the war had begun, Begin presented it as a great service to the United States and “the free world,” as the IDF found in south Lebanon, according to Begin, “ten times more Soviet weapons than we ever expected. […] In fact, Mr. President, we now realize that this area had been turned into a Soviet base, the principal centre of Soviet activities in the Middle East.” No less than that. Begin’s rhetoric, which framed the war as a battle against a Soviet proxy in the Middle East, resonated with the president. And indeed, during an exchange with the Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev over the role of the United States in the operation, the president blamed Brezhnev that the Soviet Union bore responsibility for the war because it supplied the PLO with “immense quantities of weapons” that “undermine the political stability of Lebanon and provoked” the Israeli attack.

Giving to the war in Lebanon a Cold War clout was boosted also by the IDF success in its fighting against the Syrian troops in Lebanon. The Israeli tanks destroyed hundreds of Soviet-made Syrian and PLO tanks. The encounter between the Israeli-made Merkava tanks, which included American components, and the Soviet Union’s most advanced T72 tanks was particularly noteworthy. In this battle, ten T72s were destroyed, while no Merkava tanks suffered lethal hits. The Americans were also impressed by the Israel Air Force’s (IAF) success in destroying Soviet-made SA missile batteries that the Syrians had deployed in Lebanon. The IAF also shot down dozens of Syrian Soviet-made MIG 21s and 23s, with the American-made IAF planes without suffering any losses. Over the course of the war, nearly a hundred Syrian planes were shot down. The departing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David C. Jones, said that the Israeli success “must be generating some second thoughts in the Kremlin” as to the abilities of its planes, tanks and antiaircraft missiles to stand against the American weapons.
Israel’s persistent warnings and heads-ups; the American acceptance of the rationale for the Israeli attack; the presentation of the war in the context of the Cold War, strengthened by the successful encounter between the American and Soviet made weapons from the American point of view; the prospects of changing the status quo in Lebanon to the West’s advantage – all contributed to the administration’s relatively measured reaction to the war. Even when the Israeli actions provoked a sharp American reaction, these remained isolated incidents that hardly affected the overall Israeli-American relationship. One incident stood out, though, highlighting the contrasting reactions of President Reagan and Prime Minister Begin towards each other. On August 12, the IDF launched a massive barrage of West Beirut that became to be known as Black Thursday, resulting in the death of around 300 people. President Reagan called Begin and demanded that the bombing ceased. It was apparent from the tone of the conversation that the president was overwhelmed. He told Begin that, “Here, on our television, night after night, our people are being shown the symbols of this war and it is a holocaust.” President Reagan used the word “Holocaust” deliberately, fully aware of its emotional impact on Prime Minister Begin. He demanded that the bombing cease, since “our entire future relations are at stake if this continues.” Prime Minister Begin promised the president to halt the bombing, which the IDF ultimately did.87 The phone calls were followed by a letter from the president, in which the president reiterated his threat that “our entire future relations are at stake if these military eruptions continued.”88 The Prime minister was deeply offended by the letter. In answer letter, which he no longer addressed to ‘Ron,’ as he used to do, but rather to ‘Dear Mr. President,’ he wondered why the president felt compelled to repeat his ominous message in writing, after receiving assurance from the Prime Minister that the fire had stopped. Prime Minister Begin also took the opportunity to criticize the president’s use of the word Holocaust to describe the situation in Beirut. “I know some facts which may be unknown to my fellow men” about the Holocaust, protested Begin.89 It was all a misunderstanding. The letter that upset Begin so much, was not sent after the phone call, but rather simultaneously with the phone call. Thus, Reagan’s phone call and his letter were a single message, which Begin mistakenly regarded as separate. Nonetheless, this bitter and sharp exchange stood out as an exception. To start with, prior to the war, President Reagan had promised not to link disputes with Israel to aid to Israel, a lesson learned from the troubled times of 1981, and he kept his word. He did not use at any point the Israeli complete reliance on American aid to dissuade Israel from acting in Lebanon. Moreover, the Americans had vetoed several Security Council resolutions condemning the Israeli operation.90 While the war in Lebanon produced a few, random and concrete frictions between the two countries, in part due to the rhetoric used by Prime Minister Begin, its lasting outcome was the further strengthening of the American-Israel relationship. Strategically, the war led to a deeper collaboration between the two countries, as the United States was keen to draw lessons from the conflict and the clashes between American and Soviet weaponry. A sign of this enhanced strategic relationship was the extension of the agreement on intelligence sharing between the two countries. Such an agreement was first signed after the 1973 war, and a more elaborate and broad agreement was signed in November 1982. Among other things, the agreement gave Israel the right to purchase American countermeasures and equipment built based on the data Israel provided.91 Therefore, the agreement was a clear indication of the enhanced cooperation between Israeli and American military officers, and it further deepened their ties. In March, two American generals visited Israel, and during their visit, they exchanged information about the war. The Pentagon was more willing to remove obstacles in handling daily operational issues between the two countries, demonstrating a greater willingness to work together.92 While the trend of improvement in rhetoric and action continued, another hurdle, when President Reagan presented a peace plan on September 1, 1982. The plan aimed to lead to a negotiated settlement between Israel, the Palestinians in the occupied territories, and Jordan, and it was based on three premises: no Palestinian state, no PLO involvement, and no Israeli sovereignty over the occupied territories. Additionally, the plan called for Israel to freeze the
build-up of new settlements, while existing settlements would remain in place. The Begin’s government disapproved of the plan in form and substance. It was deeply disappointed that despite earlier promises, the administration did not consult Israel during its preparation of the plan. As to substance, the Israelis rejected the plan for two main reasons. First, the plan did not recognize Israel’s claim to the west bank, and second, it called for a freeze in the settlements’ build up during the negotiations. To make the point, the government decided on September 5 to establish five new settlements in the occupied territories. Begin was equally perturbed by the belief that the plan was a ploy to topple his government. In an interview he gave to the IDF bulletin shortly after Reagan’s peace plan was published, the prime minister argued that the administration interfered “rudely” in Israel’s domestic affairs. He quoted a Washington Post report that the Reagan plan was meant to be a precursor to the “uprooting of the Begin’s government.” It was Begin’s contention that when it was facing a defiant government, the administration would take measures to replace it. “These methods are known,” he blamed, “and the intervention had begun.” However, stated the prime minister, Israel was not Chile, nor was he Allende.

It is easy to imagine how Israelis and the American Jews would have reacted if the president had made such accusations against the prime minister. The president’s silence showed how patient he was towards the prime minister, probably also understanding Begin’s idiosyncrasies. It also had shown how deep and strong were the Israeli-American relationship, that even such a scathing attack against the United States and the American president did not result in a rift. In response to Begin’s accusations, the administration sent a soothing message that the Secretary Of State delivered to Foreign Minister Shamir in October 1982, suggesting that the administration’s wished to work closely with and fully cooperate with the Israeli government. The president, too, conveyed the message that the tensions were ephemeral and far less meaningful than the essential foundations of the Israeli- American relationship. “I am disturbed by the perception of strained relations between our countries,” he told President Yitzhak Navon, who visited in the United States in January 1983, and added, “there is no change in our pledge to the security of Israel and to our friendship with Israel.”

The end of the crisis

And indeed, the relationship between the two countries improved during 1983, spiking upward. The cloud that the Reagan plan cast over the Israel – US relationship was lifted when Jordan’s and the PLO’s rejected the plan. The president described his unsuccessful attempt to navigate the minefield of the peace process as follows: “Long term resolution of the Middle East’s problems seemed further than ever from our grasp.” Additional reasons contributed to the improvement of relations between the two countries. One was the removal of Sharon from the ministry of defense in February 1983. The Kahan committee of inquiry that investigated the Sabra and Shatila massacre (September 1982) held Sharon partially responsible for the massacre. This led to his resignation, and he was replaced by Moshe Arens. The reshuffle in the ministry of defense “brought a different tone to the relationship,” testified former ambassador Lewis. Secretary of State George Shultz, too, saw the appointment of Arens as an opportunity to improve the relations between the two countries, and so did President Reagan. Another contributing factor to the improvement was an outcome of the Lebanon War, the Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement, signed in May 1983. When he replaced Alexander Haig as Secretary of State, George Shultz was reserved in his attitude toward Israel. However, he changed his mind after the Israel-Lebanon peace agreement. Shultz thought that along with the Israel-Egyptian peace agreement, during which Israel had evacuated the Sinai, it was yet another proof that Israel was not expansionist, and it was ready to relinquish territory for peace. The Arabs could no longer assert that it was impossible to negotiate peace with Israel.
The final reason for the improvement in US-Israel relationship was the stepping down of Prime Minister Menachem Begin from the position of prime minister and his replacement by Yitzhak Shamir. The stepping down of the quarrelsome Begin resulted in a decrease in the inflammatory rhetoric Begin occasionally employed in his contacts with the administration. It made it easier for the administration – and the more moderate Israeli officials - to maintain a high level of cooperation between the two countries. At the same time, Begin’s erratic behaviour only demonstrated how strong were the Israeli-American relationship. No individual, even the Israeli prime minister, could harm them. There were debates, disagreements, and conflicts – sometimes even harsh and bitter. But none of these had a lasting impact on the Israeli-American special relationship. As noted in the introduction, the relationship between Israel and the United States was special even before the establishment of Israel, as it was based on a set of constants that shaped the course and nature of the relationship between the two countries. This enduring relationship was maintained despite occasional disagreements or conflicts, demonstrating the strength and resilience of the bond between Israel and the US. The interests of the two countries not always aligned, but the constants – religion, shared values, and history- were robust enough to overcome conflicts of interests, and occasionally, transcend them. While the Reagan-Begin encounters may have briefly strained the relationship between Israel and the United States, this tension was short-lived and ultimately gave way to the enduring constants of the relationship between the two countries. It was an irritant, sometimes even quite annoying, but with which it was easy to cope. Hence, coming back to the Great Man theory, the Israeli – American relationship during the Reagan-Begin tenures can serve as a demonstration that the foundations of those relationships were stronger than any impact the two leaders might have had.

Notes
11. Hal Lindsey (with C. C. Carlson), *The Late Great Planet Earth*, (Great Rapids, Zondervan, 1970).
18. Menachem Begin at the 228th Meeting of the Third
30. NSC Meeting, April 1, 1981, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Meeting File, b. 9/282.
31. Secretary of State to American Embassy, Tel Aviv, April 7, 1981, No. 3184, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 37; Secretary of State to White House, April 7, 1981, No. 2057, *ibid*.
34. Memorandum of Conversation between Prime Minister Begin and President Ronald Reagan, September 9, 1981, ISA, FO8466/6.
35. All these are discussed extensively in Nicholas Laham, *Selling AWACS to Saudi Arabia* (Boulder: Praeger, 2002).
39. Record of Meeting Between Prime Minister Begin and his Entourage with the Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee, September 10, 1981, ISA, A 4349/13.
41. President Reagan to Prime Minister Begin, February 16, 1982, ISA, FO 9346/15.


46. Reagan, An American Life, 413.

47. Memorandum of Conversation, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Subject File, b. 48.


49. Secretary of State to American Embassy, Tel Aviv, July 4, 1981, No. 175875, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 37-38.


53. Secretary of State Alexander Haig to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, July 10, 1981, ISA, FO 9356/10.

54. Sharon, Warrior, 414.


58. Minutes of the 32nd Meeting of the Tenth Knesset, December 14, 1981, Diveri Haknesst, 778, 780.

59. Minutes of the 32nd Meeting of the Tenth Knesset, December 14, 1981, Diveri Haknesst, 778, 780.

60. Secretary of State to American Embassy, Tel Aviv, December 18, 1981, No. 3550, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38.

61. Secretary of State to Various American Missions, December 18, 1981, No. 3543, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38; Secretary of State to American Embassy, Tel Aviv, December 18, 1981, No. 333551, ibid.

62. Meeting Between the Prime Minister Begin and US Ambassador Lewis, December 20, 1981, ISA, FO 8466/6; American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, December 20, 1981, No. 1698, RRPL, Executive Secretary: Country File, Israel, b. 38.

63. Memorandum for the President from J. S. Nance, December 20, 1981, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38.

64. Meeting Between the Prime Minister Begin and US Ambassador Lewis, December 20, 1981, ISA, FO 8466/6; American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, December 20, 1981, No. 1698, RRPL, Executive Secretary: Country File, Israel, b. 38.

65. American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, December 20, 1981, No. 1698, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38.

66. American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, December 20, 1981, No. 1698, RRPL, Executive Secretary: Country File, Israel, b. 38; Avner, The Prime Ministers, 587.


68. American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, December 20, 1981, No. 1698, RRPL, Executive Secretary: Country File, Israel, b. 38.


71. American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, December 22, 1981, No. 1771, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38.


74. American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, January 2, 1982, No. 0016, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38; Prime Minister Begin to President Reagan, January 16, 1981, No. 488, ISA, FO 6834/2; American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, January 25, 1982, No. 01235, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38; Entry for January 30, 1982, The Reagan Diaries, 66; Secretary of State to American Embassy, Tel Aviv, February 4, 1982, No. 030130, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38; Memorandum from A. M. Haig to the President, February 6, 1982, ibid; American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, April 9, 1982, No. 7533, ibid; Nehushtan to Office, Jerusalem, May 17, 1982, No. 320, ISA FO 6834/2.

75. American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, February 22, 1982, No. 3177, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38.

76. Secretary of State Haig to American Embassy, Tel Aviv, February 4, 1982, No. 1727, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38; Entry for February 6, 1982, Reagan, The Reagan Diaries, 67; Memorandum of Conversation, Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon – Secretary of State Alexander Haig, May 25, 1982, No. 537, ISA, FO 9346/16.

77. Memorandum of Conversation, Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon – Secretary of State Alexander Haig, May 25, 1982, No. 537, ISA, FO 9346/16; Haig, Caveat, 335. See also Shimon Golan, Israel's War in Lebanon 1982 (Ben Shemen: Modan, 2017), 97-100.

78. Golan, Israel's War in Lebanon, 111.

79. Secretary of State Haig to American Embassy, Tel Aviv, February 4, 1982, No. 0130, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38; American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, April 7, 1982 No. 5214, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38; American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, April 9, 1981, No. 4799, ibid.

80. Secretary of State Haig to American Embassy, Tel Aviv, October 10, 1982, No. 7157, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38. See also Secretary Haig to Prime Minister Begin, May 28, 1982, ISA, FO 6834/2.

81. Meeting Between the Prime Minister with Ambassador Lewis, April 11, 1982, ISA, FO 6834/2.

82. Secretary Haig to Prime Minister Begin, May 28, 1982, RRPL, Executive Secretariat, Country File, Israel, b. 38; Prime Minister Begin to Secretary Haig, May 30, 1982, ibid.


87. Telephone Conversation Between the President and Prime Minister Begin, August 12, 1982, 11:14, RRPL, Kemp, Geoffrey File, RAC, b. 5; Telephone Conversation Between the President and Prime Minister Begin, August 12, 1982, 11:45, ibid; Entry for August 12, 1982, The Reagan Diaries, 97.

88. American Embassy, Tel Aviv to Secretary of State, August 12, 1982, No. 225717, RRPL, Kemp, Geoffrey File, RAC, b. 5.

89. Prime Minister Begin to President Reagan, August 13, 1982, ISA, FO 9346/15.


96. M. Arens to Prime Minister, October 14, 1982, No. 7126, ISA, FO 6835/1.

97. Meeting Between President Navon and President Reagan, January 5, 1983, ISA, FO 6834/2.


102. A Meeting of the AJC with Secretary Shultz, May 23, 1983, No. 38, ISA, A 4328/12.

**Disclosure statement**

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